



May 2020

I broke the rules. Although I haven't personally gone online, I had to ask for help in order to register for classes and stay enrolled in my PhD program. I finally heard back from my department's registrar. He said that he hadn't had much time to think about my situation as emails haven't stopped since registration opened. Originally, he had agreed to help me out, but since he started working from home on a laptop that crashes anytime he has more than one application open, things have changed. He reminded me that he personally does not have the administrative privileges to register me and told me that, because all McGill's administrators are working remotely, it's impossible to call anyone. Even if he were able to get a hold of someone through email who has the administrative privileges to help me, "it will be way too easy for anyone in central to say something like 'It's not possible', or 'given the current situation, why is he asking this?'" I know the registrar was trying to suggest what *other* people might say, but I feel like he may have cleverly found a gentle way to express his own frustration with my stubborn insistence on continuing my offline project during the pandemic.

After talking to the registrar, my supervisor, Naomi, advised me to think of another way to register. I suggested that I cheat by giving my McGill password to a classmate and asking them to register for me. Naomi responded that this solution "is not cheating. It's being sensitive and adaptive." She also said it "doesn't in any way hinder what [I] can learn from this experiment." I feel bad for asking someone to do something online for me (Thanks again, Vanessa!!), but as Naomi said, sometimes being empathetic and flexible is more important than sticking to rules – especially rules that I set for myself fairly arbitrarily.

For this month's letter, I want to share some thoughts – from myself and others – about how we've been communicating during the pandemic. Because I'm not online, I've missed out on a lot of Zooming around and haven't had FaceTime with anyone really – unless you include old fashioned face-to-face time, like I've been having with James. At first I was feeling sorta sad to be missing out on all the creative connections and intimacies people were exploring online. Now I'm feeling a bit more ambivalent about it, especially as people have started sharing that they're jealous of me for being offline during Covid. My friend Kory, who works for a tech company, sent me a letter saying he's "grateful for each off-screen minute" he gets these days. Alongside feeling good about offline moments though, I should note that many of my friends continue to praise online video chatting tools for keeping them sane and connected through this pandemic, especially in moderation, and particularly for those who live alone. Plus, some ways of connecting online sound more meaningful than others. James told me about a fun Zoom call his friends set-up: they went back over 10+ years of Facebook statuses and made a quiz out of obscure or embarrassing updates from each other, challenging everyone to guess who wrote which

update. As Covid-related changes spill into the long-term though, before rushing to accept all the new communication practices, I'm wondering: how are people feeling about the ways we're staying connected in isolation?

Recently, I had a long phone call with my friend Davey in Austin. He's a very social and connected guy and shared that he's been having a hard time with the quarantine. He told me about the incredible amount of FaceTime calls he's been on – so many that he described feeling a sense of 'FaceTime fatigue.' He said that, when he's on a video call, he feels like there's a glass between him and the people he's speaking with. (I love similes that are also literal.) Even for people who prefer online interactions, there are both conscious things and things beyond our awareness that are different about hanging out remotely. Maybe it has to do with smells, or maybe there's something about reading each other's non-conscious cues that is more like telepathy than our rational, modern brains are able to admit. Regardless, Davey feels at the moment like he's never been more connected to people, *and* he feels like he's not connecting. Davey also pointed out that, because everyone knows that everyone else is at home – even if you're just as busy as before – there's somehow a shared understanding that we're all available to connect. And the obligations pile up. My friend Lana put it well when she described how she feels trying to keep up with all the Covid-related changes: "If my brain was a computer, the fan would be on overdrive and the colour wheel would be spinning. It's like I'm trying to have five Zoom calls at once with a slow internet connection." (Could the virus cause literal kinds of similes?!)

I had a similar chat with my friend Ira in Vancouver that clarified some of the issues with having too many calls. I brought up the term 'FaceTime fatigue' and Ira knew exactly what I was talking about. Like Davey, Ira's normally a very social guy. However, unlike Davey, he has limited himself to a maximum of two video calls a day. He said that Zoom is different from regular hangouts because it doesn't leave space for silences. It's like a tiring tennis match, Ira said, where you rally back and forth without pausing. He added that having several video calls in the same day makes him feel like he's at a family reunion and just parroting the same two or three talking points over and over. It's disconcerting to chat with friends a lot about the problem of chatting with friends too much. I've noticed that Davey and Ira's concerns apply even just with regular phone calls. I tell myself though that I'm an exception, that talking to me isn't obligatory or overwhelming. But the problem with communication overload is that even if I am an exception (which I'm probably not), I still contribute to the problem.

Although phone calls face many of the same issues as Zoom or FaceTime, there are differences too. My friend Benji and I were talking on the phone and he told me he prefers phone calls over video calls. For the call we were on, for instance, he was able to go for a walk and not just stare at a screen while we chatted. He added that there's something about looking at oneself that can be awkward. This reminded me of a funny story my friend Luka told me earlier this month. He was on a video call with friends and was feeling uncomfortable. Then, he glanced at the video of his face and noticed that he looked uncomfortable. This made him feel more uncomfortable, which made him look even more uncomfortable – so much so that one of his friends noticed and said he looked uncomfortable, which made Luka that much more uncomfortable. It all sounded pretty uncomfortable. I asked Luka whether he feels this way on all his video calls and he said, "only the ones that aren't consensual." The idea that video calling could be non-consensual at first seemed a bit absurd. But I realized that, like Davey explained, it's nearly impossible to turn down an invite for one of these online calls while we're under

quarantine, especially in evenings when people expect that we're not working and just hanging out at home. Of course we could say no, but it feels like we can't. And once it starts, it's hard to get out of it.

