

Communication and Quotidian Conversations: What We Lost During the Pandemic

In a universe glacially indifferent to the concerns of mortals, homes were traditionally sacred sanctuaries, impervious to the hardships of the real world. No matter what horrors occurred externally, we could always return to these bastions of innocence and count upon the comfort and kinship created within. One of the most flagrant violations of the COVID-19 pandemic was how it subverted this status quo. During these last agonizing years, millions have perished at the hands of this baleful virus, and hardly a person on Earth can claim that it has not impacted their life. Even those who did not personally lose loved ones still faced the peril of exposure every time they stepped outdoors if only to buy a gallon of milk. The rampant misinformation and fear-mongering that awaited us each time we turned on the news only compounded feelings of panic. In addition, we were all trapped within the suffocating confines of our own homes. Suddenly, the bastions that had protected us in the past transformed into rigid bastilles - with us being the prisoners. And, as in most imprisonments, this physical separation soon manifested into mental isolation.

Before the pandemic, my naive eighth-grade self severely underestimated how lonely quarantine would be. I had difficulty connecting with others my age back then, and I only really began to make friends in eighth grade. Before that, I used to make polite conversation with the people who sat next to me in classes, but those relationships were rather superficial. When it came time to pick teams during gym or find seats at the cafeteria, those classmates would stick with their cliques, and I would take whatever position was left. When I had a choice back then, I always favored my novels, dependable as they were, over capricious friends who I couldn't

count on even in the best of times, and spent my free time reading rather than interacting with others. In hindsight, I *was* somewhat lonely in middle school, but since I didn't know what I was missing out on, I felt satisfied with my life of relative solitude. Thus, when the pandemic hit, I thought I was well-prepared for living without human contact outside my family. How wrong I was!

I failed to realize then that the most meaningful part of the school day, even for me, the hermit I was, wasn't memorizing the stickings for playing "Rolling in the Deep" on the xylophone or discovering what a horizontal asymptote is. Instead, it was the series of impromptu interactions and casual conversations that spontaneously occur in a classroom: a random rickroll, a passionate debate about the distinctions between veg biryani and pulao, a humorous reenactment of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and the list goes on. These were what spiced up the monotony of everyday life and made it worth living. And in the cold awkwardness of virtual learning, they were the first things to be lost.

Though Google Meet and Zoom did provide some semblance of normality in the classroom during the chaos of the pandemic, the foreignness of speaking to a silent void of generic profile pictures prevented many students from engaging in class or seeking clarification when they were confused. Even the most devoted teachers struggled to persuade them to participate, especially when the tempting offerings of the Internet were only a click away. Lowered grades and self-esteem resulted for my fellow students and me, which, when combined with the lack of personal interaction in the virtual world, contributed to a general apathy towards education and life. A vicious cycle ensued, with self-loathing prompting feelings of despair and depression, then indifference when those failed, and further diminished outcomes.

One of the few things that could rouse me personally from this loop was Google Chat. Though it, unfortunately, also served as an excellent way to procrastinate doing unappealing assignments and sometimes retriggered the cycle, it simultaneously provided the regular human contact that I so desperately craved from the beginning of the pandemic. At the start of my first year of high school, all of the ninth-graders created a collective group chat and no matter what hour of the day, someone would be active on it. The topics discussed varied wildly, from frantic questions about an assignment due in an hour, to elaborately prepared pranks and random meme references. As minor as my classmates' messages would seem to an outsider, I clung to them as a drowning man would to broken pieces of wreckage in the sea of constant dejection that otherwise dominated my life during the pandemic (Chekhov, 1915, p. 6). For others, family and art and music served this purpose instead, but the same narrative unfolded in households across the country.

Though quarantine was able to corrupt the sanctity of our homes, turning them from places of relief from this harsh world to areas of seclusion, these coping mechanisms helped us keep our heads above the water. They restored our sense of connectedness and community, and through the escapism they allowed, we were able to survive the last few years in dignity. Now, as most lockdowns and other COVID-related restrictions are being lifted, we can finally emerge from the bastilles of solitude that had apprehended us for so long. To waste the painful lessons the past has taught us, though, would be folly. We ought not to forget the isolation of the pandemic and discount the exchanges of the everyday as banal or boring. Instead, we ought to cherish them as the meaningful hints of our humanity they are.

Works Cited

Chekhov, A. P. (1915). *The Bet, and Other Stories*. United States: J. W. Luce & Company.