

## **The Inadvertent Catharsis of a Non-Automated Society**

*~How COVID-19 has exposed how our online culture has disconnected us from our immediate community, something we are in need of now more than ever*

**By Kayleigh Stack**

I may be waxing poetic for a moment in time that merely exists in my memory alone, however, I deeply believe there are crucial human exchanges we are missing out on in our overly automated world. Perhaps by chance, the self-isolation and social distancing protocols that are being implemented as a response to COVID-19 to flatten the curve might be a timely confrontational reality to collectively witness what has not been working. Turning down the volume of a culture's insidious to-do-list mentality to find who we have to reach out to during such times of despair, challenge, and collective growing pains, can uncomfortably shine a spotlight on our disconnected lives.

Born in 1987, I may have been one of the last generations to have been sent outside after school to play in the woods. I had a sandbox (now seen as highly unhygienic), a tree house, a swing set, and I think most crucial of all, a community of neighbors. Technology was limited to a phone with a cord, until it got upgraded to a cordless with a fancy caller ID. Our computer- what would now-a-days be considered an unseemly gigantic Macintosh (updated to the far leaner "Apple" model) limited us to computer games of two options- Solitaire & Minesweeper. Neither of those kept many glued to the screen longer than a couple rounds.

In addition to being outside and in activity more, we had exposure to the community. We had a relationship with our mailman and UPS delivery person. These were the times where, rather than the constant popping up of ads on a computer screen, which we can now easily block, there were in-person interfacing opportunities with door-to-door salesmen. Not being behind a screen or a cell phone, one didn't have an option to click the "unsubscribe" or "end call" button in someone's physical presence. In this, there were unofficial lessons on how to talk to an unexpected guest, a quiet education on the significance of unplanned, impromptu exchanges.

The door-to-door sales tactic is how I got my first set of encyclopedias and the way my mother purchased her highly desired Kirby vacuum cleaner. But it was more than simply an exchange of goods for monetary compensation. Oftentimes, it was a recognition in helping a community member out, acknowledging how one person's livelihood helped another. On a deeper level what all these exchanges offered were unplanned,

non-organized, organic conversations with other humans. Without the premeditation that our text-dominant world now cultivates, there was a compliance in the pleasure of the immediate moment.

Before a culture of Amazon, there was that inconvenience of store shopping. Groceries, clothing, school supplies, office odds-and-ends, and fitness options all found outside of the comforts of the domestic living unit. Unbeknownst to us at the time, these menial, brief exchanges one engaged in with the department store staff, the grocer, or a fitness instructor, served a deeper, crucial purpose of diffusing our aloneness. The importance of such encounters and exchanges have not been given the credit they deserved at the time. Now we are most certainly seeing a crisis unraveling of what it means to not have such seemingly irrelevant exchanges.

Many have no physical office or working quarters to go in-and-out of on a daily basis, as a result of the rise of remote employment. While incredibly convenient, this has also increased isolation. Ironically, with the now mandatory isolation laws instilled due to the coronavirus, we are finding ourselves under a microscope of the circumstance we created. We are plugged into people's stories but often don't unplug from our podcasts to wave to one another on the city street, something that we are more than ever in dire need of at the moment. As a response to this isolation in the work environment, co-working spaces have popped up as a solution to lessen the burden of our solitude- a solution to what was originally a remedy for the original disgruntled labor force, not realizing the social impacts that working, living, and creating without companionship entailed.

Another consequence of these "select your own" work environments means we now have overly curated social situations- choosing the people, places and cultures we want to be exposed to, not often being challenged by differing opinions and world views. The opportunities for growth that are received when exposed to others who may not share similar philosophies or motives to ours, are lost, perpetuating a culture of convenience and comfort, and perhaps increasing the otherization of that which is unfamiliar.

While I don't believe the issues are as binary as this reflection might suggest, and I acknowledge there has been a tremendous amount of collaboration and camaraderie built within our cloud-based softwares, I do believe our "culture of convenience" generated through automation, codification, and outsourcing of labor has caused the current byproduct of a community of people grappling with their desperate need for one another, and in the meantime engaging in self-medication remedies by way of caffeine,

alcohol, and pharmaceuticals to lessen the blow of the crippling feeling of disconnect. Pent up isolation has led us into passively accepting addiction.

