



# **FAMILIAR STRANGERS**

by REBECCA LI







*For my parents - the four people who have most influenced the way I move through the world.*





# CONTENTS

ABSTRACT (TL;DR).....	xi
TAKE A CHANCE ON ME .....	001
THANK YOU, CAPTAIN.....	009
ON THE TABLE (SOCIAL OBJECTS) .....	012
PROJECT: SOCIAL SURFACES.....	017
FORMS OF DIALOGUE .....	031
PROJECT: LIGHT REMINDERS.....	035
WHEN DO YOU FEEL CONNECTED? .....	047
CONTINUED: CONVERSATIONS.....	051
PROJECT: REMY.....	064
PROJECT: TELL ME MORE.....	073
THE CONDITIONS FOR LISTENING .....	097
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	102



## **ABSTRACT (TL;DR)**

I am interested in dialogues of connection – from our ongoing internal ramblings, to the moments where strangers do not feel like strangers, to the conversations that wander late into the night. Our connections are the foundations of the human experience; they give weight to the every-day and ground us in time and place.

Today, our digital devices have become invaluable tools for bringing people together. No matter where we find our physical selves, we have the ability to tap into our digital worlds and access our most intimate social circles. But our seemingly insatiable desire for constant communication often alters the content of our conversations, encouraging rapid exchanges centered around control, character count, and speed.

Contemporary sociologists worry that the disjunctive communication style of texts, Tweets, and Snaps is damaging our ability to engage in focused thought and conversation - dialogues critical to the development of our relationships. If our relationships are central to the human experience, we owe it to ourselves to explore the ways in which our daily interactions can expand beyond the simple exchange of words.

Even in a digital age, there is an indisputable link between our social interactions and the physical spaces in which these interactions occur. Whether in our homes, restaurants, or on the streets, my work explores how objects within these environments can invite us to engage in internal and external dialogues. After all, our digital devices are just tools. And if it is a surface for social interaction, a printed memory, or a collection of objects that contain our own histories, we should not forget that the world around us contains a richness of other tools that can aid us in the pursuit of connection.

*Keywords: Mobile relations, public engagement, connection, empathy, conversation, listening, technology*



That moment when you're close in proximity to people & they still don't talk to you. That moment when you realize no matter how many times you try to articulate it, people will not understand you. We have little differences, but the sum of them seems huge. My words mean different things to me than they do to you. That moment when you take a deep breath & decide not to share. Explaining all of this would be too tedious. That moment when the social pressures to remain composed & bubbly & nice are too much and you just want to run off into the mountains. Or crawl into bed for a weekend & talk to no one. That moment when you stop trying to make yourself heard. That weird moment when a person feels like home. I don't care where we meet, just that we do. That weird moment when you don't need to go through small talk to fall into a conversation. Or when you realize all your conversations for the day have been small talk. That moment you miss someone so much you

want to cry. That moment you realize you have emotions. Or when you realize you can turn your emotions off if you will. Or when you have so much to share & say, but actually getting it out to be heard just seems like too much work. See above. That moment when someone goes from stranger to friend. Or from friend to family. Or when they go from feeling like family back to feeling like strangers. Or to just memories. That moment when you realize no one will ever be in the place you want them. That the people you love will always be scattered around the world.

10.20.2016

““”

Creation seems to come out of imperfection. It seems to come out of a striving and a frustration. And this is where I think language came from. I mean, it came from our desire to transcend our isolation and have some sort of connection with one another. And it had to be easy when it was just simple survival. Like, you know, “water.” We came up with a sound for that. Or “Saber-toothed tiger right behind you.” We came up with a sound for that.

But when it gets really interesting, I think, is when we use that same system of symbols to communicate all the abstract and intangible things that we’re experiencing. What is, like, frustration? Or what is anger or love? When I say “love,” the sound comes out of my mouth and it hits the other person’s ear, travels through this Byzantine conduit in their brain, you know, through their memories of love or lack of love, and they register what I’m saying and they say yes, they understand.

## **BUT HOW DO I KNOW THEY UNDERSTAND?**

Because words are inert. They’re just symbols. They’re dead, you know? And so much of our experience is intangible. So much of what we perceive cannot be expressed. It’s unspeakable. And yet, you know, when we communicate with one another, and we feel that we’ve connected, and we think that we’re understood, I think we have a feeling of almost spiritual communion.

And that feeling might be transient, but I think it’s what we live for.

– *Waking Life (Film)*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Richard Linklater. *Waking Life*. Online Video. Directed by Richard Linklater. Los Angeles: Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2001. *Waking Life* is an animated film where the protagonist moves through his own dream world investigating the meanings of the universe. *What is the meaning of life?* This scene begins at 13:12 and was an early inspiration for my thesis investigation.

**FOMO**, n. FO·MO /fo mo/

*noun, informal, early 21st century abbreviation of ‘fear of missing out.’*

Anxiety that an exciting or interesting event may currently be happening elsewhere. Often induced by material seen on social media.<sup>2</sup>

**ALL**, n. ALL /ɔl/

*noun, informal, early 21st century abbreviation of ‘actually living life’\**

Depressingly rare phenomena that occurs when one is fully engaged with the present moment, often associated with (but not limited to) the act of putting down one’s phone or device and engaging with the people, places, and things within one’s physical proximity. Related: IRL, abbreviation of ‘in real life.’

*\*Obscure AF. Not to be confused with ‘all,’ the predeterminer & pronoun used to refer to the whole quantity or extent of a particular group or thing.*

<sup>2</sup> ‘Social Media’ generally refers to internet-based applications that allow interaction through user-generated content. Examples: Facebook, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, Line, WeChat, Tumblr, Instagram, Twitter, Baidu Tieba, Pinterest, LinkedIn, Gab, Google+, Google Hangout, Gchat, YouTube, Viber, Snapchat, Weibo, Skype, Flickr, Jst, OurPlan, MyFitnessPal, DeviantArt, This., Vine, CarePages, Reddit, Tencent QQ, QZone, Vkontakte (VK), Telegram, Taringa, Foursquare, Renren, Tagged, MySpace, StumbleUpon, The-Dots, Kiwi Box, Skyrock, Snapfish, ReverbNation, Flixster, Cafemom, Ravelry, Nextdoor, Wayn, Cellufun, Classmates, MyHeritage, Xing, Ask.fm, Meetup





<sup>3</sup> Edward Hopper, *Sunlight in a Cafeteria*, 1958, oil on canvas, 40 3/16 in. x 60 1/8 in., Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn.



# TAKE A CHANCE ON ME

Back in 2002, sociologist Leopoldina Fortunati published a paper on the mobile phone in *Information, Communication & Society*, a journal dedicated to examining the “cultural impact of the emerging properties of the new information and communications technologies.”<sup>4</sup> In her paper, Fortunati examines the impact of the mobile phone on our interpersonal relationships. Though this article was published fifteen years ago, many of the themes she discusses — an expansion of space and time as a result of ‘nomadic intimacy,’ a focus on choice in social productivity, and a decline in empathetic capacity — are still at the forefront of our efforts to understand connection in a digital age.<sup>5</sup>

Our understanding of space and time have shifted alongside the development of more sophisticated ways to keep in contact. The ubiquity of the mobile phone enables us to keep in near constant communication with our chosen social circles. We split our attention between our presence in physical

<sup>4</sup> Leopoldina Fortunati. “The Mobile Phone: Towards New Categories and Social Relations,” *Information, Communication, & Society*, Vol 5, Issue 4 (December 2002): 513 – 528.

<sup>5</sup> Fortunati, “The Mobile Phone: Towards New Categories and Social Relations,” 515 – 516. In this article, Fortunati points out that the mobile device has allowed us to expand our social spaces in an almost infinite way while also allowing us to ‘recapture’ the loss of linear time by filling unstructured gaps and pauses in our schedules with communicative time in our devices. This chosen interaction results in a nomadic intimacy where we can digitally engage in “the private space of interpersonal relationships” even while we physically share the public space of “streets, stations, means of transport,” etc. However, constantly remaining in our own intimate social circles instead of engaging with the public and those in our immediate vicinity puts us at risk of remaining in our own closed discourse. Without exposure to the new (or oppositional), people lose both their ability to negotiate challenging conversations as well as their ability to empathize with others and recognize similarities when encountering unexpected ideas.

space, and a virtual presence in digital space. Consequently, “the public space is no longer covered in full, lived in all its aspects...but is kept in the background of an itinerant cellular ‘intimacy’.”<sup>6</sup> We are accustomed to this power of choice — to being in control of our social interactions. Unsurprisingly, when presented with the choice of an unlimited number of interactions available at our fingertips, “chance socialness” (which may develop in the physical world) loses its appeal. When we’re faced with unexpected down time, how often do we reach for our phones first?

We have taken all of these gaps in our days and filled them, but to what end? In eliminating ‘wasted’ time, we are dividing our presence always, flitting between the physical world and our many virtual ones in search of the ‘best’ connection. We have trained ourselves to fill every gap in our days with chosen interactions, expecting that these short bursts of conversation will fulfill our needs for intimacy and connection, forgetting that sometimes we must embrace the unpredictable nature of conversation in order to reach those feelings.

Fortunati’s paper is still used to shape discussions on technology and society among students at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. I first heard about her work through a conversation with my younger brother, Sam.

Sam is a college junior majoring in Communications and Strategic Journalism, home for the Thanksgiving holiday. When he introduces me to Fortunati’s paper, we are standing outside of our mother’s home, waiting for the rest of the family to get ready to leave. I have just interrupted his interaction with his phone by asking him whether he thought the presence of the device was ever detrimental to his relationships. Without ever putting his phone away, Sam tells me about his studies at school and his skepticism around the benefits of Fortunati’s ‘chance socialness.’

*Sure, phones impact my relationships, but I think it’s good. When I’m doing something important, like I’m out with my girlfriend, I can put it away if I want. But I’m not doing anything important right now...I’m just waiting for [our family] to get ready. So I have all these other things I can check in on.*

Sam shows me several social phone applications that allow him to keep in touch with his friends, he swipes to show me the news article he had been reading before I interrupted, he then makes a sweeping gesture with his free hand, implying that through his phone, the options are limitless.

<sup>6</sup> Fortunati, “The Mobile Phone: Towards New Categories and Social Relations,” 516.

This itinerant, nomadic intimacy is certainly a blessing in many situations, allowing us to keep in contact with our loved ones as they spread around the world. The mobile allows Sam to reclaim the time when he's 'just waiting,' time that might otherwise be perceived as wasted. In this way, Fortunati believes that the ubiquitous mobile device (and associated social shifts) encourages all of us "to single out the pauses in [our] actions, the pores, the cracks in time" and use them instead for chosen connective experiences.<sup>7</sup> A few months later, my brother described his own experience of nomadic intimacy through his phone in more detail.

