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A Case for In-Person Conversation

A few weeks ago, I called my grandmother and she spoke to me about the week that she learned cursive in elementary school. She told me the story during one of our usual calls—a time she lets loose the rambling images stored in her 88-year-old brain as I fold laundry or organize my calendar. That day, she jumped from describing the plots of the books she read on the train to visit her sister in New York to her best friend who lived across her street in her hometown in Pennsylvania. My grandmother’s memory of her friend led her to speak about her days in school and when she learned how to write in cursive. She talked about the loops that her hand would make, one after the other as her fingers absorbed the curve of the pen on the page and her mind memorized the ink patterns that it formed.

I thought then about when I learned cursive in my own second-grade class. I loved the way that that the letters had to fit between and skim the solid and the dotted lines, and that each letter could connect with one another. *H* could connect with *o* to *m* to *e* to make “home” or the word *blue* could break the rules when connecting the loop between *b* and *l* as it dipped below the worksheet’s dotted line. As I spoke to my grandmother, I sat at my desk with my headphones in my ears and my face on my screen. My fingers itched for the feeling of connecting a *b* to an *l*. While I had the privilege of literary criticism, fiction, and poetry a click away, years of humanities-based education under my belt, and access to a network of professors and students, I craved making loops on a piece of paper with a pen.

I have wanted to unplug my computer and throw it out the window from time to time over the last few years, but by the start of the new year in 2021 it was all I wanted to do. Just when it felt our screen time could not get any worse, it did. Jobs, school, doctors' appointments, meetings, birthday parties, cocktail hours, movie watching sessions, comedy shows, panels and discussions, concerts, cooking shows, tutorials, workout classes, and other blocks of time slipped behind the screen during the pandemic.

And it is incredible that they did. Individuals' move to the screen allowed others greater access to education, political and social discussion, connection with loved ones and strangers, and the continuation of vital and non-vital parts of the day. Businesses, institutions, companies, social groups, and individuals all showed incredible ingenuity and creativity adapting to a distanced life. While we have voluntarily distanced ourselves from each other for the sake of health and survival, and technology has alleviated some of the negative effects of this isolation, we are in a position where in-person connection is possible again.

Access to the internet and screens is a privilege. However, for those who do have the privilege of this access, the effects are not all positive. This is not news to anyone. In addition to mental stimulation that comes with a muscle memory engagement, hours behind screens take many people away from limited time under the sunlight, out of the open air, and away from the smells, quirks, mannerisms, and habits of loved ones and strangers. Wayne Koestenbaum writes in his book *Humiliation*, published in 2011, about technology's uncanny ability to separate people from one another. According to Koestenbaum, it distracts people from themselves by sabotaging their ability to self-confront, which allows people to get to know themselves and then create more empathetic connections with others.

The paradox of the internet's ability to connect as it works as a biased intermediary between people effectually depersonalizes individuals. The screen blocks a person's reading of someone else

because it creates a limited, curated, and unrealistic vision of that other person. While this conversation is not new, the effects particular to a nonfiction writer's engagement with the outside world are worth discussing. Koestenbaum writes, "More and more, the industries of communication and entertainment—with their globalizing quest to amuse, stimulate, connect—secretly work to deaden, or desubjectify, the human voice" (Koestenbaum 31). Koestenbaum describes the cruelty of what he calls "desubjectification," or a compromise of human understanding of the humanity of other people. Echoes of this deadening effect seep their way into most conversations I had with people about screen time. These stories range from a friend who is a social care worker talking about how hard it is to get kids to speak during virtual therapy sessions, texts from kids I nannied who say their eyes feel like they're falling out of their heads by the end of the day, family and friends who stare at multiple monitors while sitting at desks in their childhood bedrooms.

Digital Overload and Empathy

Last winter I went to the eye doctor and had my eyes checked. The doctor showed me big black and white images of the backs of my eyeballs. He pointed to each vein that squiggled across the disembodied giant orbs on his screen. I squinted at them, not really caring as much as I probably should about his explanations of the muscles that connected my sensory receptors with my brain.

All looks good, he said. Any questions?

It took me a minute to pay attention. *Hm*, I said, considering the recent pain somewhere behind my eyes. *Have you gotten many pictures of eyes that don't look good recently?*

He said, *Actually no. But I have gotten a lot of complaints about computer headaches, especially with younger kids. The eye is a muscle, and when it concentrates on something up close, the muscle is contracted. Only when it looks at something at least fifteen feet away can it rest. People's eye muscles are contracted all the time and for long periods of time so people are tired.*

Our brains take in an imbalanced amount of sensory information from screens to our eyes, which are contracted for an imbalanced portion of the day. Especially those with jobs that require hours and hours behind screens have been interpreting screens rather than smells, touches, sunlight, or human voices. The harder such people work, the worse their digital overload becomes.

