cover: picasso, las meninas (1957)

artigo

what we almost said

on the lost conversations in the digital era

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abstract
This normative philosophical essay reflects on the silent call of the child to be seen—a call often left unanswered in the quiet drift of digital life in relatively affluent societies. It combines narrative fragments. Drawing on the Hebrew word *hineni*—"Here I am"—and the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas, situated within the tradition of philosophy for children (P4C), this work explores how children today inhabit a what I call *shared solitude*: physically close, yet unseen, surrounded yet untouched by real presence. Through narrative fragments and ethical reflection, the essay explores how belonging can begin with a glance, a gesture, or a moment of attunement that whispers, 'I see you.' Without offering solutions, it remains with hesitation and ambiguity, and asks whether we are still able to look up with openness and care. Matthew Lipman describes the child's philosophical longing as a quiet desire not only for answers, but for dialogue, recognition, and shared meaning. David Kennedy's notion of dwelling with the child deepens this stance, suggesting that to stay near in moments of uncertainty may itself be a form of ethical response. Rather than diagnosing or prescribing, the essay lingers in the space between presence and absence. It invites reflection

on how children and adults might meet—sometimes almost, sometimes imperfectly, but perhaps still meaningfully, in ways that remain fragile and true.

lo que casi dijimos
sobre las conversaciones perdidas en la era digital

resumen
Este ensayo filosófico normativo reflexiona sobre el llamado silencioso del niño a ser visto —un llamado que a menudo queda sin respuesta en la deriva silenciosa de la vida digital en sociedades relativamente acomodadas. Combina fragmentos narrativos. Inspirado en la palabra hebrea *Hineni*—"Aquí estoy"—y en la filosofía de Emmanuel Lévinas, situado dentro de la tradición de filosofía para niños (P4C), explora cómo los niños habitan hoy una forma de soledad compartida: físicamente cerca, pero invisibles; rodeados, pero no tocados por una presencia real. A través de fragmentos narrativos y reflexión ética, el ensayo considera cómo el sentido de pertenencia puede comenzar con una mirada, un gesto o un momento de sintonía que susurra: "Te veo". Sin ofrecer soluciones, permanece en la vacilación y la ambigüedad y se pregunta si todavía somos capaces de levantar la mirada con apertura y cuidado. Matthew Lipman describe el anhelo filosófico del niño como un deseo silencioso no sólo de respuestas, sino de diálogo, reconocimiento y sentido compartido. La noción de David Kennedy de habitar con el niño profundiza esta postura, sugiriendo que permanecer cerca en momentos de incertidumbre puede ser en sí misma una forma de respuesta ética. En lugar de diagnosticar o prescribir, el ensayo habita el espacio entre la presencia y la ausencia. Invita a reflexionar sobre cómo niños y adultos pueden encontrarse —a veces casi, a veces imperfectamente, pero quizás aún de manera significativa, en formas que siguen siendo frágiles y verdaderas.

o que quase dissemos
sobre as conversas perdidas na era digital

resumo
Este ensaio filosófico normativo reflete sobre o apelo silencioso da criança para ser vista — um apelo muitas vezes deixado sem resposta na quietude da vida digital em sociedades relativamente prósperas. O trabalho combina fragmentos narrativos. Baseando-se na palavra hebraica *hineni* — "Aqui estou" — e na filosofia de Emmanuel Lévinas, situada na tradição da filosofia para crianças (FpC), a pesquisa explora como as crianças de hoje habitam o que chamo de solidão compartilhada: fisicamente próximas, mas invisíveis; cercadas, mas intocadas pela presença real. Por meio de fragmentos narrativos e de uma reflexão ética, o ensaio explora como o sentimento de pertencimento pode começar com um olhar, um gesto ou um momento de sintonia que sussurra: "Eu vejo você". Sem oferecer soluções, ele se mantém hesitante e ambíguo, e questiona se ainda somos capazes de olhar com abertura e cuidado. Matthew Lipman descreve o anseio filosófico da criança como um desejo silencioso não apenas por respostas, mas também por diálogo, reconhecimento e significado compartilhado. A noção de David Kennedy de habitar com a criança aprofunda essa postura, sugerindo que permanecer por perto em momentos de incerteza pode ser, por si só, uma forma de resposta ética. Em vez de diagnosticar ou prescrever, o ensaio permanece no espaço entre a presença e a ausência, convidando à reflexão sobre como crianças e adultos podem se encontrar — às vezes quase, às vezes de forma imperfeita, mas talvez ainda assim

