The Chattering Classes

A few weeks ago, I visited the house of a family I had known for some time. Their father had passed on at the age of one hundred, and I went to pay my respects. One person there reminded me of the time they had helped me to get a bed, some decades ago. Those were simpler times in Jordan. The neighborhood was still on the outskirts of Amman. It was undeveloped, shorn of the apartment blocks that now crowd out the sun. Goats roamed freely among the olive groves. The invasion of American goods and the internet was in the distant future. That bed was also a simple affair. It was a board of wood, balanced on two wooden cinderblocks of the type that a lumberjack might use to chop wood with his long-handled ax. I reflected on those simpler times. Possessions were few. But, most of all, connectivity was non-existent. We had time and space to worship, reflect and think. Tech played no part in treading the spiritual path. It just wasn’t needed.

At the last British Suhba, we spoke on how big data companies like Facebook and its offspring WhatsApp are modifying people’s thoughts and behavior. In Hyderabad, we talked about how excessive cell phone use harms physical health via dopamine, adrenaline, and cortisol. Today, we’d like to complete this year’s trilogy of nasihahs on the overuse of technology by mentioning a few words on how rumors and secrets are amplified by cell phones, disturbing our minds, relationships, and well-being. This amplification has given birth to a new chattering class.

The chattering classes first emerged in London in the nineteenth century. They were the liberal intelligentsia, who gathered together for social occasions. They carried about themselves a confident, self-assured expression on current events. They had a great number of opinions on a lot of subjects. And they had a high opinion of their own self-worth and way of thinking. The type of people who might justify bombing a foreign land they know little about because of an
arrogant self-confidence or in the superiority of their education. The thing is no one had anything good to say about them. The editor of the Merriam-Webster dictionary would say, "They are characterized by idle, useless opinions. They do not amount to very much, but they love to hear themselves talk."

When people chatter and throw around their opinions, rumors inevitably start, then take on a life of their own. The British soon realized this and used it to their advantage in the Second World War. The Ministry of Information started a rumor campaign that spread throughout Europe. A deliberate, casual remark might be said at a poker game attended by a notable banker; a comment was made at a doctor's appointment; gossip was dropped at social gatherings of industrialists; or an event was mentioned to lawyers. It was like throwing a lit match onto dry kindle. This whispering campaign spread through the chattering classes in German-held territories. Pretty soon, Hans in Frankfurt, Franz in Stuttgart, and Fritz in Berlin were hearing the rumors as they advanced through German society. No one was ever quite sure of the source of the rumors. It was a very British answer to the Panzer Division. In the early 1940s, the London Daily Telegraph reported on the death of General Udet, second-in-command in the German Luftwaffe. This rumor spread by the press was lapped up by the chattering classes in England and Germany. It was also untrue. It too had been planted by the British Ministry of Information.

The aim of this British establishment commitment to spreading rumors was to sow unrest and mischief. It proved to be effective. By 1942 the German Press had to issue warnings that threatened the death penalty to anyone spreading false rumors. The reason for such a stiff penalty was that rumormongering was undermining the morale of the German military and public. It led to confusion and distrust within society. It cost lives. The British knew well that rumors were a powerful weapon of war. They invested heavily in this weapon. They knew it damaged morale and motivation while
promoting discontent, disharmony, and dissatisfaction. They were well aware it could alter relationships between people. It was a weapon of war wielded with devastating effect upon the chattering classes.

In the aftermath of World War II, rumor became a subject of interest to psychologists. The first seminal study conducted in 1947 continues to be cited seventy years later. The authors found that rumors damage the morale of people, spreading when anxieties are high and worsening those anxieties. They formulated a mathematical model of rumor to show how the strength and effectiveness of a rumor is contingent upon the importance of the subject to the individual. In other words, if you allow yourself to partake in rumors about things or people you love, they are more likely to have a stronger or more devastating effect upon you. Like the Germans, your morale will also be undermined.