*When you're in situations without people that you know, you're on your phone. And especially with people my age, we're always on our phones no matter where we are. Like, if you walk into the elevator and there's two other people there, it's just a natural reaction to take out your phone and look at it instead of saying something to that person. So if a person is in a strange place with no reason to interact, like with a club or student organization, then people don't interact. Or at least I don't interact. I just stay on my phone.*

But of course, if I hadn't disrupted my brother's chosen experience with his phone when we were waiting for our family, our conversation about Fortunati would have never occurred. A few months later, after his class had concluded, Sam still believes that chance conversation seems unnecessary. Instead, his mobile phone helps him navigate his chosen social spaces – digital and physical – with seamless ease. Thanks to the devices in his hand, he is always poised to tap into his expansive social network.

*You don't feel the need to talk to strangers. And I don't know if there was ever a time when you did talk to that person sitting on the bus next to you. But you know, now we just all go on our phones.*

However, constantly tapping into choice socialness doesn't only eliminate the opportunities you might have with a greater public (e.g. Sam's references to the person next to you on a bus or elevator). It also limits the ways we develop our relationships. Maria, a senior at Brown University, is trying to be more conscious about her phone usage. Sometimes, she finds it hard to interact with her friends when they don't also make the effort to put their devices away. When everyone else is on their phones, Maria abandons her efforts to remain present and takes her phone back out.

*Isn't it funny, we're with our friends, but we're all on our phones. We're always Snapping and showing the friends that we're not with what we're doing with the friends we are with.*

<sup>7</sup> Fortunati, "The Mobile Phone: Towards New Categories and Social Relations," 517.

*Like, 'we're having so much fun with these friends!' but then when we go hang out with those friends, we're Snapping back to these friends...We're never really with the people that we're with.*

This disjunctive communication style—where one is jumping back and forth between social worlds and messaging applications—breaks up the natural flow of conversation. It keeps us from diving deeper and instead encourages rapid back and forth of facts, images, or ten second video. This is what Fortunati classifies as “compartment conversation, a typical communicative mode in which nothing very important is said.” This type of conversation focuses on the exchange of information, “this and that of no importance,” rather than the examination of topics.<sup>8</sup> Our seemingly insatiable desire for constant communication affects our ability to engage in focused thought and conversation—dialogues critical to the development of our relationships.<sup>9</sup>

Have we come to accept quantity over quality, or to think of quantity as an indicator of a desirable social productivity? Contemporary sociologists observe that we “communicate incessantly but are afraid of face-to-face conversations; [we] worry, often nostalgically, that [we’re] missing out on something fundamental.”<sup>10</sup> Somehow our constant pursuit of connection has resulted in an acute sense of loneliness and anxiety.<sup>11</sup>

Entire days can pass, filled with strange disconnects—like that moment when you’re close in proximity to people, but everyone is staring at their phones; or that moment when you realize all of your conversations for the day have been small talk. If our relationships are central to the human experience, perhaps we should reconsider our actions and invest in other methods of deepening our bonds, rather than constantly stretching them across virtual space, before we forget why we were searching for connection in the first place.

<sup>8</sup> When we engage in disjunctive communication in order to remain in constant contact.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Franzen. “Sherry Turkle’s ‘Reclaiming Conversation.’” The New York Times Magazine, September 28, 2015. The New York Times. Web. Accessed 10 Dec 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Franzen. “Sherry Turkle’s ‘Reclaiming Conversation.’”

<sup>11</sup> Brené Brown. “The Power of Vulnerability,” TED Talk, TEDxHouston, Houston, TX, June 2010.







**Captain Obvious**, n. cap·tain ob·vi·ous /kap ten əb vē əs/

*noun, informal. Typically derogatory.*

Name for a person who makes a statement that is easily perceived or self-evident. Not an actual captain who is the person in command (e.g. of a ship).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Sotirical dictionary definition.



# THANK YOU, CAPTAIN

Dear Reader,

It goes without saying (though I'm about to say it anyways), that our phones and other digital devices are invaluable tools for connection.

Of course, technology has always affected our abilities to connect. From a system of sounds (and later symbols) that constitute language, to a wave that could transmit those same sounds across countries and oceans, technological advances change our ability to communicate with and relate to one another. *Creation seems to come out of imperfection.*<sup>15</sup> Our desire for connection, for expanding our mutual understandings, and “transcending isolation” is at the heart of many of our developments. It is our connections with each other that ground us in time and place, that give our lives weight and meaning.<sup>16</sup>

So it seems clear: technology has a profound impact on our ability to connect. However, it is nearly impossible for me to recognize the connecting capabilities of the device without also acknowledging the behaviors that had developed alongside our technologies — that of constant connection *through a device*, even in the physical presence of others. For better or worse, we now commonly move through

<sup>15</sup> Linklater. *Waking Life*.

<sup>16</sup> In one scene from *Waking Life* (see previous quote on page xv), the characters examine how misunderstandings, mis-communications, shortcomings, and imperfections in our communications drive development of language.

our days by dividing our attentions between our physical and digital worlds. To this, skeptic ‘reactionaries’ push back, claiming that our devices are destroying our social interactions at home, at work, and at school.<sup>17</sup> But of course, for every skeptic there is an enthusiastic ‘revolutionary’ to remind us that our devices also have powerful connecting capabilities — they allow us to return to our most intimate relationships regardless of our physical location or proximity to our loved ones.<sup>18</sup>

One could argue that the reactionary-revolutionary binary surrounding the mobile phone echoes the feelings of the generations before us who experienced the birth of the personal computer, television, public radio, newspapers, etc. Every new technology has been accompanied by a shift in our social behaviors and a push-back against that shift until a balance is reached (or a new controversial behavior emerges).

So what, if anything, has changed?

Sherry Turkle is a social psychologist and a professor at MIT who examines the ways technology is impacting our social space. In 2012, her TED talk, “Connected, but Alone?” was a piercing examination of how our communicative styles have changed with the rise of digital technology. Today’s mobile technologies “are so psychologically powerful that they don’t only change what we do, they change who we are.”<sup>19</sup> Our devices, in the form of cell phones, laptops, tablets, or even speakers embedded with digital assistants, are present at nearly every business meeting, coffee date, family vacation, and evening meal. Our behaviors have shifted rapidly to accommodate technological progress, resulting in “a new way of being alone together.”<sup>20,21</sup> I look around and see friends and families sitting together for meals with their heads down, all absorbed in their phones. We accept — even expect — that the people around us are constantly dividing their attention between physical and digital spaces.

<sup>17</sup> Mark Oppenheimer. “Technology Is Not Driving Us Apart After All.” *The New York Times Magazine*, January 17, 2014. New York Times. Web. Accessed April 14, 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Oppenheimer. “Technology Is Not Driving Us Apart After All.”

<sup>19</sup> Sherry Turkle. “Connected, But Alone?” TED Talk, TED2012, TED, Feb 2012.

<sup>20</sup> Sherry Turkle. “The Flight From Conversation.” *The New York Times Magazine*, April 21, 2012. The New York Times. Web. Accessed May 10, 2017.

<sup>21</sup> Oppenheimer. “Technology Is Not Driving Us Apart After All.” According to Oppenheimer, Turkle and her peers are working on the topics central to contemporary sociology today. These researchers question whether modern society is making us more lonely and actually “inhibiting human interaction.”

When Turkle published her second book on digital culture in 2015, *Reclaiming Conversation* quickly became a New York Times bestseller. The universal quality of her work is evident in the ease with which it bleeds across disciplines.<sup>22</sup> *Reclaiming Conversation* contains the results of hundreds of hours of interviews and conversation over five years of research – it is a call to action for us all, a reminder that our devices, the very tools meant to aid us in our pursuit of connection, also have the ability to drive us apart.<sup>23, 24</sup>

Brené Brown is a university professor and professional ‘researcher-storyteller,’ who shares similar concerns with Turkle. Her own extensive interview-based research has a sobering conclusion: even as the tools available have become more and more advanced, we find ourselves feeling more anxious and isolated than ever.<sup>25</sup> Brown’s three New York Times bestsellers focus on communicating her findings on vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame - what she calls the foundations of connection.<sup>26</sup> Six years after it was filmed, Brené Brown’s TED talk, *The Power of Vulnerability*, has garnered over 28 million views.<sup>27</sup> It has been subtitled in 52 languages. I have listened to it at least a dozen times.

Even with the rising sophistication of our technological tools, *we are still searching for ways to better connect.*

Thank you,

*captain obvious*

<sup>22</sup> Sherry Turkle’s work has come up during my conversations with conversations with computer science professors, psychologists, journalists, artists, designers, etc.

<sup>23</sup> Sherry Turkle. *Reclaiming Conversation*. New York: Basic Books, 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Sherry Turkle. *Alone Together*. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Brown. “The Power of Vulnerability.”

<sup>26</sup> Brené Brown. “About.” [BreneBrown.com](http://BreneBrown.com). Web. Accessed May 11, 2017.

<sup>27</sup> Brown. “The Power of Vulnerability.”

## ON THE TABLE (SOCIAL OBJECTS)

Through interviews and contextual observation, I learned that while we recognize ways to improve our connections (committing our undivided attention, asking better questions, putting down our phones), we struggle with committing to these behaviors in real life.

Museums often use what they call 'social objects' to facilitate and encourage person-to-person interactions. These objects allow people to focus on a third party (or object) rather than each other, making interpersonal engagement more comfortable. Artists and designers like Jon Rubin (*Conflict Kitchen*) and Candy Chang (*Before I Die*), have used the same approach to invite open and honest engagement in their communities.<sup>28,29</sup> Social objects can also be seen in our daily lives - things like sporting events, board games, and even pets all have the potential to bring people together while taking the pressure off direct engagement.

<sup>28</sup> Jon Rubin, *Conflict Kitchen*, 2010-Present, Restaurant, Pittsburgh, Penn. The *Conflict Kitchen* restaurant aims to encourage public engagement and discourse with the, "culture, politics, and issues at stake" for the countries and regions with which the United States is in conflict.

<sup>29</sup> Candy Chang, *Before I Die*, 2011-Present, Various, Worldwide. *Before I Die* began as a simple prompt on a blank, abandoned wall. The first wall of "Before I die I want to \_\_\_\_" prompts inspired members of a single New Orleans neighborhood to connect with each other in deeply personal, uplifting, and vulnerable ways. Over 2,000 *Before I Die* walls have now invited participation in 70 countries.

