Partnering in the Time of COVID-19

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As a research-practitioner focused on the ethics of physical interaction, the infection control actions in response to the COVID-19 crisis directly challenge the foundation of my work. Friends and colleagues have been asking, "how we can meaningfully relate to each other now that we are collectively in a state of social distancing?". My initial reaction was pessimistic: we can't. We have temporarily lost the opportunity to physically do things together, such as playing music and dancing together, as well as simply sharing physical space at work, on public transportation, and so on. I found myself grieving from the sudden disappearance of physical connection.

As a university academic, there's a rhetoric of *digital substitution* that I find especially jarring, as economic pressures mount to "stay productive" and run in a "business as usual" model. As a dancer, my intuition is that we lose critical points of connection because partnering is contingent on *physically* sharing space together. However, after coming across edited online videos of individuals creating at home, playing an instrument, singing, and even dancing, I am considering how this physical distance may actually expand what it means to partner. It's not the same, but it's not nothing.

Physicality

Physical proximity provides many benefits beyond the obvious fact of being physically near one another. Proximity offers a level of immersion and engagement, and this is where our language starts to fall short. There are biological considerations, like the fact that when we share space, we breathe the same air. From research in physiology, we also know that our bodies are made of more than chemistry — we oscillate and vibrate at different frequencies. Our electric nervous systems react to different internal and external stimuli, making our vibrations variable rather than static. Sometimes we *resonate* with each other, sometimes we don't. While we have plenty of techniques for capturing electrical activity in the body — electromyography (muscular activity), electrocardiograms (heartbeat), and electroencephalography (brain activity) — it is far more difficult to make sense of the data in terms of how we influence each other when we are in close proximity versus when we are not. Without the possibility of being in close proximity, this crisis has led me to consider the ways we interact digitally. If we cannot share the same space, what can we do instead to practice connecting in subtle ways?

We can start by considering the current language being used in this time of crisis. The term social distancing can be misleading at best and damaging at worst. For those who have access to computers and the internet, who have secure homes, and who are used to working from home, there is seemingly little difference. For some who live on their own, have limited or no access to online platforms, whose work is experiential, or do not have secure living situations,

there is a real danger that using the term "social" distancing poses. Some of the leading news sources are already being careful to use the term "physical" distancing" rather than social. By emphasizing physical distance, we can use this time of distancing to reflect deeply on what socializing means for us, as individuals and as members of a global community.

Digital Substitution

Many institutions of learning and business organizations have made a shift to online platforms, which have their own host of glitches. Digital lag is one example. When we are physically together, we can have conversations without delay, without having to worry about the image freezing or the sound distorting. If we treat our online interactions in the same way, with the same expectations and values, we set ourselves up for disappointment. This disappointment reveals the significance of larger values such as alignment, coordination, and synchronicity -- we like when things happen at the time we expect them to, and we become frustrated when our interactions misalign.

When we rely on technology to facilitate connection, coordination problems can emerge from weak understanding of what it means to relate to others. Turn-taking is a prime example, in which conversations devolve into one person speaking while others wait for their turn to speak. Turn-taking can be exhausting, leading to decreased motivation and burnout. When this mode of interaction becomes the norm, we miss out on opportunities to acknowledge each other -- to resonate beyond a reductive "you say, I say" model.

Upon deeper reflection, I have come to see this global crisis as an opportunity to consider how we can practice being receptive and responsive in creative ways which are *alternative* to the act of being physically together. After all, interaction is so much more than mere turn-taking. For example, let's take the concept of *dialogue*. 20th century philosopher Martin Buber, author of the renowned text "I and Thou", argues that dialogue is the act of turning towards each other without necessarily having a prescribed goal for the interaction. This is a particular mode of relating which allows us to practice care through the act of listening, receiving, and responding to each other. In close proximity, we are able to practice being receptive without particular goals in mind. We acknowledge the presence of others through positive affirmations such as eye contact, nodding, smiling -- all of which likely have electrical ramifications for our nervous systems. I believe these practices of acknowledgement can be brought into the virtual space when we take the time to reflect on all the possibilities that technology enables.

Complementarity

I see this crisis as a time to deeply examine our value systems in relating to one another. One value that seems to be emerging, at least for the dance and music community, is something I have referred to as *complementarity*. In taking an online dance class, it is difficult and often frustrating to attempt to follow along by synchronizing with the instructor. In participating in a music "jam", where individuals log on to play collectively, we cannot perfectly synchronize and coordinate our sound as we could if we were physically together in the same space. I find myself repeatedly stating that the experience is not the same as playing together, but the experience is also not "nothing". Despite the frustration, there is still some point of connection. I have found, at least for myself, that the "all-or-nothing" mentality leads to deeper frustration and maladaptive forms of relating.

By having the observational resolution to be receptive to each other, we can come to see the loss of synchronicity as a creative constraint. If I let go of my desire to move synchronously, in favor of witnessing and responding in *complementary* ways, then I am expressing a different sort of willingness: to be in dialogue. We can interact by playing with repetition, canon, call and response, contrast and opposition, and other formal and informal aspects of movement and sound. The value of synchronicity, alignment, and coordination can be replaced with a willingness to be receptive and to bear witness beyond what is happening on the screen. I have found that this willingness allows a parallel experience of interacting in the same physical space -- it's definitely not the same, but it's definitely not nothing. The broader values of patience and care can still be embodied within virtual interactions.

Care

By taking the time to deeply reflect on our value systems, we can hone our ways of caring for and about each other. While the energy of proximity is an integral aspect of relating receptivity and responsiveness, the experience of witnessing and being witnessed reveals another dimension of partnering. I invite individuals across disciplines to consider the constraint of physical distancing as an opportunity to deepen our relationships to, and understanding of, what it means to be connected. Through phone calls, during zoom meetings, or in isolation at home, there are still ways to practice care by acknowledging each other and by letting go of the desire for synchronicity in favor of complementarity. Being receptive to each other in this moment can be a radical act of empathy.

I have been inspired by some of the beautiful collaborations that have blossomed in this crisis, as well as frustrated by the reality of so many artistic postponements and cancellations. Taken together, both the inspiration and the frustration can cultivate a deeper sense of care for each other. We have a chance to reflect on the values underlying how we relate personally and professionally. We have a chance to reflect on what it means to be productive. We have a chance to be creative in simple ways of getting through the day.

The important thing to remember is that these virtual interactions are *alternatives*, not substitutions. The language employed of "pivoting" online, while choreographic in nature, is still a mere metaphor. The pivot is a mental one, and it is easy to become pessimistic fueled by the fear that embodied practices are already on a steep social decline. We need to work on creative alternatives rather than relying on the rhetoric of digital substitution. We need to remember that receptivity and responsiveness are values that can still be practiced, so that when we can share space together again, we will not have lost our ability to manifest care.