

The silences between things

Kimberley Lovato wonders what price we're paying for all those new tools that keep us connected

... WHEN IT COMES TO BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS, THERE IS NO SUBSTITUTE FOR BEING PRESENT ...

The other day at the breakfast table, my husband and I were discussing the approaching birthday of our nephew.

"We haven't seen him in a long time," I said. "He must be so big now."

My husband looked at me strangely and replied, "But we just saw him last summer."

After a few head scratches and date backtracking we deduced that yes, we had seen our nephew. He was laughing, kicking a soccer ball around his living room, wearing his favorite team's jersey – on Skype.

Twitter, Instagram, email, Tumblr, YouTube, Vine, LinkedIn – this laundry list of communication tools is a part of the world we live in. Like many of us have, I've borne witness to new babies, graduations, weddings, vacations, pet grooming, food plating, and tattoo



inkings, each delivered to my screen frame by frame; and each giving me the falsely satisfying illusion that I'm a part of the lives flashing before me.

That is until I realized, like my husband and I did, that I wasn't a part of any of it. I was just plugged into it.

Don't get me wrong. I love the wonderful and efficient methods people use to stay in touch, both personally and professionally. I rely on it. From keeping tabs on children who have gone off to university to remote job interviewing, and from to journalists filing stories from around the world to online banking, technology has made daily life easier for most of us, and has made relationship maintenance possible, where as without them, these relationships would have fizzled into memory (not always a bad thing).

But with the planet more interconnected than ever before, has it come at a price? In spite of all these tools that make our lives 'simpler,'

they've also raised our anxiety levels and distanced us from the very people we want to connect with. These tools have enabled us to work longer hours, 'check in' while on vacation, and who hasn't sent a quick birthday message on Facebook in place of taking the time to sign and mail a card, like we did in the good old days?

I read a recent article that cited a Cambridge University study analyzing the effects of communication technology on relationships. The conclusion: Technology can both improve and hinder relationships. Well, duh.

A subtle nuance, however, illuminated something. Participants universally agreed that communication technologies such as Skype, email, and Facebook improved relationships with friends and family faraway, yet had a negative impact on relationships closer to home, especially with immediate family.

Why? Basically because these computers,

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phones, tablets, and all the accoutrements they come with, have also become members of our families. They do our banking and our shopping; they provide our entertainment and music; they manage our calendars and our birthdays. And like family members do – they wrestle for our attention, pulling us from other important things.

This got me thinking about my breakfast table again. It's the communication hub of our house, and it's where we discuss anything from weekend plans to doctors' appointments, and most recently my teenage daughter's grades. Determining the 80+ text messages she got a night were the reason for their slip, we'd taken her phone away during the school week. Her grades steadily improved and by the end of the term, we told her she could have her phone back. To our surprise, and I think hers, she didn't want it.

"I got so much more studying done without it," she said.

A lesson learned? Check one win for mom and dad in the parenting department.

Of course there's not one sole solution, and every relationship is different. The reality is that

technology is here to stay, which is a good thing, I think. But how we use it needs to evolve as fast as the tools arriving on our laptops. Prolific travel writer and author Pico Iyer recently said in an interview that he "has to find things that prose can do, that no iPhone can do better. This usually has to do with memory, reflection, and the silences between things".

I think there's something to that. Communications tools are great for what they are intended. To keep in touch, share information, research, submit work, check bank balances, etc. But when it comes to building relationships, there is no substitute for being present.

To create memories, to reflect, to study the silence between things, you need to unplug and reconnect with your human side; the one that shares a glass of champagne at that friend's wedding; the one that holds the new baby; and the one that kicks the soccer ball back to the nephew you haven't seen in four years.

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