So often, like Sam, we reach for our phones to counter the uncertainty or potential for boredom that accompanies the natural flow of focused conversation. When dining, I often observe that phones end up on the surface of the table or placed in our laps. In more extreme cases, I see people share entire meals where they're each absorbed in their devices. They're physically together but effectively alone. We need the distraction and reassurance of our devices, even though we know it is not conducive to developing conversation. Whether placed face-up, face-down, or in our laps, studies have shown that even the presence of a cell phone can be detrimental to our relationships.<sup>30</sup>

Restaurants like The Grange in Providence, Rhode Island are finding ways to encourage its community to fully invest in each other. The Grange hosts Mindful Mondays, where patrons check their phones at the door in exchange for a discount on their bill. Another Providence favorite, Seven Stars Bakery, chooses not to offer Wi-Fi at any of its locations, making the café a place for community members to connect with each other. On a national level, Common Sense Media's "Device Free Dinners" mentality has become a social media movement endorsed by the American Academy of Pediatrics.<sup>31</sup>

These organizations are not saying that devices are always harmful – certainly, sharing YouTube videos, new music, or photos from the day, can all be connective experiences. However, complementing those interactions in a neutral environment without cell phones can help to “foster closeness, connectedness, interpersonal trust, and perceptions of empathy — the building-blocks of relationships.”<sup>32</sup> Eliminating devices around mealtimes can help us find balance in the ways we use our tools (media, technology, face-to-face conversation) to develop connections.

<sup>30</sup> Helen Lee Lin. “How Your Cell Phone Hurts Your Relationships.” *Scientific American*. Scientific American. September 4, 2012. Web. Accessed April 10, 2016. “[Because] of the many social, instrumental, and entertainment options phones afford us, they often divert our attention from our current environment... [cell phones] serve as a reminder of the wider network to which we could connect, inhibiting our ability to connect with the people right next to us.”

<sup>31</sup> Michael Robb. “Why Device-Free Dinners Are a Healthy Choice.” *Common Sense Media*, August 4, 2016. Common Sense Media. Web. Accessed May 5, 2017.

<sup>32</sup> Lin, “How Your Cell Phone Hurts Your Relationships.”

## What is the impact of the mobile device at family mealtimes?<sup>33</sup>

**93%**

Of parents think family dinners are important for conversation

**61%**

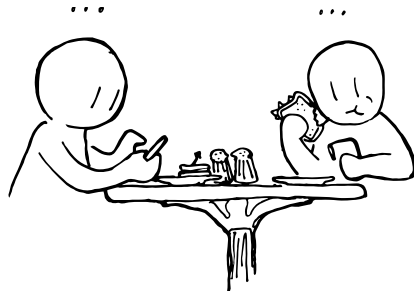
Of parents acknowledge that content sharing on a device can bring families together

**58%**

Of parents believe the mobile device is hurting their conversations

<sup>33</sup>Robb. "Why Device-Free Dinners Are a Healthy Choice." Poll by Common Sense Media. Responses gathered from 900 families with children between the ages of 2 and 17 years old.







## **PROJECT:** **SOCIAL SURFACES**

In the same spirit as Mindful Mondays at the Grange and Device Free Dinners, I wanted to explore how a table surface could become a social object that supported the development of conversation.

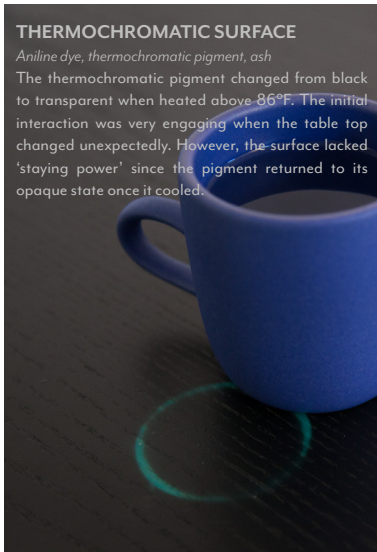
Following several months of contextual research and observation, I began experimenting with different table surfaces that could provide a small distraction for when conversation hit a slow point. At moments when there is a lull in conversation, users would be able to use the surface to alleviate discomfort or boredom. To be successful, the interaction with the surface could not be so engaging that it disrupted the flow of conversation.

**To test behaviors, I made three small tables  
with different interactive qualities.**

### THERMOCHROMATIC SURFACE

*Aniline dye, thermochromatic pigment, ash*

The thermochromatic pigment changed from black to transparent when heated above 86°F. The initial interaction was very engaging when the table top changed unexpectedly. However, the surface lacked 'staying power' since the pigment returned to its opaque state once it cooled.



### MAGNETIC SURFACE

*Plywood, magnets, ash veneer*

A layer of ash veneer hid the magnets embedded in the surface. As a result, it was not immediately apparent that the surface was interactive. The magnets were difficult to locate with the provided magnetic wands, making this table surface the least engaging of the three.



## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

### DRAWING SURFACE

*Acid etched glass, Sharpie paint markers, ash*

The drawing table had multiple levels of engagement for a user to choose from. Individuals could look at the surface to see what others had drawn or written, or they could leave a message of their own. Of the three surfaces, this table had the highest staying power, allowing visitors to leave a mark that lasted even after they left.





Rebecca Li. *Three Tables: Experiments in Social Surfaces*. 2017

## ROUND 1: AMY'S PLACE PROVIDENCE, RI

Amy's is a local breakfast spot and cafe in the Fox Point neighborhood of Providence. I installed the drawing table at the restaurant with a jar of paint markers. From day one, Amy's visitors drew and wrote on the surface, quickly creating a colorful representation of the community.

As in initial experiments with drawing table, people's interactions varied. Some visitors ignored the surface entirely, while others wanted to spend time adding elaborate drawings. Other visitors spent time reading previous responses or writing their name or a short message.

Amy's enjoyed the table and the positive interactions between customers around the surface. At six weeks, the surface was completely covered. Because employees found they were spending more time editing unsavory messages, we decided to move the table out of the space.

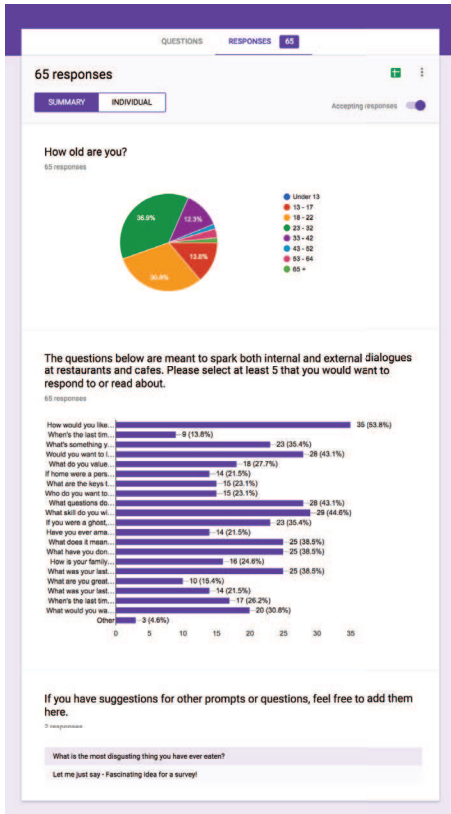




Rebecca Li. Social Surfaces at Amy's Place. 2017

## EDITABLE MARKERS (Right)

Waterproof wet erase markers replaced the Sharpie paint pens. These markers were fast drying, brightly pigmented, and semi-permanent. If necessary, restaurants would be able to erase the markers with an ammonia-based cleaner like Windex.



## PROMPT-BASED WRITING (Left)

Most of the messages from Round 1 were simple, "I love Amy's" or "Jane Doe was here" type notes. To encourage more depth in the exchanges and create a conversation, I wanted to place a prompt on the table. I pulled content from StoryCorps, The New York Times, and my own research and interviews to generate a list of potential prompts. The final questions were chosen by a randomized Google poll.



## PREPARING FOR ROUND 2

Incorporating lessons learned from Amy's Place.



### TABLE TOPS ONLY (Above)

It's much easier to find a home for a table top (custom-cut for a venue's existing tables) than it is to find a home for new tables that might not blend into a restaurant's aesthetic. Round 2 tables were cut from plexiglass frosted on one side to highlight drawings and writings.

## ROUND 2

Five new Social Surfaces with prompts were installed at four different locations over six weeks. Pictured here is a table at the Watermark Cafe, just one week after install.

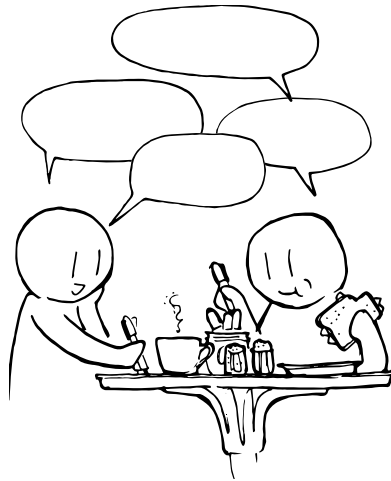




Rebecca Li. Social Surfaces at Watermark Cafe. 2017







## **Thank you to all participating locations**

AMY'S PLACE (PROVIDENCE)

WATERMARK CAFE (PROVIDENCE)

SEVEN STARS BAKERY EAST (PROVIDENCE)

SEVEN STARS BAKERY WEST (PROVIDENCE)

SEVEN STARS RUMFORD (EAST PROVIDENCE)





“Conversation presupposes solitude, for example, because it’s in solitude that we learn to think for ourselves and develop a stable sense of self, which is essential for taking other people as they are.”

Jonathan Franzen

## FORMS OF DIALOGUE

I didn’t begin to understand why it was so important to me to encourage moments of pause and introspection as well as person-to-person interaction until I read the paper by Leopoldina Fortunati that my brother Sam passed along. My understanding was deepened when I rediscovered Brené Brown, and really expanded once I was pointed to Sherry Turkle. *Conversation presupposes solitude.*<sup>36</sup>

The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines conversation as “an oral exchange of sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas.”<sup>37</sup> But the type of conversation that grows us, that challenges us, requires that we go beyond a simple *exchange* and truly examine our own understandings of the sentiments, observations, opinions, or ideas presented. This is the type of conversation that builds mutual understandings among participants. It’s the type of conversation that brings us closer together and deepens our relationships. It teaches us to listen, and strive to understand opinions that might at first seem to stand at odds with our own.

<sup>36</sup> Franzen. “Sherry Turkle’s ‘Reclaiming Conversation.’”

<sup>37</sup> Merriam-Webster Dictionary. “Conversation.” Merriam-Webster.com. Web. Accessed May 11, 2017.

