

Chapter 9. The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Writer: The Growing, Unsatisfiable Hunger of Connection

The human capacity for language has extended our capacities for communicating with others to share knowledge, perceptions, observations, and thoughts as well as to cooperate or contend with each other in complex intentional ways. The contents of the signs we create to symbolically communicate with others, in turn, can guide our own actions and self-understanding, in effect reorganizing our internal neurological system. Written language has extended these capacities far beyond our immediately observable worlds and beyond the people in sound range. The creation of written language has marked an important juncture in the transformation of ourselves as sociocultural creatures. The technologies of the recent centuries and most recent years have further offered transformative possibilities of who we are.

As I have experienced writing, each of the developments in communicating beyond ourselves has created a dependence on those connections and extensions for emotional, psychological, and practical sense-making as well as for gaining social information and cultural knowledge, cooperating with others, becoming parts of collectives, and taking action. This dependence and enrichment made me and perhaps others hungry for these connections and feel the want of them, creating the need to share internal experiences and observations while also finding points of intersection with others. Yet while these developments hold out the hope of finding more connection and common ground with others, language, especially written language, also creates the potential for greater individuation, difference, and challenge in sharing observations, knowledge, motives, and inner sensations. The need for common sense-making and collaboration pushes some of us writing humans further into sociocultural communication and the arts and crafts of using our symbols, as we find we have more differences to overcome. Both personal emotional comfort and the success of our collective depend on our communicative effectiveness. This has the paradoxical effect for some of increasing the potential for loneliness among the people most immediately around us as we draw on more distant sources while decreasing the opportunity to engage in immediate dialog and personal bonding with some of those writers who most influence us. To unpack the human hunger for connection, however, we need to travel back to the formation of life and follow some of the psychological implications of our biological and cultural evolution.

Sensation in Simple Life

Biological evolution has created exquisite devices for monitoring and adjusting internal states of all life, from single cell algae and protozoa to complex, large

brained mammals with extensive networks of nerve cells throughout their body and massive aggregations in the brain. In Antonio Damasio's accounts (1999, 2010, 2018, 2021) threats to organismic well-being, or homeostasis, are intelligently sensed and responded to through various chemical and haptic mechanisms that run throughout creatures small and large, although there may be no self-conscious awareness of them. These mechanisms sense imbalances and needs to take action rectifying the identified problems.

Though they may not have the neural means to be aware of it, it is a hard life for simpler organisms, consisting perhaps of only one or a few cells. They are dependent on what they can sense on their own to act to maintain life without any need for feelings. The biochemical processes that sense imbalances and respond to them happen out of sight and without the need of minds to notice, monitor, and act. Some organisms, like hydra, starfish, or jellyfish, have nerve cells, but the information from them is not aggregated in anything like a brain. Without a central neural system, they have no ability to represent or find patterns in what they sense. Without even what we might call feelings or emotions, they adjust internal states and external actions, though they have little control over their external conditions except to float or wander into more environmentally friendly and nutrient rich locales. As individuals, they are on their own, though populations may thrive and multiply in more favorable conditions.

Learning to Feel

As nerve cells become aggregated in more evolved animals, some of the sensed disruptions to homeostasis can be felt—that is, can evoke feelings, such as of discomfort, hunger, pain, or pleasure—which then evoke organismic attention and action. Thirst helps organisms to seek liquid and tiredness to seek rest. These feelings about things sensed can be monitored and thought about through formation of images where these nerve cells are aggregated, as in the brain. Noticing where in the body pain comes from requires some internal neurological mapping of the parts of the body. Neural aggregation of information can create patterned images of states of internal being and of sensed external conditions. Specialized sensory organisms of sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste detect heat, moisture, threats to the cell structure, presence of nutrients, and other useful survival information. Organisms thus are able to monitor their environments to help them navigate, locate sustenance, and avoid dangers. These external sensors also feed the information they collect into the internal monitoring and control systems to allow the organism to adjust. This added internal and external information and the ability to process it with greater coherence improves the organism's relation to the environment. It may not even be aware of some of its adjustments to the environment nor its choices or choice making processes, as Damasio (1999, 2010) would note, or as would Michael Tomasello (2022) in his recent work on the evolution of agency. Nor would there be any expectation of working with others, or

even reflective understanding of the possibility, nor even neural mechanisms to gain and process such information—for all the images would be of the organism's own state and immediate conditions. Some might call this the freedom of the self-contained self, communicating and regulating the self as an individual within the walls of the organism with extensive information about internal conditions and the external world collected through sense organs. All this information is transmitted within the neural system in the full richness with which it is collected. To put this in terms of more complex animals, we can call this communication within the skin barrier, transmitted and processed internally through the neural system.

