



COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION IN A TECHNOLOGICAL AGE

- Leaving space for the Holy Spirit
 - Not so much what is “said”
but how it is “said”

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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Human Development magazine is a quarterly publication for people involved in the work of fostering the human and spiritual growth of others. This includes persons involved in religious leadership and formation, spiritual direction, pastoral care, education, counseling, health care, and those interested in the development of the whole person.

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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

(ISSN 0197-3096) Volume 43 Issue 2 – 2023.

Human Development is published quarterly by Guest House, Inc. 1601 Joslyn Road, Lake Orion, MI 48360-1139.

This magazine is mailed at Periodical Rate in Lake Orion, Michigan and additional mailing offices.

PRINT SUBSCRIPTION RATE

United States, \$39.50; Canada, \$49.50; all other countries, \$59.50; online/digital subscription, \$39.50. All prices are for a one year subscription.

Please visit website for discount subscription rates: Guesthouse.org/hd-magazine/.

Single print copies: United States, \$10, plus shipping; Canada, \$15, plus shipping; all other countries, \$20, plus shipping.

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of Pastoral
Communication



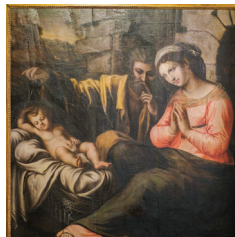
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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dear friends of Human Development,

The desire and need to communicate seems innate within our human species. Indeed, many would say that all aspects of our “common home” – including animal and plant life – seek to communicate a message. Yet communication is not always easy and it’s common enough for people to choose to “shut down” and isolate themselves when they are afraid or overwhelmed.

Communication flows in a wonderful manner when two (or more) minds and hearts are in sync; but it can flounder when there is suspicion and misunderstanding. On every level of human interaction (one-to-one or nations in dialogue), the same dilemmas arise regarding clarity of message and sincerity of heart.

Many of us would consider ourselves to be somewhat “expert” in this dynamic and yet we would also be quick to admit our challenges and failures. Sometimes we can’t handle silence and fill the “airwaves” with unnecessary, even confusing or harmful words. Other times we hold back from expressing what we want and need to share and let an ambiguous silence linger in the air.

Communicating God’s word in liturgy or in sacramental encounters and in the privileged settings of pastoral care is a whole special kind of “language,” especially in a world still smarting from continuing fear of COVID and contagious diseases. We’ve learned the pluses and minuses of Zoom and on-line substitutes for person-to-person conversations.

Fr. Dave Buersmeyer, a seasoned and respected pastor in the Archdiocese of Detroit, offers our lead essay as he addresses all these challenges and refers to Jesus’ own method for respecting the “in-between” space where the Holy Spirit can “work.”

Dr. Paul LaChance, a therapist and counsellor, addresses in a very straight-forward fashion the issue of outrage in social communication in the media. He invites us to reflect on the timeless wisdom of distinguishing **what** we say and **how** we say it, the “art” of good communication back and forth between speaker and listener.

In our third essay, Carolyn Humphreys expands on many of the insights of Dr. LaChance as she suggests that beauty, goodness and truth communicate the best of all that is human and reveal the Divine communication at work in and through our words and deeds, and even our silence.

Thomas Petriano picks up on the mystery of silence in the way God and St. Joseph communicated and how we can learn many a lesson from St. Joseph’s “deep listening” that leads to action.

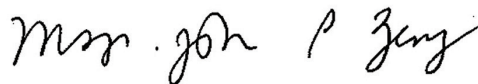
Some further examples of how social media can actually be a means for shared silence, prayer and reflection are offered by therapist and psychologist Fred Cavaiani.

Susan Muto, a frequent contributor, looks at the way we are all “formed” to favor or **dis**favor structured ways of communal discipline in our communication with each other. She suggests the goal of becoming a “creative, open, transcending personality” who lives with peaceful trust in the “flow” of God’s grace among us.

Our issue closes with two shorter, reflective pieces. Br. Ben Harrison, Missionary of Charity, shows the way to appreciating God in our own life-choices by sharing his own insights as to how and why he experienced vocational attraction to being **with** and **for** people struggling “on the margins.” Finally Msgr. John Strykowski, retired priest of Brooklyn who has spent much of his life in service of the Church Universal, takes us on a “guided meditation” on a transatlantic flight! Your next flight will never be the same: every little aspect of the journey will now trigger possible avenues for prayerful communication with God!