This is the type of conversation that develops with focused effort – the one that develops when we embrace the chance socialness of real time, real life interaction. In this form of dialogue, empathy towards others and their opinions is critical.<sup>38</sup> But where do we develop that empathy? Jonathan Franzen, in his review of Turkle’s *Reclaiming Conversation* for the New York Times, concluded that, “conversation presupposes solitude.”<sup>39</sup> Leopoldina Fortunati writes that, “[communication] feeds off silence.”<sup>40</sup> Sherry Turkle tells us, “Solitude is where you find yourself so that you can reach out to other people and form real attachments.”<sup>41</sup> And in her viral TED talk, Brené Brown explains that to feel connected to others, we must connect with who we are. “We can’t practice compassion with other people if we can’t treat ourselves kindly.”<sup>42</sup> To develop empathy, we must develop our relationship with who we are. This is the link between our internal and external dialogues.

Our external dialogue is made up of the experiences we have with the outside world. The articles we read, the conversations we have with others, the interactions we engage in – these experiences all contribute to our external dialogue. In harmony with the external is our internal dialogue – our introspective moments – these are the moments where we take in the world around us and filter through the information to determine how it relates to the beliefs and values we’ve previously formed. It’s in these moments that we develop our sense of ‘self’ – it’s where we formulate our understating of how to answer the question of, “Who am I?” It becomes the lens through which we view the world.

The process by which we form this lens is never-ending, and it is this lens coupled with an understanding of how we formed it (the continuous examination of influential events) that enables us to empathize with others. “To incorporate the experiences of others into the experience of the self (i.e., to be

<sup>38</sup> Fortunati. “The Mobile Phone: Towards New Categories and Social Relations.” 516. “The sclerotic aspects of communication are also made more acute by the fact that people tend to flee from them, in that they have lost the capacity of mediating reciprocal interests at a social level, empathy towards their interlocutor, negotiation...To avoid conflicts, in fact, people learn to be silent or to talk little or to talk about this and that of no importance.”

<sup>34</sup> Franzen. “Sherry Turkle’s ‘Reclaiming Conversation’.”

<sup>35</sup> Fortunati. “The Mobile Phone: Towards New Categories and Social Relations.” 518.

<sup>41</sup> Turkle. “Connected, but Alone?”

<sup>42</sup> Brown. “The Power of Vulnerability.”

empathetic), one must have an intact sense of the self.<sup>43</sup> If we do not spend time in our own minds, examining the new opinions, experiences, and voices of our surroundings, we do not gain insights into our own motivations and find ways to respect our very human capacity for reasoning.

If we do not respect that ability in ourselves, how can we learn to respect that ability in others? “Conversation feeds off silence.”<sup>44</sup> Not a silence of fear or anger, but a silence of consideration, or internal thought. Conversation that moves beyond the simple exchange of information requires this examination of material, of thought.

<sup>43</sup> Brick Johnstone, Dan Cohen, Kirk R. Bryant, Bret Glass, and Shawn E. Christ. “Functional and Structural Indices of Empathy: Evidence for Self-Oriented as a Neuropsychological Foundation of Empathy.” *Neuropsychology*, Vol 29 (May 2015): 463-472. In 2014, members of the American Psychological Association set out to identify the neuroanatomical foundation of empathy. They defined empathy as, “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another.” In previous studies, a group of researchers had located specific neuro-networks related to empathy within several areas of the brain, while others had attempted to identify how brain disorders affected the expression of empathy. Johnstone’s team hypothesized that by combining the methods used by their peers, they would find to identify the relationship between empathetic expression and the ability for self-identification. Contrary to their own expectations, the team concluded that, “...to incorporate the experiences of others into the experience of the self (i.e., to be empathetic), one must have an intact sense of the self.”

<sup>44</sup> Fortunati. “The Mobile Phone: Towards New Categories and Social Relations.” 518. “The loss of diastemic awareness in the administration of time, however, can have very harmful effects on social and above all emotional relations. In the same way as communication also feeds off silence, so seduction needs to cultivate absence: if we eliminate absence and silence, relationships are exposed to premature deterioration, because the rhythmic and aesthetic dimensions of time are lost.”



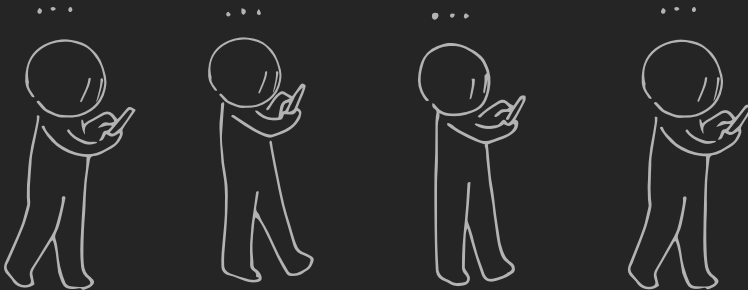
## **PROJECT:** **LIGHT REMINDERS**

Internal dialogue is too often forgotten in our rush for productivity. What happens when we're caught off guard with a new sort of question? Made to run off of a battery, *Light Reminders* is a small light installed in public spaces. A simple motion sensor and lens project a question to passers-by.

In designing this experience, I had a difficult time determining the specific takeaways and interactions I wanted a user to have with the light. I often use fictional writing to position an object in the 'real world' and determine the workflow around it.

The following piece of fiction is an example of this process.

**FICTION:  
TIME WELL WASTED**



So anyways. I'm walking. I'm walking to my car after a frustrating day at work. I'm posting a status update, I'm Snapping my walking, and maybe I'm texting my boyfriend. I don't remember the order, and it doesn't matter, because either way I'm sharing that my day was I-hate-everyone frustrating.

**6:19 PM:** *Don't talk to me until I have a glass of wine in my hand. #mondaysuck #justleavingwork #never-endingnightmare*

Can I get a double tap?

So I'm walking. And I forgot where I parked, and I kind of remember the level, but there are still so many cars here even though it's past **6:00 PM** and we all got here before **8:00 AM**, and no one ever takes a real lunch anymore because we're so busy. My battery in my key is dead, or I'm too far away for it to work, and I can't get my Honda to beep back at me.

*I can't find my car...this day blowwws*  
Add the timestamp filter: **6:22 PM**

My car isn't on this level. *Think, think. Where the hell did I park this morning?* I remember I was running late because I picked up my phone at **6:45 AM** to stop my alarm and started checking my email instead, returning to the inbox-zero battlefield from the warmth of my bed. I got caught up in that little red icon highlighting an email from my manger about a client escalation and found myself fighting fires with my thumbs until my boyfriend's alarm rang 30 minutes later at **7:15 AM** letting me know that I was now already behind schedule. *I never have enough time!* Speaking of which - I'm feel like I'm going to be late to that **7:00 PM** dinner with my friends.

**6:24 PM:** *Sorry! Meeting ran over and I can't find my car. Tell everyone I'll be 15 min late, tops!*

I probably parked on the next level down if I was late. This one might have been full by the time I got here.

I'm still stewing over the morning as I walk over to the stairs. I didn't even have time to eat breakfast. I called my manager at **7:08 AM** on my drive into the office, exchanging complaints over our client's stupidity. *It'd be so much easier if we just did it ourselves and explained it to them later. They never make the right decisions, why do we bother outlining options?? We need to throw a flag; can you write something up today?* So I blew off the internal staff meeting at **8:00 AM** to draft up a flag for an escalation that

probably shouldn't have happened in the first place while sucking a Jolly Rancher for breakfast.  
*#adulting.*

*I wonder if she reviewed the flag yet.* I scroll down to refresh my email as I walk down the steps. **6:25 PM.** The wheel never stops spinning. I don't really get service down here.

I'm on the next underground parking level, still clicking my car key, trying to get a beep in response.  
*I hate this. What a waste of time.* My phone buzzes to let me know my 'running late' text didn't send.  
**6:27 PM.** No service down here. I hear a car beep. *THANK GOD.* I dump my bag into the passenger seat, plug in my phone, and drive too fast.

*Hey Siri, text Sally Sorry comma I just left work period I'm going to be fifteen minutes late period frowny face.*  
*Ready to send.*

Sent: **6:28 PM**

We're meeting downtown for dinner, and at this point it's probably easier for me to just park at home and walk. Traffic is terrible, so I should avoid the highway. *I hate being late.* **6:30 PM.**

*Hey Siri, call mom.*

23 minutes later, I say bye to my mom and pull into my parking spot. I ditch my bag but grab my wallet, unplug my phone, and lock the car. I shoot a quick *on my way!* message and then open Instagram. **6:55 PM.**

Double taps all around. I look up periodically to make sure I'm not going to walk into anyone else, or worse yet, find myself in the middle of the street when I do not have the right of way. I comment on a photo my sister shared of my niece this afternoon.

*Ohhh, she's getting so big! Stop growing up so fast!* **7:03 PM.**

**7:06 PM.** A banner appears across the top of my screen.  
*Sally: Don't worry about it! We're still waiting for our table. See you soon.*



So I'm walking. And I just want to be with my friends, and I feel like my whole day has been wasted. Wasted with emails, wasted with small talk at the beginning of phone calls with clients, wasted with walking between meetings, wasted with finding my fucking car. I reach the bottom of new photos on my Instagram feed and open Snapchat to feed myself on ten second videos and images. **7:07 PM.**

I'm half a block away from the restaurant when a light appears at my feet. I stop. It's text, a question in white light, projected on the sidewalk. I look for the source and spot a small light mounted up on building beside me. I look back at the sidewalk. The projected text is a bit blurry on the edges, but it's still pretty easy to read...

**How would you like**

**to be remembered?**

I blink. *How would I like to be remembered? Is it important for me to be remembered?* I consider it for a moment. *Who would I want to remember me? My family, certainly. My boyfriend? And my friends? What about all the other people I come into contact with? I've never wanted to be famous, but I definitely want to feel as though I'm making an impact. Whatever that means. Am I making an impact here? I want my presence to have made an impression, to have left...something. To have contributed in...whatever way I've deemed valuable...I'm pretty sure there's a Dickinson poem about this.* A double buzz in my hand interrupts my train of thought.

I look down at my phone and see a text from Sally: *Seated in the back! 7:11 PM.*

I take another look at the text on the ground and, almost instinctively, snap photo I might never look at again before moving on. **7:12 PM.** *How would I like to be remembered?* I turn the question over in my mind as I walk the last half block to the restaurant. I pull open the glass door, smile at the hostess, and head towards the back of the restaurant. I put my phone on silent and slip it into my pocket. **7:14 PM.** *How would I like to be remembered? Who do I remember best? What do I remember about them? Their overall energy, the buildup of their presence over time.*

I greet the group with apologies and sit down at the open spot next to Sally. The four of us used to work on the same project together, and though it wrapped up last year (and Ian doesn't even work at the company anymore), we still tried to get together once a month to catch up. We update each other on events of significance, complain about work, and talk about upcoming adventures. We all want to follow Ian's lead and quit our jobs.