The Emergence of Consciousness and Learning to Communicate With Other Organisms

This communication and choice making internally does not necessarily require monitoring or self-awareness of the process. Damasio (1999, 2010, 2018, 2021) has seen the origins of consciousness, particularly in the organism's monitoring of its own feelings, thinking, and actions and its identifying these as belonging to that organism itself, as central to the formation of consciousness, which then allows for a recognition of its own interests, intentional choice making, and planning. This understanding of consciousness then lays the ground for understanding other creatures as also having a consciousness which can be influenced by one's actions. Exactly where in evolutionary history consciousness appears and which creatures we might currently attribute some degree of consciousness in Damasio's sense is unclear, but any foraging, predatory, or hunting behavior implies a degree of consciousness (for example, a spider's strategic location of a web), as would any behavior that would intentionally attempt to influence others of one's species (for example, a mating display or a cry for others to engage in a hunt) or of another species (such as puffing one's size to appear frightening, or hiding to avoid being captured and eaten).

Life gets a bit easier, though more complex and more constrained, as organisms develop possibilities to communicate with one another, whether by symbiotic sharing of chemicals or other resources (as with trees' mycorrhizal networks), the emission of chemicals that affect one's neighbors (as with ant pheromones) or affect other species (as flower smells attract pollinators or skunk smells chase away predators), tactile behavior (mammalian nuzzling or fighting), or noticing of each other's behavior (as bird formations arise by visual alignment with neighboring birds, or animals attempt to evade seen or heard predators), or by sounds externalizing feelings (as in danger calls of many mammals). Some of these communications are of feelings evoking similar or contrasting feelings in others (cries of danger or delight), while others may indicate intentions, capacities, or actions (such as mating calls or sounds to scare opponents). Some do not seem to require any conscious awareness of a feeling self or elective agency, but others involve

choice making, planning, and agency, which would imply a sense of one's self, thoughts, and actions—and thus, in Damasio's terms, consciousness.

Even without language or symbolic communication, the information shared, whether for cooperation or contention, allows the organism to influence the behaviors of other organisms, often with high degrees of mutual influence and planned action, as possibly with beavers constructing dams. Presenting information allows signaling or even misleading of others of capabilities, intentions, or actions, whether by planned means or evolutionary adaptation. Through gaining information from beyond the skin barrier, organisms learn friends and enemies, then learn to work with them, avoid them, or mislead them—or to capture and eat them. Even notoriously loner creatures such as wolves become social creatures in this sense of gaining information from their own species and others and thus being aware to some degree of the states of creatures around them.

Some of this communication goes beyond the transmission of feeling to share images, perceptions, or observations, perhaps in some symbolic way. The cooperation of beavers suggests they somehow communicate design of the dam and the contribution of each piece of work of each of the dam builders, though this likely is emergent in the course of building the dam, with accomplished elements of the construction indicating to others consequent work to be done. Chimp calls, bird songs, and whale songs seem to signal unique identities and domains as well as observations of threats in the environment; they may convey even more precise information we do not much understand yet. Nonetheless, even though organisms become more sophisticated in this communication beyond the skin barrier, the signal remains thin compared to all that occurs within the large numbers of neurons and control systems within each of the complex creatures. And every external communication must be processed—perceived through each individual's sense organs to be brought inside the skin barrier and integrated into the internal neurobiological operations. In short, a lot more signaling is happening and coordinating internally in the neurological system than what is noticed from the outside as salient and relevant for the organism's well-being.

Organisms, as they gain from this communication, come to depend on it and seek it for immediate preservation, well-being, and awareness of the ambient world in which they make their way, of course still driven by their internal imperatives and processes. Parental nurturing, awareness of predators, food sources, potential mates, and the like are of great value; lacking that connection can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation.¹ The ability to cooperate with others and take on differentiated roles make animals dependent on their social collectives, which may include host or symbiotic species or even species preyed upon. The organism in a sense becomes less lonely in addressing the difficulties of living but also may feel that loneliness more consciously as it becomes aware of its dependence on cooperation, information, and knowledge from other organisms, including these

1. Evidence for loneliness among animals is reviewed in John T. Cacioppo, et. al, 2015.

organisms' own states and intentions. That information from outside and its processing affects the neural development inside the organism, changing its internal connections and reactions. The organism comes to seek and interpret such information by scanning the environment visually, auditorily, olfactorily, tactilely. It may even seek responses by prods, calls, visual displays, or the like.