significativa, de maneiras que permanecem frágeis e verdadeiras.

palavras-chave: *hineni*; infância digital; solitude compartilhada; responsabilidade ética; lévinas.

what we almost said

on the lost conversation in the digital era

introduction

prologue

The child comes home from school.[1] The parents are each on their phones. "Hi, hi," they say, smiling, without lifting their eyes. The child says, "Hi, I am here", quietly. And walks to his room. The parents send a message in the family chat.

> Good to see you! Was school okay today?
> Yes.
> Do you have homework?
> No.
> OK. Dinner soon.
> Not hungry. Ate on the way home. Going to football now. Talk later.

They've spoken. No one was unkind. No conflict. No slammed doors. The choreography of a weekday. But something remains unsaid. Not because it is a secret. Perhaps because it hasn't yet found its shape. Just soft exchanges that leave the child unseen.

The parents stay seated. They asked. They sent hearts, thumbs up. They did what one is supposed to do. And still, something lingers in the room. A faint echo, maybe. A thin line of absence. Not loud. Not dramatic. More like a forgotten grammar of closeness. Of conversations that don't begin with "Did you do your homework?" but with "What was it like to be you today?" What lingers is the absence of the face. Eyes not lifted, presence not met.

Across 19 countries, children describe growing up through their screens (Smahel et al., 2020). They send messages. Receive replies. React with hearts, with silence, with short words. They speak with friends, classmates, and strangers. With siblings, partners, gamers on the other side of the world (UNICEF, 2025). Some speak with adults. Some have adults who ask them how their day online has been. But more often, the questions are practical, about time, rules or safety.

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[1] The opening vignette is a composite illustration based on what children and young people report in large international studies of digital life in relatively affluent societies (e.g. Smahel et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2025). It is presented not as empirical material collected for this essay, but as a pedagogical vignette to illuminate the ethical dynamics under discussion.

There is care in these questions. Yet they reveal a rhythm that values efficiency over presence. A life where it's hard to find time to sit. To just be. To look at a child's face for longer than a moment. Such questions show how practical care can unintentionally silence the child's deeper voice on what it felt like, rather than what was done.

And when this voice is not invited in words, it often seeks other routes. Sometimes a child shows us a video they've seen. Something odd. Or funny in a way that stings. Or disturbing. Maybe they say: "Watch this." And we answer: "Later." Or we watch with one eye. The other was still caught in something else. A glance is given, but not the face. Without the face, the summons is not answered. Such moments test how we share the child's world. Or whether they are left hanging in mid-air.

We swipe forward. Press *Like*. Maybe we send back a reel. One we laughed at. It's our way of saying: "I'm okay. I'm fine. What about you?" In copying their gestures, we echo the motion but not the meaning. Our eyes train on the feed, not the face. We show gestures, without encountering.

But what happens in these moments is that presence shifts. The gaze drifts from the child's eyes to the screen, indicating a displacement of presence (Błachnio, 2024). The eyes that look, but not into faces. Because our eyes are fixed on screens. We move between laughter, shock, and disbelief. We swipe past discomfort.

Sometimes we hesitate to share forward. Afraid of what others will think of us. And so, the sad thing stays with us. And the joyful thing. Until we swipe on to something more shocking. Just before we fall asleep.