I trust these essays will console you and challenge you as you seek to contemplate and share the precious gifts of human and divine communication.

Your brother in the Lord,



Msgr. John Zenz

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*“If I speak in human and angelic
tongues but do not have love, I am a
resounding gong or clashing cymbal.”*

(I Corinthians 13:1)

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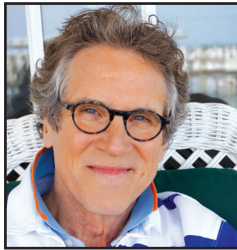
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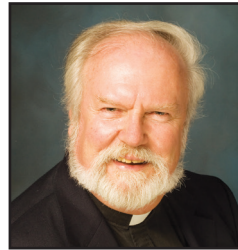
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Men's Spring Alumni Retreat

April 17-20, 2023
Capuchin Retreat Center
Washington, MI

Men's Spring Alumni Retreat

April 24-27, 2023
Mater Dolorosa Passionist Retreat Center
Sierra Madre, CA

Guest House Golf Classic

June 12, 2023
Oakhurst Golf and Country Club
Clarkston, MI

Women's ICAP Retreat

July 2-8, 2023
Carmelite Spiritual Center
Darien, IL

Men's Alumni Reunion

August 7-10, 2023
Notre Dame Spirituality Center
Ipswich, MA

Men's Fall Retreat

September 24-28, 2023
Mercy by the Sea
Madison, CT

Detroit Bishop's Dinner

October 10, 2023
The Mint
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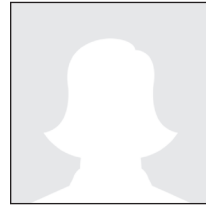
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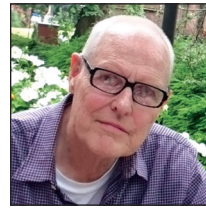
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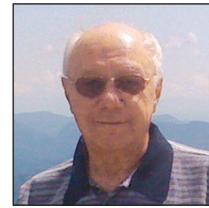
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The editors of *Human Development* are quite eager to publish articles that translate the latest research in psychology, health, medicine, and spirituality to ministry, formation, and practice. Our hope is that *Human Development* will be known as the most user-friendly ministry publication. This will require making complicated theoretical knowledge, research, and concepts understandable and applicable to the personal and professional lives of our readers.

Since ministry is in a time of significant transition and change, we anticipate that the articles we publish will enlighten and positively influence the daily decisions and practices of those in Church leadership, ministry formation, spiritual direction, and counseling of any kind. There are also a number of previously under-appreciated forces that uniquely influence ministry and ministers: cultural, organizational, and situational factors. We intend to highlight and honor these factors in the pages of *Human Development*. Accordingly, we ask prospective authors to be mindful of these considerations in their manuscripts. Manuscripts are received with the understanding that they have not been previously published and are not currently

under consideration elsewhere. Feature articles should be limited to 4,500 words (15 double-spaced pages); shorter articles will be considered. All accepted material is subject to editing. When quoting sacred scripture, the New Revised Standard Version is preferred. All manuscripts are to be prepared according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th edition).

Letters are welcome and will be published as space permits and at the discretion of the editors. Such communications should not exceed 600 words and are subject to editing.

Authors are responsible for the completeness and accuracy of proper names in both text and bibliography/suggested readings. Acknowledgments must be given when substantial material is quoted from other publications. Provide author name(s), title of article, title of journal or book, volume number, page(s), month and year, and publisher's permission to use material.

Manuscripts should be submitted to Msgr. John Zenz at jzenz@hnchurch.org as an email attachment.



VALUES IN COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION

by Paul J. LaChance



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WHOSE FAULT IS ALL THE HYPE - THE NETWORKS OR THE VIEWERS?

Social trust is at an all-time low. Some researchers think that this is either caused by - or at least exacerbated by - social media outrage.

