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My (Shrinking) Space: Spe Salvi and Consumer Culture

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BY AMY UELMEN

Online chat rooms for kids present a virtual world with extremely limited room for authentic relationships. Are we all just surfing mere shadows of deeper needs—profound experiences of friendship, love, and acceptance?

IF YOU LOG ON TO Barbiegirls.com with your daughter these days, the possibilities seem limitless. You create your character, choose your look (hairstyle, skin color, the shape of your eyes and lips, clothing, shoes, accessories) and emerge on the scene of Barbie’s World.

A few clicks later, and the new “you” is at a virtual mall spending B-Bucks, buying furniture for your room, accessories for your pets and clothing to fill your limitless closet. You can design your world: your nails, your own music video, and even your boyfriend’s look, personality and future career (surfer, fireman, rock star, vet or teacher).

Yet it is striking how reduced this “world” has become. Real concerns arise from this and other virtual worlds of “friends, fun and fashion”—not from the fun or the fashion, but from what it all means for authentic relationships. If these are any indication, we grownups may also be surfing in mere shadows of deeper needs to relate.

Desires for profound experiences of friendship, love and acceptance tug at the human heart. And if it’s not too much of a stretch to move from Barbie to the pope in this single essay, Pope Benedict’s Spe Salvi has a lot to say about these yearnings. There are many valid ways to shed light on our darkening culture, where our consumer society makes it more and more difficult to experience true unity.

Far from the dollhouses of yesteryear, in Barbie’s World there’s no kitchen, no living room, no rooms for brothers or sisters or parents—in fact, no concept of family at all. Private space, accessible through the “house” icon, is limited to just “my room.” Public space, accessible through a “globe” icon, consists of the shopping mall with a handkerchief-sized outdoor park. There are no schools, no places of worship. And of course there are no offices or other places of work (except store sales people), because money is “earned” by playing games and watching movies.

Well, that’s okay, you might say, because the purpose of the Barbie Girls’
website is not to replicate the real world, but simply to add some graphic pizzazz to what is essentially a chat room. But even the chat dimensions raise serious questions. What does it mean for elementary school children to start thinking about relationships in a space where “you don’t wanna include your real name” in your screen name? Although there are obvious safety benefits, you can never be yourself in this intentionally anonymous world.

“B Chat” consists of pre-selected phrases from which the dolls can choose in order to engage in “conversation” with the other dolls. Half of the choices in the category of “friendship” consist of comments about another’s clothes or possessions: “I love your outfit, your pet is the cutest ever, cool room, U R such a style queen!” If the work of personal integrity and maturity is to develop increasing cohesion between what one thinks, what one says, and what one does, what impact will it have on elementary school children to spend long hours “conversing” with pre-selected and largely consumption-oriented phrases?

The ground rules for the chat are clear: “Always be nice to others!” the website urges. “Don’t say anything hurtful or naughty, or you could be given a ‘time out’ from the site.” The site is “for everyone to enjoy, and that means treating others the way you wanna be treated.” Not bad advice.

But what happens when a fight breaks out among the chatting girls? “If a girl feels that a friend or best friend is misbehaving, she can click ‘block’ to keep that person from sending her messages. And she can instantly remove anyone from her room by clicking ‘ask to leave.’” Despite the benefits of seeming safety and control, how do instant “block” and “ask to leave” buttons impact how children navigate conflict and build solid relationships?
While there are tight limitations on random chat in the mall, “best friends” can chat more freely because they have actually met in real life. What does it mean to define one’s “best friends” as someone who has purchased the Barbie MP3 player?

As I toured the Barbie Girls website, aware that it was probably one of the more innocuous of the online virtual worlds, I was filled with a deep sense of sadness and anxiety. Could it be that in just a few short decades the world of play has become so lonely, so complicated and so frightening?

