THE CONNECTION GAP

Why Americans Feel So Alone

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INTRODUCTION

We are losing touch. And we don't even realize it.

On Wednesday evenings, after the children are asleep, I go alone to the third floor of our 105-year-old Victorian and do what no previous inhabitant of this house has ever done. I sit in front of a fourteen-inch color monitor, log on to the Internet, and type in the Web address of my online grocer. When the home page appears, the image of the mother and smiling infant reminds me why this is the best way to shop. This new way of putting food on the table—or at least in the cupboards—should net me more time for playing. Funny, though, I *feel* more rushed than ever.

I enter my password and cruise the virtual aisles, scanning product names under headings like "fresh," "packaged goods," and "household accessories." It takes only about twenty minutes to fill my virtual shopping cart. This approach to tackling the weekly supermarket list has taken some getting used to. (Who knew that Tony Tiger cereal is properly called "Kellogg's Frosted Flakes of Corn"?) Nonetheless, it's remarkably trouble free. There is no heavy lifting, no worries that those two cases of caffeine-free Diet Coke will crush the bread or, as happens to me in the real store by the time I reach the soda aisle, won't even fit in the cart. I even get a running total of how much I'm spending. I don't have to haul anything home; it is all delivered the next day.

But probably the biggest pitch for online grocery shopping is that you don't have to deal with other people. Forget the folks who park in front of the dried pasta or abandon carts in the middle of aisles. There's no wait for the person at the bread counter to select the sourdough baguette with tongs from behind a plastic case. *People* slow things down. And I'm not the only one who feels this way. The appeal of interacting

with a computer or a machine instead of a human has caught the fancy of vendors from McDonald's to the local turnpike authority. In my state of Massachusetts, the former turnpike director made no qualms about the draw of skipping the required interaction at the tollbooth by using the Fast Lane transponder. "With as much as people have going on in their lives, sometimes stopping and interacting with other humans is difficult," he said. "You would rather deal with a machine. People would rather not deal with humans if they don't have to."

There is something trying, even exhausting, about human interactions. Why meet when you can e-mail? And digital video makes it *seem* like you're there. Right? Certainly, we are still sorting out all the new technologies we've been endowed with. The novelty is wearing off, and when they become absolutely mundane, we will have incorporated them all into life. It's just the way things are done. Nothing special. It's not special to use a cell phone or to get e-mail. This is how we communicate with each other. But the transition from in-person to online is not just trading slow for fast but is renegotiating the terms of engagement and the ground rules for living. More often than not, the new rules leave less time and less opportunity to connect—with other people, with the physical world, and with ourselves.

A CEO of a firm that helps established companies build and market an online presence works nearly all the time. He spends fourteen-hour days at the office, comes home to eat dinner with his wife and four children, and then goes upstairs to check his e-mail and keep working. He's not so unusual. He loves the speed and the excitement of the work. It *is* fun to be involved with something hot. Problem is, he hardly has time to connect with anything else. He likens his link with his job to a T1 connection—as opposed to a dial-up—and says he won't have any meaningful time of his own until after retirement. (He's only forty-nine.) He savors the forty-five minutes a day he spends commuting because, he says, it is "the only forty-five minutes I can control." The rest of the day, he behaves like a human pinball ricocheting from one thing to the next, reacting instead of contemplating. But that's the way business is today, he says: "We are making half-assed decisions because we are responding to stimuli."

Much has been written about how time-starved Americans are today. Like the CEO, many of us don't have time to think, either. We, too, respond. No wonder e-tailers, hungry for people's attention, must make each Website "stickier" than the last. It is no accident that time is what the e-commerce world peddles: "Spend your money and they'll *give* you time" is the message. Who wouldn't find that appealing?

That's why I bit when the flyer arrived in the mail offering trial online grocery service. But now, months later, I'm not sure what's happened to the time I used to spend grocery shopping. I don't feel as if I have a great surplus of minutes to savor. Other things just seem to fill the space. I don't play with the children any more than I did before. I don't take long, soaking baths. And I seem to have more, not less, trouble finding time to get through two daily newspapers and the scads of magazines that arrive. In the end, I haven't gained that much. And I've lost some.

When I first started grocery shopping online, I thought I would miss handling the food, judging one Granny Smith apple against another or debating the appeal of Cheez-Its over Cheese Nips. But a funny thing has happened: I have found that the ritual of grocery shopping doesn't have much at all to do with the food. As with other aspects of daily life, the value and meaning of this chore are camouflaged by its very ordinariness. I now find it interesting—even fun—to go to a supermarket. There is the *whoosh!* of sensory stimulation that strikes when you enter, those odd bluish lights, the colorful pyramids of fruits, the sheer stunning display of product choices.