What follows in this essay is a normative conceptual exploration, unfolding through fragments that spiral in circles and return. The repetitions are not for resolution, but because what is at stake resists being told. This is not data, but openings. Lévinas (1981) describes subjectivity itself as a recurrence—a responsibility before freedom, a repetition without return. Jacques Derrida (2003) observes that Levinas's own writing resembles waves breaking again and again on a beach, pounding with repeating force and intensity on the same spot, each time with greater insistence (p. 124). Because the ethical always exceeds the said. It cannot be settled. Only by returning can what almost disappeared be noticed. The

same scene may surface again, not to probe, but to let its weight be felt differently each time. To what end, one might ask? Ethics does not close or conclude. It unfolds, growing with each new dilemma.

As the ethos of philosophy for children (P4C), this essay resists closure. It echoes Lipman's (2003) insistence that philosophy with children is less about answers than about continuing the conversation. It opens up a space for further reflection before new dilemmas arise that exceed what has come before. Hence, the essay does not close with answers. It seeks instead to participate in ongoing conversations, offering fragments as invitations rather than solutions.

dinner and the conversation that did not take place

And so, the parents eat dinner. Each with their own screen. They click, they scroll. They smile at each other now and then. "Haha, yeah—so much strange stuff online." A reel is shown. A meme is shared, a way of showing they are fine, with no words. And then, one of them pauses.

> Hey… did the child seem a bit quiet today?
> Quiet? What do you mean?
> I don't know. He was here. And then he just went straight to football. Said he wasn't hungry.
> Right. That's true.
> Did you see his face when he came in?
> No. Why?
> I don't know.
> Was there something to see in it?
> Maybe not. Or perhaps I missed it. I was just… caught in something and didn't look up.
> Have neither of us actually seen the child today—in the eyes?

A silence, this time not digital. A fork left resting on the plate. The question hangs there. Not as an accusation. But as ache. A soft realization. Not that something terrible has happened. That something gentle may have been missed.

This everyday scene raises a broader ethical question. As Lévinas (1981) might remind us, the child's silence is not a void, but—perhaps—a gesture on the verge of presence. Kennedy (2010), reflecting on Lévinas, describes it as a silence that is always on the verge of presence but never comes to presence (p. 46).

And sometimes children treasure the absence of adults, while also fearing being alone. *Pixie*, one of Lipman's (1981, p. 63), philosophical novels for children, explores themes of autonomy and existential ambiguity through a child-centered

narrative. In it, the children are left alone, and the protagonist shouts, "We're free! The house belongs to us!"—a moment that captures both the thrill of freedom and the underlying longing for recognition and guidance. Like many children, Pixie longs for freedom, but also to be guided, seen, and taken seriously. In this tension, Lipman recognises a philosophical longing: not for answers, but for dialogue. To be heard. To matter.

born into the digital

Many children in relatively affluent societies today are born into the digital world characterised by constant connectivity and early exposure to screens (Smahel et al., 2020). They know nothing else. Their photos and videos are shared. With family, with friends, with strangers. Like and share. Send forward. Regret. Delete. This is the world they inherit: fast conversations in passing, family chats, strings of emojis. They do not know the world that many of us grew up in. The long walks through forests, the conversations that stretched for hours, without headphones cancelling out the sounds around us.

A landscape of layered sounds shaped our minds. Birds singing. Children crying. Traffic. Wind. Dogs barking. Music. Small talk. Shouting. Laughter. We weren't overwhelmed by this complexity—it was simply life. The old sounds we once shared have thinned into private channels.

For many children today, life is now structured by short chats and endless streaks, rather than layered conversations (Turkle, 2017).

One sound at a time from sound-cancelling earphones. Short chats. Long chats. Endless streaks on an app. Three dots flicker on a screen—typing… typing… waiting. Those three dots become the longest moments they have ever known. Waiting to see if the person on the other side will answer. Three dots and the right swipe can decide their worth.