Symbolic Communication and Cultural Knowledge

Language and other symbolic capacities among humans and other animals bring another level to this sociality (along with potential competition and hostility)—a level that previously would be unanticipated and not therefore missed by the organisms, though drawing on prior developments in neurological complexity, sociality, mutual awareness, memory, and communication. The repurposing of these earlier capacities seems to require cultural learning among like-minded, cultural creatures, along with refinement of existing biological potentials. Tomasello's (2019, 2022) comparative studies of chimps and human children suggested some of the kinds of empathy and social cooperation that seem requisite for language teaching and learning, including early ability for both infant and adult to track each other's eye gaze. Tracking eye gaze allows humans to notice what others are attending to and thus focus on common objects. This shared attention supports cognitive and emotional sharing and awareness of how language can affect the mind and feelings of others.

Language expands the potential for cooperation and coordinated action. When we turn language in on ourselves, language can also help us organize our perceptions, understanding of the world, planning, and actions. This internalization further increases our power to externally share with others as we are better able to share the contents of our own minds and thoughts with others beyond signaling feelings, which we are typically able to do at a much earlier age. Collaborations can become more complex as we can understand our role and its contribution to the whole. One can hear reports of things beyond one's immediate senses and one can participate in group planning.

Language further transforms consciousness as we find words to identify ourselves, the objects of our attention, our feelings, and our thoughts. These words then allow us to share our experiences, observations, thoughts, and plans with others. For writers, of course, much of the communicative activity requires conscious awareness, as writers turn impulses into words to be then transcribed; there may also be extensive conscious planning, choice making, and weighing of alternatives. Readers, as well, must consciously process the signs on a page as words, which then they recognize as meaningful in conscious thought. Writers become increasingly aware of the difference between their words and thoughts from those of others. The value of reading and writing hangs on the recognition of ownership of conscious thoughts both in the words one produces and in the words received.

We are even able through language to organize our experience to align with the collective knowledge of others in a group. Words can be powerfully influential in aligning members of the group around concepts, explanations, modes of behavior, expectation, and strong bonds of affiliation and commonality. Yet we must remember that words are artifices we create to communicate with others, and we have far more neurons than we have words. Every word must either arise out of or be interpreted into complex neural processes. Internally perceived neurological events activate us more intimately and viscerally than even the most powerful of words (which of course depend on how they resonate within our internal neurological systems for their power). Further, words resonate differently within the differently organized neural systems of different people, whose neural connections have developed through a lifetime of experiences and language exposure and use. So each word that we may share conveys only an approximate meaning which evokes different neural states within the separate skins of different people. Consider how we each have different sets of words that resonate deeply within us and that we find deeply meaningful, as suggested by the personal slogans and quotations people thumbtack to their corkboards, add to their electronic signatures, or post on their social media walls.

Nonetheless, meanings set in motion through the finite, constructed signs of words and other symbolic means can become powerful internal organizers of the self as they are used to organize perceptions, calculations, and reasoning, thereby influencing the connections within one's neural system. Words can be thresholds to concepts that are deeply persuasive to the individual and can become central to their perceptions and feelings. Consider for example when people feeling distress find a diagnosis that seems to fit them. Even if the named condition (with the research and knowledge that comes with the naming) does not lead to an effective treatment, it changes the person's orientation toward their feelings and experienced realities, whether increasing despair or creating some intellectual distance from feelings and perceptions. Less at the extreme, consider the effect of defining some foods as healthy or harmful, palatable or unpalatable. Those designations change our behaviors and change our feelings at the food's ingestion or even sight—even where those designations are culturally local and not a matter of biology. People may experience various organ meats or certain fruits as disgusting and nauseating and even may throw up if they discover they have unwittingly ingested the taboo food. Other fruits or meats may be culturally experienced as delightful beyond their effect on taste receptors. People who become vegetarian later in life may have their rational reasoning reinforced by their changed sense of taste, delight, or disgust.