More profoundly, what I miss is the *life* of the supermarket. I used to see the same people working the cash registers. I miss hearing the boss, named Joan, coordinate break times or appear momentarily stressed by the absence of an advertised product. Despite my frustration with other shoppers, I realize I do miss peering into other people's carts to see what they're buying. I miss having other shoppers look at me, acknowledging my existence and confirming my inclusion in society. People used to ask me the ages of my children, notice when they helped load food onto the checkout counter, or nod as they managed to absorb their disappointment when I said no to candy. I miss the public experience of the supermarket.

Certainly, it is easy enough to do without grocery shopping in person. But it is less easy to do without what grocery shopping allows us: to be involved in the details of our own lives and to feel part of the human world. I know there are people involved with the process of getting my food to my home, but I do not see them. I order, then go to work. When I get home, the food is there. And what has happened in grocery shopping is happening in other areas of domestic and com-

mercial life: In the name of efficiency and convenience, we are taking the interactions out of our days. The background noise of the supermarket or the chitchat with the cashier may seem meaningless. But it's not. It is exactly what makes us feel connected.

I realized this when I made a supplementary trip to the supermarket where I used to make my weekly bulk purchases. I brought two of my children, my infant son and five-year-old daughter. As we cruised through the aisles, my daughter loved picking items off the shelf and placing them in the cart. People babbled with the baby and asked my daughter how it felt to be a big sister. At the dairy case, I searched with another woman for unsalted butter, which was in short supply because it was near the holidays, when even the least talented bakers feel moved to produce sweets. At the checkout, the cashier watched and chatted as my daughter unloaded the cart onto the conveyor. As we walked out into the cold and dark late autumn afternoon, my son strapped to my chest and my daughter with her small, ungloved hand in mine, she looked up at me and said, "Those people are so, so nice!" Her observation was her own, out of nowhere, a simple thought that tumbled forth. Yet she had captured the experience perfectly. We had both had a wonderful time—yes—grocery shopping, simply because we were there, engaging with other people. Grocery shopping had made me feel happy.

The experience with my daughter came as I found myself increasingly frustrated by online shopping. There were mistakes, especially with produce. The avocados for making guacamole arrived as hard as rocks; more than once I received someone else's chilled food order instead of my own. I resolved to do more grocery shopping in person. This is how I have gotten to know Richard, a supermarket employee who appears to be in his late forties. He is a solid man who often wears khaki pants and strong, sensible shoes. Because he is mentally handicapped, Richard is given jobs like collecting carts, sweeping the parking lot, and raking leaves. His voice has a slight nasal quality. The rhythm of his speech is awkward, perhaps because he grows impassioned about topics many people care too little about to even discuss: the legality of burning leaves and—a favorite—the rules of operating a motor vehicle (I gather he is not allowed to drive). Nonetheless, we have had important conversations, too.

One morning, standing in the parking lot, he told me someone close to him had punched him in the back and called him a "retard." He didn't know what to do. He leaned over his rake and looked extremely sad, almost excessively so. I felt in that moment a sense of responsibility. He needed to know: What should he do? Was it true? Was he just a retard? Should he strike back? We talked about how he felt and how you can respond when someone hurts you. In the end, Richard decided to explain that they could not remain friends if his friend treated him so hurtfully. It may seem a rather simple problem with an obvious solution. But working through the dilemma made the experience memorable, probably because I could feel him struggle at first and then feel empowered by his solution. I look forward to seeing Richard when I go to the store. I find him refreshing, perhaps because of the very mental handicap that makes him so eager to engage.

I have no illusions. I am not Richard's friend. In truth I do not know him very well. But I do value our interactions, even though they are the kind many people think are best avoided: They take up too much time and energy. But I do believe such interactions give us something for the trouble: the opportunity to connect and to feel part of the world we live in. Granted, connecting with the gas attendant or the library clerk may on first blush not seem worthwhile. Or, as one senior physician put it when asked why he didn't attend his hospital's holiday party, "I don't want to boogie with the elevator man." After all, the bright new world of high technology, the multiplying services, and the strides we have made in elevating the average American lifestyle are ridding our lives of junk so, as my online grocer's home page suggests, we can get to the good stuff. Why muddy it up? Who wouldn't want to cut out the junk and leave just the very best of what each day has to offer?

But such reasoning misses a critical point: The *junk* has value. The junk is what keeps us human—grounded and connected to our lives, to others, and to our world. It is the realm of the impromptu act, the glance, the word, the thrill of being seen as a person, not because of your title, your position, or your money but because you are there and involved. Many people know the feeling. In a moment, verbally or physically, you extend yourself—you empathize, act, or open yourself to listen. The butcher boasts that his girlfriend's mother from Hungary makes the best meatloaf he has ever eaten. He hurriedly rushes through the swinging doors in hopes of finding you the recipe.