In the spring of 2020, Brown University Literary Arts professor Rick Moody expressed his worries teaching his students literature and writing over Zoom. He was concerned that his students would feel disconnected from one another, and from the subject of literature itself. He writes, “The literary arts are more about a human in the room feeling something, expressing it, and the other humans listening, and, ideally, feeling similarly. Such is the invention of compassion” (Moody 2020). This sense of connection, expressed on the page, requires the physical presence of other human beings. The “invention of compassion,” then, involves a combination of self-reflection, conversation, and a willingness to acknowledge the presence of the other people in the room. It is substantiated by sensory perception and an awareness of the existence of other people’s thoughts and individuality. His gerund “feeling” encourages a commitment to a collective action within that moment of togetherness. It is human-with-human participation that incites connection and hopefully, empathy. Empathy’s effects on writing nonfiction are particularly useful to study.

In her long essay *The Argonauts*, Maggie Nelson enacts the creation of empathy on the page by citing thinkers whom influenced her thinking. In *The Argonauts*, Nelson shares a lyrical and autobiographical account of the development of her thoughts about art, language, love, kinship, and creativity. The essay focuses on the need for faith in human relationships. While a person can feel in the same room with another person, they cannot know that the other person is feeling. However, that person can still create from what they glean from others’ creations. Nelson includes, accompanied by margin citations, anecdotes of her encounters with writing by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Eileen Myles, Judith Butler, Denise Riley, Susan Sontag, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Luce Irigaray,

Michel Foucault, Eve Sedgwick, Andrew Solomon, and others, as well as her loved ones (Nelson 2015). By naming these different thinkers, Nelson tributes the periods in her life in which their writing drove her own writing or thinking.

Beyond mapping what she has learned, Nelson locates places and periods that mark the various processes of her creative development. When she recalled writing a thesis about the act of writing as a performance for the sake of intimacy, she credited Judith Butler. She defines the idea behind her thesis, “I mean writing that dramatizes *the ways in which we are for another or by virtue of another, not in a single instance, but from the start and always*” (Nelson 60). Butler’s name appears in the margin next to this passage. Nelson, similar to Moody, shares her own experience with the provocation that dialogue and on the presence of others enriches a person’s thought and ability to create. At the end of *The Argonauts*, Nelson writes that there cannot be reproduction, there can only be production (Nelson 143). Her interactions with specific thinkers that peaked her interest at particular times in her life allow her to realize the uniqueness of her creativity. This production is entropic because of the interwoven web of interactions that inspire it. Through Nelson’s attentiveness to the formation of her thinking and her art, she inadvertently invites her readers to also reflect on their own interactions.

Sherry Turkle, professor in Social Studies of Science, Technology, and Society at MIT argues that technology’s presence in our days blocks our abilities to self-reflect and interact meaningfully with others. Applying Turkle’s science behind the benefits of in-person interaction offers insights into how nonfiction writers in particular can balance the screen-empathy divide as she also researches and writes about the ways that technology has ingrained itself in human interaction, social mores, and political architectures. In Corinne Purtill’s Zoom interview with Turkle in March 2021, Turkle observes how she quarantined in her house in Massachusetts on a beach where Henry David Thoreau went for a walk with a friend when he hoped to “seek deliberateness,” as (Purtill

2021). As a transcendentalist and as a man who was advantaged enough to spend long hours or days outside reflecting, Thoreau wrote about his anxieties over the increasing pace of society from railroad and print technologies (Thoreau 1854). In his essay “Where I Lived, What I Lived For,” he writes, “Why should we live with such hurry and waste life” (Thoreau 1319), and later, “For my part, I could easily do without the post-office. I think that there are very few important connections made through it” (Thoreau 1319). While Thoreau’s desires to live outside of his society and without technology seem improbable, his anxieties over communication technology’s trend in increasing the pace of working and social life while distancing people from their thoughts and unaffected connection to others seem to foreshadow Turkle’s research.

Turkle recognized isolation and life-behind-the-screen’s effect on human interaction and on kinship relations. However, Turkle told Purtill in the interview that one of her worries was that given the option, people will still choose to converse behind screens rather than in person, or the “frictionless options with which we’ve grown comfortable” (Purtill 2021). In her book from 2015 *Reclaiming Conversation: the Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, Turkle writes about how social interactions behind the screen impede the necessary interaction of in-person conversation. Such in-person conversation involves friction as people choose to follow, read, and speak to those with whom they agree. Users’ interactions online are “friction-free” (Turkle 293). Much of the information presented to users flows without reference or connection to reality. Turkle writes,

This history of easy dispatch is only one way that digital life shapes a new public self. It conditions us to see the world as a collection of crises calling for immediate action. In this context, it is easy to skip necessary conversations. What led to the problem? Who are the stakeholders? What is the situation on the ground? For on the ground there is never a simple fix, only friction, complexity, and history. (Turkle 293)