The Impact of Language on Our Selves

As our internal processes become more influenced by others, we have the words to better share what is going on within ourselves, what we have heard or seen, or

how what we observe makes or doesn't make sense. We become capable of comparing and testing our knowledge with those of others. We come to depend on confirming our senses against the senses of others we come to trust, and we can compare and confirm the wisdom of plans. Often our closest bonds of sharing and communication are among those who have grown up and live in the same kinds of circumstances we have, as in our same household or tribe, and accordingly have experienced some of the same events, cultural practices, and cultural reasoning. We may even have used the same words in interpreting those events. If we, however, experience some unusual conditions or hardships or we find ourselves driven by taboo impulses, we may find that those who understand us best may come from places not local to us. We in fact may seek them out, as we look for support or fellow feeling, whether from people who share diseases or traumas, who have less common passions like climbing mountains, or who have taboo attractions. They can help us in our self-understanding and can become perhaps our best collaborators in these specialized domains, even if they differ from us in other ways, because they "know what it is like" and are best able to recognize what we indicate by our words, having seen or felt similar.

In a world of language, we become hungry for information from relevant others and impelled to share with them, whether for immediate preservation (to address pain or hunger), or to help make sense of and organize internal complexity and processes, or to expand our knowledge and experience of the world to make sense of it. In this sharing, our closeness to others and empathy for their conditions can grow, creating strong bonds. The potential and need for sociality expand as our capacity for it increases. But the limitations of the signals by which that sharing of feelings, self-understanding, experiences, problem solving, or collaboration occurs mean we must find interlocutors who process what we say in ways sufficiently close to the impulses that have led to our formulations. We call this the process of finding friends or locating groups of like-minded people. The more they are able to understand what we mean, what we are indicating by our words, the more we are connected and feel ourselves having common substance and interests—Kenneth Burke (1969) might call this identification or consubstantiation.

Without that sharing one feels incomplete and under constant threat, even insecure and uncertain about whether one's thoughts have gone astray. Consider the Old English poems "The Seafarer" (Hostetter, 2024) and "The Wanderer" (Hostetter, 2022), which not only talk of the physical dangers the isolated poets find themselves in and the missed comforts of the collective life but also the sense of exile, not being part of others. As fitting with the culture of their times, both poets turn to God to seek some sense of the missed communion and consubstantiation. A major appeal of a number of religions has been the personal relation to a god that understands the individual as an ideal parent or friend might in ways that ordinary humans do not seem to do.

Also consider the impulse we have to persuade others to agree with our views, to confirm that we have made proper sense of the world and are choosing sensible

actions, even when there appears no particular benefit for us to do so. We need confirmation we are not living under private illusions and delusions or are off on an emotional sidetrack. Consider the need of the narrator of “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (Coleridge, 1798/n.d.), who stops the wedding guest to tell the harrowing tale of venturing into the supernatural, an experience which has driven him to the edge of sanity but has left him with a gospel of love which he is impelled to share. Consider the loneliness of those who have hallucinations, add up their experience in novel ways, invent ideas or ways of organizing experiences, or make plans that put them at odds with others. As they become aware of just how different their view of the world is, they become hungry to seek confirmation in events and conditions and may go to great lengths to make up stories to justify their views.

How Culture and Language Learn to Travel

Within oral cultures the circulation of symbols and the organization of life and experiences are mostly local. People growing up within such groups learn to collaborate with those around them and come to view their worlds through the words and experiences available to them. Linguistic resources are limited by what circulates locally, and individual consciousness often becomes closely identified with the consciousness of the collective. Accordingly, people have great need and desire to fit in with the people they live among. Saying something different or challenging risks ruptures in necessary collaborations. The pressure is always to repair breaches and rejoin the local collective under the available roles and conditions, expressing what is comfortably expressed. The alternative is exile, ostracism, or being identified as having lost one’s mind, unless one is lucky enough to be designated as having been visited by the gods.

Material technologies and artifacts can travel beyond the people we see daily, loosely connecting practices of distant societies, but the most intense bonds and shared perceptions remain local. The social need to get along with each other encourages accommodations and endemic approximations in communication, good enough for the practical purposes in the moment and rarely held to greater coherence or accountability or principle over time.

From the time that humans started to migrate across the planet, there have been travelers who have had contact with others—whether in trading, or war. Other cosmopolitan roles developed as news bearers, entertainers, teachers of specialized arts, proselytizers, or seekers of wisdom moved from group to group. Such travelers tended to remain as outsiders, communing most fully with those who shared cosmopolitan experiences. The activities and forms of cosmopolitanism themselves are formative of ways of thinking, acting, and relating, often built around the activity that is the basis of their travels. Musicians, jugglers, carneys, traders, or mercenaries are typically most trusting and trusted among those of their professions but typically have been viewed with suspicion as marginal outsiders by the communities they travel among.

