



## Self-referentiality and *Bowling Alone*

I was reading an article last week on diversity and post-modernity (ooh, how academic!), and the author made the observation that our post-modern age is marked by self-referentiality. The external authorities that have helped provide structure (political, religious, etc.) in the past have been supplanted, through our on-going questioning of everything, by a reliance on self. Each of us is our own ultimate authority; our individual experiences trump external norms.

I've been thinking about that a lot since reading the article, and I began to associate it with sociologist Robert Putnam's book of a decade or so ago, *Bowling Alone*, in which he recounts (and laments) a seeming breakdown in community (as evidenced by a decrease in participation in league bowling).. Are we, in light of both of these analyses I wonder, moving along a vector in which we will become totally alone, connected only electronically (think of the somewhat stereotypical portrayal of people sitting next to one another, and not talking to, but rather texting, each other). Do virtual communities become adequate substitutes for actual, physical, communities? Can they?

And, of course, as you might imagine, these questions have jumped to the fore in my life over the last few weeks as I've come face-to-face with my own limitations as an individual -- especially as one who is challenged to do all of the things for himself that he used to do. And what I've experience is the power of community -- real, physical, community. Folks from my faith community have provided meals for my family, relieving my wife of the necessity of cooking every night. Folks from my faith community have provided transportation and care for my kids. Folks from the DU community have schlepped me to and from home (THANKS!). Yes, I spend enough time on Facebook to claim to have a "social network", and I enjoy that, but there's only so much that folks only connected by "ether" can do.

The major religious traditions of the world value community; they value, and emphasize, gathering together. Even when stressing the individual's need to connect with the divine him-, or her-, self, there is also a recognition that the support of the congregation, the sangha, or the community at the masjid, is essential to the individual's well-being. We learn from, and teach, each other. We help, and receive help, from each other. Face to face. Shoulder to shoulder. Hand to hand.

I'm grateful for my human-encounter communities. And I'm learning that the connections go deep. Sacred connections.

Blessings,

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