



A CONFABULATION ON WHAT'S WHAT

Honors College Capstone Project

William L. Benkelman
Spring 2021

The smell of coffee wafts throughout the small café tucked away in a slower part of Manhattan. The mood inside is eased, nobody moving with the typical New Yorker purpose. Steady rain has been coming down since mid-morning, forcing people to come inside little coffee shops like this. To bathe in the soft yellow lighting, dry off, and thinking about everything yet nothing while the pavement is soaked outside. Robert Jackson is waiting for his friend to join him; they were supposed to meet up about fifteen minutes ago. Robert is not peeved nor disappointed. He is simply engaged in the classic human past time of staring out the window, without anything in particular on the mind. Watching people scurry by to try and stay dry—a mental state of bliss—disturbed occasionally by the bell ringing as a new patron enters the café, but never fully broken.

The peacefulness that Robert is engaged with is difficult to attain, as he glances around the shop there is a light blue makeup powered on everyone's faces. Necks scrunched down, eyes glazed over, as endless pixels from their technological devices entertain these other people with who knows what. It is absorbing enough that most of the people do not break their stare when the bell rings as a new person comes, an old person goes. A few people have a book out, and their eyes dart back and forth as they move down the page. There is no one else staring out the window, watching the rain plop down to earth. Staring out the window aimlessly, people watching, looking into space. These actions result in a type of mental autopilot; there is a feeling of nothingness but at the same time a sense of being calm and engaged. The customers around Robert are prescribing to the modern idea of efficiency. That we must be doing SOMETHING, even if that something is utterly NOTHING. Is flipping through social media that much better than staring out the window, Robert ponders. If both account for nothing, then at least when you

are staring out the window you are admitting to those around you that you are indeed up to nothing. The individuals with their noses in their cellphones are not admitting to those around them that they are up to nothing. We must look efficient! The old saying goes something like “idle hands are the devil’s playthings.”

The beauty of staring out the window is that you can simultaneously notice the many different events going on the other side of the glass, or it can be a steady blur without much focus. This is the mental autopilot mode that can be so fulfilling. It is amazing, the simplicity of that moment.¹ The simple things in life are often overlooked, and one has to think about them directly to notice their benefit. Robert wonders if anyone in this shop has taken the time to ruminate on the pleasures of looking out the window on a rainy day. Surely someone else has to have thought about why looking out a window is so enjoyable; just like he is thinking about it now. If not, then they must have at least spent time pointlessly looking out a window, Robert confirms.

When staring out the window, and our mind slips into that autopilot mode, but the mind is not blank. Often autopilot is where we begin to have our thoughts leap around like a string of Jumping Jack Fireworks. They spin on the ground at insane speeds before launching into the air and falling some distance away from where they were initially lit off. The mind does this all the time when given a moment of pause, and the mental autopilot is a moment of pause.² Our thoughts shoot around our head, and we can hardly control these thoughts; it is best to just

¹ This idea of a simple moment was inspired by Leo Tolstoy’s “The Death of Ivan Ilyich.” The main character, Ivan Ilyich, spends most of his time striving to live in a manner that is influenced by status and society of the time. He does not live simply, and thus dies a very agonizing death. His butler and helper during his death throngs lives in a simple manner, and it takes Ilyich this painful death to realize that his life was lived in a manner that was shallow and unfulfilling. To enjoy moments of simplicity is to engage with life on a deeper level.

² The French writer, Michel de Montaigne, wrote numerous essays about a wide range of topics. One of his essays focused on the inability of the mind to hold on to an idea for an extended period of time. This is especially true when we are doing nothing. The mind does and thinks what it wants while we simply sit and watch.

process them as they bang against the front of our skull and let them go when bouncing off.³ This sounds like mayhem, but the brain is designed to function in this way when we do not need to focus on anything too prevalent. We might be wary of some of the thoughts that pop up; the type you might not want to share with your grandmother. It is nothing to fear, just simply take the thought in, and then move on from it. In this mental state, transience is the mode of operation. The window acts as a looking glass into ourselves. The rain rolls down outside on the sleek surface, while our thoughts roll down the sleek surface of our minds just the same.

Robert lets his gaze come back to the chairs and tables of the café. The only person that he talked to since he arrived was the barista when he ordered his London fog, not much of a coffee guy. One would think in such a welcoming café that there would be a buzz of conversation stimulated by caffeine. This is not the case. There is faint music playing, the stereotypical coffee shop tunes, and the hum of the coffee brewing equipment hard at work. Besides the conversation when someone makes an order at the front counter, the café is oddly quiet. This, Robert finds bizarre, so many people, sitting within feet of one another yet hardly a peep. There is no rule written in stone that says you cannot talk with a stranger in a public place. Light banter with someone you do not know can be quite enjoyable if you do it right. Do we all believe that our time and energy are that valuable that we cannot talk to a stranger? Robert mulls the question over before deciding this cannot be the situation.

