

*Like Butter Spread Over Too Much Bread:
Multiphrenia in America*

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"I am old, Gandalf. I don't look it, but I am beginning to feel it in my heart of hearts... I feel all thin, sort of stretched... like butter that has been scraped over too much bread"

(Tolkien 41)

So laments the hobbit Bilbo Baggins, after living a long and adventurous life. The sentiment is bittersweet: after all, he has perhaps "lived" more than any other hobbit in history, and yet the greatness of it all has taken its toll. Bilbo may not look worn thin, but he certainly feels the strain of it.

America has begun to live in much the same way. With the globalization of society and the astounding technological advancements of the recent centuries, the wealth of the western world has become a plague upon its well-being. While our financial and technological advantages have provided the means of traveling, working, relating, and living, these ever-expanding opportunities leave one with a feeling of insufficiency to achieve all that is possible. They provide the basis for a multiplicity of social circles and relationships. Unfortunately, living in this way doesn't allow for the time necessary to develop and enjoy these new relationships, but it does provide for the opportunity to experience them with less accountability and integrity.

The result is a culture of "thinned" out individuals, living "more" life at a lower relational quality. Like Bilbo, they may not "look it," but the signs are everywhere: divorce, depression, and single parenthood are rampant. The more freedom we attain, the more enslaved we become to the tyranny of endless opportunity. Kenneth J. Gergen calls this reality "multiphrenia," and that is what this paper will examine.

The Cause

The trend in multiplication of the self could be attributed to a myriad of factors, but I would like to focus on three: the increase in social opportunities, a more accessible world through transportation development, and the explosion of technology that allows for “social” interaction even across great distances. Each of these factors have allowed one person to become involved in a myriad of social spheres, activities, and relationships.

The first factor to be discussed is that of the increase in social opportunities. In the late 1700's, only 5 percent of Americans lived in “urban” areas, which were defined as cities with more than 2,500 residents. By the year 2000, that number had increased to 80 percent, with the definition of “urban” being revised to require more than 50,000 citizens in a city (Cha, September 28). This increase in population density brings people within the reach of an astounding number of “neighbors”. Whereas a resident in the 18th and early 19th Centuries would likely know all of their immediate neighbors intimately and most of their neighbors well, even the idea of knowing all the residents in an apartment building today is absurd.

This expansive source of social relationships thus lets anyone pick and choose those who will know them, with gyms, organizations, religious groups, bars, coffee shops, and parks in abundance. If one begins to get bored or frustrated by a social network they've joined, another club or church is just down the road, ready to welcome newcomers.

A second major factor contributing to multiphrenia is that of improved transportation. With the advent of railways, interstate highways, and supersonic jets, the world is getting continually more accessible to the average American. Cha points out that the suburbanization of cities is a clear indicator of this reality. Given an average tolerance for a 45 minute commute, the radius in which a citizen may find work or social involvement has expanded drastically in the past hundred years. In the past, this might have limited a person to living nearly their entire life within a 10 mile radius, whereas now many Americans commute 20, 40, or even 60 miles or more every day to work (Cha, September 28).

Transportation does not just extend to work, however. Increased mobility means that a large number of Americans face one or more major changes in their place of living. A 2005 study of university enrollment in Missouri showed that approximately 15% of students in public institutions that granted baccalaureate degrees and 43% of students in corresponding private universities were out-of-state students (<http://www.dhe.mo.gov/>). A December, 2008 article in USA Today reports that 44% of Americans have lived in more than one state, with 15% having lived in four or more states, and those numbers ignore moves for college or military service (Jayson).

Finally, technology has rapidly expanded the social opportunities and multiplication of the self via an ever-increasing amount of “maintained” relationships, something Gergen refers to as the “perseverance of the past” (Gergen, 62). Facebook reports that its average user has 130 “friends” (<http://www.facebook.com/>). Email messages and long-distance phone calls cross the globe in the blink of an eye—a

journey which would have taken days or even months via horse, steamer, or even airmail. During Wednesday, July 30, 2008, Skype never had less than 7 million users actively video- or voice- calling (<<http://www.skypestats.com/>>).

