

Online, In Touch, and Out

Pondering the [Dis]Connections in the Age of Social Media

In 1994, I had a computer with the very first version of Windows and soon after was an original subscriber to America Online. Remember that—when you had to pay by the hour for Internet service? It was like an expensive means of long distance, something else now practically archaic. I sat in front of that huge monitor, listening as my computer dialed up; there was a shrill sound as it connected to the vastness of the World Wide Web, the distinct voice announcing “You’ve got mail!” to my utter delight.

Back then it didn’t have such a fancy name as “social networking.” People found each other via chat rooms and bulletin board threads arranged by interest subjects that ran the gamut of possibilities.

At the time I was a new mother struggling to juggle a career, home, and baby and didn’t have much outside support; I turned to the Internet for help. I spent endless (costly) hours communicating with others grappling with similar issues, and together we tackled them message-by-message and thread-by-thread. In that space, I found comfort and friendship through the lines of text on a computer screen.

Technology has advanced a lot, but what hasn’t changed is how people continue to connect in cyberspace for multitudinous



by Kathryn Martini

reasons—and it’s easier now than it’s ever been. Today, we have constant connection at our fingertips. Our laptops, iPhones, and Blackberrys keep us perpetually linked to our email, text messages, Twitter and Facebook.

We know what our friends and family and Twitter follows are doing at almost every hour of the day; we know what their mood is, if they’ve had a fight with a friend, a bad dream, a death in the family or where they are going camping for the weekend.

I’ve heard many people in social, professional, academic and casual settings question this kind of connectivity and wonder if it has left us in a social place where we don’t talk to each other anymore. Have we regressed in our social skills to where we look at our iPhones and don’t have conversations?

Do we build only “virtual” relationships instead of actual, physical ones? Is the handwritten note dead, the phone call non-existent and the personal visit obsolete?

Or is it the opposite?

I have many friends on Facebook and Twitter. Some of these friends are people I know in real life. Some I went to high school or college with, some are professional contacts, and some are readers of my blog, or I of theirs. Some I only met through the Internet and have never known in person, or I’ve met online and with whom later become friends.

Whatever the relationship, I read every single day what is happening in their lives. I connect, I support and I care about them as individuals. I know when they get married, have babies and celebrate a birthday, and I take the time to congratulate them on their achievements.

We share information and we share our lives. We may do it in a “status update” or in 140 characters or less, but we share our lives. We interact with and embrace each other—even if it’s on a screen and even if it’s through written words, not spoken ones.

I’ve lived in my neighborhood for over three years. I’ve lived in my town for 13. I don’t know my neighbors’ birthdays and I don’t know if they’ve lost their job or have a death in the family. I certainly don’t know if they’re having a bad day or some profound thought they may be experiencing in the middle of the night.

I know the 600+ people on my Facebook and Twitter better than I know who lives across the street. Social media didn’t replace my relationships with my neighbors; I didn’t have them in the first place.

But how has Social Media changed the lives of others?

@MeaganKate on Twitter says, “It has given me every major opportunity I’ve had since I moved back to Portland. It’s given me friends. It’s given me confidence.”

Sarah Horner on Facebook says, “I feel part of a loving, supportive community and feel less isolated. My closest Facebook friends rally around each other, lift spirits, share ideas and reach out. It’s comforting.”

@zen_devil_duck says, “FB has allowed me to reconnect with old [high school] friends and stay in touch with other friends I’ve met through work, school or travels.” And Donna Shands-Island reconnected on Facebook with the woman who is now her wife.

No human connection? I don’t think so.

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