Written Language, Finally

Written language, however, increases radically the information, ideas, alignment, organizations, identities, affiliations, and activities we connect with from a distance, even while we continue living within a local group. As Jack Goody (1986) documented, writing can allow people to gather wealth and power or to be influenced by ideas from beyond the local oral world. Humans can be regulated by governmental, legal, or religious strictures and structures that come from a great distance. Even if a person is not literate, interpreters and mediators such as scribes, priests, lawyers, government officials, or accountants can connect one to the worlds opened up by literacy.

Literate connections made with those at a distance may also draw us to migrate to distant or more cosmopolitan places. The rise of literacy happened simultaneously with the formation of urban centers, courts, and religious centers as people became drawn to the center of power, wealth, and knowledge. Literacy provided the tools for those centers to extend their reach, while creating the need for more literates to maintain and increase power and wealth. Literacy soon supported complex cultures and activities in the ancient Middle East, such as medicine, astronomy, prophecy, or literature. All these early literate activities became intertwined with the development of education (see Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson, 2011).

Literacy also extended the expressive reach and personal identities of readers and writers. Messages travelling through time and space can influence people whom writers may never meet. Literates can find identity and communion with people far away, particularly if messages from other times and places articulate experiences, provide enlightening knowledge and ideas, seem accepting of local taboos, or satisfy curiosities that are not readily supported in one's local community. In reading, one can recognize one's self in thoughts from other societies. Through texts one can imagine different audiences and refer to experiences, objects, and ideas locally absent or ignored. One can take on roles and identities one would never express locally.

Uses of literacy can influence and shape the individual's experience, development, perceptions, potentials for actions, and thus the organization of the person's plastic neural systems. Literacy also provides tools for self-examination, monitoring, and understanding that add layers to thinking and provide tools for examining one's expressions of observations, feelings, ideas, and principles—drawing on an expanding literate environment. That is, the social changes brought about by literacy draw us personally more deeply into varied and dispersed social relations and identities, goals and activities, ways of thinking and perceiving, coordination and systematic organization of activity, and even communion with people with whom we share unusual experiences, forms of attention and interests, or ideas.

Writing and Individual Differentiation

The varied possibilities of connection afforded by a rich literate environment proliferate the possibilities of lines of personal development as we find deep

connection and learning from others far away. Those distal connections can differentiate us increasingly from some of the people physically closest to us. Books and schooling bring ideas and information from afar, with teachers who may also have been immersed in books from elsewhere. They may have been educated and even grown up elsewhere to bring new skills into the community. In short, teachers often bring some cosmopolitanism into even the most closed of communities. Schools, even at the most basic level, bring together instructors who devote their attention to different forms of knowledge and kinds of group activities. Schools, furthermore, train people for different roles, many closely tied to the needs of the more cosmopolitan parts of society. Some teachers attend to trade and finances, others to specialized crafts, others to medical and health practices, others to knowledge of the heavens and the earth. The varied knowledges for these separate tasks give rise to disciplines, subdisciplines, or research and theory groups. These many kinds of proliferating differentiations allow us to form our own paths and develop in distinctive ways. Moreover, within the same specialized area, people may bring different resources from their other interests and activities, complex personal histories, and even the books and articles that capture their attention.

Thus the more complex, rich, and varied the sociocultural worlds beyond the skin barrier one engages with through literacy, the more complex and varied becomes the organization of the self within the skin barrier. That internal reorganization itself guides how one experiences and acts in the world. People who make car parts, for example, act in a world of designs, specifications, commerce, stock sheets, and mechanics, among others, which creates common interests with different people in different organizations and worksites.

Our internal neurological monitoring and maintenance of heart, liver, and other internal organ functions may go on much the same as in other animals, continuing unnoticed and unnoted, except when things go wrong, leading us to consult with literate medical professionals. Nonetheless, these unnoticed functions may be affected by the levels of anxiety, blood pressure, and other somatic consequences of what we perceive and how we interpret the world around us, inflected by literate communication. The businessperson (perhaps informed by management and business theory learned at the university) worries about supply chains, production, deliveries, competitive pricing, and profits and losses; regularly scours spread-sheets, order forms, product specifications, machine part catalogues, state road regulations and taxes; and may suffer rapid changes in cortisol and blood pressure levels. Or consider how people use the wisdom offered by self-help books, exercise manuals, nutrition guides, and medical information to self-regulate their personal lives and bodies.