And sometimes, there is nothing. No reply, only silence. They are being *ghosted*. They become invisible. They disappear. The child is gone from someone's world without a word, without an explanation. Cancelled. Forgotten. When a young heart suddenly ceases to exist for someone they once held close, it can feel devastating. Vanishing without explanation is not only silence. It leaves a wound

in how one knows oneself. To be ghosted is to lose the face that once confirmed you.

And then, they go back to the apps. They swipe left. They swipe right. Here, people become products. Without feeling. Without value. Perfectly edited photos go right—the ordinary ones go left.

You cannot be ordinary. You must be perfect. And show it.

the face, and what is (not) seen

Many children today feel that there is not enough time in their daily lives to pause and have long conversations (Hedegaard & Fleer, 2013). Families are busy, with school, work, and various activities filling their hours. The space for slow, wandering dialogue or wondering questions feels narrow. At home, there is a shared sense of needing to unwind, to rest, and it often doesn't feel like we have time to truly listen to each other. We share the rhythm of tiredness, although this sharing is not the same as being present. Unlike looking at one another's face and eyes and asking, gently, how the other person is doing. Unlike seeing the Others' emotions—joy, boredom, indifference, pain.

Lévinas (1981) reminds us that the face of the Other interrupts us. He describes the face not merely as a metaphor, but a real interruption – a moment that transcends cognition and demands an ethical response. The face calls us to responsibility even before we comprehend what is at stake. This way, Lévinas situates ethics before knowledge and intention.

This encounter is asymmetrical: we are obligated by the other's vulnerability. To look away, to scroll away from a face marked by agony and sorrow, is, therefore, not only a distraction but ethical withdrawal.

We rarely allow ourselves to be interrupted anymore. Our gaze does not linger long enough to meet the eyes of the other. The face, the eyes. They can show us how the Other is doing. But now, our attention is trained to look down, away, to the screens (Turkle, 2017).

Alas, the face is our first language. In its movements, children learn to recognise joy, sorrow, indifference. When the face turns still, the infant feels the strain (Tidemann & Melinder, 2022). Without such an exchange of gaze, this recognition falters. In the glow of today's digital culture, the risk grows: children

may lose the subtle grammar of bodies, gestures, eyes that once spoke without words.

The grown-ups' gaze is displaced; it shifts from the child's face to screens, from presence to scrolling. The silent message is that what glows elsewhere matters more (Błachnio, 2024). Such scenes return in different forms because the wound of not being seen never fully closes.

From the very beginning, as Trevarthen (1979) has shown, children do not simply exist alongside others—they reach out for them. They seek connection through shared rhythms, through the meeting of eyes, through mirrored joy. And when no one looks up, when no one meets their gaze, the child is left in that reaching alone, even before they have words for what they long for.

As Lipman (2003) might say, children may begin to wonder whether they are real—when no one looks up, no one responds, and the silence is louder than words. In such moments, existence itself is not assumed, but questioned. Not through philosophy, but through absence.

Today, our shared gestures are often reduced to emojis. Symbols that cannot replace the truthfulness of a glance (Stern, 2018; Trevarthen, 1979). We share gestures, not glances. Schedules, not stories. It is as if the word 'sharing' has grown louder, just as what we truly share has gone thinner. And yet a glance is something we should share more often, perhaps the most needed sharing of all. A look that meets us, that holds us for a moment, or more. Such a glance cannot be copied, pasted, scrolled, or sent. It asks for presence, for time, for courage. Perhaps the truest sharing begins there.

The eyes. They do not lie, they say. They are windows to the soul. In them, we can see how someone is feeling. A glans can say, "Here I am," or refuse it. It lives in the eyes turned away. The eyes show how the child has been online today. If we know what we are looking for in the eyes, we can help the children share what they have seen online. What others have shared with them. And then left behind for the child to find. Without a scaffold. Leaving the child with the sorrow, the fright, the devastation.

