

What Does It Actually Mean to Feel Close to Someone?

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This week, in honor of the impending update of a certain HBO show that might just have cemented a certain ideal of early-aughts cosmopolitan friendship, we are celebrating the art of being acquainted—in all its torturous complexity and beautiful glory.

My workday is interrupted by a thousand pings and prods; my non-workday is beset by needs and demands: Feed me, squeeze me, exercise me. It's a constant, toddler-toned chorus. Here we are now, entertain us. I crave silence and alone time—to reflect, read, use the toilet without someone banging on the door. When my husband tries to talk to me at the end of a long day, I sometimes shush him. Communication—in all its modern and blunt primitive forms—is not in short supply.

And yet, I might be lonely? As Harvard scholar **Jeremy Nobel** has put it:

“If you’re on Mars and you have the most powerful telescope...you can find all the isolated people on planet Earth. But you couldn’t find the lonely people.”

Edward Hopper knew it. You can be in the middle of a crowded city (or in my case, a crowded house) and be very alone.

Of course, the pandemic enforced a new awareness of loneliness upon all of us, and it's an effect that seems to be compounding even now, as the blight drags on. In a survey of Medicare recipients, 40 percent reported feeling less socially connected in the late summer of 2021 than in the fall of 2020—a point at which the pandemic had already been raging for several months and vaccines were nowhere in sight. Deep and shallow connections alike are suffering. A much discussed piece in *The Atlantic* from last January was titled “The Pandemic Has Erased Entire Categories of Friendship.” All those “weak link” connections—coworkers you don't know that well, the guy at the front desk of your gym—gone, or at least struggling after a year and a half of limited contact.

But for me, the pandemic had a strangely inverse effect. Without the ability to move throughout the city to attend events and wave across a room at people I *really* didn't know, I had more time to spend with friends and acquaintances in my Brooklyn neighborhood. Or rather, it wasn't that I suddenly had more time, as the windows of our interactions remained brief—compressed by the demands of homeschooling and multiplying Zoom meetings—it was that I *needed* to greet the parents in line at school drop-off or the man who handed me a coffee from behind a mask; they were often the only people outside my family whom I saw.

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A whole new form of social sustenance grew up within a five-block radius of my house. I started to go for regular evening walks with a neighbor, and we grew genuinely close; we were each other's decompression valves from the pressures of a hectic life largely contained within four walls. Parent friends came over to drink beer and play in our backyard with their kids; we weren't going anywhere else. (A moment of appreciation for the birthday party circuit reprieve.) When the weather got warm, on a whim, I invited a parent friend last minute to come with us to Jaccob Riis beach with his two little boys, and he came. He told me of his years working as a PA on film shoots and how he met his wife when she was married to another man. We've texted maybe twice since, and yet I still feel sort of close to him. I mean, the bad art friend thought that she was genuinely close to the woman who mocked her behind her back—who is to say what really constitutes intimacy?

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In the summer of 2021, when a tantalizing glimpse of a vaccinated normal was within our sights, my family moved—for a year—to another city. Suddenly, my pandemic-precipitated neighborhood intimacies vanished, and I found myself bringing my kids to school amid a sea of unfamiliar faces. There was only one coffee shop within walking distance, and an old lady yelled at my 6-year-old for standing too close the first time we visited it, so repeat visits to establish a friendship with the baristas held little appeal. Visiting the office—which I had begun to do once or twice a week in the summer—now required a three-hour train ride. Most of the time, when people in the office gathered for a meeting, I was one of the silent squares hovering on a conference room Zoom screen, straining to catch some of the casual cross-talk.

I felt as though I was starting over with my own private pandemic: isolated, rarely going anywhere, but exhausted all the same. And if the actual pandemic gave me back the time I had spent commuting or attending events that didn't, ultimately, have much meaning to me, this new personal pandemic didn't give me anything that I wasn't already accustomed to having. I already knew the rhythms of a work-from-home life, the faint thrill of only washing my hair twice a week. Without my neighborhood friend to pressure me (and vice versa) into an evening walk, I often let the workday drift into the evening domestic shift (dinner, bath, bed) without so much as a gulp of fresh air between them.

One evening, I texted that neighborhood friend to see if she wanted to chat while we walked. Yes, she texted back, excitedly, *I didn't know you were here!* No, I clarified, I was just going to, um, call her on the phone. How retro. We chatted via our AirPods while we strolled, but it wasn't the same.

There's a theory that the shallow friendships and acquaintances that come into your lives, often to fulfill utilitarian needs—workplace colleagues, carpool mates, and the like—don't matter as much as the friendships that have deeper roots and are grounded in pure pleasure. (Or

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so Aristotle says.) And the thinking goes, if you're feeling untethered from society or the world, it can make sense to winnow out your shallow friends and hone in on these deeper connections, the people you would hang out with one-on-one, to apply an easy framework. Those are the bonds you should make sure you're cultivating with adequate care and attention.

But when I tried to apply this litmus test to my own network of friends, the hierarchy collapsed. There are the friends I am always thrilled to see when they're in town and with whom I can keep up the most invigorating banter, but months can also pass between our calls. My "best friends" in fact, few of whom live in the same city as me, I barely speak to once a month. There are the friends I have felt genuinely close to *because* we've struggled through some professional difficulties together, not in spite of the fact that we were initially brought together in an office. And there are the friends who have served a purpose that could be seen as utilitarian—new moms whose parental leave overlapped with mine, for example—but whose communion and perspective at a moment of vulnerability and transition I valued deeply. I haven't seen some of those mothers in years, but that expanse does not diminish the comfort they offered me.

In a way, the pandemic made loneliness universal, as Kristen Radke puts it in her beautiful book *Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness*, by imposing isolation "on all of us at once." It also exposed some falsehoods: "Loneliness is often exacerbated by a perception that one is lonely while everyone else is connected. Perhaps now we can learn how flawed that kind of thinking is."

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