



Being Human

Feeling Our- Way in This New Millennium

A friend at a big nonprofit that better the lives of disadvantaged children said to me, "I'm sick of the starving child portrait!" "Get over it," I retorted. "We need to see a face :-)." Of course this was by e-mail—or maybe we chatted, texted or tweeted. I don't recall which, but I do know I'm clueless about whether my friend was being callous or just feeling overwhelmed. I didn't see her face. The only face in this exchange was the goofy punctuation smiley I added at the end. Oh the irony!

We are a social species. Connectors. Back when our kind lived in small tribes and gnawed on bloody hyena legs still warm

"If I look at the
one I will act,
if I look at the
masses, I never
will."

—Mother Theresa

from the kill, we could smell fear, see in the dark, sense approaching animals. We knew only our own tribe. But we traded in these survival skills for the ability to distinguish the ring tone of an iPhone from that of a Blackberry and a decent Pinot Grigio from a lousy Soave. Luckily our primitive brains still react to a baby's plaintive cry, the aroma of burning

wood, the crisp taste of mountain spring water. Word-of-mouth, a human phenomena, still helps warn us of impending danger. And while we are each still part of a small tribe, in reality we are aware we are also just one in a cast of six billion. Our humanity is not lost, just overcrowded.

Believe it or not, most people are fairly altruistic—that is, if they can see the person, the individual. Studies show that, when given a choice, most people will give more to another person than is needed or requested—even if it's a stranger. When the plea is to help thousands in dire need, the individual becomes a statistic, and empathy can become apathy. We need to see a face. And preferably touch a hand, hear a voice, smell a person.

Indeed we have a unique construction housed in our skulls: one part ancient amygdala (emotion-driven) complemented

by the modern prefrontal cortex (rational and calculating).

And our numbers are projected to increase by an unnerving third, climbing to 9,000,000,000 in the foreseeable future. James Lovelock, father of the Gaia theory of the living Earth,¹ speculates that, as conditions become unbearable, wars will break out leading to massive slaughter and starvation. Survivors of this apocalypse will be the early adopters who will once again create small tribes and, with luck, find oases soon enough so they may survive while the Earth heals. Lovelock's radical projection is either severely depressing or weirdly uplifting, depending on your perspective.

One wild card has been tossed into the game—the Internet. Crowd Acceleration Innovation is the theory that as millions are being connected, especially youth, online, they are rapidly educating themselves and therefore able to pull altogether at warp speed through technology.² This positive view gives us a shot at a winning hand. It speaks to the connector, the survivor, in each of us. Cisco speculates video will fill the Internet of the future. We are uniquely wired to decode information when presented in an accessible, human way. Since we are drawn to sentient beings, the appeal of much of that content will use spoken and body languages, faces and emotions. As the knowledge revolution was spawned by the printing press, the Internet may lead to a new Age of Enlightenment (YouTube videos of Bridezillas and hot dog gorging contests aside) for the next generation.

How XD may save your soul

Humans cultivate empathy by making meaningful, quality connections with other living things. When information is presented in a compelling and creative way in any venue, neurons start firing, emotions ignite the imagination. Any place where people congregate presents such an opportunity. Nathan Shedroff, an experience strategist and program chair of the design strategy MBA program at the California College of the Arts (CCA), says, "All experience happens in a place—and all aspects of a place need to be considered. Taste, smell, touch, sight, sound and our emotional/intellectual interpretations of these sensations are what make up any experience.



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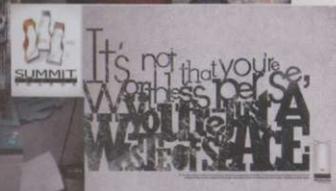
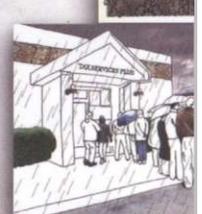
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Awareness of sensory factors is what is called Experience Design (XD)." "A place" may be a store, a Web site or a kitchen. Maria Giudice, CEO and founder of Hot Studio, says, "Experience design is a widely adapted term now. And its inclusiveness brings designers into parity with business. The millennium generation, those who were born into technology, automatically 'get' that there are multiple touchpoints. The old way of thinking—the cocktail napkin design solution—is old hat."

