

## PSYCHOLOGY AND CYBERSPACE: ASKING BIG QUESTIONS

As a psychologist counseling individuals diagnosed as mentally ill for many years, I empathize with their suffering and am moved by their “big questions” which are:

- who am I
- why am I here
- is there really a God
- what is the nature of good and evil
- what is death

With the passing of years, I continue practicing psychotherapy not only with those labeled mentally ill, but also with people considered highly functional by most societal standards. Many of them enjoy material, vocational, and academic success. Nevertheless, they also ask similar “big questions.”

At times, I wonder if clients are drawn to me, at least in part, because of my own quest to explore what it means to be fully human. Asking my own “big questions” has led me through varied realms of consciousness, spirituality, and depth psychology. They have unlocked other questions. My personal search has not ceased and has kept me absorbed.

Now, I describe my work as psycho-spiritual development. I have come to realize the importance of psychology and spirituality building on each other. The Greek word for soul is psyche, which refers to the center of the human being, the core place where deep wisdom and passion resides. I conduct workshops and retreats in Europe and Asia – working with individuals from far-away lands, from diverse cultures, and from different spiritual traditions. They ask the same “big questions.”

These questions also led me to academia. I teach Developmental psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University. Even in this institutional setting, my students' "big questions" find a home in the classroom. The sensitive and vulnerable nature of such questions have made me realize that emotional safety is important wherever people—no matter the age -- open their minds and hearts.

Because I live in Philadelphia, my international work began to make commuting each week a challenge. I started to consider ending my university teaching. As I discussed this with Columbia colleagues, they asked whether I would teach my two courses – "Personality Development" and "Spiritual Development" in "Hybrid" format instead. This meant I would teach mostly online, and a few times a semester I would hold on-campus classes – and those students living outside New York would still be able to join the class online. My on-campus classes would take place in a "smart classroom" where distant learners would appear on a big board and the rest of us would be in the classroom.

After initial resistance, I began to think seriously about my teaching style. It always felt important for me to teach my classes in ways that promoted openness, interaction, and humanism. Online teaching seemed like it would be rigid and lacking in human warmth. I was concerned that the quality of the classroom experience would be compromised.

As an experiment, I decided to give online technology a chance, at least for one semester. The college promised that they would provide a "virtual" technology support person – maybe even a few. This way, there would be someone, always there (even if in cyberspace), making sure that a computer glitch would not sabotage the whole effort.

Notwithstanding, I still doubted that I would be able to teach in an authentic and sensitive manner – where students' feelings were encouraged, and where the classroom would be emotionally secure. Previously, I perversely prided myself on never using a power point presentation. By avoiding any kind of technology, I believed that the chances were greater that I could facilitate a comfortable space where students would explore their deepest beliefs and values, and as always, be encouraged to investigate their own "big questions."

Time marches on. I have taught online courses for three semesters. I have met my tech support person and she is very helpful. My angst regarding cold, impersonal

technology has proved false. Instead, I discovered that online courses not only enable students to share openly, but to forge deep connections – with each other, with tech personnel, and with me.

It has taken awhile to let myself fully acknowledge that my previous self-righteousness regarding the flaws of on-line teaching was dead wrong. I cautiously have been letting myself consider that there may be something quite profound happening between people and machines. Although I am chronologically a mature adult, when it comes to cyberspace, I feel like a newborn baby – maybe a toddler -- slowly but surely discovering that there is an amazing new world to explore and discover.

It is apparent that technology is accelerating at an unprecedented rate; so much, that many aspects of our society, workplaces, and educational institutions are completely revamping themselves. I understand why there is initial resistance by many towards anything this new and monumental. There are others, however, who easily are able to jump on board with enthusiasm.

At the same time, it is well-known that there are serious problems with digital advances. Since this article is not about scrutinizing such difficulties, I will identify just a few commonly recognized problems. There are those individuals who use the internet for destructive intent. There are also educators and neuroscientists who claim that a child's brain, attention span and motivation, are negatively impacted when they stare at computers for much of the day. Additionally, some psychologists feel dismay that young people are developmentally immature in interpersonal relationships because of social media. These challenges will need further research and resolution in the future.

As I began to teach my courses online, I was surprised to realize how my teaching style and ways of processing students' feelings were not very different from how I had always expressed myself in a regular classroom. I also noticed some differences that were startling.

Instead of talking to students from the front of a class, far away from where they sat, I was in my own home talking with them through my monitor. In so doing, I discovered that I could see them close up; thus, creating a form of intimacy that was not there before. I became conscious of their facial expressions, the times they felt vulnerable, confident, maybe even sad. Because of having greater

awareness regarding the nuances of students' emotions, I was able to respond in ways that were more empathic and reassuring.

Further, because most of the students were in the privacy of their own homes, there was an increased sense of common humanity that we all shared. There were times, for example, when all of us could visualize a student's dog or cat running across the screen. Another student was holding her newborn baby in her arms as she made a class presentation of her spiritual progress over the semester. She held the baby up to her screen, and her classmates, near and far, smiled and felt connected to the loving energy exchange between mother and child. On occasion, students also saw my dog, and even heard her bark when she saw a squirrel outside my window.

There was the student sipping his drink under the tropical foliage in Mexico, while most of us were in temperatures below freezing. Then, there was the student speaking to us from her home in Jordan. She shared with us how the crisis in the Middle East was affecting her. Because she was actually living there at the time, we could somehow feel her pain more deeply, and understand her life struggles in ways that were illuminating and educational.

On a few occasions, I noticed that a student's facial expression and tone of voice were providing clues that she might be experiencing emotional distress about certain psychological material being discussed. I was able to follow up after class, by sending an e-mail, asking if there was something concerning her about the material. We could then have a private face-to-face online discussion at a convenient time.

My journey with psychology and cyberspace continues to progress. There was a day recently, when I had a Skype psychotherapy session with a young man in India in the morning, and then 10 hours later, I counseled a client in Australia. In a few days, I will be joining an online meeting with a group of colleagues from Germany, Russia, France and China. We are planning together an international psychology program that we will hold in Asia.

As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and complex, remarkable technology is bringing people together in new and extraordinary ways. More and more of us are now connecting, collaborating, and realizing our common humanity with greater ease than ever before.

It is now apparent to me that computers are making life-long learning a necessity. As a society and a culture, this opens possibilities and opportunities for many people who previously felt constrained in narrow fields of interest.

Recently, I had a dream in which I was holding a small, shrinking globe of the world in the palm of my hands. I find myself contemplating humanity's evolution in ways that feel exhilarating and a bit overwhelming at the same time.

Gradually, brand new "big questions" burst through my consciousness:

- How will the merger between human intelligence and machine intelligence evolve?
- Are we spiritual machines?
- How do we transform models of internet teaching from mere computerized delivery systems to deep learning?
- Can human compassion be integrated into technology?
- Through machines, we now possess new and creative means for empathic communication with people outside our immediate circles. How do we build on this to offer opportunities for greater unity and understanding?

Many more "big questions" will arise for my generation and for those who come after. Humanity has reached a time in its evolution where mind and heart are converging with machines. Such a union has potential for creating a new and ever-expanding moral reality.

My journey has just begun. So much to think about, so much to learn. Psychology and cyberspace – a wondrous possibility.