



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Being Somewhere Else**

## **Being Somewhere Else**

The highly acclaimed movie, *Being There*, was made in 1979. It stars Peter Sellers, Shirley MacLaine, and Melvyn Douglas. Sellers plays the role of a simple-minded man, named Chance, who has spent his adult life tending to a wealthy man and the man's garden. He lives in the man's townhouse. His only relationship with the outside world is from television.

When his patron dies, Chance must move out of the townhouse, and ends up wandering around Washington, DC, not knowing what to do or where to go. He comes across several young thugs on the street. One threatens Chance by pointing a knife at him. Pulling a TV remote control out of his pocket, Chance points it toward the bully and tries to change channels---to get the boy out of his life.

Later, Chance passes by a TV store, where he sees himself on a television screen that is positioned in the store window. His image has been captured by a video camera. He is bewildered and entranced by seeing himself on TV. The movie unfolds from there into a humorous and poignant film.

Recently, I was reading the news magazine, *The Week*.<sup>1</sup> One of its columns, titled "When Kids are Shaped by Screens," discusses the obsession young people have with social media and the smartphone. As the reader may know, I have written previously about the dangers to our societies of social media, and devoted a chapter to the subject in one of my books.

The column caught my attention and reminded me of the scenes from *Being There*. The writer of the column, Eloise Hendy, said, "I know of one 2-year-old girl who, upon seeing a real butterfly outside her window, made finger movements to zoom in on it." Her behavior was like Chance and his pointing his remote control device at the knife-yielding pesterer.

The child could not discern between a real butterfly and one on a smartphone monitor. Like many of America's youth, she has been conditioned to perceive reality through a miniature handheld computer screen.

Hendy states, "American kids born since 2010 have only known a world dominated by handheld screens; by 2017, a study found, 80 percent of children had access to a tablet."

## **Balancing Being Here and Being Somewhere Else**

Social media can do more harm than good. I won't re-hash my concerns, as I have written about them extensively.<sup>2</sup> I recognize how popular and useful social media is, and some aspects of my misgivings come from my age and associated experience of living most of my social life in, as the saying goes, "a non-digital world." Old habits die hard.

But as you may know, not my professional life. I have consulted and written about this technology for many years. Thus, I understand the digital world better than most people, and I appreciate what it has done to benefit millions of individuals and organizations. I use texting on occasion, and find it very helpful.

Thus, I do not advocate that we should forego using Twitter (X), Facebook, and other social media outlets. I am issuing warnings that they are being mis-used and over-used. I urge adults to read more and to encourage their children to do the same. And to wean themselves from

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<sup>1</sup> *The Week*, December 8, 2023, 12.

<sup>2</sup> *The Coeur d'Alene Press*, "A Social Media Danger to Society," July 26, 2022 - July 30, 2022; the *Livington Leader*, "Social Media: A Social Danger," July 27--August 31, 2023, and *Fractured: How Class and Culture Wars have Divided America*, (IEI Press, Coeur d'Alene ID, 2023), 231-259.

having their faces stuck to a computer screen most of their waking hours. It is known that the practice of frequent reading has a significant positive effect on a person's cognitive skills.

Psychology professionals have coined the term, *digital dependence*, to describe social media users who cannot or do not function well in the real world because of their reliance on the virtual world. Regarding children, these experts claim, "Excessive screen time interferes with the development of eyesight, spatial awareness, and motor skills."<sup>3</sup>

I am no expert on digital dependence, nor have I done studies on the subject, other than my day-to-day observations of my fellow humans. However, it takes no expert on human behavior to know that something is amiss when a child cannot tell the difference between the real world and the virtual world and tries to "zoom in" on a butterfly outside her window.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Week*, *ibid.*