

## INVITATION PART FOUR SCREEN TIME

I attended an interesting meeting with a group of colleagues from various organizations recently (via a Zoom call) and heard how one by one they were finding their way with the use of screen time to communicate with the world, with their students, or with others who are in need of connection right now. These were all, for the most part, organizations that had not used screen time to represent their field of work up until now.

Now, weeks into the mandate to stay home, many of us may be a bit Zoom-weary while at the same time grateful for the possibility of remote connection. A positive note my son offered the other day was that his business Zoom calls tend toward being more focused and efficient. Even so, he also noted how tired he is at the end of the week after being on screen every day. I can relate.

A bigger question looms in my consciousness. How are we going to be when/if the time comes that we are able to return to community life, to start meeting in person regularly, to let go of pervasive amounts of screen time? Knowing that screens have an addictive nature will we all need massive therapy to free ourselves from checking our phones and social media frequently? Will we have grown comfortable with the ease of connecting virtually? Will we be awkward with each other at first – uncertain about shaking hands, offering a hug, standing closer than six feet apart? Will we be at risk of a *social-emotional pandemic*?

As our children are growing, and potentially facing ongoing fear-engineered, regulatory-controlled reductions of civil liberties with increased use of robotics in almost every field of work and service industries, what foundation can we offer them now so that they can meet whatever comes with resilience and humanitarian impulses?

One thing we can strive for is to model a balanced life. Engage the whole family in the Living Arts:

- practical, domestic care of our homes and surrounding environments
- nurturing care of each other and ourselves
- creative and artistic activities and skill building
- and social awareness and interest in others

These human-connection pursuits will help our children to be better equipped to recognize the difference between artificial intelligence and a soul-bearing human being, for example. Another thing we can do is to model a balanced way of using screen time and social media.

We can also do our best to understand the different stages of development of the children in our care and how they take in life. Let's do a tiny review:

The **young child** has no filters and takes in everything in their surroundings. They learn primarily via imitation and through sensory intake. When they are very little they are learning how to name the world and, as they grow, how to give it meaning. They tend to think that everything is "real". I heard a story recently of a little one whose teacher had sent a video to all the little ones in her care, and throughout the video this little one was trying to speak to and engage with her teacher. It was confusing to her that her teacher would not respond. This might make us feel that FaceTime or Zoom, which is somewhat "interactive", is better. I don't know – maybe. Believe me, as a grandmother I have had occasional FaceTime calls with my grandchildren, yet when they were little I had mixed feelings when they would reach for the phone to try to give me a kiss. I really didn't want to become virtual grandma, yet I loved "seeing" them. My hope was that the physical play in which we engaged when we were together somehow mitigated the non-physical moments of virtual connection. These are decisions we each can only make for ourselves and hopefully without sitting in judgment of others as they, too, are navigating this world where we are sometimes vast distances from those we love. We can also do our best to transcend the medium we are using by bathing it with love and light during the time we are on screen. The cautionary tale is to err on the side of "less is best." If we are bringing content to young children, perhaps at the request of parents, let us remember dear Fred Rogers of Mister Rogers Neighborhood. He moved and spoke at a pace that made room for warmth and love. One could feel that his intention was not entertaining as much as it was healing.

Perhaps as teachers and caregivers we can better offer support directly to the parents via Zoom or other platforms if they ask for it, although a truly personal phone call can really mean a lot to a parent after weeks of social distancing! And we can hold these families lovingly in our hearts in the hope that this time together will create deepening human-to-human connection and experiences for the children and their sensory awareness.

As parents, we can trust that our children will figure out how to entertain themselves over time if we keep their surroundings and their schedule simple and engage as much as possible through The Living Arts mentioned above. If we, in a moment of overwhelm, decide to offer some type of screen time experience to them, again keep the balance in mind. If possible, get them out in nature (even in the backyard) for at least twice as long as they were on the screen and also, after the screen experience, give them a cuddle and loving human touch to bring them back into the "real".

**Middle childhood** children are typically more awake to the workings of the world, and while they still take life in through their sensory experiences, they also have more developed filters and capacities to understand the difference between what is real and what is virtual. A challenge to bear in mind, however, is that some (perhaps most) commercial programming has woven into it an addictive quality, most especially gaming.

