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The Best-Kept Secret of “Digital Omelas”

At a recent UCU Open House, I had a short welcoming word, and what follows was my main message for the young people who were interested in our programs and who were also willing to go through our highly competitive selection process.

I believe our fundamental competitive advantage in the rapidly unfolding 21st century is grounded in humanness and is strongly dependent upon our ability to become humane and to live in a humane way. We as humans have our unique and somewhat paradoxical experience of time; we deserve to be acknowledged as “humans” and “human beings” at any given moment, and yet “becoming human” is perceived as a destination still ahead of us. Being able as a human being to hear and respond to a calling to become human and thus to discern a “destination” to responsibly advance is what makes someone truly and enduringly competitive (if you like that word most) or truly humane, accomplished, grateful and happy (which I like better).

Having offered this proposal in front of about 200 young, smart and “digitally-native” Ukrainians, I found myself the next day asking to what extent a “human being becoming humane” evokes ideas

of development, accomplishment, fulfilment and calling along with a complementary idea of responsibility for becoming what one ought to be. And to what extent do young people perceive freedom itself as being manifested foremost in and through one’s responsibility? One earns freedom by responding (shouldn’t one wonder that “responding” and “responsibility” ring so similar) to what is inherently worthy and valuable. This is also a way of discerning, attuning and opening oneself up to one’s own calling.

I think the younger generation’s (much richer than mine) experience of the digital or “digitality” phenomenon has powerfully introduced and familiarized them with an idea of “plasticity”, which is a truly fascinating aspect of the digital reality. To a large extent, becoming “digitally native” is conditioned by someone’s ability to accept a “plasticity concept”, master it and start feeling at home with constantly adjustable and fluctuating digital surroundings. Digital reality suggests its own experience and reading of freedom for its inhabitants. I believe it could be rendered by describing freedom as a form of “plasticity”, defined by an agent’s “here and now” desires, projections, and imaginations.

From a “digital world” perspective, “humanity” as a concept might seem to be too “rigid”, too “vague”, and too difficult to master. The seemingly “digital plasticity” or “plasticity of the digital” seems to be much more appealing, pleasing, commendable and instantaneous. My “digital appearance” and my “digital community” – with the help of the algorithms – can be construed as so much faster than my real “Self”, than my “personality” through which the Self reveals itself; and more quickly established than my circle of friends tested by time and shared experience. In a digital land, it seems, I can be anybody or anything with any sort of identity and for as long as I want it to be.

And yet, loneliness seems to be one of the most rapidly growing and expanding phenomena induced by the digital environ-

ments. We do often feel a communication “hunger” and a longing for an authentic relationship. A post-truth world offers a rich and easily accessible information and communication menu with an unprecedented outreach which may seemingly serve everybody’s taste, except for at least one crucial ingredient often being missed (or misused) – which is truth itself.

Again, what are our intellectual, spiritual, and psychological “reflexes” and attitudes under those circumstances? How do we cultivate our appetite and taste for communication if information is superabundantly available? How do we break away from loneliness and curate authentic relationships?

Sadly, a challenge we are confronting is even more complex and troubling. The main threat comes not merely from being overwhelmed and disoriented in searching for our “digital freedoms and identities”.

We all are familiar with a saying that “big data is the new oil of the 21st century”. What worries me is the fact that it’s really us humans – who are viewed, approached, and treated as the most valuable data sets in the big data pool – that are becoming the 21st century’s new resource to be exploited. We have subjected ourselves to a kind of Copernican revolution. The change is certainly everywhere, penetrating into different segments of our life and living, as the authors of “The Social Dilemma” vividly elaborate. I think that the most spectacular and massive changes are those we observe in business and in politics (think for example of Facebook and Brexit). In a digitally driven world, the roles of the “customers” and “voters” seem to be understood and treated differently from how they used to be traditionally conceived.

A whole relational aspect of humanity, namely, our being-in-relation with others in almost everything we do, think, decide, experience, etc., becomes radically reconfigured. The immense plasticity

of the algorithms allows them to cultivate our emotional self in a radical isolation from others and also from factuality and truths. The algorithms have ample information about us; all they still need is our attention, and more often than not, we offer it in abundance. If you project this onto the business and political fields, you can see what the dividends might be for someone who runs the algorithms and has a “client base” of millions or billions of people. It also shouldn’t be difficult to imagine that a “military spin” could be added on top of all of this, which has certainly been a part of our Ukrainian experience of withstanding Russian military and hybrid aggression over the last few years.

Some of us are familiar with Ursula Le Guin’s story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” Only a few pages long, it is about a beautiful city wherein peace and order, work and enjoyment are nicely balanced and comfort and please its citizens. The social contract behind this happiness hinges upon the life of one child, a girl of about 10 years old, who is forever locked in a windowless basement and leads a miserable and painful life. If this child is freed, the city and the life of its citizens would be destroyed. Everyone knows about it:

They all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children ... depend wholly on this child’s abominable misery.

Many of the citizens have visited the child with their own children and most of them feel horrible about what they saw and it takes them quite an effort to get back to their happy life. A few are so burdened by this knowledge that they leave the city and never return.

My conclusion from this story is this: We become vulnerable by becoming what we are not or by pretending to be what we are not.

The issue of human vulnerability is not resolved by a hypothetical immunity to all possible hardships and destructive, oppressive

forces, and a cessation of the immensity of suffering. Omelas’ case illustrates a kind of vulnerability which still exists even in the midst of the seemingly happy and enjoyable life. This is why I’d like to suggest that vulnerability becomes an issue whenever we misunderstand, mistreat or ignore our humanity along with its developmental potential.

This is the main and the major challenge we are facing throughout our individual and social lives. This is what Omelas’ case illustrates powerfully in just a few pages. One could read it predominantly in the social and societal terms of trying to discern how much inhumanity is too much. One might say that one child’s suffering sounds incomparably more acceptable if compared with gulag model. Perhaps, someone might argue, small doses of inhumanity are justifiable in view of the quantifiable wellbeing of many others? Yet, one can also think of the Omelas case in much more self-reflective terms. This is what David Brooks mentions in one of his texts:

In another reading, the whole city of Omelas is just different pieces of one person’s psychology, a person living in the busy modern world, and that person’s idealism and moral sensitivity is the shriveling child locked in the basement.

In view of our present topic, I have my own reading of Le Guin’s story which very much resonates with David Brooks’ comment. The main risk we are facing as we rapidly plug into Digital Reality is not noticing that in the emergent Digital Omelas, our humanity (along with its “humane” potential) might be allotted the role of the child in the basement and thus will become the best kept secret by all of us and among us, the digitally native Omelasians. My sincere hope is that we can avoid this outcome, and that the young people of UCU can be leaders in maintaining a humanity that is humane and resilient and truly connected.