

# The Asian Reporter

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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## In the time of Zoom

Before the pandemic caused shutdowns, sheltering in place, and social distancing, I had never heard of Zoom, a video-conferencing application that apparently many professionals in the world were already using.

Now I spend several hours a week and sometimes meet daily with people on Zoom. At first, it was novel and fun as I learned how it differed from Skype, FaceTime, and Google Hangouts. Events I once attended or produced in person, such as moderating panels for organizations or theater shows, suddenly were possible to conduct with between 10 and 100 people virtually.

It's different talking to people primarily through my computer screen. I prepare for these meetings and events in my home office by putting on makeup, making sure there's decent lighting, and wearing a top I hadn't previously worn on a chat. Then I hit "start" much like one would for a live television show. It took some time to stop looking at myself to check my posture or framing on-screen. After a while, I couldn't stand looking at the boxes in the groupings that feel much like "The Brady Bunch" or "Hollywood Squares" — now I simply ignore it.

The first Zoom event I moderated was held in May. It was an affinity group conversation with about 25 Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). It was for Oregon Humanities and the topic was anti-AAPI COVID-19 racism. We commented about how emotional it was for us to be able to gather this way to talk. I still have similar feelings when I meet with friends and colleagues whom I haven't seen in person for a long time. I learned to interview guests on my radio program via Skype or FaceTime long ago. It's not the same as meeting in person. It never can be. But it is possible to connect meaningfully when I meet with people using Zoom.

Occasionally when I'm "Zoomed out," I ask if a good old-fashioned phone call is possible, which is sometimes more intimate and personal to me than Zoom. This type of communication allows me to walk around without being stuck in front of a monitor with people watching. It also allows me to fiddle around with un-done busywork around the house.

Since having to stay at home, I realized my anxiety and work stress were reduced. For 30 years,

I've performed most of my work within my home office, but I have also done a lot of public speaking and recorded field interviews in public for radio documentaries and my local arts show, Stage & Studio, on KBOO. I used to look forward to a lunch meeting — or a theatre rehearsal or stage play — that would get me out of the house. But until life changed so dramatically for all of us, I didn't grasp how much time and energy it took to be able to participate in these public engagements.

I've learned through the years that I'm both an introvert and an extrovert — an omnivert, if you will. Yes, I attend parties or get on a stage to perform, but it's not natural for me. I have to gear up for public events. And at times I experience mild panic attacks and anxiety about putting myself in the spotlight. "Busy weeks" used to be typical for me. Looking back, I think I got used to feeling tired. I wonder now if I can ever go back to that old schedule of constant multi-tasking and travel from place to place for my multiple jobs.

Nowadays, on the infrequent occasion when I actually go to a store or accompany my husband on an errand, I look at everyone as a potential virus carrier. It saddens me to not be able to chit-chat with people, but at the same time, I'm relieved I don't have to expend energy gearing up for in-person interactions or battling my unease with public speaking.

I've always been an anxious person and prone to worry. I think it's something I inherited from my mother and from an insecure childhood. Not having to deal with anxiety on a near-daily basis has been better for my health. I sleep better, have time to exercise every day, and my life is more simple. This is a profound realization for me — and an indicator that I may not return fully to what I'd been doing. Maybe this is the way I should have always lived.

When a vaccine is finally tested, approved, and distributed to the public, and we one day receive the "all clear" (that is the hope), we'll emerge profoundly changed. I cannot go back to the way I worked or the feelings of angst and exhaustion I used to tolerate. I suspect this may be true for others.

But for now, virtual conferencing and staying mostly at home seem to be the way things are in this time of Zoom.

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