When you fix dinner, dive into the pounding surf or change a baby, you engage most of your senses. Yet, in your average day, how much time is spent experiencing rich sensory experiences? Texting and e-mailing have become preferred communication paths for many even though in doing so, we can become a tad autistic, detached from the true emotion behind the communications we send or receive. But like Pavlov's rats, we get a charge out of it. When a teen girl texts (an average of 4,000 times a month), she's shooting 4,000 doses of love (i.e., dopamine) to her virginal amygdala.

The cheap thrill of dopamine is, however, a tradeoff; since e-mails and texts lack emotional nuance, the quality of the exchange is deteriorated (the punctuation smiley or frowny face are Band-Aid remedies at best). And, by narrowing down sensory engagement, the interruption required in order to

perform the task can cause normally placid people to become downright apoplectic or rude.

We wear our technology. We sleep with our iPhones.

Our ancestors had to be a lot more physically active than we are just to survive. But no leopards are stalking us now. In fact, many of us spend our days seated, in isolation, at some kind of computer. With all this communication technology Giudice wonders if our connections to the real world "get blurry."

In the mid 1970s, I waited expectantly, with a bunch of squealing ten year olds, at the Exploratorium (the museum of science, art and human perception) in San Francisco. Standing in front of the geodesic *Tactile Dome*, we were instructed to strip down as much as we could before diving into a pitch-black, womb-like tunnel in the dome not much bigger than our bodies. Off came socks and shoes, boys pulled off T-shirts amid stereophonic giggles and sighs from girls. One by one we climbed in, suddenly blind, feeling the sides of the tunnel as we made our way. As the tunnel went down we slid, then we crawled around a turn where we came to a fork and had to choose a direction unable to see what lay ahead. Each of us interpreted the different textures on the walls with our fingers. My senses limited to touch, smell, hearing and intuition, I felt so "in the moment," exhilarated, totally disoriented, a brand new experience.

I drove back to my design studio in the Mission "District to finish a mechanical for a product package. Using my Schaedler rule, I spaced type on the Bristol board on my drawing table, dialed a call on my plug-in telephone while I waited for the Best-Test two-coat rubber cement to dry. While I was using touch, smell, sight, hearing and intuition to do this, I was not conscious of how my senses informed my work. This kind of thinking was not yet on the radar in design. But now it is.

Giudice says, "Products are now developed within holistic systems—look at Apple. They are selling in the App Store, on iTunes. You are not buying a product on its own. You are buying into a relationship. Zappos is another good example. They are selling shoes they did not design. What you are buying is incredible customer service that just happens to be online. The customer controls the relationship much more than ever before." This new relationship is cutting down on the need for real estate as well as packaging. And commerce is now being transacted daily in the privacy of our living rooms.

Liz Danzico, chair of the School of Visual Arts MFA interaction design program, says, "There are fewer borders between public and private. And therefore there may be a decreasing tolerance for inconsistency in commerce. User experience design (UXD—a subset of XD) has the opportunity to make the experience useful (meaningful) usable (intuitive) and

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delightful (joyful). Our consumer culture is becoming much more collaborative—we have access to reviews, have house shares, we barter for products, services and more. Designers can make all these systems more rewarding to use."

Shedroff says to the designer, "You are a curator in a collaborative process that is going to trigger meaning, when you know the triggers. We kick the students' butts to the curb and get them to connect to the ultimate user. They need to meet the customer. We push students to experience things deeply, to immerse themselves in experience: to notice which experiences are so routine, they don't even register, like brushing your teeth. To realize how people transition from one place to another."

Had there been a World Wide Web, would there have been a Hitler?

