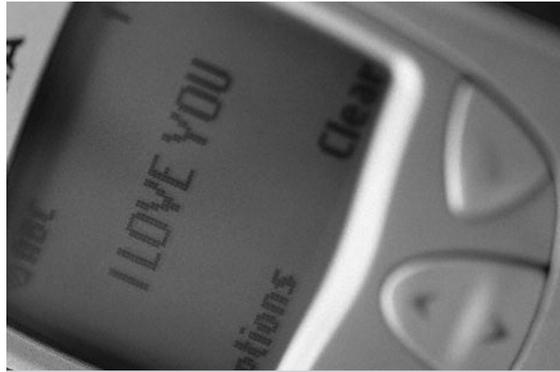


# CYBERSENSE

## GOODWILL: VIA FACE, VOICE, EMAIL, TEXT?

**YOU WATCH AS ON YOUR SCREEN THE GROUP OF PICTURES MOVES TOWARDS A CENTERPOINT.** Some wink out. Others pop in, replacing them. They all grow smaller and begin to form a rectangular shape. You see a sailboat, wine-glass, hands clasping, many shots of a young daughter in white dancing or smiling. This wistful collage gradually morphs into a modern, internet-enabled cell phone. “Connect to all the things you love in life,” comes the voice-over.



But how wise is this guidance? Is relying more on this little device the key to all that’s good and wholesome? The graphic display is pure “eyecandy.” If you read my past columns (*in previous issues*), you know that eyecandy is intended to slip emotional affect past the guardian function of rational thought.

So what about goodwill? If we look at face-to-face communication—voice only, email letters, and text messages—**how easy is it to maintain goodwill over these different channels?**

You are probably familiar with the notion of *bandwidth*. That’s a matter of how “fat” the “pipe” is. How many channels does a communication link have, and how much data can be moved through each one. In cyberspace, higher bandwidth is what brings you instant loading of web pages, animations instead of stills, and videos that play on the click of the mouse without stopping every few seconds for the data stream to catch up. **Bandwidth is cool, in any form.**

And bandwidth is crucial to all human communications. What internet and computer marketspeak never refers to is this. When you move from face-to-face, to voice only, to email, to text messages, you encounter in each case, a drastic and dramatic decrease in bandwidth. A kind of amazing truth here is that the voice-only pipe is a trickle compared to the in person face-to-face pipe. And email’s pipe is a trickle compared to voice only. And texting is a trickle compared to email.

So right away—you know there’s a problem. Cyberspace, for most, is still primarily

text and email. There’s no way “everything you love in life” can come to you through their tiny bandwidths. Not that a cell phone can’t help you in various ways. We’ll come back to that in a minute. Making good cybersense means seeing both sides of a profound shift.

But where do I get this “amazing truth” about bandwidth? Well, it’s simple really. In “real space,” face-to-face with people, you have four powerful, sensory channels available—sight, sound, smell, and touch. The sounds of language are inflected with constant nuances of tone, volume, and pacing. Facial expressions, posture, and gestures, and the general flow of shared activity all flow into an extremely rich (high bandwidth) calculation of “what someone really means.”

Face-to-face signals indicating irony or sarcasm can shift that meaning all the way into the opposite of what is literally said—which is all that would appear in text. Or take a dirt simple sentence like, “I did not walk home today.” Say it aloud it to yourself first with even stress on all the words, then again with heavy stress in turn on WALK, HOME, and TODAY. Watch the meanings shift drastically. First you get “I didn’t go home at all today,” then “I did go home but didn’t WALK,” then “I walked today but not to my HOME,” and “I’ve walked home at other times, but not TODAY.”

These examples provide just a tiny glimpse of how much typically goes missing in cyberspace. Telephone retains at least all the intonations, which helps a lot, but strips facial expression, gesture, and shared activity. Email, without even the intonations,

especially written and read in haste—will lead to misunderstandings far more often. Get the intended literal meaning wrong, add a little confusion about someone’s emotional attitude towards you—and you are off on the wrong foot. Put simply, goodwill can survive here in many circumstances, but it takes much more care and feeding.

Top international CEOs spend hundreds of thousands of dollars and up, to 180 days a year, flying around the world to get face time with their key managers. They understand that band-

width is crucial to their success. At the same time, I know a couple with children on the edge of divorce, trying to work out profound marital problems via text messages, chat rooms, and their blogs. Yes, if they need emotional distance now and then, and write very, very carefully, cyberspace can help. But imagine learning that your wife wanted a divorce by noticing she changed a drop-down box on Facebook from “married” to “divorced.”

Again, this is not to say cyberspace is bad or useless. Far from it. The lower bandwidth tools can extend your geographic reach, speed the flow of simpler, less nuanced messages to those close to you, and facilitate thin-pipe contact with a wider range of people. My sister met her wonderful husband online. But online was just a prelude to substantial face-to-face test meetings. A recent *New York Times Magazine* article (9/7/08)<sup>1</sup> explores what’s good and bad about the new forms of “digital intimacy.” Tens, or hundreds of online “friends” can have their uses. They also present new kinds of problems.

There is way much more to say on this topic. I hope you will drop by **www.makecybersense.org** where I have expanded on some of these points. In the meantime, preserve goodwill and real understanding best with a healthy amount of high bandwidth face-time. That’s our *niyama* (yogic observance) here. A good *yama* (yogic restriction) might be—use the very thin pipes of cyberspace with caution for less-nuanced communications. ▲

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/09/07/magazine/07awareness-t.html>