

On the Importance of the Human Face, II

Is there a channel of nonverbal communication as powerful as is the human face? We encode messages in our own facial expressions, and we simultaneously decode the faces of the people around us. In even the most simple interaction, our attention naturally gravitates to the face, seeking to read some of the vital information we know is "written" there. We constantly monitor the face because it provides vital clues to an impressive variety of possibilities: attraction, whether a person likes or dislikes us, the complexity of emotions, identity, age, humor, and a person's regional and even national background.

And given that most young people find it very hard to imagine living in a time before instant communication, some of my musings probably account for very little in their minds. An advocate for instant communication could bring up all kinds of things in support for it, e.g., that we can telecommute for work thus saving time and money and achieving a better life-balance; that we can communicate with ease and speed with friends and customers throughout the world. So what's the problem they might ask, given these benefits?

It's that we are a social species. God designed us for face-to-face communication. Immediately after birth the eyesight of babies at first, are designed to see Mom. God made us such that we read facial expressions and body language on a near subconscious level; laughing together, smiling at one another, shaking hands, sharing a meal, singing together...things happen to us on a very primal level that cannot be replaced by electronic communication.

And think about the cues we take from the senses – not just sight and sound – but feel, taste and touch, that happen when we interact face-to-face. Even that phrase, "face-to-face" is filled with meaning. And the interesting research that has been done on smell – which produces information for us on a subconscious or chemical level – points to the insufficiency of electronic communication.

But when we are directly in front of someone (at two feet, which is our normal social distance), we are able to make eye contact, able to smile or frown and receive cues from the other's facial expressions, connect with a good handshake (I mean one that is firm), able to listen at a far deeper level (and see if the other is listening to us), gather information and get better feedback as to the other's honesty.

Even if you are very adept at written communication, the need to schedule face-to-face meetings is essential in many aspects of daily life. If the only contact we have with someone, or the only contact in which we are willing to engage is electronic, then we send a message that (whether we intended this or not) the recipient is not very important. Emails can be cold and distant, which is why it is far easier to deliver bad news via an email; it is easier to say "no" over the wires.

We should consider too how hard it is to convey emotion and tone in an email, and the attempts to do so with chat-speak like LOL or those irritating emoticons like winking smiley faces, do nothing to alleviate this problem. The loss of face-to-face time can easily result in the shy person coming off as cold, and succinct people coming off as rude like in one-word replies. But if you see someone in person, now you have an indication that they might be tired, or sick, or happy or stressed out. And seeing these in the face of another will greatly influence how we craft our responses to him, and at the same time influence what emails may have to be sent as follow-up.

Take a look for a moment at the collective advice of good business practices. In reading some of these on the internet, I find a number of things repeated in different ways: (over)

1. Regular personal encounters help ward off discouragement, depression, and many of the side effects of these. Happiness can be contagious, but only when we are in close proximity to another and can see his face. God made us to be part of a tribe; of a society.

2. They recommend lunches, dinners and events, with not only business associates but also with relatives and friends.

3. They recommend play in short – camping trips, fishing, exercise, cards, concerts, sporting events, art shows and what-not – and these especially if one telecommutes for work.

It is notable that these activities are called by some business experts as “face-time.”

Let us now turn to art. Is there any other object in human art as important as the face? We should not be too surprised at this, given the amount of time and energy (and money) poured into the human face; cosmetics, the colorization of hair, the cutting of hair to accentuate the face or compliment it, and the style of the cutting all figure into the perception of attractiveness. I suppose we could even say that the contemporary attempts to cover up or obscure the face with multiple piercings and tattoos testify in their own way to the importance of the face.

I’ve read that the hardest part of the body to paint is the human hand, so that if you want to quickly identify bad art see if the hands are hidden. But no painting is worth the canvas if it ignores the face. Painting recognizes that all human faces are unique and contribute greatly to individual identity. Moreover, the face is one of the most fundamental parts of the body for self-recognition. Vision, hearing, olfaction, eating and breathing are primary functions of the face.

When a toddler or young child falls down, they often look up to see their mother or father for their reaction; if the parent has an anxious or frightened expression, this contributes greatly to the child’s perception of pain. But if the parent remains calm, cool and recollected, such that the child receives the information of “It’s just a scratch, you’ll be fine,” then chances are the child will remain calm.

This same rule holds in painting. Art, in and of itself, is subjective on many levels, but nonetheless we react to the painting based on the image the artist reveals to us, especially regarding clear and strong facial expressions.

This may be seen in any good painting, whether it portrays the subject in a good or bad light, so to speak. For the latter, we need only look at the great master of portraits of the 16c, Hans Holbein. He painted St. Thomas More and Thomas Cromwell sitting in front of the fire across from one another, and one critic (Waldemar Januszczak) once labeled Cromwell as “the least attractive sitter in the whole of Holbein’s art.” Even Hilary Mantel, the authoress who wrote *Wolf Hall* (the extensive and mendacious libel of St. More) admitted that Holbein’s Cromwell is “an incredibly dead picture.”

In the next insert, I want to go into more spiritual reasons why the human face is so important. Suffice it to say right now, I regard the universal wearing of face masks to be an unmitigated disaster for human society, and for the human soul.