In modern literate societies humans' internal and external communication interact in managing personal conditions, but at the skin barrier the modality changes, with a further change in modality from speech to writing to overcome distance of time and space. As we move outward from our skin, we are able to draw on more, but we need to translate and compose our complex sensations

and meanings into words to be intelligible to people living in different social, cultural, and material circumstances. The few words we share trigger even more varied neurological events in people who have led increasingly different lives. The messages we receive and those we send are increasingly open to interpretation and adaptation.

Overcoming Barriers of Differentiation

Of course, parts of our modern lives remain local, shared with people close to us, over meals or in gatherings, outings, activities, even shared reading. Yet even within families or community groups or sports teams, people read different books, watch different movies, go to different schools at different times, and develop different thoughts and perspectives they might want to share. We wonder how relatives get to see things so differently and hold different positions. We marvel or become upset at the different skills and imaginations and knowledge each person brings, though we may not understand exactly what they know or can do, or the ideas that excite them. The differentiation that comes with literate engagement with different communities at a distance further tests the limits of tolerance within each family, community, or team. It makes us aware of the difficulties of sharing our thoughts with people who interpret our words so differently through their personal systems of meaning. We may learn to take care with our words to make them as intelligible as possible to the audiences which might encounter them. This testing of our words against others' interpretive frameworks can also lead us to refine our thoughts, overcoming the idiosyncrasies of what we might try to express. Or it can lead us to despair at the impossibility of communicating with others, leaving us feeling isolated and giving up on the attempt of making ourselves understood.

Even with our different neurological constructions of meaning, we can at times develop shared understandings and become sufficiently intelligible to each other over shared experiences and projects. Members of different parties in a legislature can at times come to agreement on laws that they can feel proud of contributing to, even if every provision and every word is not precisely how they would represent it or would mandate exactly the action they would want. Lawyers can commit themselves to the judicial process and be proud of their contribution even if their clients may lose or judgments may not always be exactly what they want. In fact, if the arguments of all parties did not differ there would be little need for courts and judicial judgments. This is also true of people participating in research, theoretical, or creative professions—all of which thrive on novel perspectives, experiences, and claims that are then adjudicated through the practices, criteria, and needs of each field.

We can try to varying degrees make ourselves understood, learn from each other, and come to contingent agreement on some matters. But no matter how robust our shared understanding is at any moment for any particular purpose,

new considerations can change views and impel us to discuss new issues. Further, confirmation that we have been understood and approved by our readers is even rarer than in an oral face-to-face world. Often enough we get no response from readers, or if it comes it may be long delayed and borne only by written words. Further the response may be ambiguous or reflectively nuanced with distinctions or demurrals or even outright rejection. Even though the new social media platforms offer opportunity for rapid feedback, the response is often brief and blunt, offering little evidence of detailed understanding. Contributions receiving no response can leave one wondering whether anyone noticed or cared about the words, picture, or video one posted. These platforms seem to tempt writers to seek notice and quick response. Social media may proliferate popularity and even passions but not necessarily a sharing of minds.

This is why writing becomes so important and difficult—studying audiences, finding common ground, identifying topoi of persuasion, choosing recognizable genres that mediate activities, gathering and representing compelling evidence, sequencing the reasoning to carry our audiences along, or finding phrasing that speaks deeply to readers. At the same time, writers may be struggling for coherence, as different words with different implications may arise within the writer's complex of thoughts; this struggle for coherence also leads to fresh perspectives and syntheses that further make the writer's statements distinctive. Though writers may share some characteristics with our readers, readers understand writers only insofar as meanings are intelligible through the mediation of the limited, social medium of words. Readers inevitably interpret written words through their own senses of meaning, experiences, needs, and interests. This puts pressure on the writer's communicative skills to articulate ideas, knowledge, and sense of self. This added pressure can then foment further discoveries and unanticipated, unfamiliar things to say. The paradox remains: The more we as writers try to make ourselves intelligible, and the more we make sense of what various others offer us, the more we become different and harder to understand, requiring us to work harder on our writing.