We do reach out. But it is growing harder, in part because we have more choices that allow us to eliminate meaningful human interaction from our daily experience. It is easier to slip past Richard, slip past each

other. It is easier to shop online, to e-mail the complaints, to not deal with other people. We are busy. We have a lot on our plates and our minds. And, to be honest, we don't want to boogie with the elevator man. What the online, streamlined, customized lifestyle offers is the ability to interact only with people we want to—people, mostly, just like us. Our society may be more diverse, but our experiences are growing narrower, our quarters more ghettoized. We draw the circle of concern closer around ourselves. Reveling in the junk of daily life—grocery shopping in person included—is one way to connect.

This book is about where we have come from and where we are going. It is a book about ideas and the power of the trivial to shape major change. It is a call to consider the junk of daily life, not as a distraction, but as a potential tool for connecting us to things we care about. Like the CEO who has little time to think about the decisions he makes, many people are becoming overbusy executives of their lives. People are willing to be pulled along into the new way of living without considering the trade-offs. There is a great deal of hunger today to find meaning and purpose in life. Some search for meaning in religious commitments; some leap from bridges or scale canyons. I believe these quests are symbolic of the disconnection many of us feel.

In this book, I speak much about "connection." It is a word that means different things to different people. For me, connection is about engagement with ourselves, our physical surroundings, and other people. Connection is about reclaiming our humanness. It is about making better choices and realizing that we—not the new technology or the latest cultural value—have the power to shape a meaningful existence.

This idea is simple, but difficult to hold on to because so much today—from tangible scientific discoveries to basic social constructs—is in flux. Long-held beliefs are called into question and values upended. Once-certain limits of scientific knowledge are shattered. We are living in a special moment, but it is a moment defined not by any parameters but by the speed with which the parameters change. Scholars and experts in various fields intone about the mythic quality of our age. Historians compare the time to the Industrial Revolution. Economists wonder if tried-and-true rules can still apply. The worlds of politics, science, medicine, human rights, communications, advertising, sports, and more are changing as the result of new events and breathtaking discoveries. The world often feels as if it is exploding with new things and

new ways of doing old things. The microprocessor that first allowed a lunar module to land on the moon now costs eighteen cents. Today, millions of the chips power children's toys.

Change and stunning new inventions have become so routine that the shock of the new no longer shocks. At the same time, old parameters and standards fall away: Our society has become comfortable with the pornographic, familiar with the violent, and at ease with the crude. The rising cadre of newly minted Internet millionaires (in their twenties and thirties, no less) has shattered old ideas about a proper ascent up the ladder of success. No wonder the notion of calibrating indulgence and self-sacrifice seems hopelessly dated. Rules no longer apply. But amid the chaos and excitement that comes with great new ideas is the more humble—and stable—fact that we each must attend to our own life.

So while many experts, scholars, and writers today have their eyes on the big issues of our time, I intend here to focus on what is less glamorous and less considered: the junk. In the end, I believe small things have a powerful impact. If we can pay attention to the oft-ignored aspects of our lives, we will gain the grassroots ability to construct a future that we're excited about living. In this book I begin with a concern: I believe we are growing apart, unwittingly disconnecting from our world, from others, and from ourselves. We are, in rather base terms, being sucked along. In this book, I will consider the choices we are making and the values we are embracing. I will, for example, examine the way we build and live in our homes, make friends, and socialize. I'll consider how we communicate and how the virtual world alters how we navigate the real world. I'll look at the power of shopping, our hunger for mobility, and how we quietly struggle to find meaning and connection.

As I see it, we have arrived at a moment of opportunity. We have choices about how the future unfolds. Often, though, instead of making choices, many of us react to stimuli. We want the next thing. But the very new, new things and new, new values that promise to make life more comfortable, convenient, efficient, and private also create the reverse: lives that are more isolated, increasingly self-focused, and lonelier.

It may seem ironic, when "connection" has become the buzzword of the moment and anyone at all is immediately reachable from any location, that people are suffering from loneliness. But many of us are.

It is not, of course, loneliness in the traditional sense. I'm not talking here about the widow in the too-quiet house, the lone figure walking unaccompanied on a vacant street. I'm not talking about the listless and the lovelorn, or about the Eleanor Rigby prototype, the lonely one missing out on the party of life, famished for human contact with too much time to wonder what's gone awry.

I am writing about the rest of us: the overstimulated, hyperkinetic, overcommitted, striving, under-cared-for, therapy dependent, plugged in, logged on, sleep deprived. We are the new lonely. This loneliness touches us whether we are married, single, widowed, or divorced; gay, straight, or bisexual; whether we have children or are childless. It touches the urban, the suburban, and the rural; the hip and the hopelessly uncool. It is not a personal character flaw or a reflection of failure. It is simply how we conduct our lives. It is a mindset and a way of being suited to this age. People trust less and keep to themselves more. People seek privacy, fencing in property, installing security systems in homes, and escaping into cars, behind apartment doors, into master bedroom suites and gated communities.

