

Electronic Intimacy

Friendships that were once maintained with the rudimentary technology of pen and paper are now reinforced 24/7 with the stroke of a few keys. A longtime letter writer reflects on what has been gained . . . and lost.

BY CHRISTINE ROSEN

WE MET AT MUSIC SCHOOL IN VERMONT IN THE 1980s. He was the golden boy, popular and cocksure. I wore thick glasses and played the bassoon. Somehow we formed a friendship, much to the annoyance of his string of romantic conquests and my friends, who disliked him. When August came we parted ways, close but not entirely connected. Two weeks later, I received my first letter from him. It was still broiling hot in Florida as I stood by the mailbox and tore open the envelope. My friend had gone to the trouble to find my address, and, by including his own on the back of the envelope, signaled his expectation that I should write back.

During the next few years we wrote regularly about all kinds of things—the music we were listening to, our parents' willful misunderstanding of our monumental teenage torments. A "pen pal" is what everyone called him. But that childish phrase always bothered me. It sounded too limited and casual, nothing like an expression of the way our letter writing felt. I went through the day filing away little experiences to replay later in a letter to him, and eagerly awaited his responses. Once he wrote "It's here! It's here!" on the back of an envelope containing a letter that was tardier

than usual. He understood perfectly my anticipation of his letters because he shared it.

Years passed, and our friendship deepened. We spoke on the telephone occasionally and reunited during one more summer at camp, but most of our communication occurred through letters. After hundreds of small revelations, we made large ones to each other—but only to each other. Our letters were always handwritten. Private. Mediated only by the technology of pen and paper and the postal service.

I don't recount this long-ago exchange to lament the lost era of letter writing. These days, I rarely put pen to paper. Instead, like most of us, I rely on e-mails or text messages, which I simultaneously embrace for their brilliant efficiency and loathe for the conformity they impose.

But I wonder how humans' chosen forms of communication alter our emotional experience of connection. Our feelings for each other haven't changed. We continue to seek validation and happiness and contact with others. We still flush with pleasure when we spy a particular person's e-mail in our in-box. But does the way we communicate with each other alter that experience significantly?

In preparing to write to someone, we prime the emotional pump. We think about how we feel; ideally,

CHRISTINE ROSEN is senior editor of *The New Atlantis*. Her book *The Extinction of Experience*, which explores how our lives are increasingly mediated by technology, will be published next year.

we reflect for a moment. The medium of pen and paper encourages this. E-mail and texting and interactions on Facebook encourage more efficient and instantaneous affirmation or rejection of our feelings. They also introduce something new—a form of social anxiety caused by the public nature of so many of our communications. A study published earlier this year in the journal *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* found that the more time and more “friends” people had on Facebook, the more likely they were to agree with the statement that others had better, happier lives than they did, and the less likely they were to believe that life is fair. Researchers have confirmed what many of us already know: Using social networking sites is pleasurable. But the pleasure of publicizing our connections on social networking sites is inextricably linked to the anxiety we experience about the meaning of those connections and what they reveal about the value of our offline lives.

We are living in an age of electronic intimacy. Its hallmark is instantaneous global communication inseparable from an ambient awareness that we are or should be connected to others. Scientists have documented that we experience a dopamine rush when we receive a new e-mail in our in-boxes. The flip side of

that rush is the vague social anxiety we feel when we see that we have no new messages. This is new emotional terrain.

Smartphones are the Geiger counters of this electronic intimacy. They are supremely efficient at delivering information, allowing us constantly to measure the levels of connection radiating throughout our social network. Such connection is a genuine pleasure. But is more of it better?

Surely, some of the disquiet about the revolution we are experiencing stems from the fact that a world that supports the marvel of instantaneous communication is also one in which we must decide who is and is not worthy of our communications—the average Facebook user has 130 “friends,” after all. The possibilities are endless—we can talk one on one, broadcast our feelings to a small group of friends, or weigh in as an anonymous Internet commentator and be heard by millions of strangers. Yet most of us have also suffered decision fatigue when faced with this proliferation of choices. Why this particular person, why now? We have always had to answer these questions, but never this often or on this scale.

Our new communications technologies have ful-



filled their promise to help us find people with whom we might form intimate relationships. But they have done so by giving us an overwhelming amount of choice and a copious amount of false hope. A recent meta-analysis of online dating published in the journal *Psychological Science in the Public Interest* found that people “become cognitively overwhelmed” when they search through hundreds of dating profiles. To cope, they must “objectify” the people they are sizing up for some sort of emotional connection. And despite the many claims online dating sites make about their “scientific” matching systems, the study found that none of the systems devised to predetermine compatibility reliably predicted the long-term success of relationships. Algorithms that purport to match the athletic cat lover with the poetry-reading outdoorsman might lead to a first date, but they are no better than blind luck at ensuring lasting love.

Even when we already have a thriving social network, it can be a challenge to keep up with everyone in it. In social networking’s most extreme form, we end up engaging in a kind of intimacy porn as we keep tabs on hundreds of our Facebook “friends,” follow the Twitter feeds of others, and respond to a daily deluge of e-mail. All the while, we are expected to keep our own electronic presence up to date. The extent of this transformation is evident in the marketing slogans of telecommunications companies. In the late 20th century, the Bell System urged customers to “reach out and touch someone.” The company’s advertisements assumed that we would prefer to see our loved ones face to face. If we couldn’t, the ads suggested, a conversation on the telephone was the next-best thing.