People are reticent to face reality when it threatens their worldview. There's a tricky balance individuals must achieve

that allows them to become healthy, productive members of society. America has been branded as a nation of over-consumers. Shedroff says, "When people try to fill the voids in their lives with 'stuff,' it may help our economy in the short term but may not be so helpful to our society in

the long term. I want designers to consider a wider range of options when they create meaningful experiences for people, experiences that will satisfy them on deeper levels." So they still spend their money, but on experiences, not necessarily products. Certainly, this would be one antidote to the rampant consumerism gobbling up our natural resources while keeping the economy afloat. Shedroff implores, "We need a new business model. The world needs *a lot* of new business models. And **XD** can be an effective tool within these models, to help reshape our economy."

Shedroff reminds us that, playing on the fear of change, lobbies have historically protected the status quo. "RCA tried to get Congress to deny approval for **FM** radio; they were protecting their business interests in **AM**." Since relevance drives all markets Shedroff adds, "Had we tried to protect dying industries we would never have gotten to electronics which, of course, led to high technology: the buggy whip, whale oil, petticoats and corset businesses all go unmissed. Expectation and a positive sense of possibility lead us to open the doors for change. A lot of young people have this spirit. Experience design can help galvanize it. It's the innovators who shall inherit the earth."

The exploration of one's inner feelings was seen as demeaning until the early part of the twentieth century when Freud's

theories became popularized in the West. Not coincidentally that was around the time Freud's American nephew, Edward Bernays, created the field of public relations. Basing it on the manipulation of the mass unconscious, he employed Freud's theory that deep inside us all are instinctual, uncontrollable, animalistic forces. Bernays's clients included John D. Rockefeller, Procter & Gamble, the NAACP, *Cosmopolitan* magazine and the CIA.⁴

In 1929 Bernays was hired by the tobacco industry to get women to smoke—a social taboo that was affecting the industry's growth. The cigarette looked like a penis, Bernays speculated and therefore represented suppressed oral eroticism and so smoking in public would symbolize independence in the women's subconscious. Capitalizing on the women's movement he enlisted "suffragettes" to smoke "torches of freedom" while marching in an Easter Day parade in New York City and the sale of cigarettes to women shot up. Smoking and freedom was in fact a totally irrational connection but it worked. In the 1960s the now contrite Bernays pleaded ignorance for his actions: Sorry officer, I didn't know the gun was loaded.

Later he used his talents to help his manufacturing clients promote planned obsolescence, and helped to manipulate society to devolve from a "needs to a desires" culture in order to stimulate the economy through over-consumerism. This massive shift contributed to the growth of the field of advertising.

In an effort to get his client President Herbert Hoover reelected, Bernays formed a non-partisan fact-finding committee, which sought to fool the public by publishing polls showing an overwhelming victory for the Republican Hoover against his Democratic rival Franklin Delano Roosevelt. When FDR came into office he brought in the New Deal, and the belief that the average man, if informed and educated, could make up his own mind. This point of view has remained in conflict with big business ever since.

Stimulating the selfishness of the masses meant that their contentment would allow leadership to take control. In a stunning irony, Bernays, who was Jewish, also inspired the leaders of Nazi Germany. Freud, who was also Jewish, became indigent and fled to England as the Nazis threatened to invade Austria. Bernays became Freud's promoter and benefactor, popularizing his books in America to support his uncle in exile and to enhance his own fortune.

XD is neutral, and so its impact depends on who is using it: for good or evil. Giudice observes a new check and balance, "**x**DerS start way upstream. They understand the customers' needs and desires having learned from observation and research that the customer is in the driver's seat. Companies are becoming more and more aware of this reality. Anyone can find out about a brand. There's no insulation of the

company anymore. And since word of mouth is still the best way to build the brand, you connect with the people and products who agree with you."