People talk a great deal about "community" but complain of feeling less and less a part of one. People long for rich relationships but find themselves wary of committing to others. Many of us hunger for intimacy but end up paying professionals to listen to, care for, and befriend us. We are a bundle of contradictions, eager to feel rooted but finding ourselves willingly pulled along with the tide. As a society, we face a collective loneliness, an empty feeling that comes not from lack of all human interaction, but from the loss of *meaningful* interaction, the failure to be a part of something real, or to have faith in institutions that might bring us together. This is what I call the Connection Gap.

The Connection Gap is the cumulative cultural consequence of the choices people make and fail to make, the values that are embraced and those that slip away. It is the result of huge forces reshaping our everyday world, from technology and consumerism to the drives for efficiency and self-actualization. I am talking here about the gathered fallout of a thousand frenetic moves: decisions to use a cell phone even when it's unnecessary, to hire professionals to run your life, to "visit" on the Internet when you know you should do it in person, to shop for stuff you don't really need because you have come to think you do need it, to stay later at the office, to buy a bigger home for a smaller household, to not bother to get to know the neighbors or vote in the local

election because it has come to feel like it doesn't matter if you do. And yes, to grocery shop online or Ask Jeeves instead of the local librarian. The Connection Gap is that precious moat of space around us. It is both the protection we crave and the barrier we complain about.

Hey, What Happened?

It's easy to strike up a conversation with anyone over thirty about how radically life, the world, society, and the old neighborhood have changed in recent years. There is virtue, in fact, in recalling the alleged simplicity with which even the most privileged among us was raised. Now, of course, it is far different and all a wreck. This is the familiar line that seems endemic to aging. My grandpa didn't tout the virtues of the Clean Plate Club because he was thinking of us. He championed eating watermelon right down to the rind and chicken clear to the bone because he was a product of the Great Depression. It was the way you were supposed to eat; anything less was wasteful. Clearly, our perceptions are colored by our experiences. It would be easy enough to attribute concerns about disconnection to people glorifying the Good Old Days. In fact, you don't have to go far to see marketing aimed at doing just that. The implicit message, of course, is that if you buy you can reclaim that cozy, connected feeling. One has only to step inside Restoration Hardware to see people longing for a romanticized past of Betty Crocker recipes and bright red metal toolboxes.

But there is more to what's going on now than a hunger for Howdy Doody or the Brady Bunch. The current wave of nostalgia is all the more intense because we are at the dawn of the twenty-first century and in the midst of such a rapid change. We are at once exhilarated by new possibilities for living and fearful of leaving the familiarity of what we have known. These dual forces—longing for the past and eagerness for the wondrous future—have created an awkward tension, one that cannot be eased by the purchase of a butterfly chair or a Bobby Sherman lunch box. The truth is that no one wants to look like a Luddite, but people also worry that good stuff, rich stuff, risks being lost forever. The concern is not unfounded. We are experiencing more than the age-old sense of the uncomfortable passing of time. The world really *is* changing—and so are we.

Sven Birkerts argues in *The Gutenberg Elegies* that we are in a time like no other. "The primary relations—to space, time, nature, and to other

people—have been subjected to a warping pressure that is something new under the sun," he writes. "Those who argue that the very nature of history is change—that change is constant—are missing the point. Our era has seen an escalation of the rate of change so drastic that all possibilities of evolutionary accommodation have been short-circuited."[1]

We are drowning in our own victorious advances. We are seizing the future and the present but missing what we hold in our hands. Despite the widespread awareness that technology is radically reordering our lives, we have failed to think deeply about how we want to use it—and how we *don't* want to use it. "In hindsight, the situation is clear to everyone," Langdon Winner writes in his book *The Whale and the Reactor: A Search for Limits in an Age of High Technology.* "Individual habits, perceptions, concepts of self, ideas of space and time, social relationships, and moral and political boundaries have all been powerfully restructured in the course of modern technological development." The very things we embrace transform not just the one specific thing they seem to address but a whole constellation of related things. Changes wrought by high technology are profound, and yet, Winner complains, they "have been undertaken with little attention to what those alterations mean."[2]

So are we smarting from the speed of change? Or have we simply failed to pay attention to what was happening? The truth may rest between the two extremes. It's my hope that, while we may be powerless to slow the rate of change, we may at least increase our awareness of its arrival. Right now, we seem stuck in receive mode, accepting all incoming alterations without question. The speed and seamless manner in which the Next New Thing is put into play leads us to focus on learning how to use it, and not on seeing how it shapes our behavior. Initially, I paid more attention to getting the kinks out of my online grocery shopping experience—customizing my electronic shopping list and finding ways of more quickly perusing the virtual aisles—than I did to thinking about how this would change my sense of community and connection. After all, whether in person or electronic, I still call it "grocery shopping." But, in fact, they are two very different activities.