When rumors spread so do secrets. They are like two evil twin brothers who play off and strengthen each other, increasing in their destruction of people. Telling a secret, keeping a secret, betraying a confidence is no longer just a moral quandary. It’s now a significant health problem. Much of the recent work on secrets has come out of Columbia University. There, teams of researchers have conducted study upon study on secrecy. These studies build on two decades worth of findings on problems connected with concealment. When we get involved with other people's secrets and private life there is harm in hiding the secret, living with it, and thinking about it. The more frequently the secret is thought or talked about the lower a person’s well-being. There is increased anxiety, depression, morbidity, and a more rapid progression of chronic illnesses. The constant vigilance and concealment are exhausting. It results in less satisfying relationships. Those who recall other’s secrets start to make extreme judgments of their external environment and circumstance. In the Netherlands, they found that keeping emotionally burdensome secrets leads to physical symptoms.
It's almost as if there is a physical and mental punishment for getting involved in secretive talk.

The problem is both secrets and rumors are amplified by the smartphone. Previously, we warned about giving up our privacy to data corporations like Google and Facebook. But there is another important privacy consideration: honoring and respecting the privacy of others. It's now not unusual to make a remark to a single person, only to find out that tens or even thousands of people know within a few hours. That remark sent by a text is forwarded on, with the sender then losing control of the original message. One scholar in England was horrified to find photos of his private living room and library plastered over social media, after a visitor thought nothing of sending it out over Twitter, while his host made coffee. Not so long ago, betraying a trust, or spreading a rumor took some effort and time. The number of people reached was limited. It couldn't be done when people had retired to their homes for the night. This time and effort provided a filter. There was a window of time to reflect before talking or acting. Now, everything is instant and right now. People retire to their homes, yet the screen lights up across neighborhoods with gossip and rumors well into the night. This light-speed hyperconnected world leaves no time for collective deliberation. We no longer make carefully considered decisions about what we say or spread. All of this is amplified by the smartphone.

On the way over from Amman to Toronto, we took the opportunity to ask some questions of a traditional Chinese medicine doctor practicing in the Oxfordshire countryside. We got talking about the health effects of cell phones and computer use. She told us that the eyes are overused with these technologies, as people lap up information or messages while glued to a screen a few inches from their face. In Chinese medicine, the eyes are the gateway to the liver, while the liver is the seat of emotional health. If the liver gets riled up from too much useless information fed to it through the eyes, a person becomes emotionally unbalanced. She
continued, "From the liver the emotions drop into the spleen, before arriving at the kidneys. Gradually, the kidneys become weakened, leading to chronic disease. This might happen over many years, and a person isn't even aware of what caused their condition." Put simply, spending too much time on a smartphone leads to emotional and physical health problems. This might sound strange to those enthralled with the false god of scientism, but the theoretical and empirical underpinnings are strong. We now know that there is a massive spike in anxiety disorders, that correlates strongly with increasing smartphone use.

We asked the doctor about her own practice, and she gave some solid advice, that people could do worse than to follow. After noting that almost everyone is addicted, she warned, "The cell phone does not allow you to do a task undisturbed. You do nothing very well. When doing anything, whether socializing, with your children, working, seeing a client, writing, studying, or exercising keep the phone away from you". This is her own practice. When she works on her translation projects in the evening, the phone is in a different room. In fact, if you try to ask a question by email or text message, she will take a day or so to respond. This is deliberate, and she is training her own patients. She's unconcerned with losing business. There is no instant back and forth of messages. There is a time for reflection, work, solitude, and silence. There is a break from the screen.

Solitude can have many benefits. It regulates emotions and builds moral courage. It strengthens and deepens relationships with people when you meet and talk with them. Most of all, it increases our ability to be creative and clarify hard to solve problems.

In 1879 Frederick Nietzsche resigned his professorship due to ill health. The next decade of his life was powered by ambulation as he walked up to eight hours a day in the mountains in a bid to get better. He did so in a remote Alpine valley in the Swiss Alps. During this time, he cured himself, had the most wildly productive decade of his life, and his
fame spread. Away from the chattering classes of the academy and urbane life, Nietzsche found freedom from the input of other minds, and he stopped reacting to other people's works and thoughts. This culminated in his work *Twilight of the Idols*, which took just two weeks to write. Abraham Lincoln took a similar tack. When President he would repair every night to a cottage thirty minutes ride from the Capitol. Away from the needs of the nation, it gave him time to formulate the Gettysburg Address. In both cases, being absent for a time was not wasteful nor self-indulgent. It led to better health and works that otherwise would not have come to fruition.