73 minutes, four hugs, and a group photo later, I find myself standing on the sidewalk beside the question again. **8:20-something PM.**

### How would you like to be remembered?


I look at the words in light, not sure what to think. *Not like this.* I walk home slowly, trying to articulate an answer for myself. When I arrive home, the door is already unlocked. Tyler must be home. I find him on the bedroom floor, rolling out his calf muscles after his workout. *Hey. Hey, how was dinner?* I shrug and sit down on the carpet with him. *It was nice to see everyone.* I watched him for a moment, still a bit lost in thought.

Tyler.

He looks up expectantly.

*How would you like to be remembered?*





What do you miss  
about them?

Of the people you've lost,  
Who do you miss most?



Rebecca Li. *Light Reminders*. Rendering, 2017.



With Do You  
Miss Most?

“THE PROBLEM WAS THAT  
HE COULD NO LONGER  
CONNECT. HE WAS  
SWALLOWED WHOLE IN  
A FANTASY WORLD FULL  
OF GHOSTS AND ILLUSIONS  
SNAP SNAP! WAKE  
THE FUCK UP!”  
— ZESTOE —  
←♡→



## WHEN DO YOU FEEL CONNECTED?

It seems that despite the numerous ways in which we have to connect, an unwieldy number of our interactions stagnate at the surface, never breaking past the barrier of non-committal exchange. While we may understand the fundamentals of forming relationships, we struggle to apply these understandings on a daily basis (IRL).<sup>45</sup>

Zestoe is a 24-year-old graffiti artist in the Providence area. He often writes public poetry that highlights a deeply universal feeling of loneliness. During our interview, he needs only a moment to think before he can describe the feeling of connection.

*It's immediate vulnerability. A lack of withholding. Complete authenticity. It's feeling as though you could share any part of yourself. But in order to feel connected, you have to give a lot of yourself to do that. You have to prepare yourself to cross an ocean. And you have to open yourself up to feel – it's an emotional thing you have to choose to engage with.*

<sup>45</sup> I have gathered quotes from interviews and conversations I've had over the past two years. When I share quotes and summaries of my interviews, names have been changed to protect the individual's privacy when requested. Important details are kept intact.

When I ask about what it feels to be connected, Zestoe describes feelings of vulnerability and challenging acts of courage (opening yourself up) – echoing the themes of Brené Brown with no knowledge of her work.<sup>46</sup>

In contrast to Zestoe, Lake, a self-identified ‘intimacy junkie’ and graphic designer, describes the process of creating connection as intuitive and effortless. She tells me the story of meeting one of her closest friends, Olive, at an art opening. “I think I overheard some joke she made...we ended up falling into a conversation. It was twenty minutes of pure nonsense that stemmed from a shared sense of humor.” Since then, the two have deepened their friendship by investing in each other. Lake compares the process to “exchanging energy and knowing where it goes.” When Lake spends time with Olive, she does so with the knowledge that they share a dedication to each other and their friendship. It’s easy for her to be vulnerable and giving, because she trusts that Olive will reciprocate. As a result, Lake says, “[Olive] feels like home.”

Aaron is friend of mine who described his understanding of connection after an experience of disconnect – he had just spent a weekend with a new group of friends and felt on edge the entire time. He says, “Understanding people is being connected. To be connected is to be vulnerable and giving.” When he describes connection, he describes the necessary honesty and exposure associated with truly giving yourself to another person – something he did not feel with the new group. With shared exposure, “there’s comfort there – in being uncomfortable, but knowing that you will be met without judgement.”

But why is this lack of judgement so important? Perhaps it is because social acceptance, a sense of belonging, and security within those feelings are basic human psychological needs worldwide.<sup>47</sup> Sharing openness without judgement is key to connection because it opens the doors to shared understanding and an acceptance of others as individuals (and vice versa). For Zestoe and Aaron, to feel connected is to feel as though any and every part of you can be shared without the fear of judgement.

<sup>46</sup> Brené Brown’s foundations of connection: vulnerability, courage, worthiness, and shame.

<sup>47</sup> Louis Tay and Ed Diener. “Needs and Subjective Well-Being Around the World,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 101(2) (August 2011): 354 – 365. Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs is a human psychology motivational theory first published by Abraham Maslow in 1943. In recent years, psychologists and scientists at the Gallup Organization aimed to test this theory with a larger population representative of 95% of the world’s population. From 2005 to 2010, over 60 thousand participants in 155 countries contributed to the Gallup World Poll on subjective well-being. (356-359)

We want to give our ‘authentic’ self, but need reassurance that our multiple versions of ‘self’ will be met with openness. Alice, a graduate student at Rhode Island School of Design, describes the same themes when she tells me about her feelings of connection.

*What does it feel like? Or how do I know? If I’m not connecting, it feels uncomfortable. Perhaps like I’m walking on egg shells, or I’m watching what I say, tempering my own expression. I have a lot of different versions of myself...If I’m not deeply connected, I feel the need to stay controlled, locked into a certain facet of my personality. But if I’m connecting with someone, I feel like I can be loose and free, silly. I feel as though all of the facets of my personality are accessible and allowed. But if I sense that someone isn’t willing to go there with me, I don’t want to offer that up either.*

Many of the people I spoke with identified some version of shared vulnerability, courage, and commitment – the same tenants identified by Brené Brown – as necessary for connection. We understand, in theory, how we must behave in order to form meaningful connections with others. We must be committed to their presence, to their honest and vulnerability, and meet their courage with our own.

One night, I spoke with Brian, a middle-aged man whose constant curiosity and profession as a design consultant encourages him to seek open conversation with anyone and everyone. He described the commitment and vulnerability necessary for connection as a ‘surrender,’ and touched upon the necessity of developing our sense of self.

*We have our own realities, our own bubbles. So we need to find a way to somehow merge bubbles. The perfect conversation is the opposite of what most people do. It’s a surrender to the discourse. A surrender to the empathy. If we subjugate ourselves to dialogue, we stay limber in our beliefs, our identities, our understandings.*

The challenge to connecting lies in not in *recognizing* relationship-forming behaviors, but in performing them wholeheartedly. If we repeatedly seek to fill our days with chosen, controlled social encounters, we may find that we continue to operate at a non-committal level. When others see us only partially present, always engaged in our devices, they are discouraged from opening up, from going deeper. But if we allow ourselves to embrace the nature of real life, if we surrender to the encounters that develop through chance, we may find our interactions richer in entirely unexpected ways.



## **CONTINUED: CONVERSATIONS**

The following pages contain quotes and thoughts from some of the people who have spent time sharing their thoughts and helping me reflect on relationships.



“When I think of how I got here, of the maturation process key to my own social and emotional intelligence, I think of the people who asked really good questions. Those heavy questions are always there, but forming relationships is about accessing those layers and discovering the depth of these questions together.”

- Mark

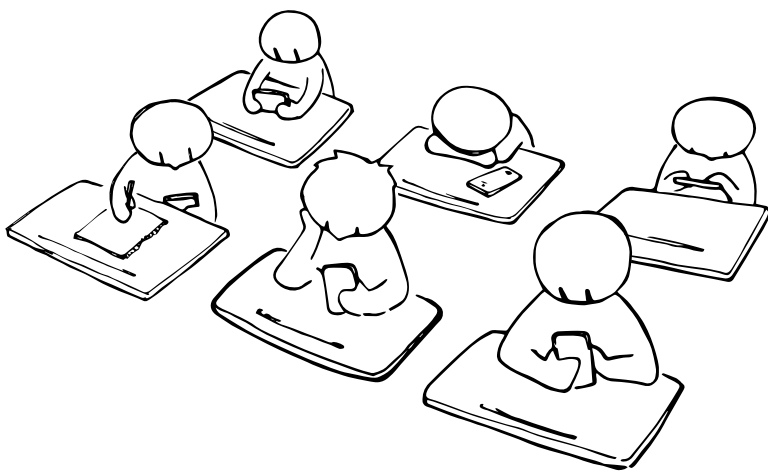
*Confused existentialist, soon to be father*



“Sometimes I think that my students would pay more attention to my in-class demos if I recorded myself and they watched me on YouTube.”

- Michael  
*University of Rhode Island Professor*







“I really try to avoid any issues that are too polarized. It’s hard to have a real conversation...because you can always tell by people stances when they aren’t sure about the atmosphere [of the group]. You don’t want to be ‘that guy’ that brings stuff up. It’s not like you’re going to change their minds; emotions always end up getting in the way. So we don’t bring it up, and [we] don’t learn how to talk about difficult things.

We learned in class that it’s called the ‘spiral of silence.’”

- Charles  
*College student*



“These girls in front of me were filming, Snapping, texting, posting the whole time. It was like they weren’t even there. But I’m sure that they have a lot of followers [on social media]. And all of them will know that [these girls] were at the concert.”

- Tyler

*Music fan, concert-goer*



“She said, ‘I’ll see you at 5’ with a question mark. Maybe I’ll say, ‘Yes, looking forward to it.’ Or should I be like, ‘Let me know when you’re on your way?’”

“What about, ‘Yea, can’t wait’ with a smiley face.”

“I feel like I send too many smiley faces. I’ve been going too hard on the emojis. It needs to stop. But I feel bad sending messages without them because it’s like...they don’t know my tone.”

“Your dead-pan tone? Hah, use a zombie or ghost! Or just send a thumbs up...”

“Alright. I think I’m going to do an emoji anyways. Okay. What’s a cute one? I’m going to say, ‘Let me know when you’re on your way.’”

“Oh. That’s a dangerous one. Because it ends the conversation there. Unless you want it to.”

“Okay...Maybe...Here. How’s that?”

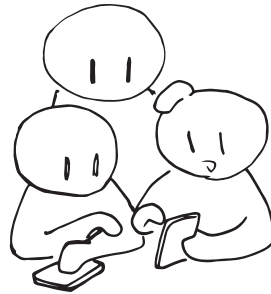
“Maybe you should ask what she wants to drink?”

“I don’t want to assume she drinks though.”

“Good point. You can just pick up beer and she can drink water if she doesn’t want it.”

“Cool. Sent. Now I really need to clean my place before she gets here. It’s a mess.”

- Walker, Felicia, and Adi  
*iPhone users, texters*







“If you’re constantly Snap-chatting or texting or whatever while we’re talking, I feel like you’re missing out on the physical environment and what’s going on around us. You’re not paying attention to how I’m communicating with you; it becomes obvious that you’re not fully invested.

And really, it’s not even just about me. I want people to be aware of their environment and what’s going on. It’s more than just the conversation we’re having. There’s stuff going on around you that can pull you into another experience.”