The average adult is awake for around sixteen hours a day, and how many of those waking hours are spent doing legitimately productive tasks? The average workday is around eight hours, but most people do not work for eight hours straight. Farmers are perhaps the most

³ This is a continuation of Montaigne's ideas on the sporadic nature of the mind.

productive group in the lot, but so much time slips away without cause or consequence. It is frightening when one begins to accumulate the wasted time, doing NOTHING in the pursuit of SOMETHING. Someone keen to pick low-hanging fruit would blame technological advancements and saturation. Our cellphones suck up an insane amount of time; this cannot be denied. It is certainly part of the problem that Robert is noticing in the coffee shop, but he is having a hard time putting his finger on exactly what is what in this situation. It will have to be a question for his friend, whenever he arrives.⁴

Looking back out the window, Robert begins to wonder where his friend is. He is nearly thirty minutes late, and despite never being someone known for his punctuality, this is late even by his standards. Who knows, maybe something hung him up, or he simply forgot. Robert makes the decision that he will not text nor call his friend to see what might be causing such delay; rather, he will just be patient and wait for his friend to show up when he does. Then they can begin to enjoy the afternoon together. After all, it was not too long ago that the possibility to check on someone's whereabouts was much more difficult. It is hard for younger people to get the idea that less than two decades ago, plans were made in trust. You phoned a friend on their landline or wrote them a note planning to do something, and then trusted that they would show up at the time and place that you agreed on. You got there and you began to wait. If your friend was late, the options were you asked to borrow the phone of the establishment or try and find a payphone to give them a ring. The only way to get an answer to the question over the phone was you are lucky enough that your friend was still at home to pick up their phone, and if they are en

⁴ This small discussion is inspired by the many discussions that Ray Smith and Japhy Ryder engage in throughout Jack Kerouac's *Dharma Bums*. The value of the society we live in is a common theme that Kerouac works with throughout the book, and often these characters are doing nothing in the pursuit of something. A bohemian form of enlightenment that is supported through hitchhiking, wine, and good conversations with friends. Similar to the Tolstoy influence, this is an inversion of what Kerouac is telling us to do.

route, then you have no answer. This system of trust creates a slight edge of suspense for day-to-day interactions. Are they almost here, did something happen, what is taking them so long?

These types of questions keep you engaged, and at the edge of your seat. They do not cause a full-blown panic attack. Life before cellphones had a vein of acceptance in terms of what we can and cannot control; I cannot control where my friend is, and I must accept that.⁵ Look at how things have changed; we immediately text or call our friend's cellphone five minutes into waiting on them. They can respond instantly, and the improved communication capabilities are beneficial yes, but are they truly necessary?

This is a question Robert feels we are not asking enough when we see technological improvements. Is it truly necessary, do we actually need this? A lot of times it is that we are told by the Big Tech companies we need this brand-new shiny device, but how much did it improve from our old devices? An iPhone cannot call or text any more effectively than an older flip phone: both are dependent on the quality of the cellular reception. The mechanics of cellphones, specifically, have relatively remained the same over the course of the twenty-first century. The “life-changing additions” have been the inclusion of the internet and speed of communication. The difference between 5G coverage and 4G coverage, is that 5G will give users blazing fast internet data speeds on the smartphones, and they will never have to wait again!⁶ Waiting is not the end of the world. People have been waiting for the entirety of human existence, and the

⁵ Tanner's book was an overview of the Stoic philosophy. One of the main ideas in Stoicism is the spheres of influence (also known as the circle of control), and the idea is that there are spheres around us that we have control. The closest sphere of influence is us, where we have the most amount of control. We can control all of our actions and reactions to the world around us. Then the spheres branch out into the social and physical worlds, and the farther the sphere is away from you, the individual, the less control you have. Stoicism advises to master this understanding of control to make life better. I used the idea with cellphones and when there were not cellphones to show a modern example of our perceived notions of control. We want more control than we actually have.