According to one narrative, let's call it the "supply side" narrative, increased polarization and negativity are the direct consequence of a business model pursued by social media companies. In his recent book entitled *The Chaos Machine: The Inside Story of How Social Media Rewired Our Minds and Our World*, Max Fischer explored how social media companies leveraged anger and outrage to keep viewers engaged. The same insight is relayed in the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma* (2020). Former Facebook, Google, and Apple engineers quickly discovered that moral outrage can maximize the time users spend on their platforms. Consequently, media companies present users with content that will be potentially upsetting and not necessarily the most accurate. The result? Increasing social and political polarization, making it harder each day to maintain civility and compassion in online communication. Why is this "over-supply" of outrageous material so successful? Our own addiction to righteous indignation seems to be the answer. This brings us to the "demand side" of the equation. Self-righteous indignation, says astrophysicist and novelist David Brin, is like a drug: "We've all been in indignant snits, self-righteous furies. You go into the bathroom during one of these snits, and you look in the mirror and you have to admit, this feels great! 'I am so much smarter and better than my enemies! And they are so wrong, and I am so right!'" (See Episode 66 of *Geek's Guide to the Galaxy* online.) Although such thinking is

almost overdone in the media, it does manifest some psychological truth. Stanford professor of neurology, Robert Sapolsky, notes in *Behave: The Biology of Humans at Our Best and Worst*, that punishing violations of norms releases dopamine, giving the brain a momentary experience of pleasure. As the authoritative voice of Gerald G. May, *Addiction and Grace*, has proclaimed, we humans can become addicted to **anything!**

From the supply side, the solution to our personal and social dilemma would be to put down the phone and cancel social media subscriptions. From the demand side, the solution lies within us to develop a capacity to tolerate the discomfort of being without social media for a time, perhaps by taking media holidays, and filling our lives with other sources of meaning, value and joy.

FROM WHERE COMES ALL OUR OUTRAGE?

If, however, we look more deeply at human feelings and the dynamics of human communication, the problem and solution are much more challenging. Righteous indignation is not like the desire to enjoy or to avoid any particular person, object or experience. I may, for example, be annoyed at losing a sports competition, but not outraged. I would however, be outraged if I found out that the contest had been "fixed." I may be angry at being passed over for a job, but that anger would turn to outrage if I found the reason lay in the employer's prejudice against

You go into the bathroom during one of these snits, and you look in the mirror and you have to admit, this feels great!
'I'm so much smarter and better than my enemies!
And they are so wrong and I am so right!'"

Communication happens in a cyclic pattern: the speaker-listener technique. There are particular rules or socially approved ways for the speaker and for the listener to interact.

me. I may be furious at the outcome of an election, but I'd become outraged if I found out that the election was rigged. The trauma experienced in bullying is not just the individual injuries but comes when it appears to be the collusion of many peers. The feeling of outrage is not identical to the feelings I have about an individual thing or experience; it is a response to the pattern, system, or institution on which that thing was dependent. For this reason, outrage, more than anger or hatred, seeks to change these very structures and practices themselves.

UNDERSTANDING AND MANAGING OUTRAGE

Bernard Lonergan, S.J., reminds us that feelings respond to the values that make up our world. We respond to different values in a hierarchical order; we respond more strongly to higher values than to lower values. Consequently, Lonergan would say particular goods, like a meal or a conversation, must be seen in the larger context of the social order that make these individual good things possible. Understanding and managing outrage **in** the media and **by** the media then, requires us to understand issues of order and justice in the “art” of social conversation.

Beyond particular goods and institutions there is a third level of value that consists of what are called the “transcendentals,” truth, beauty and goodness itself. This third level emerges when we ask about the moral worthiness of a par-

ticular institution or of how it is functioning. When we seek to challenge, improve or replace an institution, we do so hoping to make things better. That hope in us responds to some sense of goodness in light of which we assess and evaluate institutions. In the face of competing claims about corrupt practices, prejudice and stolen elections, we seek to respond. But, apart from a commitment to truth we cannot condemn lies, reveal prejudice for what it is, or explain what fairness in a system should look like.

My intention in this article is to highlight a scale of values in the practice of public conversation. This essay focuses not so much on **what** we talk about but on **how** we talk to each other. We will look first at the behaviors and patterns that make up the social practice of communication, then identify how it typically goes wrong, and finally reflect on how we might manage our own outrage and make our real and virtual conversations more compassionate.