When the child's face is not seen, emotional recognition may falter (Stern, 2018). Perhaps children cannot even know what they are missing when they are fed while their parents gaze at their phones (Mason et al., 2024; Nomkin &

Gordon, 2021). Pushed in a stroller while the parent runs with noise-cancelling headphones, the child may again feel unseen. In such moments, the child's unspoken appeal becomes almost audible, as if whispering: "I'm here. Where are you? I know there is more than this in this world—what is there?"

A young person may not continue to express himself to Others if no one answers. He would not know what to say or to whom.

The kids talk about apps and emojis, about being cool, perfect, muscular. They talk about eating clean, drinking protein shakes, and getting a six-pack—both kinds. Because if you have all that, maybe someone will swipe right. Maybe. Between the slang of apps and the weight of philosophy runs the same thread: the fear of not being seen.

The boy wonders: how would anyone ever find him, among thousands of photos? All of them are young, beautiful, and perfect. With impressive hobbies, a good education, and perhaps even a future job. What if he swipes right—and no one swipes back? What if no one ever swipes right on him? Does that mean he's worth nothing?

There is no one he feels he can ask. Is that even something you're allowed to ask? There is no way of knowing. In the absence of someone to turn to, the thought drifts towards the machines. Maybe he can ask ChatGPT. At least then it won't feel awkward. At least it won't be embarrassing. Yet even here, the question remains unanswered, for systems like that cannot truly comprehend feelings. A machine may reply, but it cannot stay. Real presence cannot be automated.

The child's question lingers. Machines may answer, but not carry the weight of presence. They have no face to meet, no eyes that can hold the question. What he seeks is not information, but someone willing to stand there with him. A word that is more than data, more than a reply. A word like *hineni*.

hineni; responsibility before freedom

Sometimes the most powerful words are spoken without sound. A glance, a pause at the doorway, the reluctance to answer too quickly. These are gestures that whisper: "Here I am. *Hineni*".

In Scripture, *hineni* is the word spoken when one is called (The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, 1989). Not a casual "I am here", but words spoken

in moments of radical vulnerability and ethical readiness. It is said before knowing what will be asked, before counting the cost. Not a promise of solutions, but a willingness to remain. *Hineni* is not a description but an ontological stance of availability, even in the face of uncertainty.

The one who says *hineni* is fully present, willing to set aside their own needs and open their mind and heart to others' pain and misery.

As our digital world becomes increasingly fragmented and uncertain, the space for *hineni* appears to be shrinking. Being present is difficult. The summons waits in a child's eyes. But our screens do not wait. They hurry past, leaving *hineni* unsaid.

Before, words on a page could wait. Now the screen never does. Each on our screens. Alone. Together (Turkle, 2017). We see another's sorrow and feel the dissonance, but we let ourselves look away. The summons is to lift our eyes, to see the pain, to plant our feet and stay present. *Hineni*. Even when it hurts. Even when it comes at the worst time, when everything in us wants to rush ahead, we tell ourselves it will sort itself out. It will only grow more complicated if we get involved. Easier to smooth over, to smile, to let go. But ethics begins otherwise: in the moments we do not turn away.

Lévinas says that responsibility comes before freedom *(Otherwise than Being* 1981). Also, Todd (2003) reminds us that responsibility is not chosen but arises from the call by the Other. Here, not a pedagogy but a vocabulary. *Hineni* reads as the child's voice, spoken through pauses, glances and silence. In this sense, even the child's silence, a glance, or a hesitation may already carry the weight of *hineni*.

In the digital age, when the child is the Other, the responsibility to see them belongs to parents. Teachers. Peers at school. To the policies and authorities that shape the world around them.

The boy sometimes wonders if he's a little see-through, invisible, maybe. At least some of the time. Other times, a message might arrive that reminds him he's here. That he exists. That someone cares. They ask how school was.

Whether he has homework, they want to give him dinner.