**Alone With My Stuff**

Recently Chiara Lubich has spoken of the “dark night” of culture as a world in which it is extremely difficult to build real relationships. Because consumer culture leads us to focus on ourselves and our consumption of material goods, we neglect to develop the skills we need to build authentic relationships with others. Barbie’s World seems to capture that tragedy: I am basically alone with my stuff. Perhaps I can chat with a “best friend” if she has the MP3 player, but I spend most of my time wandering the mall as a character who is not me, chatting with pre-programmed phrases that focus on outward appearance and the acquisition of material goods.

A catchy song from the Backstreet Boys displays this hunger for friendship and love in an anonymous world: “I don’t care who you are / Where you’re from / What you did / As long as you love me.” On the surface it seems like the ultimate expression of an open, accepting, non-judgmental creed. But on a deeper level, it expresses a complete erasure of identity: “I don’t care about the deeper questions, as long as you are satisfying my immediate needs.” This is not exactly the recipe for a long-term relationship.

Is there any hope? The antidote to the “dark night” of culture—whether expressed in the virtual worlds of adults, youth or children—is in turn a cultural solution.

The Focolare Movement’s dialogue with culture rests on the conviction that love itself can provide a light and a sense of direction, and in turn inform a set of ideas, a way of life and a way of seeing the world around us. Specifically, love itself can be the guide for parents and other caring adults to help kids navigate the confusing maze of desires and hopes that permeate this generation’s virtual worlds of play.

In some cases, love might mean simply helping the kids turn off the computer so that they can focus on building real-life friendships. In other cases love might suggest playing online together in order to help them develop a series of critical questions about the media itself.

Perhaps the deepest solution is to help young people see that the desires expressed in these virtual worlds are actually a shadow of a much more profound desire for an even more profound experience of friendship, acceptance and love.

**The Vastness of Being**

In his recent encyclical on Christian hope, *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict understands the desires that tug at the human heart: “We need the greater and lesser hopes that keep us going day by day.” Whether expressed in the chat rooms of children attracted to “fun, friends and fashion,” or the later search for a secure position in the world, “Young people can have the hope of a great and fully satisfying love; the hope of a certain position in their profession, or of some success that will prove decisive for the rest of their lives.”

But the pope digs deeper, to the desires that push beyond the immediate satisfaction of needs. “When these hopes are fulfilled, however, it becomes clear that they were not, in reality, the whole. It becomes evident that man has need of a hope that goes further. It becomes clear that only something infinite will suffice for him, something that will always be more than he can ever attain.”

The human person was created to be filled by God, the pope explains, “But his heart is too small for the greatess to which it is destined. It must be stretched.” He then draws on the example of St. Augustine, a young man who had been caught up in the pursuit of material and sensual pleasures, but then found himself taken up into a much greater, divine love. Augustine gives a wonderful image of prayer, the heart of one’s relationship with God, as “an exercise of desire”: “Suppose that God wishes to fill you with honey; but if you are full of vinegar, where will you put the honey?”

Participation in this love then leads to profound relationships of communion with others: “To live for Christ means allowing oneself to be drawn into his being for others.” This in turn transforms our relationship with material goods: “Love of God leads to participation in the justice and generosity of God toward others. Loving God requires an interior freedom from all possessions and all material goods: the love of God is revealed in responsibility for others.”

According to this vision, the antidote to heal excessive consumerism and materialism is not so much the effort to vanquish our desires, or to postpone them to the next life, but rather to expand our hearts so as to enter into a much deeper perspective on the culture that surrounds us: “Whoever is moved by love begins to perceive what life really is.”

And this “life” in turn becomes the ultimate preparation for eternal life, the fulfillment of all desire, “the supreme moment of satisfaction in which totality embraces us and we embrace totality ... It would be like plunging into the ocean of infinite love ... a plunging ever anew into the vastness of being, in which we are simply overwhelmed by joy.”

There is hope for a material world. Openness to the deepest desires of the human heart leads to a witness of happiness and fulfillment, as the pope puts it, an “active hope” for others which can “keep the world open to God.”