COMMUNICATION BETWEEN SPEAKER AND LISTENER

Communication happens in a cyclic pattern: the speaker-listener technique. There are particular rules or socially approved ways for the speaker and for the listener to interact. These somewhat subtle but necessary and respectful rules have emerged from an understanding of the impact of defensiveness and aggression on human communication and the necessity of curiosity and

respect for genuine conversation. As the couple therapist Dan Wile observed, when individuals are locked in an attack and defend cycle, no one gets heard and everyone gets hurt. When individuals are curious and willing to admit their own faults and responsibilities, they are in a collaborative cycle, which has every possibility of creating intimacy and managing problems.

The rules for the speaker are a version of the famous “I-statements.” It is understood the speaker – the initiator – will articulate his/her own experience and perception; he/she will not focus on the other person’s faults or failings. A typical example: “When you say _____, it makes me feel _____.”

The rules for the listener center on a desire for understanding and often include asking questions that might help further explain what the speaker means. Such questions seeking understanding might be “What is most frustrating about _____,” or “What might make this situation feel different?” Then the listener might express some form of validation or acknowledgment of something learned from the speaker: “I see what you mean.”

The listener’s job is to demonstrate that he or she understands the speaker by expressing the speaker’s message in a way that fully satisfies the speaker. A listener ought to hold off on trying to persuade until he or she has understood the speaker and can validate something, no matter how small in the other’s message. Once the rules are agreed to, both parties also agree to take turns. When the speaker is satisfied that he or



she has been heard then the roles are reversed. The conversation proceeds in stages so that each has the opportunity to speak and to feel heard.

It is critical to note the difference between **personal good** and **common good**. Each person’s desire to be understood in a compassionate way is only part of the overall goal of mutual understanding in a way that creates a level of intimacy and trust appropriate to the relationship. The main goal, of course, cannot be attained without first attaining the goals of each of the stages. The speaker’s personal goal is to send a message with the best possible chance of being received. The listener collaborates in this process and pursues his or her own particular goal as a listener, wanting to learn something about the speaker by being curious, managing defensive feelings, and validating some piece of the message. When the roles are reversed, the personal goals are also exchanged.

Distinguishing between personal and communal goals allows the partners to also distinguish between what each needs for his or her own good

and what **both** seek for the common good. As Vatican II defined it, the “common good” refers to establishing and maintaining the conditions that will allow all people to flourish in every aspect of life. (See Church In the Modern World, articles 73ff.)

Given that the overall goal can be achieved only by taking turns, the first person to fill the role as listener faces particular pressures and challenges. In turn, the partners are invited to set aside personal goals, work toward the other’s goal, and prioritize the goal of the communicative practice. Only in this way can the experience of the conversation become a building block in a lasting and positive relationship. Both partners must work to set aside expectations of harm and willingly entertain the possibility of experiencing some new reality or understanding. It is much easier to listen when one feels heard and that one’s needs are being taken seriously. The person who acts as listener first carries with him or her the burden of the history of conflict. Even greater charity may be required to embody the role of listener in a virtual environment in which

individuals have already suffered harm.

SOCIAL CONVERSATION AS SEARCHING TOGETHER

In a good conversation, it is better to be charitable than to be right. Calmly and graciously disagreeing with what someone has to say demonstrates a respect for truth. Listening to what someone has to say demonstrates not only intellectual comprehension of some concept but more importantly a respect for the person. Listening well enacts the love I have for the other as a child of God. Truth understood and acknowledged is a particular good. The *relationship* is the context which makes this understanding possible. The personal authenticity of both speaker and listener is the achievement of individuals who are nurtured by loving communities. We are loved into our full humanity before we are able to speak from it. We learn within communities of love to seek truth and judge correctly. Love of persons is the condition for healthy relationships within which we obtain the truths to which God seems to be calling us.

