

St. Jerome's University College
Betty G. Headley Award Submission
A Personal Essay: Together Apart
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Together Apart

What is love? An increase in oxytocin? An intense bond? Happiness? Human dependency? In the book *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* Jeanette Winterson argued that we measure love based on the degree of our losses: What did that person mean to us? What would we miss if they were gone? (Winterson, pg. 8) Though the trouble with this definition is that if love is understood by loss, then we can only appreciate love until it is gone. Consequently, you cannot ever predict when a person will be gone, and, therefore, we often underestimate the value of love before it is taken from us. Social isolation has taken love from all of us.

It was a quiet Saturday afternoon. It was one of those days that the sky was so cloudy it looked completely white; it was like the walls of the world were caving in, locking its people in to suffer in all its chaos. March 14th, 2020 was the day after my friends and I abruptly evacuated our lives at school to return back to be with our families. We somehow knew that we wouldn't be coming back, at least that's what the media was telling us, but deep down I didn't believe it. By March 16th, it was confirmed that we would not be returning back to school, so that day my friend and I got in a car to drive back to my school to pick up the remainder of my belongings. There wasn't a single person on the roads. The country roads spanned infinitely around the dried up farm fields, their arms opened up to invite people to travel on them: to see the world, but no one could adventure. It was frightening to see a world with over seven billion people in it so uninhabited. I was awestruck to see the world move so slowly.

On our journey we blasted our favourite tunes while singing along to the lyrics. We worked together to pack up my stuff; many hands make light work. We chatted, and talked,

and laughed, and shared, leaning on each other's vocalized words for support. We ate one last meal together: A&W burgers, onion rings and two ice cold root beers. Then, after unpacking all my boxes, I dropped her off at her house. It was easy, we planned to see each other the next day. It was a quick "See ya dude!" and then I pulled my car out of her driveway. Neither of us looked back, why would we?

The next day we were told we wouldn't be seeing each other for a while because of the government's social distance advisory. I can remember being shocked and appalled that isolation was ever a plausible solution to anything. Nonetheless, that day, I ignorantly drove away. Would looking back have made this any easier? No, whether you take one last look or two, the loss of someone's positive presence is always hard; it's just a matter of if you need to accept it once or twice. The COVID-19 pandemic assured us that we would not be seeing each other for a while, but the goodbye was different because it was not forever.

Saying goodbye is something I've had to do a lot in my lifetime. My first goodbye wasn't really a goodbye, because I was too young to understand that my Daddy's death meant that he was gone forever. Sometimes you don't say goodbye until the person has been gone for a while, yet, when I was old enough to say goodbye, it was too late because he had already left. I've also moved between cities twice in my life: once for when my mom got a new job, and once for when I left home to go to school. These moves were not as challenging because my losses equated to my gains: I was leaving the old and discovering the new. When you have nothing to replace what you are losing from saying goodbye, your emptiness is what makes goodbyes the hardest to overcome. For me, one of the hardest goodbyes in my life was saying goodbye to a person I truly loved. Relationships are unique and dynamic, and the combination between two people can never be replicated, and that's why their loss is so significant: it's a hole that will never be filled again. Sure, other people can bring you

happiness, and a sense of belonging, but it is the unique qualities about the person that can never be reproduced. Just think about the person that you love: the angle of their smile, the pitch of their voice, the texture of their skin, and the depth of their eyes; the distance between you and future lover is the only dimension that can be replicated.

On March 17th, 2020, the distance between the people I love was a screen, six feet, and an unknown number of days. It's now April 17th, 2020 and the distance between me and the people I love feels even bigger and more unknown. A couple of days ago I asked people on my Instagram, "What do you miss most about the people you can't see because of social isolation?" Among most of the answers, people just mentioned their "presence": they didn't have to be a specific person who did specific activities together, really, people just missed how people felt when they were with the people they had in mind. They used words such as, acceptance, affection, conversing, sharing, touch, warmth, comfort, smiles, laughter; a voice coming through your phone cannot provoke these sensations in the same way as the company of the person themselves.