One common resolution of this paradox is to limit the communicative burden by accepting the sets of beliefs and statements of a well-established community and trying to conform internal states to be consonant with the group's stated (typically written) beliefs. The vocabulary and phrasing of that group becomes the means of characterizing one's experiences, understandings, and communicative impulses. Communion can then be found with others adopting those same beliefs and terms, with those outside that circle considered as not understanding, perhaps being only communicated with for purposes of proselytizing or for typified practical purposes.

We may be able to communicate clearly with our tax collector or insurance agent if we follow well-established procedures, filling in a few pertinent details for circulation within robust organizations, accomplishing the institutional work at hand, but it is quixotic to imagine that we can persuade those same people of

our philosophy of life or even of evidence for the educational benefit of a new way of teaching writing. Even our colleagues in teaching writing are each trying to solve their own pedagogic problems—drawing on all they have found most effective as writers and in the classroom. So the sharing of what we have come to know and believe, our way of seeing things, only comes in flashes and patches, just as what others have shared with us only grabs ahold of our understanding in moments of recognition. Some ideas writers share touch us more forcefully than other ideas by the same writers, and some writers we believe more and with greater depth than others. Evidence carries a special weight, but there are many kinds of evidence, each with its impact on different people. The more we seek common ground with others, the more differentiated we become. Writing does that to you. It is lonely not because we work alone at our desks but because when we sit at our desks (even in a room surrounded by many others), we work so hard on not being alone. Being in a crowd would not necessarily cure the loneliness but would only deny the semiprivacy needed to work to try to overcome the loneliness.

Another alternative to this desire to communicate is to become smaller, attending only to the most common experiences and views while ignoring the heterodox. For writers this would mean producing only the most conventional messages, avoiding all the specificity and novelty of meaning people usually seek when they spend time and effort in reading. When, however, we lower our sights or practice denial, often enough this narrowing of the self brings internal tensions, unease, or deep psychological pain, as our nervous systems find it hard to live under the strictures of conformity. Deeper loneliness or even despair may be the result. If we have experienced the power of the written word to reach beyond ourselves, however, we will sense the need to write to breathe.

So our drive to share and have confirmed the complexity of what we see, experience, and think within our complex neurological interior leads writers to keep explaining ourselves, but in each explanation we go further into novelty and oddity, more into the strangeness of discovery. Our views may even seem monstrous to some others, who think we see things as no proper human would or should. Loneliness is an unsatisfiable hunger, putting us in more and more rarified company of people who might understand but who themselves have wandered into their own odd spaces of differentiation. Coming to see how they understand the world and what they have come to offer enriches us, increases our appreciation of diversity, and reminds us that our view is just one part of a complex tapestry of human awareness.

We rarely have the opportunity to enter into dialog with those who have moved us deeply, because they are passed or live elsewhere or do not connect with us. When we find a moment or point of intersection with others, when what we write is of use to them, that is filled with wonder; but there are so many more moments when communications remain one-way, either coming or going. Coming from one complex of thought and going to a very different one. No matter how much affirmation we may get in those rare moments of intersection, it never seems to be enough

to feel we have been able to share all we could, given the vastness, complexity, and diversity of the many people we are trying to communicate with.

Into the Future, With No Resolution

Material technologies of writing have been developing for five millennia, but during the last century and a half, technologies have been speeding up the changes and possibilities. Telegraphy, telephony, sound recording, photography, film, radio and video transmission, and now digitization have increased the multimodality of our composed messages, convenience of production and storage, resources available, speed and reach of transmission, and formation and transformation of social groups through their mediating communications. We can now reach out and connect in real time with others at great distances—with effects on personal communication, news, business, commerce, finances, government, knowledge production, education, and many other domains of activity. Recordings keep the past in our present. Film, radio, and television create mass cultures while the internet has proliferated differentiated and individualized subcultures. As well, these technologies have increased the potentials for self-presentation, self-reflection, and expression. We can more easily and fully make available what we see and hear around us and what we think moment by moment. The ability to share sights and sounds in the moment across wide networks has changed our politics while also changing state surveillance of us. We have richer resources to render fantasies and dreams and fictions, to touch the feelings, fantasies, hopes, and fears of others. Consider even the simple act of seeing photos from a century and a half ago or of major events or of family ancestors. People now have films of their parents anticipating their birth and a film log of their childhood and adolescence. How much do these richer representations change our sense of ourselves, our histories, and our families? How much do they affect people's understanding of each other? How much might they tempt us to try to represent ourselves in ways idealized by these media?