- Alex  
*College student*



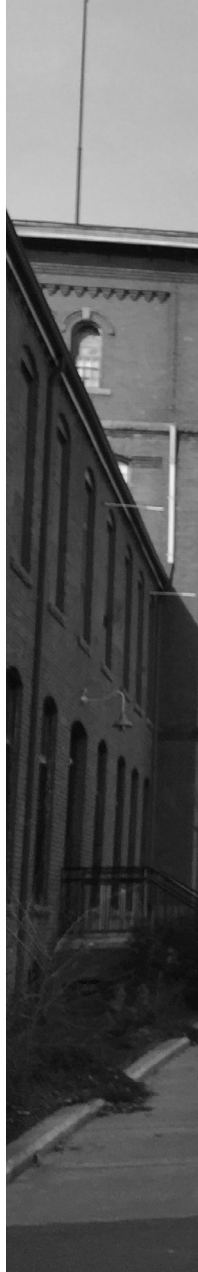
## **PROJECT:** **REMY**

We keep things despite their lack of inherent value. We are curators. We are collectors. We are sentimental. Sometimes these objects live in bags under the bed, boxes at the top of the closet, in junk drawers, spare bedrooms, and basement corners.

They cause us to pause, trigger memories, and a bit of nostalgia when we come across them — typically at inopportune times like when we're searching for our spare keys, cleaning for guests, or packing up to move. Let's get objects out of the junk drawer and into a spot made for them. And if they don't bring us joy or have a place to live, perhaps it's something that we can let go.

REMY is a storage-table to house these objects and invite their stories.

# **The things we keep contain stories.**



**\$\$\$ CASH \$\$\$  
REWARD**

**Lost Bag-Zoo York**

graffiti print w/ green interior.  
Missing 1-24 after Aesop Rock  
show @ Met. No monetary value  
but extreme personal value.

It has been my travel bag for  
16+ yrs & every item inside has  
a sentimental (hi)story. ï  
**No Questions Asked!**

**484-362-9148**

## REMY OG

The table here appears as if it could come from a big box store like IKEA. I made the original REMY table out of plywood and brightly powder-coated steel to help it blend into the background of an average interior.

However, after testing it with friends and family, I realized that the generic appearance wasn't quite in line with the intimate ceremony created when the table's contents and stories are revealed and shared with guests.



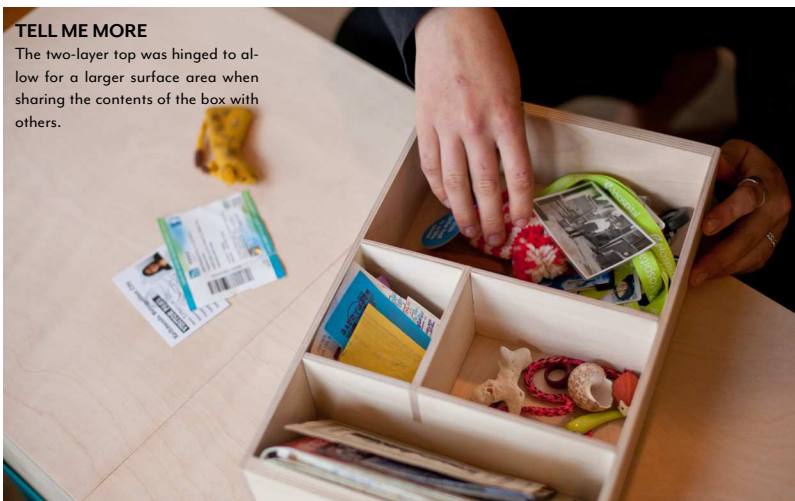
### WHAT'S INSIDE HERE?

Two-layer top and unexpected drawer glides made the opening of the table a mystery that invited guests to inquire about the contents.



### TELL ME MORE

The two-layer top was hinged to allow for a larger surface area when sharing the contents of the box with others.



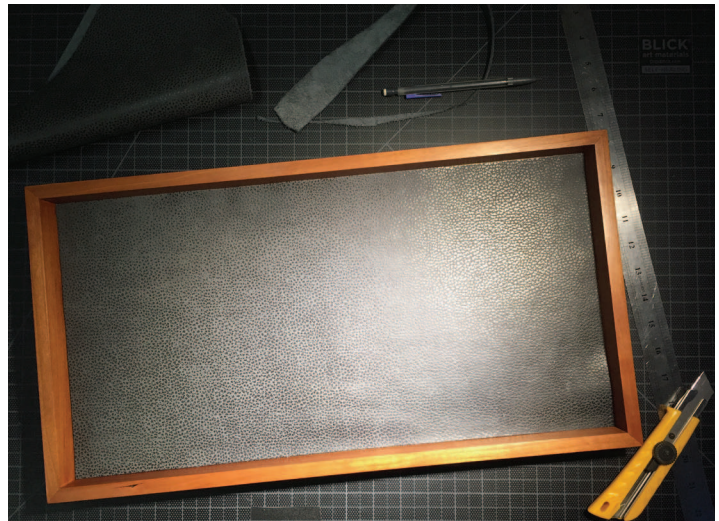




### **MATERIALS UPDATE** (This page)

As a nod to a rich history of hope, dowry, and blanket chests, the second iteration of the REMY table is made from solid wood.

The material quality of the rich cherry exterior combined with a rosewood and leather interior enhance the experience of using the table.



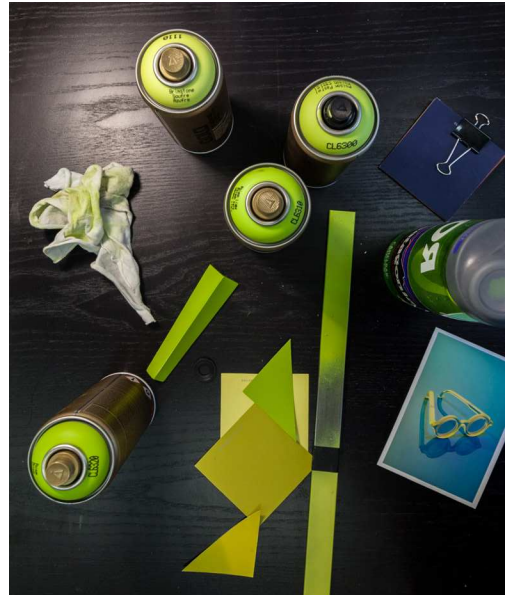
# REDESIGNING REMY

## THE PERFECT GRE-LLOW (Right)

A steel base painted a bright chartreuse color keeps the form fun and inviting.

## SIMPLIFIED MOTION (Below)

The table top opens on two sets of dovetailed slides. The lasercut rack and pinion opening mechanism equalizes the motion, meaning that as you pull one side of the top, the other side moves away in the opposite direction.









### **DOES THIS OPEN? (Above)**

The solid-wood version of the REMY table has a thin seam running the length of the top, chamfered slightly to imply an opening. The small detail tempts curious guests to take a peek.



### **I REMEMBER THESE! (Left)**

REMY isn't just about retelling your favorite tales of days-gone-by. Inviting others to share in your objects' stories is often rewarded by new stories or interpretations from your guests.

## **REMY REVISITED**

REMY is a furniture object that invites guests to ask about the items we keep and the stories contained within them. This table is an investigation in creating and continuing connections through furniture. It's about having users slow down and get to know each other in different ways, and about providing an excuse to ask questions and dig deeper.

The REMY table is an object you can visit time and time again. It is conversation starter and a conversation continuer.



# TELL ME MORE

Because the things we keep contain stories.

Add Your Story

FAQs

Object Homepage





## **PROJECT: TELL ME MORE**

While REMY is a physical reminder and invitation for conversations around the objects we keep, the Tell Me More blog is an opportunity for a wider audience to participate in storytelling in a digital setting. The site is both an online archive of special objects and an open invitation to submit a photograph of an object and the story behind it.

I started this project with a short email request to friends and family members who seemed like they might have a story they'd enjoy sharing. The blog continues to grow steadily. Through this platform, I have received stories that I never could have expected to hear and from people I never thought I'd hear them from.

The following pages contain a sample of the stories that people have shared.

## **What stories are you holding onto?**





## TREASURED SONJA SAXE

When visitors walk into my apartment they see a wide array of knickknacks adorning my bookshelves and side tables. Most of these pieces were bought specifically as decorations and none would appear to stand out to the uninformed visitor. But there is one object that will always be special to me. This piece sits, unassuming, on a glass side table next to a book titled “The Great Wide Open” and under a framed print of the modern day wanderlust’s mantra coined by J.R.R Tolkien “All Those Who Wander Are Not Lost”. It is a medium sized raw geode (the perfect size to rest in the palm of my hands) and it’s been broken to reveal the shimmering quartz crystal inside. I picked up this piece at the Carlsbad Caverns gift shop while on a cross-country road trip with my mom. We were heading from Newport Beach, CA back to my hometown of Madison, WI. This trip was taken during one of the most unsure, tumultuous times in my life.

Nine months prior to this road trip I was actually making the exact same trip in the opposite direction. Traveling from Wisconsin to California with hopes and dreams of “making it” in the fashion industry. I had accepted a new job at an up-and-coming fashion e-tailer that sounded glamorous, and although the pay was abysmal (as is typical for entry level fashion positions), it sounded like a way to get my foot in the door and move up the chain in my ideal career. Nothing was going to stand in my way...until everything came crumbling down all at once. The new job that sounded so promising was pushing me to my breaking point and wasn’t providing enough income. I couldn’t afford the rent for my studio, I couldn’t afford my car, I couldn’t afford anything. My personal relationships were deteriorating and I was sinking into a depression. So I made the decision to cut my losses and move home. My mom flew across the country to help me pack my life back into my Honda Accord and make the 2,000 mile trip home.

In order to make the most of the trip my mom and I decided to stop at as many national parks and monuments along the way as we could. This trip turned out to be the first time I felt truly happy in months. I remember visiting White Sands National Monument and bounding barefoot through the dunes with a genuine smile on my face. We visited Saguaro National Park in Arizona and I stood, mouth-agape, neck craned to look up at the towering Saguaro cacti. And we journeyed into the depths of the Carlsbad Caverns, a cave in New Mexico that is so large the Empire State Building could be laid within it. These spectacular natural sights reawakened me and acted like a guiding light out of some of the toughest times of my life.

In the Carlsbad Caverns gift shop my mom and I wandered around, admiring the different rocks and minerals that were for sale when I spotted this quartz geode and picked it up. It was \$10 but I was financially strained and couldn't justify spending any money on a rock so I reluctantly set it back down. I'm sure my mom inferred what was going through my mind and she offered to buy it for me. It seemed like such a simple piece, nothing more than a paper weight really, but I felt drawn to its raw beauty. I had no idea at the time how much I would treasure that piece as time passed.