Contemporary telecommunications companies emphasize something fundamentally different: individual control over a communications empire premised on speed and efficiency. Sprint calls itself “The NOW Network” and promises that you can do business, talk to friends, and travel the globe, all “without limits”; AT&T urges us to “Rethink Possible.” In one recent advertisement, two men sit together in a coffee

shop conducting a business meeting by sending e-mails back and forth to each other instead of speaking.

Perhaps the current state of affairs explains our spasms of nostalgia for the days of written correspondence. Peruse the cards and paper for sale on Web sites such as Etsy, an online marketplace of handmade goods, and you could be forgiven for thinking that Brooklyn’s economy is built almost entirely on cheeky letterpress stationery produced out of people’s basements. The literary magazine *The Rumpus* has launched a service called Letters in the Mail; for \$5, subscribers are mailed an honest-to-god letter from a writer such as Dave Eggers, Stephen Elliott, or Elissa Schappel. “Think of it as

THE MORE “FRIENDS” people have on Facebook, a study found, the likelier they are to believe others have better, happier lives than they do.

the letters you used to get from your creative friends, before this whole Internet/e-mail thing,” the Web site urges. But since this is a simulacrum of a pen pal relationship, a helpful caveat is included: Return addresses are appended “at the author’s discretion.”

As much as I rely on modern forms of communication today, I don’t think I would have become friends with that boy at summer camp if we had used them. The pace of an e-mail or text exchange would have been too quick, and our weird bond would not have had time to emerge amid such public and impatient forms of communication as Facebook or Twitter. For both of us, there would have been too much risk involved in publicly acknowledging our affinity for each other. Once our friendship cohered, the last thing I wanted to do was “share” it by displaying it to the rest of the world.

But our new world of electronic intimacy paradoxically demands that we share those intimacies early and often. It turns the private bonds of friendship and connection into a mass spectator sport, a game in which we are all simultaneously players and viewers (and one in which Facebook and other companies profit richly from our participation). I wonder about the nearly eight

million American children age 12 and younger who are currently registered on Facebook (having easily evaded restrictions created in response to federal laws prohibiting data collection on children under 13). By the time they are 15, they will have cultivated dozens of online friends. How many of those connections will become what sociologists are starting to call “migratory friendships”—relationships that form online but eventually move to the physical world and face-to-face interaction?

I hope a great many will, even though moving beyond the efficiency and convenience of online friendship to real-world connection isn’t always easy. Of course, future generations will have the benefit of new communications technologies offering solutions to our problems connecting with each other. Flirting apps such as IFlirt4U and Axe Auto Romeo promise to outsource the awkwardness of first encounters to your smartphone. (The Axe app even lets you set the flirt level to “warm,” “hot,” or “steamy.”) And a recent patent application filed by Apple hints that the company is developing a program that would function as a form of iDating, scanning the data on your smartphone to locate like-minded people in your immediate area and suggesting ways to initiate conversations with them.

But these technologies seem aimed less at encouraging intimacy than manufacturing serendipity—an oxymoronic notion that has gained surprising traction in Silicon Valley. “You never know when you might come across a little planned serendipity,” the mobile geotagging company Foursquare says on its Web site. In an interview he gave in 2010 while he was still CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt claimed that serendipity “can be calculated now. We can actually produce it electronically.”

Manufactured serendipity suggests that Google’s algorithms and your smartphone’s sophisticated data collection systems are better life guides than your own intuition. Certainly they have their uses, but our reliance on them to map our emotional lives poses dangers, too. As psychologist Julia Frankenstein of the University of Freiburg has found, the use of global positioning system devices significantly erodes our capacity to create “mental maps,” a skill that brings with it countless cognitive benefits. Might texting and e-mailing and tweeting eventually have the same deleterious effect on, for instance, our ability to experience

longing? In a world of electronic intimacy, we elevate immediacy and availability, from which we glean a great deal of pleasure. But it is a pleasure tinged with pleonexia—we always want more.

Then again, longing is so last century. It doesn’t seem to suit an age of enhanced reality, when our devices cater to our need for immediate gratification and we describe ourselves—rather than our appliances—as “plugged in.” Nor does it suit a culture in the grips of what sociologists call “time famine.” No wonder we turn to time management gurus for advice on how to extract the most out of every minute of the day, and rely on social networking sites to keep our far-flung friends and family informed about our lives. Longing suggests languid hours for contemplation—a luxury for most people today. But perhaps we should see it instead as a necessity, an antidote to the excesses of a hectic, wired world. During the economic downturn, retailers revived their layaway policies; couldn’t we practice a kind of emotional layaway program? Like instant credit, instant friendship in the Facebook mold yields immediate rewards. But it also has hidden costs—costs that tend to accrue long after the pleasures of that first connection have faded.

We will adapt, as we always have done. But perhaps we should permit ourselves a small lament, after all, for what we are leaving behind. As Charles Swann observes in Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, “Even when one is no longer attached to things, it’s still something to have been attached to them.”

During college, my correspondence with my friend was sporadic. We visited each other a few times, and even made a hilariously doomed attempt at a romantic relationship from which we emerged even more grateful for each other’s friendship. We never made the transition to e-mail. Eventually we lost touch altogether.

That’s life—or at least that is what the life of a friendship used to be. A closed door usually stayed closed forever. No longer. Last year my sister tracked down my summer camp friend on Facebook. From what I could gather from his profile, he is a married schoolteacher who enjoys bass fishing in his spare time. This is the moment when I should recount how we reconnected on Facebook and reminisced about the old days. But we didn’t. I never contacted him. His Facebook profile assures me that he has lots of friends. He looks happy, as far as I can tell. I barely recognized him. ■