⁶ Montaigne also has influence on this section with his Essay “On Solitude.” In the modern world, solitude is becoming truly rare. There are less and less chances to achieve solitude due to the increases in communicative technologies. Montaigne was positive on solitude, and believed there were many benefits to the practice.

modern desire to eliminate waiting is a quest cloaked in uselessness. It is a trivial pursuit that never eliminates waiting from the human equation; it just makes us worse at waiting than we were before. It is nice to be able to instantaneously talk with someone, but for the majority of human history, life moved much slower. A message could take months to get from New York to San Francisco back in the late 1800s, but now it arrives almost as soon as it was sent. The world seems closer together, but after seeing the state of communication's affairs in this coffee shop, Robert has his doubts.⁷

The door opens again, there is a rustle as someone takes off their jacket and attempts to shake it dry from the rain. Robert glances up to see who this new visitor is, only to discover that his friend, Leo Francis⁸, had finally arrived. Nearly forty minutes late, but the smile on Robert's face showed no signs of distress or anger. Just happy his friend arrived, and they can get a cup together whilst talking about what is what!

“Leo! What took you so long to get here? Is everything okay?”

“Oh yes, everything is fine. It is a bit of a funny story, I got caught talking to my neighbor, and that is why I was so late. The conversation just flowed, and I lost track of time. It was quite enjoyable!”

“Really? That is quite exciting! I didn't think that you were close with any of your neighbors. What did you guys talk about? It must have been pretty intriguing of a conversation if it kept me waiting this long.”

⁷ A continued example of the sphere of influence.

⁸ Robert and Leo's names are a combination of thinkers and writers I find influential. Robert Jackson is a combination of Robert Pirsig and Jack Kerouac, and Leo Francis is a combination of Leo Tolstoy and Franz Kafka.

“Oh Rob, you’re fine. It started as a conversation about the mail, my neighbor always gets my mail, and most of the time he just leaves it on the doorstep. In fact, that is what he was doing today when I ran into him. I opened up the door and there was my neighbor, Al, and I went ‘Well hey there Al! How are you?’ and he proceeded to tell me why he was standing right on my doorstep. You know, just telling me he was dropping off my mail, a very courteous thing to do. I decided to ask him how he was doing, just generally, and that is where the conversation began. Then it was mostly casual banter about what we do for a living, where we are originally from, are you a sports guy? Real ‘shoot the breeze type’ of questions, but it turned out to be such a pleasant experience that I got lost in it. I honestly do not know why I never talked to him earlier! Maybe I was afraid since he was old.”

“Leo there is no reason to be afraid of older people, they are perfectly normal! That is something I was thinking about why I was waiting on you; why do we not talk to people more often, even our neighbors? It does not make any sense to me. We should be talking to people every chance we get. You never know what might come of a conversation.”

“You know what I think one of the issues is? I think part of it is cultural, I mean enshrined in the very way that our society is set up. Nobody can escape it, and since it is so prevalent, we all buy into the idea behind it. America is a Western country, right? We are members of Western scientific, philosophical, and religious traditions. One of the aspects of Western thinking is the importance of the individual, and that we view ourselves above the sway

of something like community.⁹ We value the individual to increasingly perilous heights, and I do not think this is something we should be doing.”

“I like that you are tying in the idea of talking with your neighbor and the broader idea of community. I believe that they are closely related issues. Quickly, before I go on more about what I think Community has to do with all of this, I want to say something about American individualism. I agree, wholeheartedly, with your analysis of individualism being a defining part of people’s lives, but American individualism is even more so. The idea of the rugged American individual; the rancher, cowboy, factory worker, frontiersman, business maverick, are all tropes that are used in our collective mythology.¹⁰ Americans are self-reliant, as long as we trust in our own two hands and the willpower within us. I think that we have bought into this myth a little too much now. The tenor of the idea has changed from the values circling hard, diligent self-sustaining work, to we do not need any outside help and that we are better off alone. This switch is doing more harm than good. It has been part of a wave of corroding factors on the idea of the American community in general. Community is a tough topic to discuss because of its widespread nature. Most people have an idea of community, but I am thinking of it in a more narrative sense. The fruitful interaction between people eventually builds a sense of belonging, common identification, and expanded yet strong social networks. I believe most people view Community as a physical space. We live here in New York, so we are part of the New York Community, right? Wrong! New York City is an extremely huge place, so that is why a lot of

⁹ This section was inspired by the research that Cook did. Individualism has been too entrenched into the societal identity of many western countries, specifically America. It has gotten to the point that it influences our ideas on community, making us think that we do not need a community in our lives.

¹⁰ Coming back to Kerouac, *Dharma Bums* uniquely embodies the idea of rugged American individualism, but also provides a robust community that Ray Smith (the main character) is constantly engaging with. There is a level of support that includes Ray being able to sleep on his friend’s couches and floors, and then also a space where they can engage in stimulating intellectual conversations. Kerouac’s balance of community and individualism is lacking in today’s society. This is another instance of a reverse influence.