But he doesn't want to share dinner this way. Three people at the same table, each with a screen in front of them, eyes fixed. Occasionally, someone laughs or makes a small sound of surprise. A smile. A nod across the table. Then silence.

The food is eaten, and everyone drifts off to their own corners. Busy. So much to do. So little truly shared.

> It's such a busy time right now. Is it like that for you, too, my boy?
> No, not really. Thinking: do you see me? I am *here*.
> That's good! That's good. Run off to your room then and enjoy yourself for a bit. I'll finish up here in the kitchen before I get back to work.

This scene is not only domestic, but ethical: it reveals how responsibility falters when no eyes are lifted. Lévinas (1981) reminds us that the gaze of the Other makes us responsible. The face is the site of that responsibility. Without it, the call falls silent.

For Lévinas, the first response to the other is *me voici* – Here I am. As in Scripture, this calls for responsibility before choice, before decision. In this, I hear the echo of the biblical *hineni*. Not a promise of solutions, but a readiness to remain, even when the cost is hidden. And perhaps, in our distracted digital world, there is no greater act of care.

In this essay, *hineni* stands as the child's silent call to be seen. And perhaps, too, as the adult's quiet answer: "I am here. For you. Now".

But when this call goes unanswered, when no one meets the child's glance, something essential is lost. The child may not learn that he is important. Unique. That the world is better because of him. That he matters. That he can be a significant Other for someone. For an adult. A child. An animal. Without such recognition, he is left not knowing how to act.

And yet, perhaps it is not only the child who waits. Perhaps the adult, too, carries a silent readiness—to lift their eyes, to meet that glance, and quietly say: "I am here. For you." Not as a promise of answers, but as the simplest act of staying.

Kennedy (2010) might have called it a pedagogical posture: to remain near, even when no resolution is offered—attentive not to outcome, but to presence itself. As he reminds us, such staying is not a passive act, but a form of ethical dwelling—a willingness to remain near, even in silence, even in not-knowing. "Even silence on the part of one participant is a 'move,' in the sense that it eventually accumulates and causes a reaction" (Kennedy, 2010, p. 155).

From the very beginning, as Trevarthen (1979) has shown, children learn to belong through eyes and bodies that respond, through faces that light up. And

when no one looks up, when no one meets their gaze, the child is left alone in that reaching. Alone, even before they have words for what they long for.

Stern (2018) reminds us that such moments of atonement—when an adult's face mirrors the child's emotional state—are not trivial. They shape the child's sense of self. They say: "You exist. You matter. You are worth seeing". Without this, a child might not learn who they are and how to be with others.

Children mirror themselves in the adults around them (Trevarthen, 1979). We are their most important role models, the ones who show them how the world works. How things happen the right way. What exists. What is okay—and what is not. We show them how to give and receive care. That it's normal to feel. That it's completely normal to need to be seen. Noticed. To have someone look up when you enter the room. To smile—not just with their mouth. With their whole face. With their eyes.

Sometimes someone says: "I'm so happy to see you," with their whole presence. And suddenly, everything feels lighter. You know you matter to someone. You know you're worth something. Someone notices that you're here. And if you were gone, someone would miss you.

That feels good. I have to remember to be that person for someone next time, the child thinks. To show it. So they know it too. That they matter to me. That I would miss them if they were gone. Although not every thought finds its voice. Not every gesture is returned.

shared solitude and the unspoken hineni

Sometimes what could have been a *hineni* remains unsaid, suspended in the quiet between us. Never reaches the surface. A glance is withheld, a word remains unspoken, a presence drifts apart without meeting. What is left is not absence alone, but a condition we share. We are near, yet apart; present, yet distant.

We share memes, emojis, and family chats. We share the rhythm of tired evenings, the gestures that keep us in step. So much is shared, and yet so little is truly met. There is no real face on the screens. No recognition. Perhaps what we share most is not stories, not glances, but the silence itself. It is here that another name becomes necessary.

