

Bridging the Gap: A Spacial Dynamics Perspective

～ Jaimen McMillan

There is a furtive dis-ease spreading as an outcome of the drastic distancing measures taken during the COVID 19 pandemic: ***social estrangement***. Together with the COVID casualties, we are witnessing long-term, adverse impacts resulting from the hurried attempts to protect us from the disease. Slowly, as experience and knowledge of the virus grows, and wide-spread fear loosens its frantic grip, we can see a gaping social chasm emerging as a second epidemic.

There is an alarming weakening of the faculty to relate to each other, with an accompanying increase in asocial behavior. A spatial component of this diminishing relating to others is a shrinking withdrawal, a retreating to seek shelter and protection. In a similar way that children had to be taught to separate themselves from others, they must now learn to re-connect.

We must invite our children and youth out of hiding and reawaken their interest in the surrounding world for them to be able to interact and connect and enjoy being with others.

Photo courtesy of Jaimen McMillan



Human Nature

Nature is the number one way to *bring us to our senses!* Through opening our senses to nature, we build breathing bridges from the inside world to our surroundings. Whenever possible, get out of the walls of your house. Mother Nature is simply the best teacher. The timeless rhythms of the seasons, trees, plants, flowers, insect, animals, sounds, colors, beauty...all invite us outside of our restrained boundaries to experience an unbroken continuum with our environment. Not only gentle, nature is also the teacher from the old school of hard knocks. Her immediate consequence demands attention, interaction, and respect. (Fire can burn; Sand can get in your eyes; Wet rocks are slippery;)

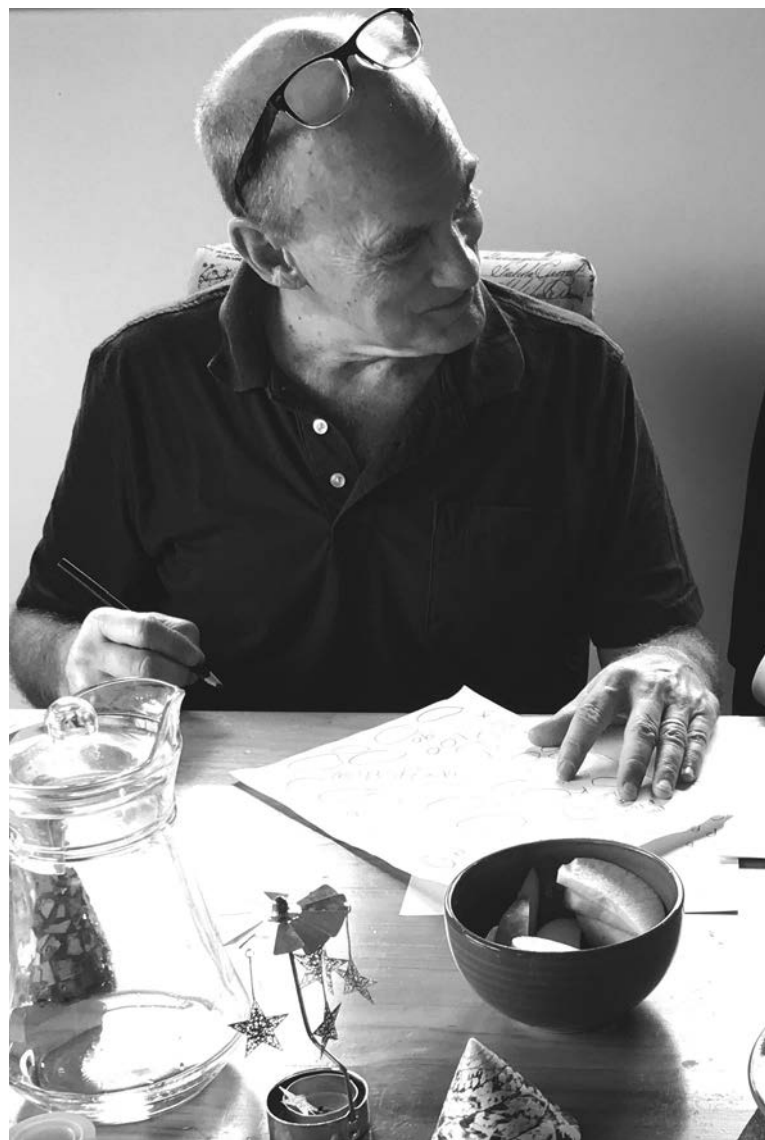
Engaging with nature always involves an interaction and evokes the experience of the interconnectedness of all creation. An awareness dawns that we too are part of nature.

Losing Face

One measure that is still being extensively used in Asia at the time of this writing is the wearing of masks. Setting aside the debate about the pros and cons of the effectiveness of facial coverings, what is not debatable is that the face plays a major role in conveying human emotions. In the first years of life the baby and the young child acquire unique qualities of emotional, cognitive, and social intelligence from the facial expressions of others. Mimicking the forms of their parents' mouths and their facial configurations when they speak are invaluable aids not only to connect, but also in learning to speak clearly and correctly.

Being able to observe the facial gestures of one's loved ones can foster the development of a rich and varied emotional and social life. This is true for youth and adults as well. It is not just the face that is masked to others. Not giving our faces full spectrum of expression can mask our own feelings from us, leading to a monotone and apathetic demeanor. Individuals who are not able to learn the art of taking social cues from others are often judged as socially clumsy, developmentally challenged, or even asocial. Young children, who have grown up surrounded by a masked world, are exhibiting a lack of ability to show and read non-verbal, social, and emotional messages that are conveyed through facial cues that signal the emotional state and intentions of the other person.