Certainly, the opioid epidemic is a part of this, and one of the easier issues to draw upon as an example, but we would be turning a blind eye if we didn't also acknowledge our culture's alcoholism and caffeine abuse increasing over the years. Living and working among one another versus apart provides a built-in checks-and-balance system that is in critical need of being reestablished. We are at a moment where our global social organism is relearning how to regain our human connection in a vastly different & unprecedented terrain.

Historically, "emotional labor", the one who takes on the responsibility of the caretaking of others, has been relegated to house workers and that of a woman's job. Perhaps, this poignant phrase should be reconsidered as something that is the responsibility of all of us if we wish to be the healthier version of our species. This would demand many of our current societal structures (healthcare, government, education) to be reconfigured in a way that does not hold external, top-down systems accountable for every facet of the health and livelihoods of ourselves and neighbors. The emotional laborer seems to be outsourced onto our political infrastructure to a degree that it has become a scapegoat of blame for nearly everything that turns awry.

Perhaps this is a product of a culture traditionally steeped in gender binaries that represented the "non-emotional laborer", i.e. the traditional laborer bred by capitalism, as one who could be more efficient, who could be the "breadwinner" if only someone else took care of their health and wellbeing. Such stigma and displacement of our personal responsibilities for our overall psycho, social, and spiritual maintenance may in fact have cultivated the societal mentality that someone other than ourselves is responsible for taking care of us. Now, there is an essential need to bring this responsibility back home to ourselves, to care for one another, our planet and our economy, not only from the "ground up" but from the "community out".

Cafes- with their free internet for the remote workforce and unlimited caffeine options- have become a refuge for our current times. More than the coffee, it's the brief exchanges had with the barista- a non-verbal smile or a back-and-forth about the economy that snowballs and catches wind for others in line to join in communal engagement. It's these moments that lend an opportunity for our much needed sense of being in togetherness. Such seemingly small initiatives are in fact the collective steps taken to bearing the burden of the emotional laborer. It can no longer fall into the hands of one arena, one person, one gender, one career, one system, but rather we must all

lend as many hands as possible, at as many moments throughout our day to restitch that which has been rapidly tearing at the seams.

The inadvertent cathartic releases that a less automated community provided with the traditional everyday exposure to a diverse set of people has shifted now. This shift is demanding us to build muscles in ways that perhaps were not requested of us before, or more appropriately put, are in fact innate instincts that we have forgotten in our rapid pace, plugged in and hooked up times.

It's high-time to reconnect. If listening to a podcast, the news, or an audiobook while walking down the street, let's take a moment to unplug and greet other passers-by either with a smile, casual commentary on the weather, or perhaps, now with COVID-19, if you are allowed out in your region, get creative and cheer someone up, while continuing to stand six-feet apart. Maybe share a sense of humor regarding these unprecedented times. It's not funny, I know, however, we do need momentary releases in the presence of one another to laugh and remind ourselves of the everpresent joy that courses through our bodies, veins and souls.

We need human contact more than we need water most days. In that, perhaps the biggest social movement that we can participate in at the moment is a candid smile to another face, as an acknowledgement of *"Hey I see you and we are all in this together"*.

Social theorist and professor Judith Butler recently commented in an [interview](#) for The New Yorker<sup>1</sup>,

[That] model of the individual is comic, in a way, but also lethal. The goal is to overcome the formative and dependent stages of life to emerge, separate, and individuate—and then you become this self-standing individual. That's a translation from German. They say *selbstständig*, implying that you stand on your own. But who actually stands on their own? We are all, if we stand, supported by any number of things.....

If we were to rethink ourselves as social creatures who are fundamentally dependent upon one another—and there's no shame, no humiliation, no "feminization" in that—I think that we would treat each other differently, because our very conception of self would not be defined by individual self-interest.

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<sup>1</sup> Gessen, Masha. "Judith Butler Wants Us to Reshape Our Rage." *The New Yorker*, The New Yorker, 9 Feb. 2020, [www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/judith-butler-wants-us-to-reshape-our-rage](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/judith-butler-wants-us-to-reshape-our-rage).

Perhaps COVID-19 can be a reminder of this essential ingredient to our aliveness, so that when the bans are lifted, and we are released from our quarantine, we can re-traverse our landscapes with a renewed practice of being in a deeper, more realized relationship with the interconnectivity of you, me and the togetherness in which we inherently exist.