

Are we becoming less tolerant and more solipsistic? I ask myself that question as I cycle sedately along the broad, paved seafront in Malta where I live, trying to avoid pedestrians who are often oblivious to other users of the promenade.

We know from experience how many of us, not just the young, walk along with our heads down staring at our phones utterly disregarding others and their space. We seem to have a tendency to wander – autistic-like – through life seemingly unable to put ourselves in the other person's head or appreciate their point of view. I nearly collide with people walking backwards to take a better 'selfie'. We live too much of our lives in a bubble centered on our own social media and now we are behaving as though we live there all the time.

I enjoy observing human behaviour and my conclusion is that people have lost much of their spatial awareness; they walk around in a world where only they exist oblivious of others; it is a symptom of the lack of the empathy often seen in autistic people. I ring my bell; it goes unheeded. Sometimes it's a young person wearing headphones but more often it is people of any age who seem to be tuned-out to what is going on around them. People walk across the road and fail to look right or left; they are staring at their feet or their phone.

This is a behaviour pattern that has transmuted into everyday discourse and dictates how we relate to others. Social interaction online has become rude, cruel and aggressive in ways which would not have been tolerated, now it is commonplace in discussion and debate and not just online.

The same is true at a party when, all too frequently, you find yourself talking to someone able only to talk about themselves and their life. Occasionally, they think, "I had better ask him something" and no sooner have you opened your mouth to answer than they revert to type. Once again 'it's all about me-me-me'. An old lady summed it up neatly when she said,

"The worst thing about getting old is that you are forced to listen to other people's organ recitals." I know what she means.

I started to wonder if this lack of empathy explains the absence of tolerance we have seen in the debates over Brexit and Scottish

independence? Indeed, can it be extrapolated more widely to relations between nations? Countries don't seem to be listening to each other or if they are, they aren't really hearing what is being said.

My new-age friends will say food additives or radiation from our mobile phones must be the cause but I don't believe there is evidence for this. Is it just old-fashioned cussedness? No, I believe it is because we have reached saturation point in our consumerist society. We are constantly bombarded with advertising, endorsements and product placement both consciously and subliminally, most of it unsolicited; it pops-up on our screens whenever we go online. Places that are old favorites are renamed after some exotic sponsor. It gets to us all eventually. The endless promotion of unattainable material success and celebrity lifestyles breed resentment and discontent. The 'Me-me-me' generation has arrived; we are all forced to be part of it.

We have learnt that greed is good and the end justifies the means. Material success is prized above duty, caring for others and altruism. This is evident when 'Remainers' talk about 'Brexit', their arguments all centre on money as if that is all that matters.

Politicians everywhere seem to take it for granted that the only sin is being found out. Everyone lies if they think it will benefit them. Politicians seem incapable of learning that inevitably they will be found out and their hypocrisy exposed. Here in Malta the current set of senior government ministers have been accused of corruption but don't think of resigning. People have no sense of shame let alone contrition. This is Europe not darkest Africa; we should demand better of those that guide and represent us.

As I continue my ride back home, I notice more people have slow reactions to spatial stimuli. People who are walking towards me and see me coming cannot step aside to let me pass or, if they do, they leave it to the last moment and step the wrong way. Is this an allegory of political discourse? Politicians have lost the interpersonal skills to negotiate round an obstacle – I am not just talking about Trump.

Women tend to be better listeners or so we are told but I see many women chatter away as if on autopilot disregarding the answers they receive or ignoring the questions posed. Men opine about

politics, sex, sport or business. The older men get the more silent and introverted they become, the older women get the more they chatter. Have you noticed that when two men meet for the first time, even if they are from different countries, they revert to the international male language - football?

Jean-Claude Juncker and his acolytes brief the press against Theresa May rather than entering into genuine dialogue with her – it's all about point scoring and the next TV news clip. The EU leaders rush to add their weight in support. Can they not see how sterile this is? Perhaps they want Brexit talks to fail in order to punish us. It certainly looks that way.

I think the press and TV are partly to blame. Every opinion is reduced to a facile sound bite; viewers do not have the attention span for anything more complex. Nothing is news unless it is dramatic and sensational; a fight, a disaster, scandal, sport or just vapid celebrity gossip. This has guided popular taste but then again, maybe it is the other way around?

We must go back to real values and relearn the art of listening attentively to others. We must live our lives being sensitive to the space and views of others or we will live to regret it.

I now hardly read a newspaper or watch the TV news. Auberon Waugh once commented that he read the Encyclopedia Britannica 1910 edition as it contained all any gentleman needed to know about science. I read *The Spectator*; it contains all the news I need to know about everything.

1070 words

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