

Community is built by ritual contact, by knowing that someone else has read the same devotional as you this morning. And community is built on frequent contact. Because 80 percent of our congregation is under age 60, it is very Internet-friendly. In fact, most of our new members come in the door because they found us on the Web. Yes, there is a disadvantage to those seniors who don't want or choose to go on line. As our parish gets younger, we will find ourselves increasingly Web and e-mail friendly.

A class issue lurks here: some people with whom we might want to communicate simply cannot afford computers. These liabilities need to be compensated for. Changing meeting times—which seems to happen hourly here—is a breeze when you can count on others to be monitoring their computers. But we have to be careful to call the one or two members of each group who are not online when new information is sent.

In addition to supporting people, transmitting information and building community, the Internet has enormous capacity for prophetic mission. Before the Internet, I probably wrote a dozen letters a year to my elected officials. Now I can do five times that. My voice is amplified, and so are the voices of many others. In a country in which only half of the people who can vote do vote, this general amplification is excellent for democracy and for peace and for justice.

Some guidelines for e-mail: Do use it to contact people, but limit the number of messages. My limit is a hundred e-mails a day and 12 phone calls. I play this numbers game to keep the contacts from taking over my life and world. Don't use the Internet to gossip and never hit the copy button without asking yourself whether you are gossiping or engaging in self-enhancing or self-protecting communication. Do use the Internet to build community in your parish and in the families in your parish. Teach people how to stay in touch, and how to touch each other. Don't use it as a substitute for hugging, eye contact or being together. ■

A LETTER TO DEREK

Silence

by Gilbert Meilaender

DEAR DEREK: It's awfully quiet around the house now that you're gone. In fact, hardly a day goes by that Mom and I don't remark on it. I suppose we'll gradually get more accustomed to it, of course, but I'm not sure we'll ever really like it.

Once you think about it, it's a little hard to know how to describe this experience. After all, before you went to college there were many times when I'd spend the evening upstairs reading while you were downstairs doing work of your own. It's not as if we spent all the time talking. So, then, why should the silence be so noticeable? Perhaps, most simply, it just has to do with a sense of presence, of being there, that we all find comforting. We need that sense of mutual presence, and without it we're just not fully at ease.

Remember last spring when you were gone on a band trip and Mom was in the hospital? I got quite a bit done those few days when I had no one but myself around, but it never felt quite right.

Yet, of course, part of growing up is that you move out of and away from our old ways of being present together. Life has a kind of shape, and part of that shape is that children gradually begin to find new centers for their lives, new places where they are present with and for others. Parents want that to happen for their children; indeed, it's what they've been working to make possible. Still, it's hard, and sometimes even painful. When you're not present, there's always something of a gap in our life.

We fill up our life together with words, and yet we move toward silence—toward a day when we are at a loss for words and can speak no more. I remember when my father—your grandfather—died not that long ago. He had lived a long life, so you couldn't say his death was entirely unexpected. Looking back, I don't think I was over-

whelmed by grief at his death, as I might have been had he died years earlier. It wasn't so much grief that struck me as it was just the loss of presence. He'd always been there for as long as I could remember, and now he was gone. There was a kind of gap in the world that couldn't be filled. There was silence.

So maybe we need these "little" silences that your absence brings. Maybe we need them to help prepare us for the bigger silence toward which we always move. In that way the shape of life helps prepare us for its end, and, even though the preparation may sometimes hurt, it's necessary. At the moment this probably sounds rather abstract to you. It should, in fact. But the day may come when you'll remember these words and see the truth in them. (You can just remind yourself then that I was right—again!)

But enough of that. Silence does not really have the last word, however important and inevitable it may be along the way. Read again some time the first chapter of the Gospel of John. At the very heart of the universe is not silence but the Word—and then our words of praise in response. At the center of things is not absence, but presence. Not pain, but joy. As C. S. Lewis once put it, "Joy is the serious business of heaven."

Therefore, we do need joy now—if only as an intimation of the joy that is our final destiny. We need presence, words, sounds. So Mom and I are looking forward to the next break, when you can once again be here for a few days. We'll gladly listen to you play the sax and piano. We'll enjoy the (somewhat less musical) sound of the Total Gym getting its workout. And we'll be ever so heartened to hear once again your cheerful "Good morning."

Love,
Dad

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