Technology also offers avenues for “relationships” that are one-sided. A plethora of television programs allow for felt relationships with fictional characters via soaps, series, or miniseries, and consume 1-5 hours of a viewer's time each and every week. Nearly four million people “follow” Ashton Kutcher via his Twitter feed, of whom the vast majority will never even see him (<<http://twitter.com/aplusk>>). Nevertheless, Gergen illustrates that these types of relationships can have significant effects on life through his discussion of events in which “ordinary” people acted in drastic ways because of their exposure to celebrities or shows in the media (Gergen 56).

Relationships are just one aspect of technology multiplying a person's world, however. The Internet provides an endless stream of news and current events, with newspapers being dwarfed by online news delivered via email, RSS feeds, websites, blogs, and directly to cell phones. Bragging rights around the water cooler now require knowledge of the personal lives of hundreds of celebrities, familiarity with the stats from two or three professional sports leagues, informed judgments on political news from six continents, an understanding of global economics, and cultural immersion in music and movies spanning a dozen or more genres. To be “current” requires exposure to a nearly endless stream of societal spheres.

The Effect

What is the effect on society of all this multiplication? Does life become “better,” or just “bigger”? There are certainly benefits to be gained, such as health care advancements via expanded academic interaction, but what are the unintended consequences of every American seeking to make his or her own life as expansive and interesting as modern technology will permit? I want to briefly examine the following drawbacks that I consider ought to inform us as we decide to what extent we expand our own personal social circles: that an increase in relationships leads to a reduction in relational depth, that more social opportunities results in less accountability, and that abundant social and employment options creates an atmosphere that requires less commitment and dependability. All of these factors may in fact decrease the quality of life we lead!

Gergen looks at the process of “social saturation” by which one becomes immersed into so many varying social circumstances that *multiphrenia* becomes a reality: “one begins to experience the vertigo of unlimited multiplicity” (Gergen 56). Time becomes factor in limiting the depth of relationships that one can maintain: spending 5 minutes each on the average 130 Facebook friends would require nearly 11 hours of time each week, and few would consider 5 minutes a week sufficient for maintaining any significant type of relationship.

Unfortunately, this loss of relational depth has troubling consequences. Larry Crabb, a respected psychologist himself, has written an entire book arguing that the explosion in psychology and psychiatry in recent decades can largely be tied to this

growing multiphrenia. In *Connecting*, he states, “When two people *connect*... something is poured out of one and into the other that has the power to heal the soul of its deepest wounds and restore it to health... But it rarely happens” (Crabb xi). He goes on to opine that if humans would learn to truly connect at the deepest levels, those relationships would bring healing in themselves. However, in our socially saturated present, we often lack the time required for this.

Randy Frazee reinforces this notion by looking at the differences between community-based life in which some some cultures don't even have words for individualism, vs. today's society that is built around such a concept (44). This society, he says, “is a dark, dreary, and lonely place to be—the place many people today have almost unconsciously adopted as their operating system for living” (72). A Gallup poll he cites reveals that as many as one-third of Americans admit to frequent periods of loneliness (33).

As we consider the extreme social mobility that living in and within reach of so many different social circles and opportunities, it becomes clear that this brings with it a lack of accountability. A recent advertising program for Las Vegas promises that “what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.” The message is clear: extra social circles means the opportunity to surround oneself by a crowd that will affirm or accept whatever particular whim or desire strikes oneself at the moment. Want to be a swinger? Find a swinger's society. Want to fight? Find some cage fighters to associate with. Want to drink yourself into oblivion? There's a fraternity on campus known for that. Want to

experiment with your sexuality? There are groups who will welcome you with open arms. Want an underage prostitute? Sexual tourism in southeast Asia is booming.

While there have always been social groupings to provide these kinds of rapport, they have never been so readily and casually available. This leads to a multiplication of people who feel at liberty to “experiment,” perhaps engaging in activities that they never would dare to try in a closed community. Sometimes, however, these ill-considered ventures leave participants with permanent scars and regrets, and encourage further jaded immersion into yet another attempt to find something with meaning. Perhaps all of this is best summed up in the words of a blogger from a smaller city in North Dakota, “Small towns are filled with gossipers. Big towns, are too, but because of sheer numbers, it is impossible for everybody to know everybody else's business. There are no secrets in small town” (<<http://goddesscassandra.blogspot.com/>>). There is “freedom” to do the culturally disdained in the anonymity that social saturation provides. One's “deviant” friends won't interact with one's “respectable” friends, making it possible to split the personality into two, or three, or three hundred different “me's”.

