



Staying in Touch

Helen Broady

It started with my granddaughter. I was still living in New York but flew in for her birth. I cried when I had to go back home,

As she got older, we talked on the phone. Later on, we'd make up vignettes and role play them over the airwaves—me often on a work break, walking through noisy streets with sirens blaring in the background. Aiya patiently repeated what I didn't hear.

I promised that child that when I retired, I'd stay a lot longer than those one-week visits. Once said, I vowed to keep my word. I now live in San Diego and Aiya, now six, marvels that I'm actually here, in person.

After a year, I'm starting to feel at home, but still between two worlds. Never will I give up those hard-won friendships back home.

Being a pre-digital native, at first I wrote letters back home (friends laughed). Some loved it, a few actually responded by mail. One friend who's like a brother refuses to use a cell phone, so we only talk when he's at home. Time has clarified which relationships are the strongest.

More and more, families and close friends live far apart. "The U.S is too big," many have observed. The pandemic, of course, has made travel and face-to-face contact worrisome and has separated friends, kept parents from children, grandparents from grandchildren. But we are blessed with many ways to stay connected: phone calls, texts, social media, email, snail mail, Zoom, and more. Do more options mean better communication—greater clarity, understanding, stronger relationships?

Not so long ago, if a loved one was away, we could only write letters. A letter, which requires literacy, envelopes, stamps, and time, also requires complete attention and absorption by both reader and writer. For both, one must be present.

The original home phones, heavy, dial-up instruments, were stationary, often wall-mounted or on a desk. You couldn't do much more than listen or talk. In my childhood, long distance phone calls were expensive and sparingly used. Customers paid according to how long they spoke, and depended on time zones. A pay phone call was a dime, with additional nickels required every few minutes. When our calls were timed, we were sure to get our money's worth; we kept conversations to the point. Now that "talk is cheap," do we pay less attention, put less energy in what we say and how closely we listen?

Regardless of how we do it, people need to tell each other stories. Of the many things we see and hear, imagine and dream each day, we choose which are worth

repeating and with whom we want to share them.

I made a friend in San Diego just before the virus struck. He took the need for isolation very seriously; our only communication for five months was by text. When we finally ventured out, though, we felt a very strong connection. I attribute that to the kind of people we are—straightforward, open and trusting; we truly got to know each other during that time.

I must admit that at times I pay less than total attention on a cell phone. He, on the other hand, has made his closest and truest connections through Facebook (in contrast to my presumed superficiality of social media). Again, I blame this more on my wandering attention in general and credit his total focus on whatever he does.

So we must slog through this difficult year into the next, and figure out how to make and keep strong connections without eye contact or body language cues, experimenting and tweaking and adjusting as we change and grow. We will choose our favorite tool or tools, use one or two or many, finding what works best for what we want and need. The quality of the connection, until we return to a more “normal” life, I have observed, depends most on the commitment of the participants. The choice is ours.