Quickly after a few days of isolation, I realized that the real symptom of the COVID-19 pandemic is the deprivation of in-person human connection. The days all merge together so I can't pinpoint a day, but I was lying in my bed, it was nearly one in the afternoon. I was unable to get up, what was the point? I was warm under my blankets, but it wasn't the kind of warmth I was looking for. I scrolled through social media for hours, looking at "funny videos" and reading Memes, but I couldn't relate, I couldn't crack a smile. I finally got the motivation to get up. I sprawled my arms out, stretching them as far as they would go, and I could feel the walls of my bedroom pushing them back towards me. I was trapped. Trapped with my thoughts. Trapped with my sorrows. Trapped with my feelings.

Trapped with myself and no one else. All I wanted was someone to trap me in their arms; I just wanted a hug; video calls don't allow hugs.

Ever since we've been forced into isolation, the capabilities of technology have been glorified, but to me, it is like an infestation. "Buzz" "Buzz" "Buzz" "Buzz" "Buzz" "Buzz" all day long, it's like there's a little bee stuck in my phone pushing on the edges of the device to get out, but it's just the sound of the people in my life trying to reach out to me; the edges of my phone are crushing their wings. Some of the time I am so low on energy I just swat the notifications away. I don't always bother replying to the virtual versions of the people in my life. They are filtered, flawless, distant, and fake. I like their imperfections, I like when they are human. I like the space they consume, not the nothingness technology makes them to seem.

The effect of technology can be applied to a classical psychology study called the "Still Face Experiment" which was conducted by Edward Tronick in 1975. Throughout the experiment mothers were told to stare at their interaction with their child by engaging and responding to their baby's actions. Then, they were told to just look at the baby with a neutral expression. The study showed that babies were incredibly distressed throughout this "Still Face" period, and eventually, after attempting to engage their mothers and receiving no action they just looked away (Ellsworth et al. pg. 68). When I scroll through social media I experience the same effect. All the posts of people are just a series of frozen faces in time. They don't move. No matter how many likes you give them, they don't smile. No matter how many comments you leave, they don't speak. They are lifeless, timeless, humanless. A series of captured seconds omits the multitudes of reactions to life that humans possess: a human is more than a fake smile or neutral expression. Rather, humans are happy, sad, angry, excited, scared, determined: relatable. A second in time is too brief to capture a living being.

Nonetheless, this technology “has its affordances” because it helps our world move so fast: efficient and convenient is our life motto. It’s not that we’re lazy, everything just takes less time so we do more in a day. Yet, I’ve found that as we constantly push forward, we push the people in our lives away. This is because, we no longer take the time to acknowledge people in person, instead we express love by typing “I luv u”. Or, we express our sympathy by forwarding a “sticker” of two bears hugging, and to account for the laughter in real life we send a smiling emoji. Essentially, to accommodate for our lack of intimacy, we draft up a series of coded algorithms and call it connection, but it is perhaps now that human beings are the most unconnected ever than; as a result, publicity has diminished authenticity, simplicity has diminished unicity and electricity has increased egocentricity.

However, now that our world is forced to be isolated we are angry, depressed, lost, and weak. Some of us are doing everything we possibly can to interact: sitting in parking lots six feet away, saying “Hello!” through our neighbours back porch window, and driving to people’s houses to drop off gifts. Moreover, there’s the few of us that just cannot tolerate and accept this distance; they’re risking physical health for mental health, but can you blame them? It’s devastating but also empowering to see that, even though our culture’s media insists that we are better off without such crucial in-person connection, our loss of in-person connection has suggested that the best form connection is between one person and another.

Ironically, even amidst a pandemic, the media is spreading propaganda promoting the lie that we are better off without each other. Their messages insist that this timeout from each other is exactly what we need to produce, invent, reach our goals, recenter, look beautiful, and to understand ourselves. These messages suggest that since we are no longer “distracted” by the people in our lives, we can now reach our peak of human’s production. I tried to be productive. I’ve been exercising, going outside, taking up hobbies, writing, eating healthier,

reading and relaxing, yet, no matter what I do, it's never enough. I think this is because, as much as I am enticed by the idea of productivity and accomplishment, no matter what, I am too distracted by the absenceness in my life. If only we could understand that we need each other. If only we could understand that our species has progressed so much, because of each other, and, more importantly, our rate of productivity would only increase if we just stopped sharing posts and started sharing with each other. It's like Carl Rogers said in his book *A Way of Being*, "We think we listen, but very rarely do we listen with real understanding, true empathy. Yet listening, of this very special kind, is one of the most potent forces for change that I know." (Stangroom, pg. 116)