If their innate, though unconscious, drive is to experience beauty, please understand there is a vast difference between a real, sensory experience of a worm or bird or a tree or a flower or wind or rain in their backyard and videos that try to show the grandeur of natural landscapes and animal life. As much as possible keep it real for them. Bear in mind that if they are spending hours doing online school work they will need plenty of time for robust movement, human connection and fresh air.

Regarding **adolescents and teens**, I have already written quite a bit about screen time and youth. This is a time when we can do our best to teach them how to become the master over their screens, rather than vice versa. As we have abandoned dictionaries, and other books for that matter, in deference to Google, we can support our youth as they research the things that interest them. Ask them to share with you what they learned from what they researched. When applicable and possible find the supplies they need to make models of what they want to create or invent. After they've been on screen, encourage them to go for a bike ride (if allowed where you live) or just go outside to digest what they have learned and try to re-imagine it in their mind's eye. If they are so inclined, encourage them to draw it on paper.

We do not know what the world re-set is going to yield in the coming months and years. The world view that has occupied my research and interest for my whole adult life leads me to believe we will have further "disruptions" as we go forward – perhaps some less dramatic, others moreso.

One topic, perhaps the elephant in the middle of the room, which I cannot go into in depth, is for us to consider "what is the means by which we connect ourselves to screens?" Does the web of satellite connections and the growing number of cell towers (particularly with the increase in 5G) have any effect on our general health and well-being? And, if it does, what can we do about it? Of course, it is possible to find numerous and conflicting thoughts about this; however, a common suggestion is to keep our 5-G (or any-G for that matter) apparatuses as distant from our bodies as possible, ideally not even in our back pocket, but in our purse, backpack or briefcase. Some people also keep their phone in a specific place in the house rather than carry it around all the time. For those of us who grew up with wall phones, this is

not a new concept! Something else we can do is turn off our WiFi connection every night and whenever we are not using it – and to have it in a room that we occupy the least.

A less common approach, and one that bears consideration is something I recently read from Rudolf Steiner from 1923: “In times when there were no electrical currents, when the air was not swarming with electrical influences, it was easier to be human ... For this reason, in order to be human at all today, it is necessary to expend much stronger spiritual capacities than was necessary a century ago.” And that was spoken a century ago! He did not encourage us, however, to disengage from modern life, but rather to be well-grounded in our practical daily lives and in our devotional lives. He calls upon us to “*Seek real practical material life, but seek in such a way that the spirit which dwells within is not deadened for you.*”

So, we can ask, what are these *spiritual capacities* of which Steiner spoke? It’s a question I encourage each of us to ponder. Certainly we know that being able to move, to speak, and to think are foundational spiritual capacities. We want to do everything we can to protect these gifts when we start moving around again, start speaking face-to-face again, start placing our thinking in the service of a more sustainable culture – not only ecological or physical, but also emotional, intellectual, artistically creative, and social.

What we are always called upon to do is to come back into balance. When so much of our personal connection to people was somewhat shuttered through social distancing, many of us started surprisingly embracing a tool we had beforehand used more sparingly – screen time! For some of us, it is not a personal choice, but rather a tool that allows us to continue our professional work. It does remind me, however, of the enchantments we read about in the fairy tales and the various ways the spells were broken in order for the prince or princess (or whomever) to come back to their true self. Certainly that is my hope – that we will find our way back to human-to-human connection and once again reduce screen time. With its compelling, somewhat compulsive/addictive nature, however, we may want to gird our loins for the effort it may take to free ourselves.

This brings us back to what do we want for our children? After years of clinical studies showing the effects screen time can have on children’s quality of life, what might we offer instead to support families while sheltering in place? Can we collectively decide to *pause*? We have the opportunity for a cultural re-set, a paradigm shift that simplifies and slows things down to a pace that is not so overwhelming, a pace that is spaciousness enough for wonder.

Human connection, life skills, levity, outdoor excursions, trust that we can navigate these times – all of this and more will create a healthy foundation for the children in our

communities, our families and our care. Putting these at the forefront and virtual connection and screen time more in the background, and only when necessary or needed, sets a stage for the resiliency we seek for our children and ourselves.