I've had a few experiences with Zoom now myself. I was on a four-person call with one of my research teams a couple weeks ago. It was supposed to be hosted on Google Hangouts with me phoning the research team leader and being put on speaker. However, someone couldn't figure out how to log in, so the group decided to use Zoom instead. During our Zoom though, we got kicked off of the call twice, there was a lot of lagging and frozen screens (even with people's videos turned off), and when anyone tried to share screens, the glitches got worse. Every single person on the call (except me, of course) made a comment at some point about how slow their internet was. I don't know why people aren't just doing more old-fashioned conference calls. Even my non-smartphone can do group calls. Of course, we would lose the ability to share screens, but I was following along on paper copies that the team had mailed me, and the only downside of that option was that it took a couple days for them to get to me. The internet lets us be more last-minute about things, but how often is that actually a benefit?

My other experiences of Zoom have been for classes. Although just phoning into Zoom works well, one of my professors who studies computer science shared some troubling background on the platform. Apparently Zoom is fairly insecure and large tech companies, as well as governments, are using these vulnerabilities to gather data on users. (Why might this be a problem? Eventually I'll write that letter about data and explain!) Overall though, the Zoom classes went well, but a few of us agreed it was harder to stay focused and feel present in a virtual room than a physical one. When you're sitting in a classroom, class is the main activity. When you're calling in from home, class isn't necessarily secondary, but it's definitely not foregrounded in the same way. This made it harder to listen as carefully or to respond as meaningfully as I normally try to. Usually in class, people are on their devices and the internet can be distracting. When class is on the internet, people are in the world and that can be distracting. And I'm better at avoiding online distractions than those in the physical world around me.

In moderation, I think phone and video calls can be really important for helping us deal with the isolation of Covid. I was talking to my uncle on the phone the other day and he told me he thinks I should suspend my project during the pandemic. He suggested that perhaps my experiment doesn't work anymore because he assumed that I don't have any alternative social potential under isolation without internet. I reminded him that phone calls – like the one we were on – can be pretty fulfilling ways to connect. My other uncle had similar advice for me. He told me that he read in my previous letter about the trouble I was having trying to register for classes without the internet and “was glad to read what sounds like maybe [I am] reevaluating the offline experiment.” He said he was sure “[my] conclusions would be just as valuable if they supported use of the internet in a balanced way or a mixed-use tailored to the individual.” Although trying to spend a year completely offline may be misleading, I actually *am* trying to advocate for a balanced, mixed-use of digital tools. But that doesn't mean I'm going to start using the internet again in that balanced way before 2021. My uncles are assuming that without the internet, I'm at more of a loss than I feel like I am. I've got my phone. James practically lives with me now. And, there's this other thing I've been doing to stay connected with 250 or so of you...

I received more responses to my April letter than I had from any of the previous ones. I don't think that I've changed how I'm sending my letters, but I think the pandemic may have changed what it's like to

receive them. Even if we can't be physically present with one another, a letter breaks into our physical isolation and shares space with us in quarantine. Its slower pace also doesn't overwhelm already overwhelmed people in the same way that more immediate mediums might. I got a message from my friend Ignacio recently, "Your letter has arrived. I'm going to be honest. I never thought your letters would be the most exciting part of the month." I know his comment has more to do with his life under Covid than how exciting it is to get my letters, but I appreciated his message.

Many of the letters I've received include something about writing letters. One I got from my friend Ben in the UK echoed a letter Horațiu sent me, part of which I shared in my February mail-out about pace of life. Like Hora, Ben wrote about the guilt that often accompanies unread emails and delayed responses. He said that with letters, on the other hand, "he didn't feel guilty for letting [mine] sit on [his] kitchen table...The temporality of the letter is *slower*. Unlike the email – which can leap hundreds of miles within seconds, demanding a reply with the speed of the particles with which it is communicated – the letter has its own, gentler pace. The pressure is off. Joy and excitement and eagerness flood the space vacated by guilt and forgetting." Especially during Covid, we could use some help embracing the slower pace of isolation and finding moments to feel good despite all the bad news around us. Granted, if letters were the only way to communicate, or if Ben and I had been older during pre-email times, we would likely be less romantic about letters. But, even if mail were more common, there is, Ben pointed out, less need for "“sorry for the delay’...for delay is the name of the game.”"

Another friend, Kody, had a similar message in a letter he sent me. But his did begin with an apology of sorts: "My apologies for taking so long to reply to your letter – or perhaps for you, it was just the right amount of time?" Kody went on: "When I receive a message (on Instagram, by email, by text), I immediately place an artificial deadline on myself for responding – the sooner the better. With digital media (emails, texts), I refuse to open them unless I know I have time in that moment to respond. In contrast, I opened your letter a few weeks ago. I did not read it immediately. Instead, I read it on the metro to and from work. I read it on the small breaks between my meetings. I read it while waiting to see the nurse. Similarly, in writing this letter, I find myself taking breaks. I don't know if this is just the result of the medium, or that I'm busy."

With the aim of exploring the value of letter writing – especially for staying connected from isolation – and simultaneously embracing the slower pace of life Covid demands, I want to share this month's CHALLENGE 4: *Send a letter to someone in the mail*. Take as much time as you need, and when you find yourself motivated and with a bit of space in your day, send someone a letter. I can almost guarantee they'll appreciate it as much as I've been loving getting letters from so many of you.

My May recommendation is a short but heavy memoir by Terese Marie Mailhot. It's called *Heart Berries* and is written mostly as an epistolary piece (a series of letters). Though it's not about the internet, it shares an incisive and insightful look at isolation and how we connect with others, or how we fail to. Even if we're struggling to connect, *Heart Berries* made me feel like it's meaningful just to try.

YT,
Aron Rosenberg