Consider, for example, how the telephone call has evolved—and changed how we converse. Objectively, a phone call is still a phone call: We used the same phrase in 1960 that we do in 2000. But as the once stationary telephone has become first portable, and now completely

mobile, the *experience* of speaking on the phone has been irrevocably altered. The phone call that once commanded one's undivided attention has over time become an event to be undertaken chiefly while you are doing something else: driving, ordering coffee, even sitting in the waiting room of the doctor's office. Certainly, people carve out times for focused phone conversations, but such times are growing rare. What was once a fairly intimate exchange is now often overheard in public. I, for example, found myself in the waiting room of my obstetrician's office seated next to a woman making a cell phone call in which she discussed the recent death of a friend—for everyone to hear. And the length of the phone call, once bounded by the conversation itself, is now subject to outside factors: entering a parking garage, traveling into a dead zone, needing to put milk in your coffee, or being called into the doctor's examining room. The "phone call" is not the same phone call one might have made a few decades ago. And the act of conversation—even the rhythm of the conversation itself—has been transformed from a mostly leisurely and attentive talk to an often clipped exchange. People today do not discuss; they get the message and run.

Technology has not altered our lives and our selves completely on its own. Its impact is intersecting with other forces. The relative affluence of our times has spurred new expectations about what kind of car we should drive, how big our home should be, what kind of clothing and other goods we should have. The increasing speed of life, too, along with the portability and mobility of nearly everything, necessarily changes how we interact. One office worker complained that all the advent of the fax machine in the 1980s did was increase the demands placed on him; papers previously mailed then had to be faxed. Now, they must be e-mailed or sent overnight. The office never really closes. Everything has become urgent. The expectation of instantly available everything speeds up the days, truncates interactions, and makes people nervous about squandering minutes or even seconds. There is no waiting anymore without agitation or—in some cases—anger. This shapes the way many of us move in the world, what we notice and what we no longer see.

The day, as we compose it, has become a series of scheduled activities—not of perceptions. When most of us talk about our days, we talk about what we did or crammed in, not what we noticed or thought. My older daughter was given a homework assignment to go outside, look around for five minutes, and then come back in and write down

everything she saw; the exercise revealed the difficulty of taking time to do what we might consider "nothing." After two minutes she was ready to stop observing. I pressed her to stick with it. Finally, after five minutes, she came inside and made her list. I was struck by how many items came from memory—the swing set, the fence by the garage—and how few bore the stamp of the moment of her observation. Could it be she looked but didn't really see? I don't think she's alone. We don't need to see—at least not as specifically as we once did. Travel directions once required people to notice the likes of stone walls and chestnut trees to reach a destination. Today, we need only turn left at the McDonald's, get off at the numbered exit, or read the street sign. Are we losing our ability to notice nature? To enjoy an unscheduled moment?

Other changing values are reshaping human relations. Consider the popular drive for self-actualization. Mixed in with the idea that each of us can and should achieve to the best of our ability is the incessant message that each of us "deserves" certain things: the perfect partner, the luxurious vacation, the services of a masseuse, a therapist, and a personal trainer. I list these "necessities" only partly in jest. It may sound excessive, but the notion that each of us has a right to certain inalienable comforts has caught on. Unfortunately, marketing messages aimed at pampering us contradict a quieter call for another human pleasure: the reward of, at times, considering someone else's needs first. Instead, people are encouraged to focus on themselves. In relationships, people worry about being emotionally swindled. No wonder results of a 1999 study at Rutgers University revealed that the United States has hit the lowest rate of marriage in modern history—and that fewer of those who are married consider their unions to be "very happy."[3]

I don't intend to suggest that the forces at work—and our response to them—yield only negative behaviors. They don't. Part of all this change is good, whether it is better technology, faster service, or a belief that it's worth searching out a loving partner instead of settling for a miserable union with a creep. But there is little doubt that, when it all adds up, we are moving toward lives that are more inwardly focused and, ultimately, more alone. This is troubling chiefly because our society relies on human interaction and the natural tendency of people to come together. We need neighbors to talk with, people who care about what's happening next door or down the street. We need people to lend a hand when an elderly woman drops a bag of groceries as she tries to cross the road. We need the other driver to yield in traffic, the guy who is making your coffee to seem human, and partners to be devoted. We need parents to spend time with their children, citizens to debate issues, and friends to take time to sit around and shoot the breeze.

Of course, among many people and in many places, these things are already ticking along nicely. But even in the happiest corners of our nation, we are facing greater challenges to the simple act of connecting. It is harder to carry on the relationships and to support the interactions that make life truly satisfying. Perhaps if we can recognize the pressures we face and the choices we make, we may help each other reconnect. Life *is* making more demands on us. It's time to make some of our own.

Are We More Alone?

Aloneness and disconnection are tough to measure in a single number. There is no national scale of connectivity. Yet scholars, writers, and others are constantly talking about it, describing in various ways the thinning social fabric. Whether in an academic journal paper, an article in the *New York Times,* or a poll on Americans' attitudes, what we hear about again and again is that our society is less cohesive than we want it to be. In fact, we are given lots of numbers—not just one—that point to a dwindling sense of connection. Missing from such news flashes is a way of thinking about what they mean and how these findings relate to other findings. This is what I hope this book offers: not a comprehensive survey of daily life but a way of interpreting and connecting the events and information around us. So while I cannot proclaim a single number that proves that, yes, we are more alone than we were twenty, thirty, fifty, or a hundred years ago, I do believe that we are. And I believe that there is lots of evidence to support this position.