A *Mind of one's own*

At the Exploratorium visitors interact with experiments that are phenomena-based, exploring many aspects of the physical world, like evaporation, light or gravity. Exhibit developer Eric Thogerson says, "When we start work on a new theme we typically spend several years-in research and collaboration. We play with the ideas that resonate with us most." As with *The Tactile Dome*, *The Mind* (also a permanent exhibit), the phenomena takes place in the mind of the visitor. For instance, *Poker Face* reveals how to read the facial expression of the person you sit across from. And, at the same time, this provides insights into your own reactions. *The Emotion Reader* charts how the skin responds; one person reacts to a slightly uncomfortable question read aloud by a companion (friend, family member). Thogerson says, "We provide props: a photo of a foot with a bad sore, questions like 'Tell me who you have a crush on.'" The players are related, so there is a social dynamic. *The Emotion Reader* measures feelings, judgment and attention. *Trading Places* is based on a technique for studying stereotyping. It's a card game that can reveal how hidden assumptions affect the way you see the people around you.

In the development phase of *The Mind*, it was suggested that people might have a strong reaction to drinking out of a toilet. So Thogerson prototyped a toilet fountain he later named *Sip of Conflict*. He hauled it out onto the floor of the Exploratorium, which provides endless willing subjects for the research and design staff—that would be the envy of any student of **XD**. Thogerson says, "People were fascinated. Everyone wanted someone to give it a try. It provided a great photo op—you know, mom drinking out of the toilet. I think it's the combination of porcelain, which is very clean as is your sink (but in a different shape), and the psychological dirtiness of using a toilet that confounds people's reactions." So Exploratorium-goers see and understand they have had an irrational emotional response.

Joyce Ma, a cognitive scientist and researcher at the Exploratorium, says, "People are rarely oblivious to their feelings and reactions. We look at the role of emotions and learning, encourage people to play and explore in a safe environment." Ma adds, "The toilet fountain was a home run. It didn't even require research. The conversations were predictable. They felt embarrassed and grossed out. A lot of people 'got' the conflict."

People need to understand their motivations, irrational reactions—in order to learn when to trust their intuition with intelligence and awareness. We don't want people to think "I've always been bad at science." They need to feel "I can find out new things for myself." Otherwise they'd give

up. Josh Gutwill, who is acting director of visitor research says, "You learn quickly how hard it is to change entrenched beliefs. Our goal is to provoke curiosity, a sense of wonder."

Gutwill says, "The devil is in the details. A really small change in directions on an exhibit can have a huge effect. We use an iterative process; make a change, watch people, make a change. And we pay a lot more attention now to language. The word 'turn' means 'gentle' whereas the word 'crank' sounds more vigorous. By asking and watching we find these things out." Some visitors are asked to participate in more documented research, by being video- or audio-taped. This way the team can study reactions that would otherwise go unnoticed.

Gutwill has learned how to learn. He says, "Celebrate failure; foster open-ended, in-depth inquiry. It's a forking path that sometimes has a dead end. You back up, but that's O.K. That's all part of the process."

We are uniquely wired to decode information when presented in an accessible, human way.

Bernays was hardly a humanist. He was not warm and fuzzy. He could not even see the individual, but he had an uncanny sense of the mass unconscious. If he were working today (he retired in the 1960s), wouldn't his clients still include manufacturers, politicians, celebrities? Is an empathetic approach to a Bernays-type strategy possible or even desirable (i.e., manipulation of the masses for the greater good)? Isn't that what Bernays deluded himself into thinking he was doing?

If we can believe polls, the exciting news is that millennials are redefining their American Dream as non-materialistic. Surveys show 81 percent of 18-29 year olds won't be easily fooled. They have a heightened savvy; they trust the leading brands they feel are authentic, distrust the ones they see as disingenuous. They are passionate about experience. Most advertising is simply irrelevant to them.⁵ These are among the new survival skills. These are the early adopters. CA

1 James Lovelock, *Gaia, a new look at Life on Earth*.

2 Chris Anderson: "How Web video powers global innovation," TedTalks.

3 "Seeking: How the brain hard-wires us to love Google, Twitter, and texting. And why that's dangerous," *Slate.com*.

4 *The Century of the Self*, BBC.

5 testing.pivotcon.com/Video/pivotvideopage.html.