I describe this condition as *shared solitude* – a paradoxical state in which people find themselves physically near but existentially apart. Near one another, yet untouched. In digital families, members are likely to scroll simultaneously, through the same reels, laughing at the same clips, drifting through the same feeds. "[…] *the TV is on, we're not watching it, not having a conversation.* […] *losing that conversation and interaction*" (Arundell et al., 2022, p. 6). Together, yet alone. It is solitude that is shared without true meeting. The term shared solitude names a kind of nearness that does not meet in presence, the silence we carry together, and the noise that conceals it.

Shared solitude is not the opposite of *hineni*, but its suspension. Even here, the call may linger unspoken. Turkle (2017) calls this condition *Alone Together*; close yet cut off, company that conceals absence. Shared solitude speaks differently. It does not close the space, but names it as an opening. A way to name, tentatively, the quiet spaces between us where the possibility of meeting remains unrealised. A silence that is felt by all, where the possibility of meeting has not yet disappeared. Rather than offer a final definition, it invites us to dwell with this phrase, to explore its resonances and ask: What does shared solitude ask of us, as adults, as educators, as human beings? And what becomes possible when we dare to interrupt it?

Shared solitude is not quiet. It is loud with the noise of separate worlds. Each of us is scrolling through a private chamber of extremities and fragments. A brutal execution. An advertisement for garden furniture. A story so tragic it hurts to breathe. A lizard climbing across the face of a sleeping child. A suicide. All within seconds. We sit side by side, but we are not together. We are flooded, not with each other's presence, but with curated chaos. Alone. Together. And in this fragmented nearness, we lack the knowledge of which way to turn, which face to meet, which reality to trust. Side by side, we drown in fragments yet remain strangers.

and time goes by

It has always been this way. We've always been busy. Long workdays. Long school days. Activities fill the evenings. Yes. But there is a difference now.

Before, when a parent sat behind a newspaper, the gaze could wander. When we returned to the page, the same words were still there. Waiting. Constant. Unchanged. As if the page itself said: *hineni*.

That is no longer the case.

Now, if we lift our eyes for even a moment, the content disappears. New shared content rushes in. More content. Exciting. Terrifying. Devastating. We must keep up. We cannot look away. We cannot stop. We cannot put the device down. The paper page waited; the feed does not. This changes what we dare to look away from.

We scroll. We are pulled in. We share.

We know we should have lifted our eyes and shown *hineni*. See the boy standing in the doorway. Look at the person sitting across from us. Notice the neighbour passing by. See our parents grow old. Were they this old the last time we looked up?

Time does not wait. It has no patience for forests. No time for a quiet walk. There is so much work to do. And after that, there is more to scroll. So many impressions, all at once. It is overwhelming. It feels like being run over by life itself, and still, we cannot put the device down. Dopamine rushes through the bloodstream with every scrolling (Sharpe & Spooner, 2025).

Just one more scroll, and then I'll stop. I promise. I'll lift my eyes. Walk to the boy in the doorway. Ask the person across from me how their day has been. Stop by the neighbour's for coffee. Visit my aging parents and help them mow the lawn—just one more scroll. And then I'll be done. I promise.

And time goes by. So much time. And yet, so little. The sense that time is running out.

And suddenly, the boy had grown so tall. We wonder: when did that happen? A young man—almost. Time moves so fast. They grow up, and before you know it, they are gone. Out of the house. Out into the world.

Should one of us have "the talk" with him soon? Or is it already too late? They probably learn all of that online now. Long before they should. There's nothing to be done about it, is there? And the last time I barely lifted my eyes, his gaze seemed distant, avoiding. He just wanted to disappear into his room.

We can't even imagine who should have that conversation. It's too late anyway. Or is it? The last thing he would want is his old parents stumbling through a talk about hormones and love. It's better to spare him that. And us.