I've since gotten back on my feet and have moved back out on my own and changed apartments a few times and every time I move the rock is packed up and moves with me. Every time I look at it I am brought back to that road trip with my mom, driving on the open road under the southwestern sun, not passing any other cars for miles and miles and talking about life. Although I didn't know it at the time, that trip marked a distinct turning point in my life. This rock is the only souvenir I collected on that journey home and it is now the only physical reminder I have of a time when things finally took a turn for the better. It signifies hope and new beginnings and I truly cherish it!

—







# IMMORTAL PETS

## GEORGES FISCHER

In my room, I have an enormous jade plant, which has been co-inhabiting my room for the last three years. The most difficult aspect of this plant is the excess growth because I am hesitant to prune it as I probably should. The branches and even leaves will re-root wherever they land and because I have such a sentimental attachment to this plant, I have an inexhaustible supply of tiny jade.

Jealous, an ex once asked me where he could buy one, so I gave him a small branch so he could have it on his desk. I don't think he was satisfied.

The truth is a huge jade like this can't really be bought or sold, and instead they are passed along, like some kind of immortal pet.

My sister's best friend lived in a home which was nestled deep in the woods, surrounded by humongous trees, a forest which her father steadily cleared away (and which steadily grew back), while around their home her mother had her own small garden.

As a child, I was enthralled by the curious assemblage of objects at their home. The eclectic collection of art her mother had curated. A varied collection of enormous potted plants, used to make the home happy in the winter. A banjo, for plucking. The enormous woodpile beside the tractor, used to clear land and plow the driveway. And her father's pipe, which he would smoke every evening after dinner.

When he died, the home was empty, the forest was transformed from the familiar cozy green blanket into a wild untamed mess and at a dinner the next week, her mother announced she would move into a small apartment in the city. That night, surrounded by friends and family, she began to give away some of their possessions and in this way, the jade fell into my care.

—



Nintendo  
ENTERTAINMENT SYSTEM™

## 2 COOL BRYAN ENGLEBERT

This unassuming, rectangular plastic box was born before I was. I don't remember how old I was, but at some young age at the fringes of my memory, my older nephew (you read that right) brought his old Nintendo Entertainment System over to my childhood home so my siblings and I could play it. As children, with barely functioning motor skills, I can't imagine we were very good at the game. Our family ended up getting the system from "Santa" at some point, conveniently around the time my nephew got a new, shiny Super Nintendo. It came with Super Mario Bros. and Duck Hunt, and to this day I don't have any other games for it.

I remember playing it a bit as a child, but a few years later "Santa" brought us a PlayStation, and the Nintendo was parked in the basement for years. As pre-teens and teenagers, we didn't appreciate the beautiful 8-bit simplicity and diabolical level design of the old games. It wasn't until sometime in the latter half of my high school years, when my parents (the artists formerly known as "Santa") gave me a small CRT television to put in my room, that I dug it out again. As the oldest sibling, dying to get away from my family, spending time in my room seemed like a perfect escape. However, I couldn't bring the newer systems to my room, as they were shared amongst the family. So I brought the trusty Nintendo upstairs, blew out the dust from the cartridge, and proceeded to spend endless hours in blissful solitude mastering every level of Super Mario Bros. until I could beat it routinely.

When I went to college, I brought it along to my dormitory. As a college freshmen, I wanted desperately to be cool, and felt a retro game system would surely be a hit. It's almost embarrassing to admit now how eager I was to show off my skills, but beyond that, I remember enthusiastically showing my roommate all the tricks and secrets of the game and watching him master the game as I had. Sharing it was far more enjoyable than playing it alone. Over the years I've collected quite a few new game systems, but I'll never move on from the original.

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## SILVER PAN

### ANNE BULTMAN

My mom didn't like to cook. She did the best she could and when I was a child I didn't realize what a terrible cook she was. She made breakfast, lunch and dinner for me and my family every day of our lives. We were never hungry, which was a big difference in her life since she grew up during the depression with an alcoholic father who often drank away the money that the family needed for food.

There was a staple in my family's diet. My mom would make hamburger in tomato sauce. She added onion and garlic salt for flavoring. If my mom put this mixture over spaghetti noodles, we had spaghetti. If she put this mixture over macaroni noodles, she said we were having goulash. And if she served this mixture on a bun, we had sloppy joes.

My mother also didn't like mornings. She wasn't a night owl, always in bed by 10:30pm, but she didn't really wake up until after 8:00am. We lived in Chicago and the mornings were often chilly and my mom wanted to send us off with something warm in our stomachs. So what does a mother who doesn't like to cook and who doesn't like mornings serve her children for breakfast before sending them to school? She heats milk on the stove and puts it over cold cereal!

As a child I loved walking into the kitchen and seeing my mom in her green chenille robe, cigarette hanging from the corner of her mouth, as she stirred milk in the little silver pan that always sat on the stove. My bowl with cereal and a glass with PDQ chocolate powder would be waiting on the table. After a mumbled good morning she would bring the pan to the table and pour the warm milk into my cup and bowl. We eventually bought a microwave, we kids were in high school and could make our own breakfasts and the little silver pan was moved from its space on the stove to one of the kitchen drawers.

We were cleaning out my mom's house after her death and I opened the drawer with her pots and pans. I picked up this little silver pan and was surrounded by the feeling of love from a mother who wanted to give her children more than she had but didn't quite have the skills or the energy to do it. A mom who did the best she could for the children she loved more than anything else. I took that pan home with me and when I see it sitting on my stove, I am flooded with thoughts of how each generation tries to make life a little better for our children and that my mom did the best she could with the skills she had to make me feel loved and cared for.

—



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# EVELYN RULES

## EVELYN LI

I have kept this mini-ruler in my purse since a couple days after I moved out of the house in 2000. While I was able to keep a few furniture and household items after ending my first marriage, I had a lot more necessities to obtain for the new place that I was moving into.

This ruler signified my independence.

I had never lived independently, financially or emotionally, in my life. After getting married, I seldom made decisions on what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go, or when I wanted to do it. Everything was done based on the needs of my first husband and my kids. When I divorced, all of a sudden I had become the center of my own life. I carried the ruler in my purse, so I could measure the things that I needed to buy and made sure that they would fit in my new place. I felt a bit of pride every time I took out the ruler in the stores.

The ruler was confiscated at the security gates when I attended an Obama Rally in 2008. Fortunately, a replacement found its way into my purse shortly after the event.

This ruler proves that I am Evelyn. Just Evelyn.

—





# EMMA'S SOMBRERO

## EMMA MURRAY

Meet my sombrero. She and I came to know each other in Chile. I was three months into a seven-month solo-backpacking trip, and I'd landed in San Pedro de Atacama, a small, touristy northern border town that looked like a set for a John Wayne Western: dirt roads, sun-bleached adobe house, horses, boots, but with its added fair share of hippies. I didn't know it at the time, but a large part of Chilean history and culture is deeply rooted in the ranch and country lifestyle—known to them as huasos, akin to US cowboy folklore.

All I had really known, or what I focused most on, was of Chile's southern mountains and majestic Patagonian landscapes. So, in the sunbaked north, I bought this hat, and together we hitch-hiked hundreds of kilometers to Argentina, and eventually south.

I seldom wore her. She never quite fit my head right, but I loved her nonetheless. She became my best friend, even when this random guy I'd met in Argentina and started traveling with tried to get me to ditch her multiple times a day. (You don't even wear it. It won't even fit in your backpack! He might've even said she was dumb. Was he jealous, or annoyed that I frequently requested he help in keeping her safe?) I stood up for her like any good friend would. It's true: she was cumbersome and didn't fit in my backpack—the only place I could store my personal possessions. But together we slept in gas stations, ran through city traffic, ate lunches of empanadas and alfajores long after the random guy had left. I took her everywhere, and she never strayed.


Now she hangs above my bed in Colorado, where every night I sleep next to that same random guy, who I met again months later and decided I'd never leave. He accepted her, and I accepted him. I still never wear her. But she reminds me of who I am at my core, and the things that will never change: my sense of adventure, my love of love, and my determination to stand up for what I believe in.

---



# PURPLE BURIED TREASURE

## EMILY DISSEN



My Aunt and Uncle are proud small business owners of a home improvement store and lumber yard called Kane Lumber in the town of Kane, Pennsylvania. Kane is the place where my mother grew up and where all of my extended family on my mother's side remains today. I often find myself thinking of Kane with the nostalgia and sentimentality of home despite having grown up in the suburbs of Baltimore, Maryland. In the summer weeks that I would spend with my Grandma, I would often find myself wandering to Kane Lumber. As a kid Kane was the perfect place to be. Everything important: my cousins house, the park, Rite Aid, Main Street, Kane Lumber was within walking distance from my Grandma's house on Birch Street. The town only covers one and a half square miles, is home to about 3,600 people, and is nestled on three sides by the Allegheny National Forest.

Kane Lumber was built on top of the old milk bottle factory, and to this day if you walk around the lumber yard you can find old pieces of glass. What made it even more magical was that the glass had mysteriously turned purple. A quick Google search will tell you that colorless glasses with manganese dioxide tend to turn purple with exposure to light. However, as a kid those milk bottles had turned purple because they had never contained milk at all and instead held potions. Or back in olden times their cows were purple and of course gave purple milk that stained the glasses. Or the grown ups were lying and there actually was an amethyst mine under the two by fours and we were all going to be rich. I spent many days perfectly content digging around searching for these worthless chunks of glass. I keep them now not only because they are beautiful objects, but they are also a reminder of the past and present. My childhood when my Grandma was still alive and I would walk from her house to go find buried treasure. Kane's past as I wonder what life was like when the town had a milk bottle factory and dozens of other places that have since disappeared into history. But also my Aunt and Uncle who are still running their family business with love as my baby cousins run around looking for purple buried treasure.

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# THE PROJECT HAMMER

## BILL BULTMAN

This is Grampa McCarty's hammer. You can see a lighter band near the neck where it once had a cloth tape labeling it "F L McCarty", in case there was any question.

A lot of the tools in my workroom were inherited from my two grandfathers, either directly or by way of my father. Both of them were tradesmen out of the 1930's, so had large collections of hand tools, many of which came to my father and eventually to me. This hammer was one of the first to come to me.

I've never actually purchased a hammer, but I do have other given hammers. I use those on quick "utility" projects like hanging a picture or refastening a floor board. My nicest hammer is stainless steel, a find from my dad's rebate room. I use it when I need a clean result, because the head of Grampa McCarty's hammer tends to leave a smudge of the dirt.

Grampa McCarty's hammer is for The Projects. I use it to do meaningful things that I want to do, not piddly things that I have to do. I stand by my peg board and actively decide whether any task is worthy of grampa's hammer. I used it to build Pete and Stu's fort in the backyard of my first house. At the second house I used it to build Evelyn's bathroom vanity, Jenni's closet, Becca's bunk beds, and helping Sam to build his Parthenon.