For nonfictionists drawing content from this context, a translation of the world outside of screens becomes challenging to particularize. If the information sphere is only behind the screen, what happens when people come into contact with a person or situation that opposes what they have consumed on the screen? Which becomes their reality, the world filled with friction, with in-person conversation with loved ones, or the smooth, curated, friction-less screen reality they share with strangers? Koestenbaum suggests an answer with his haunting image, "...imagine standing in the presence of someone whose eyes refuse to soften toward you, whose eyes refuse to sympathize or to recognize your humanity" (Koestenbaum 35). The extreme case of desubjectification from exclusively screen-based interactions would be this deadening effect, the loss of the celebration of the quirks and nuances of another person. Nonfictionists are at a particular risk for this.

Epstein and the Lure of the Interesting

Mikhail Epstein's reflections on "the interesting," what people find surprising or shocking, provide context to the psychological attraction to screens. They make "interesting" material abundant and extremely reachable. However, this access to interesting information without evidence makes users comfortable with the liminal space between reality in the physical world and data. Epstein writes in 2009, "Theory is truthful when it corresponds to external reality, correct when it is free from internal contradictions, and veritable when it is verified by tests and experiments" (Epstein 84).

While computers allow greater access to information and education, they simultaneously bombard users with information and with constant theories that are spatially or temporally distant from the user's reality. Some writers or researchers who work for mediums such as digital magazines or news sources research and report on facts meticulously. However, others might not. Still others might use a person's psychological attraction to "the interesting" as a continuous clickbait trap. The combination of these latter effects results in a lot of interaction with a lot of false or sensationalized

information. The lapse in the access to infinite theories, surprises, “interesting” pieces of information for a user relies on their ability to envision a reality that might not be close to their own. In-person conversations become important in the way that they embody a proximity to reality, the connection to or contention with a person’s theory and their external reality.

Epstein reasons that the grasp for the interesting relates to the desire for truth. Post-structuralism of the late 20th century in the age of the internet results in a fragmentation of structures, institutions, and knowledge sources. Epstein understands poststructuralism as a move away from a common certainty in the existence of a singular universal truth (David 2015). He writes that the next set of truths consequently try to ground themselves within the sensational in order to stay relevant. Just as people click only the most shocking headlines, truths themselves embed themselves within sensation. Truth becomes buzzy in order to survive, and boring truths are ignored. Epstein writes,

If poststructuralism, as represented by Derrida, Deleuze, and Guattari among others, tends to dismiss truth as a feature of an outdated episteme and renounces its conceptual status, then the next intellectual paradigm will restore the value of truthfulness within the broader category of the interesting. The truth regains its significance as unpredictable and impossible truth, a surprise at the unknown rather than an acceptance of the known.

(Epstein 84)

According to Epstein, the desire for a sense of truth combined with the attraction to the interesting will emphasize the truth of the interesting. This is a useful concept for nonfiction writers to consider.

To follow this theory, the truths that will take precedence will be the interesting truths, the sensational or surprising truths. The opposite, the boring, anti-inflammatory, calm truths will be pushed aside. If surprise exists in dimensions that do not correspond with a person’s reality, then the

truths that will remain significant will be the truths on the internet, and not the truths within a person's social, spatial, or temporal locality. However, a constant exposure to the interesting will result in a consumer who eventually becomes immune to its shock. Such a consumer loses the ability to empathize with the humans in the world about whom the headline or information is written. Epstein writes, "interestism often ends in failure, obliterating wonder by making it routine" (Epstein 85). The internet allows for a continuous reel of access to interesting headlines, pieces of information, utterances by strangers and acquaintances, photographs, videos, and a presentation of others' curated lives. The consumer becomes deadened to these presentations and they experience the desubjectification from relating to what they see (Koestenbaum 2011). The humans behind such presentations can be revered, accepted, respected or disrespected, attacked, or completely deleted by consumers of the reels.

As much as some parts of the internet can present a user with a false interesting, the internet can also distract a person from accessing a real, powerful interesting found in their sense of self. Epstein's idea of an interesting within the self implies the existence of an internal dialectic that allows a person to pay attention to both the possibility of discovery about himself or herself and others. This kind of interesting results from a person knowing *where* they do not know. Epstein suggests that the most "interesting" personalities are those who exist "between the polarities of interpersonal communication—who, like sponges, can both absorb *and* emit" (Epstein 86). This absorbing and emitting includes the self as well as others. By paying attention to the unknowns and the places for discovery within the self, a person can better understand their potential (Epstein 87). Ideally, this self-reflection would help the person interact with others and become a more compassionate person.