As a journalist, writer, and social observer, I draw my "evidence" from many quarters: academic studies, scholarly books, government publications, interviews, personal observation, poll data, government data, General Social Survey data, data from the Murray Research Center archives at Radcliffe, old periodicals and books, current newspapers and magazines, television, advertising, movies, store catalogues—even what they sell in the supermarket. It was, in fact, several years ago while writing for the *Boston Globe* food section, that I wrote an article on single-serving foods. In the course of browsing store aisles for new

products and trends, I noticed a number of new foods designed to serve just one. (By now we've grown accustomed to them, but back then they were news.) When I got to my desk, I started calling the food manufacturers, and again and again I heard the same story. They were reflecting America's changing eating habits. There were more households of singles, and in households of several people, their marketing research showed, people were eating more meals alone; families were eating *in sequence* instead of all at once. The manufacturers were adjusting to suit the market. This shift was obvious to me as I read the copy on the "family size" box of Weaver's Chicken Croquettes, which assumed consumers were heating an individual microwave dinner for each family member. The "family size" offered an added feature: You could microwave all the meals at once.

Although such information seems trivial, it's not. It is, after all, the trivial that reveals the broader picture of what a society cares about. The forces that nudge and press at us, after all, do not confine themselves to a single academic discipline or sector of life; they are manifested in many ways and in many areas of living, in some more dramatically than others. Besides, it's fun and interesting, as well as informative and useful, to subject daily life to scrutiny. The mere act of examining our environment and our actions edges each of us toward looking at life with the eager eyes of a scout.

So *are* we more alone? Much of this book will address the ways in which we are living more solo, more isolated, more inwardly focused lives. Our aloneness is played out in the way we eat, watch TV, work, play, fall in love, marry (or don't), socialize, and shop. Consider, as one example, the automobile. Americans have long loved cars, but our relationship to the vehicles has changed. The car today is not mere transportation but an intimate personal space. It is a mobile home and office—and an escape capsule so we may get away from everyone and everything. Just so, the car experience is increasingly an *interior* event; the action is not outside the vehicle but inside. Car ads focus on interior amenities—the "supple leather-trimmed seats of the new Lincoln Town Car," the stereo systems, leg room, head room, cup holders, global satellite positioning systems, video players, fanny warmers, and the like—because inside is where we spend our time. Some ads never even show the car's exterior profile. And why should they? The outward appearances of so many cars today are nearly indistinguishable. This was not the case a few decades ago, when it was the exterior—the use of

chrome, the design of the grille, the length of the fins, the shape of the taillights, the whitewall tires, the curve of the fender, and the slope of the hood—that lured and enraptured.

The story of the car reflects not just technological advances in manufacturing and design but the story of our own changing ways. What does it say when we care more about the cup holders than the fenders? Certainly cars are more personal spaces, in part because we can do more in our cars today than we could fifty years ago. But we have also come to view cars not as belonging to the household but as individual possessions. The car is a private sanctuary and a vehicle of self-discovery. "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude—THOREAU" tops a print ad showing a Chevy Tahoe parked deep in the deserted woods with rays of sunlight cutting through a shady canopy of tall pines. What does it say that a "family" car like the Volvo station wagon has been marketed in TV ads as transportation for solo soul searching? Even when we do drive with others, manufacturers create a sense of separation between driver and passengers in the vehicle's interior. Those marketing the Chevy Venture minivan, for example, tout a "Dual Mode Sound System that lets you listen to the radio in the front seat and lets them listen to a CD or whatever they call music in the back. And vice versa. Which means they won't roll their eyes when you sing and you won't have to listen to something that sounds like bees attacking a hippo." No need to fight over the stereo—everyone gets his or her way. Long gone are the images of the family piling into the car for a Sunday drive. Riding with others (when you must) is no longer a communal event but a set of parallel experiences.

Mostly, though, we try not to drive together. Despite aggressive campaigns and specially designated carpool lanes for commuters sharing rides, Census Bureau figures tracking private vehicle occupancy among workers sixteen and older show that the percentage of those driving to work *alone* rose from 76 percent to nearly 85 percent between 1980 and 1990. Carpoolers dropped from 24 to 15 percent of commuters over the same time period. And a Gallup poll released in January 2000 suggests the trend continues: The percentage of respondents using public transportation to get to work fell from 12 percent in 1947 to 1 percent in 1999; the percentage saying they drove a car or truck but did not carpool rose from 32 to 87 percent. There may be a host of reasons for the trend away from sharing rides, including lower gas prices, but the fact remains: More of us are driving alone.[4]

Our cars—the way they are designed and marketed and the way we use them—reflect a growing aloneness, a state mirrored in other parts of our lives. At times, it's true, we may embrace solitude with the eagerness of someone who needs a break from the frenzy of modern living. But as often, we drift toward solo states as a way of being and thinking even when we are not in need of respite. We have a "default mode" for isolation that seems to kick in almost automatically. Perhaps this very instinct may *contribute* to our stresses, instead of providing relief. Often, after all, our isolation is not physical but perceptual.