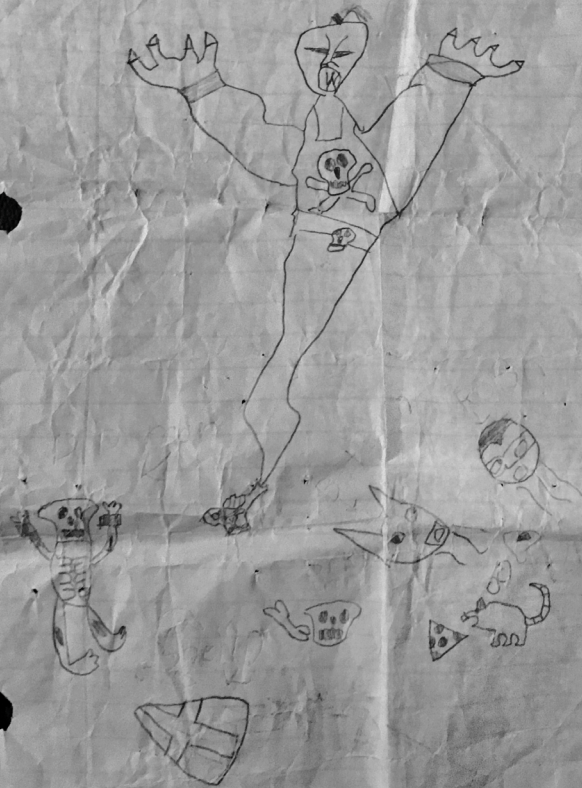
I grab that hammer any time I need a project to come out right. I don't expect my grandfather to "guide my hand" or anything silly like that. But I know that using that hammer will make me focus on doing a good job. I never took a shop class, so learned all of my lessons working with hand tools with my father and grampa. "You can always cut more off, you can't cut more on." "Pound a nail like you mean it." Using that hammer reminds me that even regular people can get neat projects done well.

My father is getting to the point where he needs to downsize and clear out his basement of tools soon. I was very pleased to see Pete grab some tools out of his grampa's basement. Hopefully among them he'll find one that reminds him of the tradition he comes from when he works on his Projects over the next 50 years.

—



Fumble to Tyler



# “BAD JANEY”

## TYLER ANDERSON

I’ve kept this piece of paper in a small wind-up musical keepsake box since I was 6 or 7 years old. While the paper has become crumpled and folded over the years, amazingly, the penciled images are still clear: the decapitated heads of Batman and Robin, an angry tank top wielding death genie, a food-crazed rat, and what appears to be a small (dancing) skeletal man.

My childhood friend Jon—whose name was fascinatingly condensed from the birth name Jonathan—was a kid who drew a lot in class and whose mother let him watch PG movies from an early age. I remember him having light brown hair and soft chubby cheeks. He was tan and had lots of dirt on his clothes from playing outside. Jon looked uncannily similar to Arliss, the younger brother in the Disney movie “Old Yeller.” I lived in Tallahassee till age 7 and vaguely remember going to Jon’s house to play a handful of times before my family moved away.

I couldn’t tell you why Jon made the picture for me, but I’ve kept it safe for over 23 years and in rather decent condition since I first received it. Maybe I thought it was going to be worth something someday. Like the early work of an artistic genius. Or maybe I just really enjoyed the boyish image collection of pizza, comics, and skeletons. And admittedly, even as an adult, those things aren’t as off-putting now as they should be. I still enjoy pizza, I like the new Batman movies, and I think anatomical drawings of skeletal structures are really fascinating.

So maybe I’m still that 6 year old in adult form?

If you look closely you can see where Jon The Artist intentionally erased the names of all the characters in the picture: Batman, RoBn, D D Man, and BaD Janey. He has also generously included 6 skulls, including one on the finely detailed genie lamp.

The more I examine the picture, the more I find oddly hilarious perspectives about the drawing. Some might find that concerning and point to the overtly disturbing nature of two children exchanging such violent images with one another. I don’t see it that way.

It's funny what we find intriguing or intrinsically valuable at different ages of our lives. For me, at age 6, it was this drawing. It meant I had a friend. Today when I look at it, the drawing challenges me to remember a time when being silly, artistically violent, and horribly bad at spelling was an ok thing to be. Maybe those things aren't such a bad thing to grow out of.

I will keep the paper until it falls apart or it stops making me laugh every time I look at it. I don't plan to use modern technology to seek out adult Jon and ask him who D D man is, or why he felt compelled to make me the picture in the first place. I will fold it back up and put return it to my shelf where it belongs.

—



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## THE CONDITIONS FOR LISTENING

Though my family no longer lives in one location, we try to take a trip together once or twice each year. This past year, a group of us - my siblings, my father and his wife, and me - traveled to New Orleans. Leading up to the trip, I was particularly excited to see my siblings; since moving to Providence, I had not really had a chance to spend 'quality' time with them. One continuous week seemed like the perfect opportunity to catch up on each other's lives and enjoy the silly dynamic that usually characterizes our time together.

But during our family vacation, a strange thing happened: we all found ourselves reaching for our devices at times we would have deemed inappropriate in the past. Between turns during a card game, we messaged other friends. After ordering breakfast, we reached to refresh our emails. At lunch, we caught up on the news. Walking around the city, we took conference calls, played Pokémon Go, Tweeted, Snapped, Lined, filmed, and photographed. Our life in the physical world, together, was paralleled by a second, third, or even fourth life within our devices.

It was bizarre, unsettling, and in the moments when one of us looked up to see everyone else looking down: distinctly isolating. As Maria, the Brown University student, said to me a couple months later, "we're never really with the people we're with."<sup>48</sup> At the end of the vacation we flew off on our separate

<sup>48</sup> See quote in the Take a Chance on Me section.

ways, and I left feeling that I had somehow blinked and missed an entire week with my siblings. Like I had truly missed something fundamental.<sup>49</sup>

The morning I arrived back on the East coast, I decided to spend another day at my father's house in New Jersey, wanting to take the opportunity to have dinner with family before driving back to Rhode Island.<sup>50</sup> We chatted mindlessly as we left the airport, unloaded our bags at home, started a load of laundry, and recharged our devices.

An hour after arriving back at the house, my father, stepmother, and I found ourselves sitting in the living room, updating my grandmother on the highlights of the trip. I don't remember how it happened, but somehow the conversation wandered into stories of their youth, the experience of growing up during a war and 'cultural revolution,' and the painful complexities of prejudice, immigration, and broken families.<sup>51</sup> Within that hour, we spoke more openly than we had in that entire week we had just spent together.<sup>52</sup>

I've been turning these two experiences over, trying to pinpoint what it was that created the conditions for such a conversation to unfold. There's a question that continues to pop up for me, and it's one that I'm not sure I can answer: *what are the conditions for listening?*

It's not the people I was with, because I have felt connection with complete strangers, and in truth, I am most at home with my family. It's not the location, because I've had these sorts of time-stretching conversations everywhere from sticky dive bars, to sun-flooded breakfast cafés, to starlit alpine valleys guarded by mountain peaks. It's not that the minutes were uninterrupted, because in listening to the

<sup>49</sup> Franzen. "Sherry Turkle's Reclaiming Conversation." As Franzen said in his review, "[We] communicate incessantly but are afraid of face-to-face conversations; [we] worry, often nostalgically, that [we're] missing out on something fundamental."

<sup>50</sup> To be perfectly honest, I also really wanted to do my laundry. #adulting

<sup>51</sup> My mother and father were both born in Taiwan. I grew up knowing that both my grandfathers had been separated from their wives and young children (still in China when they were in Taiwan) after Mao gained control of Mainland China in 1949. In contrast, my stepmother's parents stayed in China. In 1949, her grandfather was living in California, teaching and planning to bring his family over to the States. However, in 1951, worried that his young children would not fare well on the journey to the States, he returned to China instead. Just a few years later, the government accused him of being a spy, and he spent the next 20 years in various prisons across northern China. For her entire childhood, my stepmother thought her grandfather had passed away. Worried that she would be bullied or beaten if she was marked as coming from a "non-Red" family, her parents hid the truth from her. My stepmother did not meet her grandfather (or know he was still alive) until 1979 when his record was corrected, and he was released from prison.

<sup>52</sup> While I don't know how we got there, once we started to talk about family history I started to record the conversation. My family, bless them, is quite used to it by now.

recording, I know that my father asks about dinner, answers a phone call, and considers going to Costco. So, *what are the conditions for listening?*

To write this thesis, I've combed through hours and hours of my own recordings. At times I've cringed to hear myself, stiff and unnatural, when I ask questions that attempt to lead the conversation down a path I desire. Other times, I've found myself fully engrossed in the audio, hanging onto every word, still surprised by the way the conversations unfold even though I've heard it at least once before (IRL).

I think that the fundamental difference in these conversations is in our intent as participants. My most successful and engaging interviews on connection happened when I approached the interviews as exploratory conversations, keeping myself open to chance and embracing whatever topics or stories my interlocutor wanted to bring to the table. In the same way, when my father and stepmother opened up to me about their experiences of our family history, we were all committed to the development of that conversation. We were invested in exploring the topics that came up. We asked each other questions and listened to the answers. We made connections between our own separate, and at times disparate, experiences, and learned a bit in the process.

In different ways, my work attempts to make this state of being more accessible. *Social Surfaces* invites us to contribute to a multi-author drawing and conversation that develops over time; the nature of the surface asks each of us, as individuals, to relinquish control of that experience to a larger community body. The more we embrace the element of chance, the higher the likelihood we will stumble upon something unexpected. The memory table, *REMY*, gives us the opportunity to let go of our desire to clean up, curate, and adhere to who we think we should be. *REMY* asks us to be vulnerable and let others into the moments of our past that have shaped us into the complex beings we are today. In return for our own openness, we may find others speaking about their own pasts, drawing connections, and introducing us to new ideas. To bring balance are the *Light Reminders*, small objects with a large task: somewhere, somehow, help us break from the desperate pace of the day and remind us that we need time to think. We need time to process all of these new experiences and ideas and figure out what they mean for us as individuals.

These are the types of experiences and dialogues that help us challenge our understanding of ourselves and of each other. It is in these experiences that we practice our mental flexibility and hone our ability to empathize and form connection. There is no shortcut or one-tool-fits-all for how to create and maintain our relationships. In our digital devices, our physical environment, and our own thoughts and memories, there is a near infinite array of tools that can help us.

The choice and challenge is our own, but I wholeheartedly believe that we all contain the potential to create the conditions for listening, for empathizing, for examining, for engaging, and for creating the connections that ultimately define our human experience.

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May the conversation always continue