In some ways these capabilities have brought our experiences more together; large social events and local outrages go viral with millions viewing. Yet each of these forms of sharing and presentation can be focused, amplified, or manipulated by communicative skills, crafts, arts, and technologies making our messages more immediate, effective, impressive on the senses, meaningful to the knowledge of others, or deceitful. Camera angles, lighting, selection of details, evocation of prior messages, narrative unfolding—all these and other even more subtle techniques of various written, graphic, or auditory media remind us not only that individuals have different skills and repertoires developed over a career of messaging but also that our experiences, feelings, and knowledge must be filtered through the affordances and possibilities of whatever technology of communication is available, transformed through our productive arts, and directed at the audiences we seek. That is, whatever communicative impulse we have must be

formed and transformed into the medium we are using, and those media and platforms keep proliferating. Once our impulses pass the skin barrier we must contend with the arts of exteriorization. The creativity of our meaning making through the tools of social communication keeps pushing our separate uniqueness, giving us more to explain and help others connect with. So this situation demands even more art and craft on our parts, more communicative skills to participate and attempt to overcome our sense of separation with each new communicative innovation. The hunger of loneliness only grows in the attempt to overcome it, leaving us with no end in sight.

Whether this lonely consequence of writing is just the human condition, a design flaw in *Homo scribens* in becoming such a sociocommunicative creature, a terrible problem that could lead to social breakdowns, or a wonderful potential for amplifying creativity, species flexibility, and the variety of human life—all this remains to be seen.

And What About AI?

It is far too early to understand the consequences for writing of the newly available artificial intelligence technologies that produce texts, graphic art, and movies that seem humanlike. At the moment, they draw on existing human productions to form content and locate models to follow, with no particular communicative impulse or intent beyond fulfilling the human instructions or prompts. Although texts produced by large language models are not currently factually reliable, it is not hard to imagine evaluative and evidentiary layers being added to them. Consequently, they may displace the need for humans to learn or produce many kinds of documents or other composed communications. Further, as AI is configured not as a desktop symbol-only processor but as part of a robotic system with sensors, mobility, and autonomy to carry out missions and form inquiries, AI systems will become more sensitive to their experienced environment and deepening purposes. In that case, what they communicate among themselves and with humans may become more reliable and meaningful as well as increasingly autonomous.

For the time being, using corpora of existing texts, large language model AI productions may stay close to conventional wisdom, existing phrasing, and existing genres. For many tasks this will be enough. Perhaps through greater aggregations and evaluative and selection layers, which may incorporate greater purposiveness in problem solving beyond making human-looking products, there may be greater creativity and invention in AI, leading to advances in thought and elegance of expression and even authenticity and resonance with our own human experiences. If so, much writing may go the way of other outdated technologies, such as earlier forms of transportation, left for exercise, hobbyists, or aficionados but no longer central to human activity and economy. Nonetheless, we are still left with what we do to satisfy our individual hungers to share the

contents of our consciousness, the thoughts we recognize as our own, the stuff inside the skin with others across the skin barrier to connect and resonate with their consciousness.

Another Coda

In these paragraphs, in the final analysis, I may be describing a very particular situation affecting only a small group of people invested deeply in their writing or other forms of composed expression such as music or film. Others who find all their communicative impulses readily expressible within quasi-stable social and conceptual worlds of relations and meanings may not feel the isolating tensions that come from heterodox knowledge and thoughts. Others may find that the conflicting ideas made available by literacy exist only untroublingly at the margins of lives lived securely within local communities. Nonetheless, writing does seem to have a compelling effect on some others who find themselves pulled into the rough seas of uncertain knowledge and contending ideas.

This speculative essay draws on and expresses a sense of my own experience. Although I write as though this loneliness or hunger for connection comes with the territory of writing and may be an inevitable consequence of immersive literacy, perhaps these paragraphs only reveal my own particular demons and the psychosocial dynamics of my work and sense of being. Or perhaps it is the enduring adolescent in me complaining, “you just don’t understand me.” Yet the popularity of E. M. Forster’s dictum “only connect” (1910/2021, Chapter XXII) may suggest that this hunger is widely felt, at least among readers and writers. It remains to be seen whether this speculative reflection resonates with anyone, and if so with whom—with which kind of writer? which kind of person? Perhaps this essay, this speculative journey, is only a provocation to see who feels this hunger and with what power and who does not. Please write. At least it may help me feel a bit less lonely.

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