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The Real and the Virtual

By Leonard Fein

For those who are still skeptical of the power of the “virtual” world — and not just its power to mobilize people, but its power to change how we see and think, who we are — there’s this:

< http://www.ted.com/talks/eric_whitacre_a_virtual_choir_2_000_voices_strong.html >

For the more than 2,000 participants in this audacious experience, the line between the virtual and the real is totally blurred, if not erased. Follow the links and you can read the remarks of some of the folks who accepted Eric Whitacre’s invitation to submit, via YouTube, videos of them singing one of his compositions, which were then blended electronically into one giant choir, more than 2,000 people from more than 50 countries all working alone, then becoming through technology a choir, performing for anyone with an Internet connection to hear and see.

Superficial? Perhaps. Ephemeral beauty, a pleasant diversion only? Perhaps. But my own take on this event is colored by my online experience, and that experience is absolutely a part of my reality. I used to think that we all lived each in a single room in a thousand-mile-high hotel, that in our rooms we were essentially lonely, reduced to self-pleasuring, unaware that the doors to the adjoining rooms were unlocked. And now those doors stand open.

E-mail is where it starts. Yes, there’s much junk. But there are also easily applied filters to block the junk. Many of us who used to rely on our telephones’ answering machines to learn who was looking for us now first check our e-mail, where we learn not only who is looking for us but also what the organizations we care about are doing, what the thought places are thinking, what the bloggers are saying. The world I live in would be significantly diminished were all this not

readily available to me. I don't mean here the idle exchanges that Facebook has so massively popularized, but the substantive stuff that keeps us abreast and, if we so choose, involved — and that enables also a shower of surprises, as, for example, the Eric Whitacre choral invention I've already mentioned, forwarded to me by my niece, Rose Srebro.

The beginning, then, is a sense of connectedness to a world we know and care about that then expands into distant worlds, worlds where we encounter others of all kinds and now and then connect with them. Why call this “virtual”?

But e-mail is, of course, only part of the new reality. Unpacking the meanings of that reality is headache-provoking. We are in the first stages of a journey to a destination we cannot begin to imagine. In olden times, a decade or so back, it would typically take me three hours to write my weekly column. It now often takes 10 or more hours, because the flow is interrupted again and again while I check a fact on Google or Wikipedia and find myself diverted into unexpected streams, facts and ideas and thoughts and opinions, blogs without end.

That world is sometimes austere, often crude, even vulgar, a world of slag yet rich in nuggets. One moves from such revelations as the potentially revolutionary [Israeli Peace Initiative](#) to tantalizing factoids of the kind provided by multiple sources, in this case the always sprightly and often wise Tablet magazine: Did you know that Gaza [is roughly the size of Manhattan and Queens combined](#), that the Gaza Marathon scheduled for next month will race from one end of Gaza to the other, which turns out to be almost exactly the length (26.2 miles) of a classic marathon?

And so it goes, endlessly, openly. I have formed a close friendship with a family in Israel I first encountered on a blog I managed on behalf of Americans for Peace Now, I am being met on the way back from my forthcoming trip to Israel, which is interrupted by five hours of downtime in Heathrow Airport, by an e-mail friend, and there are many, many more, some peripheral acquaintances, others who provide a sense of camaraderie.

Back, if I may, to choral music. I have quoted the following passage here, among other places; it is about opera, but holds for choral music as well. It is from Nuala O'Faolain, in her “Are You Somebody? The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman”:

This was my first time to see Fidelio. Arnold and Margot had seen it in Lisbon, the very night the Salazar dictatorship ended; the soldiers in the plot of the opera, when they had come onto the stage that night, had had red carnations in the barrels of their guns, like the real soldiers of the “bloodless revolution” out on the streets. In the first act there is a quartet, “Mir Ist So Wunderbar.” The four protagonists come down to the footlights, and they do that thing that happens in opera — seemingly unaware of each other, they each sing their line of music straight to the audience, as if it is not their doing that the lines intermingle in a complex and perfect harmony it takes the four of them to make, but is a separate thing from each of them. I was transfixed, as I always am by ensemble singing. When the curtain came down on the act, I wiped the tears from my eyes and I said to Arnold, “Why is ensemble singing so beautiful? What makes it move us so much?” and he said, “People would be like that all the time, if they could.”

Well, in the real world of the virtual, it seems they can.