Better to use the time for something pleasant. Together. Someday. When there is time.

When parents wonder if they are already too late to talk with their children, what is at stake is more than a conversation. It touches the larger field of existential questions on which our humanity depends. Once the machine has spoken, adults may feel displaced, as if their role has been taken over. In such moments, both children and adults lose: the child a witness, the adult their *hineni*, their chance to say: "here I am". What remains is shared solitude—questions left suspended, waiting for someone to return. *Hineni* calls parents and teachers back to the fragile task of carrying forward the conversation through which we learn how to become human.

epilogue

The child steps outside. Phone in hand. Quiet. Used to being quiet. At school, they say he's shy. But he doesn't think he is. Maybe his quiet is not shyness, but the mark of words never spoken. He doesn't know what there is to say. Everything already feels said. And yet nothing has been said. It seems like everyone is living their own lives. They look busy. He has time. So much time. But no one notices. They look down at their screens. Scrolling. Sometimes sharing. Sometimes laughing. Sometimes they look surprised or shocked. Mostly, they seem indifferent. He wonders: are they indifferent? Or simply alone together? He thinks maybe he's the only one who has time. He wonders what they're doing on their screens. What is so important? He looks at his own phone. Nothing draws him in. Nothing holds. He wishes someone would stop and talk, look at him. He longs for the a that sees, a face that hears his call.

I'm here, he wants to say. *See me*. *Hineni*.

if we look up

Young people today may struggle to find a sense of belonging. To take root, they must feel seen. To take root is not only to be physically present in a place, but

to feel that one's presence matters. That someone looks up when you enter. That smiling eyes meet yours that a face lights up—not with obligation, but with joy. This light, this quiet affirmation, nourishes. It gives courage. Courage to grow down into the ground. To stay. To share moments. To stretch slowly toward becoming. Such attention allows a child to risk growing roots. And in time, to become a tree. A steady one. Strong enough to bear fruit—not all at once, but gradually, carefully. Small fruits, at first. And one day, perhaps, fruits that others may see. Fruits that ripen slowly, held safely until they are ready to meet the world. But without the warmth of recognition, growth might hesitate to begin. Without the gaze that says, "I see you, and I'm glad you are here," the roots cannot know which way to turn. Roots do not grow without recognition. Belonging needs a face that shines at you and says: "You matter".

Somewhere between silence and speech, children live with unanswered questions. Not always seeking answers, but something more fragile: to be met. Perhaps, as Lipman (2003) once suggested, they not only long to be free, but to be found in their freedom. To be seen.

In a world of constant distraction, *hineni* is perhaps the most radical gesture left: to be fully here, for the other, before the screen pulls us away. To look up is not only an act of care. It is philosophy enacted: a recognition that the ethical begins in the gaze, before words, before choice.

> And maybe it isn't too late.
> Maybe we can still lift our eyes.
> Let them rest—just for a moment—on the one who walks through the door.
> Let the gaze linger, warm as sunlight. And perhaps, in that quiet light, he will find the courage to stay.
> To take root.
> Here.
> With us.
> *Hineni.*

Placed together, *hineni* and *shared solitude* name a delicate ethics of nearness: a conceptual vocabulary for P4C that helps us understand presence and absence in digital childhood. The contribution here is to extend the language for education, parenting and policy, showing that even silence is never empty. *Hineni* and shared solitude are not opposites. They form a grammar of presence and absence. To share solitude is already to practice a form of *hineni*. We are interrupted by the face. Not looking away is responding. Our children's eyes already carry far too

much wisdom and wounds. They wait to rest with us. Not in solitude, but in presence.

What is offered here is not data but vocabulary. Not closure, but conversation. A name for the silence we share, a gesture toward *hineni* as an ethical posture in childhood. It does not close, but returns. Like Lévinas' spiral of responsibility, circling back so that what almost disappeared can still be heard. *Hineni*. Shared solitude. Still unfinished. Together.

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