

## **Virtual reality – can't buy me love**

Virtual currencies are fast becoming all the rage. Social networks, online gaming and virtual communities are using "virtual currencies" to buy, sell and trade. Virtual tokens, tickets and other monetary units are competing with one another to be the "virtual dollar" of choice. Sites like hi5, World of Warcraft, Second Life and myYearbook all use virtual currencies. Facebook and My Space probably aren't far behind.

While virtual currencies will tend to vie for the recognition of real-world currency, there's one thing virtual money can't buy, although many try.

Santiago Martinez is a 41-year-old accountant living in the Yucatan. Santiago does all his "birthday-present" shopping on the Internet, using hi5 coins. As described on CNN.com on 5/19, when Santiago wants to give his friends birthday presents, such as a cuddly bear or birthday cake, he orders them online, pays for them with virtual currency, sends them online where the recipient receives the virtual gift - online. There's no "physical" reality involved. Santiago says, "They can't eat the cake. It is an image -- the thing that it represents (is)...You can send the feeling of that [cake] that you want to send."

Send the feeling. Really?

I'm curious how much the five-year-old recipient of a virtual teddy bear or birthday cake feels the love. I wonder how much the adult spouse or partner wells up with heart-felt tears and deep love at the sight of her virtual diamond bracelet, his expensive tie, a virtual painting or the warmth of the new puppy? Wonder how long the memories last, the pleasure continues or the happiness lingers from that "emotional" experience! And, there's a deeper issue here.

In spite of the quantum growth of connecting through online networks, people are isolating themselves emotionally and psychologically at ever increasing numbers. With this isolation comes depression.

We have created the tools that reinforce "the casual" and augur against deeper connection - email, IM, Twitter, Facebook, etc, all the while reducing and eliminating the opportunity for true heart-felt connection. Moreover, we've come to expect things instantly, and don't spend the time it takes to have real intimacy with another person. The sad truth is that the frequency of contact and the number of contacts in our network does not necessarily translate into the quality of contact.

The dynamic we have come to know as 'relationship' is disintegrating, replaced by a connection or transaction, most often based on superficial, fleeting contacts characterized by distance and impersonal channels. Whether that contact comes through e-mail, cell phone, Twitter, Blackberry, or social networking sites or texting, this electronic connection is devoid of direct, personal contact - true feelings. There's no face-to-face interaction, or tangible connectivity, so emotional connection is lost.

Healthy, conscious relationships foster intimacy, trust, deep connectivity. When relationships are replaced by "electronic" interactions and transactions, emotional connection the human factor that creates true relationships goes missing; along with feelings of warmth and friendship towards the other person - what marriage researcher John Gottman says is the definitive foundational element that determines the sustainability of relationships. When there is no emotional connection, there is no friendship. Emotional connection is blocked by transmission through the ether. No, Santiago, you can't "send the feeling of the cake" - ever.

The major unintended consequence of all our separation by virtual reality and social networking is the erosion of genuine human contact. Without human contact, so-called relationships become mere temporary linings of convenience, as easily broken off as established. Is it no wonder parents and their children are seemingly becoming more and more estranged from one another?

Within an electronic, transactional world, more and more people may be connecting, but fewer and fewer folks are relating. We may live in an increasingly inter-connected world, but we are experiencing a far less inter-related one. Thanks to the fragmentation of relationships - one major consequence of living in such a culture - human contact is more likely to be limited to a phone call, an e-mail, or a quick "cu" or "luv u" text message even a virtual birthday card or teddy bear - a poor substitute for real conversation and authentic dealings with another human being. It's questionable whether such "connecting" represents actual contact at all.

Disintegrating relationships in our culture are symptomatic of a greater threat and challenge - one based on living in a world where all this superficial inter-connecting is replacing deeper inter-relating. Even as it becomes easier than ever to stay 'in touch', our capacity actually to touch one another physically or emotionally is slipping away.....virtual gifts notwithstanding.

As Joan Borysenko, the spiritualist, writes: "We cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch." Without relationships, little is left that can serve as the basis for on-going trust.

Oh, and if today is your birthday, and you receive a virtual card and virtual gift, I hope you can feel the feeling?

**So, some questions for self-reflection are:**

- What face-to-face conversations are you avoiding?
- Are you spending less and less quality time (not time, *quality* time - where you have a deep, heart-felt experience) with your spouse/partner, children, or others close to you?
- Do you regularly send virtual birthday or holiday cards and gifts in place of the "real" thing? Why? Do you do that for you or for the one receiving the card/gift?
- In what other ways do you shortchange emotional connection with others?
- Do you feel alone or lonely even when in the company of your spouse/partner, children or other loved ones? Why?
- Are you addicted to Twitter, Facebook or other social networking tools? If not, can do do without these tools for an hour, a few hours, a day or a week? If not, well, that's addiction...denials and protestations notwithstanding.
- Do you engage with your iPhone or Blackberry while you're having a face-to-face conversation with another person? What does that communicate to the other person? Do you care?
- Are you on an electronic leash on weekends, days off and while on vacation?
- Can you envision a world where you are not electronically connected 24/7, 365? Does that vision bring you a sense of well-being or a sense of fear/dread? Why?

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