Because we cannot always control our physical space, we seek to control our mental space by tuning out or shutting out those around us. We routinely ignore other people or do not see them when we look at them. The driver may mechanically stop to allow a pedestrian to cross the street but betray no glimmer of empathy—and may even seem to wait impatiently and rev the engine afterward. It is as if a stoplight has commanded him, not the desire to be decent. People may hold the door for you or allow you to step onto the elevator first, but the kindness is done mechanically—and without kindness. The body acts, but the switch of human engagement is turned to the "off" position. When we exist more in our private mental states than in the world, we can control others, not by physically avoiding them but by choosing not to engage. We pretend not to see the other jogger when we pass, making the Walkman the excuse for not even nodding. We feign concentration. Our attention is pulled elsewhere, into our chosen world—the cell phone, the Watchman, the Discman, papers, private thoughts. And that is the irony: We may be lonelier than ever, more disappointed in the quality of our social interactions but we are tireless in our pursuit of privacy and seclusion.

In a sense, many of us are placing ourselves in self-imposed solitary confinement. We are filtering out the stimuli of everyday encounters, willingly collapsing the possible interactions and explorations around us in our effort to cut through the day in the most efficient manner possible. The effects of sensory deprivation have been well studied, and we know how devastating solitary confinement can be. It is what breaks prisoners of war and sorely tries cancer patients undergoing bone marrow transplants, whose weakened immune systems require them to spend weeks sealed off from the world. High-tech prisons, in which inmates in solitary confinement are locked down by remote-controlled cell doors and monitored by state-of-the-art surveillance equipment with minimal human contact, have been attacked as inhumane.[5]

Most of us will never know what it is to be literally placed in solitary confinement, but we may feel the effects every day of a lesser but not unrelated experience. Consider the rising number of us who suffer from depression, anxiety, or sleeplessness. Is it just the result of better diagnosis? Unfortunate genes? Or does the more solitary way we live our lives bear some blame?

The Connection Gap

People today *are* concerned about their lives and relationships. Many of us feel less connected and more alone. But how did we get here? What can we do? In this book I will argue that we are in the midst of rapid change, not only in how we conduct our lives but also in who we are. I will examine the elements of daily life that are so ordinary they have become invisible. It is their invisibility that makes them threatening. When we see, when we can cast these elements as choices, we gain the power to act. This book is meant not as a fix-your-life guide but as an argument for recognizing the threats to connection and finding ways to reconnect. It does not pretend to provide a comprehensive survey of modern life. Instead, I am focusing on the domestic and the day-to-day. My subjects and sources are vast and varied, but I aim to hit on major themes that resonate with many people. I understand that I cannot write about all people in all situations. My bias is toward examining middle-class life in America. Even "middle-class" is a very general description, and some aspects of daily living I mention may smack of the most upwardly mobile members of this class. Yet at times I find it valid to set forth this economically endowed group as an example relevant to us all. This group sets the tone, the style, the standard of living that so many of us aspire to emulate. Even when we cannot afford all that this upper middle class has, we try. Our age is a study in the marketing of luxuries to the masses. And even people who cannot afford them still buy new cars, expensive clothes, jewelry, and more. A friend who teaches at a vocational-technical high school, who personally knows the economically stressed reality of students' home lives, never fails to marvel at the brand-new cars, including luxury vehicles, parked in the student lot. The presence of new cars, more than an economic

statement, is a statement about our times. When I was growing up, in the 1970s, my parents always drove old cars. At times, with my mother at the helm, the four of us children were instructed to offer encouragement (and a little forward rocking didn't hurt) so that "Nellie" might start. And we weren't alone. Everywhere you went there were older cars on the road. Today the story is very different. Take a drive on a major highway, and most of the cars are late models and in good condition. So, even as I might aim often at the upper economic tier, I believe the messages embedded in the analysis speak to a far wider audience.

To begin with, I will look at the culture of *shopping*. Even as many profess distaste for materialism, our society has become addicted to shopping and buying. It has become not merely a means for acquiring goods but a way of negotiating and valuing our relationships. The language and values of commerce pervade daily life. Is it any accident that personal ads read like catalogue copy? No wonder people "shop" for mates and wonder if they could get a "better deal" than they've got. Shopping itself is also a means for seeking the love and attention lacking elsewhere. Why do we so readily submit to the helpful salesclerk? Hunger for the doting chatter and gentle touch of the woman or man at the cosmetic counter? It is no accident that so many products and services are marketed as keys to enhancing relationships. Connection has become a commodity.