But when periods of solitude are eliminated it messes with our brain chemistry. There is a loss of ability to process and make sense of emotions. Our thoughts are too focused all of the time on the needs and problems of others, which damages our own wellbeing. There is less time to reflect on and do what really matters. When we experience silence and solitude the brain does not shut down. It powers up areas of the brain that are only active when there is silence, stillness, and reflection. These areas help with thought, memory, and creativity. When there is constant background noise and interruption then we lose the help given to us by these parts of the brain.

Solitude and silence also bring on surprising health benefits. At Oxford University, researchers found it releases tension in the body and brain, lowering blood cortisol levels and adrenaline. It boosts the immune system, lowers blood pressure, promotes hormone regulation, and prevents plaque formation in the arteries. Research teams throughout Germany confirmed it creates new cells in the hippocampus, which helps with planning, then executing those plans. But perhaps the most worrying finding was in a European-wide study carried out by the World Health Organization. It concluded that a lack of silence in our daily lives was a significant health burden resulting in increased morbidity.

The problem is we never experience solitude, silence, or boredom because of the constant ding or vibration in our
pocket. It is a cacophony of noise, interruption, and other people's thoughts. The source of rumor and opinion. An intrusion into our brain.

Solitude does not mean cutting oneself off or going full Luddite. It's not about becoming a hermit or ignoring friends. We are not monks. Our religion is a social one confirmed by congregational prayers throughout the day. Ours is a balanced path in which there is a time for silence and a time for talk. But it's also the path of the fitra, which is bent out of shape by the overuse of tech. It means having a break throughout the day from the chattering classes, whether their chuntering comes from emails, messages, or constantly updated news reports and websites. It means also abstaining from social media, unless crucial for work purposes, and treating it with extreme contempt and caution. It means having real human interaction or even making a phone call. Solitude is when your mind is free from input by other minds and you stop reacting to the thoughts of others — the very thing jeopardized by the smartphone.

Nowadays, when there are solitude and silence there is boredom. We spoke with the strongest man in the world about boredom. He was the first in human history to lift 1000 lbs. off the floor. He still lifts well over 800 lbs. with one kidney, while on dialysis, awaiting a transplant. He's a determined laddie. He was demonstrating a certain exercise, when he said, "Boredom! I can do boredom." It's necessary for his profession as he has to do rep after rep for hours on end. Yet boredom gives birth to a certain meditative flow in a given task, and then to mastery. Learning times tables by rote isn't the most enjoyable thing in the world, yet it's necessary to produce mathematicians. The martial artist has to drill the same movements day-after-day. The basketball player has to put up thousands upon thousands of shots. The linguist has to practice grammar and learn his verbs. A lot of boring, repetitive activities go into making people excel at something they enjoy and become an expert in. You cannot
become world class without some boring activities and lessons.

The question is why would you subject yourself to the opinionated chattering classes? Why would you expose yourself to rumors, hearsay, and secrets? A person must know three things: when to keep quiet, how to keep a confidence, and when not to meddle in the affairs of others. It's about respecting the privacy of others. Ignoring these three things will lead to your downfall.

This brings us back to the cinderblock bed because it's also a case of simplifying your life and quietening the chattering from whatever source. Take the advice of traditional Chinese doctors to have periods away from the smartphone. Then use that time to be like the strongest man in the world and work on activities that might be boring yet have significant benefit. It's about following the example of Brampton RV club who take families and friends out into the quiet of the Canadian wilds. Or the Edmonton hunting club who teach children how to bag ducks, turkeys, and wild game. You have to have moments of silence and boredom to stalk a deer — it's not at all like being a Bollywood action hero with a gun. Life is not about a screen that amplifies all your problems, worries, and anxieties. Continue serving others, but don't interfere in their life. It's time for some silence away from all this constant, life-sapping, soul-destroying, fitra-bending chatter.