Managing outrage toward media reports and replacing the attack-defend cycle with a collaborative and compassionate pattern of communication begins with understanding our own affective responses to online content. Researchers have found that individuals experiencing online content as threatening either to themselves or to their beliefs assume that the content creator is biased and not playing by the rules. People find it difficult to dis-



tinguish between personal and common goals. Threatening content is interpreted not just as a particular threat to something I desire, or even a violation of the standards of my “tribe,” it is also seen as a violation of universal social standards, infringes upon social justice and reflects sinister manipulation of power over others. The proliferation of biased content then leads people to conclude that those responsible for the content are not even capable of goodness. One can easily despair not only of this or that platform or communicative social practice but of truth itself! Consequently, individual groups despair of reliable standards of factuality, neutrality, and truth telling. Recovering our humanity online means avoiding crime and corruption and reaffirming the transcendent value of truth, goodness and human dignity. When particular lies need to be challenged or patterns of speaking need to be adjusted, it is vital that we go about this in a way that preserves not just actual truth but also human dignity.

We can achieve this goal by engaging in social discourse with curiosity and primarily for the sake of learning rather than teaching. I ought to feel a preference for loving conversations and the integrity of communication over the upshot of a particular conversation, in other words, of preserving decency rather than winning a debate. In the learning process, we are well advised to listen first and find something we agree on. We ought to respect truth enough, 1. to admit when we find that we have made a mistake or been wrong, and 2. not to accept as true something someone in our own group says just because it is to our advantage. Finally, we might practice mindful attention to ourselves and to others, calming ourselves when we feel threatened or admitting that our outrage has gotten the better of us.

WHEN LOVE WINS, TRUTH SHINES FORTH

Charity descends from the Lord to us. It begins with the commitment to the goodness and dignity of God’s handiwork, the universal solidarity of all people. This love of God and humanity issues in an unrestricted desire for truth and a commitment never to betray truth for any lesser objects or goals. It matters less who wins than how we play. Love of the good in the world expresses itself in a deep regard for the institutions that enable us to enjoy the gifts of God. This means that genuine cooperation is of greater value than the particular outcome I may desire. Through cooperation and love for the person of the other, there remains hope that things can be improved. A disordered preference for outcomes over cooperation prevents progress. Finally, following the wisdom of St. Ignatius of Loyola, we need to seek always detached, holy indifference to outcomes. In this way our personal and communal hopes and joys, anger and outrage, can be ordered toward the objective values on which our world is built.

To summarize the rules of engagement for compassionate communication in a digital world: Be Curious. Manage defensiveness: breath, admit mistakes, and apologize. Validate before attempting to persuade. Cherish truth. Love your interlocutor.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. The author challenges each of us to examine the root causes of our own moral outrage.

Rather than pointing fingers at different media outlets or political parties, he suggests we need to listen to our own heart. “Outrage” arises out of a conviction that we have been somehow betrayed by persons or an institution we once trusted. Examine your heart: have you tried to see the deeper reasons for your anger at the Church or the government or the company for whom you work? Spend some time sorting out your thoughts with a trusted friend.

2. Dr. LaChance takes the question of more “charitable” communication to the level of two individuals engaged in honest dialogue and the way listener and speaker enter into a covenant of respect, truly wanting to understand each other’s perspective. Have you used this methodology, analysis and process before when dealing with a person who did not share your viewpoint? Was the method successful?
3. Reference is made in the article to the “common good” – a teaching from the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Vatican II documents. How do you see respect for “common good” as a means for overcoming the current polarization in Church and civil society?
4. The author ends his discussion of compassionate communication with two special challenges: (1) trust in the power of pure love to create an atmosphere where genuine communication will happen and (2) be detached from a pre-set desired “outcome.” Have you seen an attitude of love and an indifference to a personal agenda as building blocks for meaningful conversations and mutual changes of heart? How might these two principles help you with a current polarized situation?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul J. LaChance earned a doctorate in Theology from Boston College and an MA in Counseling Psychology from Saint Elizabeth University. He began work as a professional counselor with a specialty in couple therapy in 2014 and is licensed in PA, NJ and RI. He has served variously as a full-time and as a contingent faculty member for over 20 years and is currently an Adjunct Professor in Theology at DeSales University. He writes blogs and hosts interviews at www.insighttodayonline.com focusing on Insight Studies inspired by the work of Fr. Bernard Lonergan, S.J.

HD HUMAN DEVELOPMENT



Upcoming Issue of HD

Volume 43 Issue 3 – 2023 – Beauty: a window to God

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