Liberal thought typically regards the fact that this means community accountability becomes a thing of the past. Unfortunately, this kind of anti-moralistic libertinistic thought does not fully consider that even they desire some degree of communal accountability. Will not even the most liberal of thinkers consider the child prostitution alluded to earlier as detestable? Wherein strong social ties may have prevented the frequenting of this type of venture by sexual “tourists” in the past, this sort of “freedom” has made that very exploitation immensely profitable.

A final negative side effect of *multiphrenia* comes in the way of dependability and commitments. An lowworkforce.org presentation on involving youth in community cautions leaders against involving youth who don't have the time to commit to the organization, but are only looking for opportunities to build their resumes (<http://www.iowaworkforce.org/>). Today's youth, faced with the availability of a nearly infinite supply of disconnected networks means that a "two-week's notice" when leaving a job isn't necessary, and if a relationship ends poorly one need not worry about possible future employers or friends every hearing about it.

In working with a youth organization, I have noticed that today's youth are increasingly resistant to making commitments, because they aren't sure what other opportunities may arise. Not wanting to break a commitment and simultaneously having a life that is fragmented among a myriad of sports, events, and responsibilities, students merely wait until the last moment to choose which path to take. Planning for a specific number of participants in an event becomes a near impossibility. Parents assume that they need to let their child figure out what they want to do with their lives, yet the result is that the student may never figure out how to do so, because they can't commit their life to any purpose long enough to make it worthwhile. Skipping through 5 majors and a dozen "careers" is the likely result. Pensions have been replaced with easily-transportable IRAs, and employee longevity has been supplanted by the event of the "year off," required to discover who oneself is amid the morass of countless selves.¹

¹ For a satirical perspective on this phenomenon, I recommend visiting <http://stuffwhitepeoplelike.com/2009/01/11/120-taking-a-year-off/>.

Perhaps most indicative of this, however, are marriage and divorce rates. Since the 1970's, marriage rates have decreased while divorce rates have increased, while the occurrence of divorce has shifted heavily towards the early years of marriage (Wolfers, Figure 1 & 2). As the number of relationships available to each person increase, the necessity of maintaining them decreases. Decades ago it might require a move to a new state to find a *tabula rasa*, whereas today it might be as simple as switching to the bar or the church a few blocks further down the road, or enrolling in a different private school or university.

How Should Christians Respond?

This phenomenon obviously has serious implications for the Church. If we consider the Church to be a place of healing (cf. Romans 12 and Ephesians 4) and accountability (cf. Hebrews 13 and Galatians 6), we must find ways to combat the trends of Social Saturation that work so vehemently against the community that is necessary for these ends. If we find even a kernel of truth in Crabb's assertion that healing best happens in true and deep relationships, the Church must become a place that provides those relationships.

Frazer sums up the assault against multiphrenia in a phrase: "we must consolidate our worlds into one" (35). Quite simply, we cannot do effective ministry if we chase the wind of society in every direction. This is not to say that the Church should isolate itself in a commune and shut its doors to the world, but rather that

each member of the church must intentionally limit the number of their engagements with others for the purpose of building depth in those engagements.

This requires a lot of humility in a world that values breadth of experience and knowledge. Sacrificing the ability to stay up on all of the latest sports statistics may be necessary in order to entertain guests over dinner frequently. Forgoing involvement with a club or theater group or “good cause” may provide the time required to fully enjoy the relationships formed at work or in another club. Finding ways to integrate newcomers into existing church programs may be preferable to creating more events or programs that will further fracture the time of volunteers.

As we pursue *fewer*, but *more significant* relationships and social interactions, the resultant increase in trust and commitment will lead to doors that are opened wider for evangelism, arenas for personal and social accountability, and the healing that love, grace, and mercy can provide most effectively in solid relationships. We may or may not look over-committed, but the individualism and availability of social opportunities that modernity has provided make it a likely reality and ever-present temptation. We must refuse to be tempted to spend our lives and our ministry in pursuit of the next ephemeral opportunity, and instead pursue meaningful relationships in durable community.

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