Telling stories or reading aloud for children in an animated way can do wonders to compensate



for experience lost through masking. If one watches carefully, one can see that the children are drinking in every facial gesture as if it were nectar for their thirsty souls.

Back in Touch

The sense of touch lets a baby and young child know they have a body, that it is a safe place, and it calls them forth. Progressing from holding, to cuddling, to stroking, to embracing are not only signs we use to communicate our affection, but they are also special spatial methods of helping children be aware of themselves in their bodies. It brings them to the surface of their skin through the warmth and caring quality of the contact. Touch invites children to come out of their bodies and make connections.

Photo courtesy of Jaimen McMillan



A foot rub before sleeping, or a simple slow downward outlining of the entire body with the palms of the hands, overcomes the experience of being separated into parts into a harmonious whole. In touching, stroke ever so slowly. Then have an in-between phase when you do not touch. Pay as much attention to when you are not touching, as to the contact itself. Choose a tidal rhythm to your touch, and not touching. What has gotten lost in these hectic times is rhythm. These rhythms help your child to breathe. Now take these rhythms of doing, and not doing, and give them to your child (and yourself) throughout the day, weeks, months, years. Get back “in touch” with nature’s rhythms.

Meeting Makes Us Human

Virtual reality takes place within the confines of a person’s body. Reality takes place in the space in between people. Genuinely meeting, engaging in the shared spaces, makes us really human. It is time to meet again. Time to reinstate play dates. It does not have to be a large number of them, nor for long periods, but let it be regular, rhythmical, reliable. The most important skill to learn in life is to meet and engage with others. Go for a hike, or even take just short “talk-walks” together.

To act is just the beginning, we need to re-learn to interact. Shared activities reach out to encounter, connect, and to span the distances that have been dividing us. Truly meeting, the highest of the arts, integrates awareness, interest, appreciation, and empathy for the other. Meeting mends the gap. It is the essence of play, the inter-play!

Time to Reconnect after Social Distancing

In 1985, when I first publicly presented Spacial Dynamics as a discipline used in education, movement therapy, even leadership training, there was only a somnolent recognition of the importance of space and spatial development. Embodiment, personal space, interpersonal space, social space, and suprapersonal space were terms that were foreign at that time. Today, “space” is a word one hears all over the world...even if it is often limited to such utterances as: “Get out of my space.” or “Give me my space!” Space, however, can be so much more. Space, like water, can become a connective medium. We can learn to live in space similarly to the way we live in our bodies.

Take “social-distancing.” With this phrase children are told they must keep six feet *away* from someone in order not to get sick. Space in this case is the objective measurement that *distances* me from the other.

It is possible, however, to give this same six feet a social twist. We could just as easily say to the children that we want to adjust to others, so that the other person and I *share* six feet of space, in order to keep each other safe. The difference in the second version is that the child can experience: space is something we can share. Seen this way, space is not what separates, but is an element, like water, that can unite what is not yet connected. Sharing space is a social Copernican revolution.

In the coming years we will have to give special attention to children and youth who were in critical stages of transitioning in their development during the pandemic: the first three years, the nine-year change, the onset of puberty, the transition from teens to adulthood for examples. These crossroad years are phases of life that require taking particularly big strides to move from one stage to another. Space will be abstract unless you fill it out. When you fill it out it is not empty, space is alive, vibrant, filled with you. You have to be the one to bridge the gap. You have to take that next step.

These spatial stepping stones are integral to human development. They cannot be skipped over. It will be up to parents, teachers, therapists, and communities to find ways to offer help for them to take these steps to be able to freely relate.

Returning to “Normal”? No, Orienting anew.

There is a painful awakening to the fact that we have all been slowly drifting apart. It is particularly alarming that it is getting more and more difficult to reach children. Talking louder, disciplining them, blaming, or shaming will not reestablish connections, but drive the children further away. Parents, teachers, therapists must ask themselves the questions, how do I create safe and invitational spaces for the children? How can we redirect the courses taken during the pandemic? We must re-orient ourselves, encompassing nature, what is real and true, and most of all, each other.

Shared Spaces

The whirlwind of the pandemic has left our social health and collective development compromised. Many of the cautionary measures employed to avoid COVID also simultaneously involved weakening, separating, or even breaking social/spatial connections. Our work

is to take measures to balance this disconnection by fostering relationships. The pandemic has taught us, more than anything else, just how important we are to each other. There is rift-mending to do so that our estrangement from one another is reversed to approaching one another.

As adults we must claim our own space back in order to share it with others. The Spatial Dynamics Institute (SDI) has trained over one thousand teachers and practitioners in North America alone who are trained to help others with postural problems, maintaining personal space, enlivening and encouraging interpersonal space. It is an art to learn to live in social spaces in a healthy way and is a learnable skill to get in touch with your greater person who “captains” your ship in the storms of life. More information is available at www.spatialdynamics.com.

In closing, connection to others is what makes us truly human. If the inability to connect to another person is the basis of man’s inhumanity to man, then consciously creating new ways to connect to others may be a key to opening the doors for human beings to become humankind. Warming, expanding, and humanizing the space between us may be a way for us to overcome the COVID era and move together towards a healthier future. Yes, there is work to do! But there is joy as well, for what is need most is to rediscover play, and create new opportunities for interplay. “Want to come over and play?” ♦

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