We cannot do it on our own, we just do not have enough resources: intellectually, physically, mentally or socio-economically. Without others, our personal battery runs low in power. Without the motivation and inspiration from the people in my life I am exhausted. Consequently, I find myself sleeping a lot more than I used to; my dreams are more vivid than my reality. When I'm asleep I can live through the summer I was supposed to experience. In my dreams my friends and I wander the streets with ice cream cones in our hands. In my dreams we drive up to the beach to see the sunset. In my dreams we lay by the pool soaking up the sun. In my dreams we have late night talks by the campfire. In my dreams, we laugh. In my dreams we converse. In my dreams we connect. In my reality spring will pass and summer will come, but my friends and I will confront the seasons alone.

Our 'life' is a singular noun to describe our existence, but perhaps it should be plural, because *our life* would be a completely different story if it truly was just *our life*, instead, our life is just a corner of a web of living beings and all their lives. Before social isolation, I used to think that I could be my own web, but a web is not a web with just one dot, the silk has to connect with *something* else for it to be deemed relevant. Nonetheless, I used to lie to myself

by saying that I didn't need people to thrive as a human being, or, at least I would be better off without people: people hurt, love hurts. Avoiding love was my final conclusion after years of heartbreak, betrayal, and the loss of those I loved. Yet, as Aristotle discovered thousands of years ago, one of humans' most distinguishing features is that we are "social animals" so our dependence on others is at the core of our existence (Myers et al., pg. 329). As a result, after a short period of time, I soon discovered that my fear of intimacy and trust could not hide my basic human needs; in other words, as much as your rational mind will pull you away from people, humanity pushes you towards other beings. Over the past month it has occurred to me that school is not the same without your colleagues, summer and spring are just seasons without friends, and life isn't living without other people. I guess Winterson was right when she said that love is measured by loss, but fortunately, this is a loss that we can regain: genuinely.

In conclusion, throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, to a certain degree, we humans have gotten what we finally wanted: we have all the time in the world, we get to stay home, and our social technologies are being used to their full capacity. However, by achieving these desires, our psychological needs as human beings have been compromised because love, self-disclosure and a sense of belonging, only lie within each other. Psychologists Erik Erikson once said, "Life doesn't make any sense without interdependence. We need each other and the sooner we learn that the better for us all." (Goleman) We need to start valuing one another.

All across the world, billions of people are staying away, distancing, and despite all of our differences, the one thing in common, the one aspect that makes us human, is that we need one another. This has been evident in the sense that, although a virus has pulled us all apart, our species keeps pushing towards each other in any way possible. Zoom lectures, two

hour phone calls, online videogames, and text messages are all ways that all of us humans are reaching out: it's how we're trying to fulfil our craving for human connection, but media cannot satisfy the mere presence of a neighbor or the hug of a friend. Do I wish I looked back? No, but I wished I gave her a hug goodbye, I wish I didn't play on my phone while we were together and I wish I would have taken the time to simply appreciate our coexistence, but fortunately, we will see each other again.

The day that we will see each other again is an indefinite amount of time from now, it could be days, weeks, months, maybe even a year, but when that time comes, we finally won't need to "stay home". On that day, we will open up our doors, and we will let people in, we won't keep them closed anymore. We will step outside and kindly greet everyone we pass by, we will wave to the rich and the poor, we will wave to people regardless of their race, regardless of their gender or sexual identity, regardless of their disability, regardless of if they are conservative or liberal, and regardless of their religion; we will greet humanity again. Then, we will walk, or rather run to our loved ones, our arms will be spread wide, our heart will open and we will embrace one another. We'll feel the warmth on our chests, the tingling in our arms, the safety in our soul, and the spark in our mind. After that, we will sit down together and talk, and laugh and see the in-person version of one another. And as we're talking we will reminisce, and cry; we will cry about our time apart and we will cry about our time when we were together but still apart. One month ago, we all said goodbye to one another but one day we'll be lucky enough to say hello again, and as we say goodbye to isolation, we'll say hello to our new definition of love; love shall never be forgotten together or apart.

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