The microchip may have invited us into this new world, but it is *screens*—television, PC, laptop, monitor, and others—that we look at and, increasingly, interact with. The screen has become an unquestioned authority people rely on and trust. It has created a new language and new images for describing our world and our human relationships. What does it mean to "meet" someone now that the online world seems as authentic as the real one? How often do we confuse whether we heard something from a friend or on TV? Or has television *become* a friend? We may use screens ostensibly to entertain us or relay information, but they are doing much, much more. Screens are reorienting our sense of time and place. They are shifting our basic understanding of what it means to *relate*—on- and offline. They are becoming our clerks, our information booth attendants, and our personal assistants. It may be just a toy, but the Teletubby with a screen embedded in its fleshy middle is the perfect metaphor for our age.

Technology—particularly the cellular phone, the laptop, and the whole range of minicomputers and organizers—has made us all aware

of the increasing portability of our work and our home lives. But our romance with *mobility* has been in the works for more than a century. From the advent of rail travel to the lack of need for travel at all, we have been obsessed with making the world smaller and our reach longer and further. It feels exciting today to negotiate a deal from the beach, call from the street, work in your pajamas. Nearly anything is better if you can do it anywhere. But what effect does a world in which nothing *has* to be anywhere have on relationships? The hunger for speed and portability has opened up a whole raft of expectations for how people live—and constantly move—through the days. As a people, we are no longer oriented to terrain but to motion. What happens, then, when we need to stop?

In the midst of all this change, one would expect *home* to remain a point of stability. But it's not. Just as we are changing, our homes are changing, too. They are becoming places where we seek out privacy and seclusion, not just from those who live next door and down the street but from those who live under the same roof. Why do we need more bathrooms in our homes today? Is it by chance that the living room is no longer for living? And what of the new urban planning efforts to build and design communities with sidewalks and picket fences aimed at bringing back neighborly interactions? Can we, if we try hard enough, build community with wood and nails?

At the heart of the book is the chapter about *relations*. One of the most confusing aspects of life in the present is that the relationships we have long counted on are changing, morphing into hybrids and new forms. What does it mean anymore to be a friend? Neighbor? Parent? Child? Partner? What is a family? It seems to take more work to maintain relationships—and we seem to have less time to build on the in-person experiences that they require. At the same time, the rules are shifting. As a society, we may be more self-aware, but we're also more self-absorbed and less willing—in all our relationships—to compromise. We want to connect, but the dance of relating has grown convoluted. We don't trust. We feel vulnerable. We want to fall in love, but we worry it won't last. We hunger for intimacy but end up confused about what that means. Why do so many—from folks on TV talk shows to people standing in checkout lines or riding on the train—feel the need to spill their innermost secrets to strangers? Why do we ache to confess?

The personal issues facing *us* are not self-contained but color our communal relations and affect our social fabric. We talk a great deal

these days about "community" and describe ourselves as living in "a global village," but increasingly these labels seem to be more tricks of language than images that reflect the way things really are. People may, after all, be more closely linked electronically and more carefully tracked by demographers and marketers, but being plugged in, grouped, or identified with a mass of others is not the same as participating in a real community. Certainly we hunger to belong, but where can we find something meaningful to belong to? Why do we trust less and fear more? And what has happened to civility and common decency? It's not by chance that public disruptions have become commonplace: A man douses airline workers with coffee because he can't get an upgrade; the thirtieth anniversary of Woodstock ends with cars and vans set ablaze.

The challenges seem huge. In the final chapter, I offer some thoughts on how we might begin *bridging the gap.* The key is to realize that we *do* have choices. We are making them every day, and they are changing who we are. Already, we see ourselves growing more impatient, more covetous of privacy and seclusion, and less certain of how to reach out to others. In some ways, we are becoming less interesting people, more cloistered in our lifestyle enclaves and more easily satisfied with what we can possess than who we can be. It's time to take back our lives.

Human relationships are vital to our individual and collective happiness. We *need* to engage and connect. We *need* to be inconvenienced, dropped in on, surprised, and called upon. Of course it may be easier for parents to hire a professional baseball coach to polish their child's pitching technique, but it may be more valuable in the end to do it themselves. As a people, we must realize that the craze for perfection, the instinct to pay experts, and the eagerness to delegate the chores of our lives are not making living better—just thinner. As we reap what we feel are the benefits of this age of affluence, we are narrowing our experiences and cutting out interactions and opportunities for connection. It's time to reverse our collective retreat and to reinvolve ourselves in each other's lives. Certainly that's tough, especially when we are constantly presented with the tantalizing opportunity to do more while doing less. But there is good news: The Connection Gap is here not because we invited it but because we have not pushed it away. The challenge seems daunting, and yet the solution is straightforward: Only connect.

NOTES

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