Striving for self-awareness and negotiation becomes important because, as Sherry Turkle writes, "Research shows that people who use social media are less willing to share their opinions if

they think their followers and friends might disagree with them. People need private space to develop their ideas” (Turkle 310). People can counter such streamlined sets of information by analyzing the ways that they interpret knowledge to realize the possibility of new ideas or new opinions. The necessity of private space echoes Thoreau’s desire to think with contemporary technology. Both Thoreau and Turkle understand the need for pause or for cognitive isolation to precede reflection and then thoughtful interaction and community-building.

In her “Introduction” to *Best American Essays 2019* about her idea of essaying, Rebecca Solnit observes that to write an essay is to pause, and to pause is to rebel against the pace of our society. For Solnit, this pausing takes effort. It is not easy to confront what Turkle understands as the frictionlessness of the internet or ignore the sometimes falsely interesting pieces of information. Solnit writes,

We who live in and through media and the online world live in a whirlwind of slogans and catchphrases and clickbait, summary conclusions and scrolls across the split screen of news programs, pop-up ads and interruptions that together make things swirl and spin and shatter thoughts and thoughtfulness, and more than that propose that they’re something to accelerate past on the raceway. (Solnit xxiii)

The fast-pace entices us because of its momentum. The interactions within this rush move so quickly and are so plentiful that their inertia is difficult to counter. Even without the need for the internet for work or socialization, it would be difficult to rediscover a pace that matches the outside world. Purtil notes in her article, “One of Turkle’s worries is that, once it is possible to interact face to face, we will find ourselves gravitating toward the frictionless options with which we’ve grown comfortable” (Purtil 2021). For many people, in-person interaction takes work because other people require patience and attention in their quirks and mannerisms. But it is within this demand and effort that understanding and listening to others can happen. Turkle writes, “Conversation is on the

path toward the experience of intimacy, community, and communion. Reclaiming conversation is a step toward reclaiming our most fundamental human values” (Turkle 7). In-person conversations will require a determined pausing. This pausing does not have to be a Thoreauvian week without technology, but it can be a special attention to the nuances of in-person conversations, challenges and all.

Moments of Calm

In April of 2020, Maggie Nelson wrote an essay titled “Finding Moments of Calm During a Pandemic,” inspired by the essay “Winter in the Abruzzi” by the Italian writer Natalia Ginzburg. Ginzburg’s essay is about a period she spent with her family in political exile in the 1940s during which time her husband dies in prison. Ginzburg’s words were a source of solace for Nelson during a tumultuous time for her own family. Reflecting on the violence that Ginzburg lived, Nelson writes that humans are a species, “...which is defined, as are all forms of life, by a terrible and precious precarity” (Nelson 2020). While Nelson describes her gratitude for loved ones, she also acknowledges that proximity to people, even loved ones, can be difficult. She writes, “I don’t want anyone—including myself—to feel that they’re doing kinship wrong if and when it hurts” (Nelson 2020). Nelson describes kinship as something full of friction. At the same time, it is other people that help a person discover themselves, as she shows through her marginalia in *The Argonauts* (Nelson 2015). The friction defines our humanity (Nelson 2020). It is through this friction that in lucky situations people grow and learn to connect with others. This friction does not involve a direct translation of experiences with others, especially intimate interactions with loved ones, but a way to approach other people, a reasoning that the friction is a site for human growth.

For Nelson, kinship especially is something that someone *does*, hurt can exist within this doing, and such a hurt is the antithesis of desubjectification because it engages confusion or

frustration. When in her book *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Judith Butler analyzes sociological or philosophical approaches to the self in relation to others, she comments that a person's inability to completely know themselves connects them to others. It even explains human dependency on community. Butler writes,

Moments of unknowingness about oneself tend to emerge in the context of relations to others...If we are formed in the context of relations that become partially irrecoverable to us, then that opacity seems built into our formation and follows from our status as beings who are formed in relations of dependency. (Butler 20)

Butler writes about the ways that an individual can be self-reflective in a social world. Many people faced violence, heartbreak, loneliness, disease, or death in the home over the last two years.

However, others faced non-threatening but challenging moments of hurt or frustration that led to moments of self-confrontation. Those moments may have brought us closer to our humanness. I tried to remember those moments as I began to interact again with larger groups of people in different circumstances.

During a creative writing class I took when I was fifteen, the teacher had the class sit in a park and eavesdrop on strangers. *These voices are sources for your thoughts*, she told us. *Use the world around you*. Lately, branches of bright leaves cut across the side streets in New York. A man posts black and white photographs on the side of a brick building and a musician plays his guitar on the corner of the street. Dogs, walkers, runners, artists, and bikers crowd sidewalks and bike lanes. Conversations swirl through the air. As we can finally be social again, I hope to pay more attention to what the people around me have to say. I plan to look up at the sun instead of at my phone when I am outside. Being outside makes us healthier, smarter, and stronger and in-person conversations with people just might make us kinder and more engaged citizens.

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