New Yorkers identify with their specific borough and neighborhood, that is their community. In order for Community to exist there has to be commonality, either with beliefs, experiences, history, or aspiration; it just does not pop up overnight!”¹¹

“Well Rob, are you aware of any examples where a thriving, interactive community exists? I agree that community is more than just living somewhere. I think that there is an awareness of the benefit of Community, but people try to force it. Think about corporations or colleges; they have these slogans like ‘building a more inclusive and resilient Community and my question is how? How do you actually build a real and genuine community? One that people actually engage in, not just empty words because there is a lot of empty words in our discourse these days.”

“I do know of some communities that we could chalk up to ‘thriving communities.’ One of them is a place called Oostburg, Wisconsin, and it is a predominantly Dutch descendant town.¹² There are other towns like this as well, that have a history of homogenous immigration, and people looking for those of similar cultures to have that shared cultural history, language and looks. We crave familiarity, right? Anyway, this Oostburg, Wisconsin is a very interactive community, but it is because of that cultural homogeneity why they can do so.¹³ Nearly everyone there is Dutch, and it is that shared heritage that drives community engagement. There is a danger to this type of community though, and that is the Dutch heritage that binds the town together, which can also

¹¹ The work that McClay did looking into communities, generally is spread out throughout this page. This is a more direct influence on the dialogue than the previous sources were. He was able to provide information that really established what type of community I wanted to use as the frame for this dialogue.

¹² The idea of a vibrant community, while the real-world example comes from McClay, the significance of such an existence also has influences from Aldus Huxley’s *Island*, where the Island of Pala is a vibrant and homogenous community that has found ways to flourish that the rest of the world has not despite the island not being considered a “traditional Western developed country.”

¹³ This example, from McClay, is designed to show how community is possible, but in most instances, there needs to be a high level of identity agreement: cultural, ethnic, religious, etc. for community to really thrive.

act as an exclusionary measure for those who are not Dutch.¹⁴ I actually came across a study that was looking into how diversity affected communities and the author of the study admitted that he was disheartened by the findings that diversity in communities can actually increase social distrust and lead to a lack of social cohesion!¹⁵ People do not want to take the time to learn about their neighbors of a different background, and then they do not end up engaging with the larger community because they do not think they could relate with these other groups.

“As for your question on building genuine community, it is something that cannot be created by a board of some type that consults with a marketing firm. I believe a lot of people have a good idea when something is phony versus when it is genuine. It is a phrase typed in blue above a group of people smiling and laughing in a brightly lit room, any idea on a poster of that caliber is not going to lead to any serious change. I think genuine community starts with groups of people weathering hardships that life throws at us because if multiple people are dealing with something together it becomes much more manageable.¹⁶ It reminds me of that famous piece of research, *Bowling Alone*, or something along those lines; community is eroding because the institutions that are instrumental in fostering community have less and less engagement. That book focused on bowling leagues as being an important part of community engagement, but it expands beyond that. These groups are middle ring social groups, meaning that they are based in the community level where an outer-ring social group would be a member of the Democrat or Republican Party.¹⁷ How many social groups and organizations are you a member of, and how many of the

¹⁴ This point, from McClay, was incorporated to show the nuanced nature of community, it can have negative effects.

¹⁵ A second example from McClay to show that certain forms of community can be negative, and any exclusionary aspect of community is negative in my eyes.

¹⁶ The final point from McClay is to show the sociological benefits of a robust community.

¹⁷ Bethune’s contributions toward the dialogue are in the same vein of McClay’s. She was able to provide more context behind why community is important, and how it can affect us. This specific reference highlights the differing levels of community that people can engage in.

meetings do you actually go to? I am a member of many groups, I get emails, but I hardly ever go to the meetings. It is not like I am disinterested in what is going on; I most certainly am, otherwise, I would not have signed up to be part of it. Community is created through engagement, and I am part of the problem because I am not engaging.

“Then the question shifts to why am I not engaging in issues I find interesting and that I am passionate about? My leading hypothesis is that we undervalue how much time we have, and we overvalue how important we think we are. What I mean by this is that we trick ourselves into thinking that we have way less time to do something, anything for that matter than we actually do. We then think that the things that we do need to do are very important, and I understand that sometimes there are very important things to do.¹⁸ I question how important they actually are. The keyword is actually. To me when I ask you ‘how much free time do you actually have, I want to know how much total free time you possess during the day, the potential amount of free time. Not the amount of free time you think you have because these numbers are different. If we were to chart out everything that you had to do on any given Wednesday—for example—we would most likely find that you have over four hours of free time, that is my guess. You probably think that you have hardly any free time outside of work and that your life is a constant scramble from one task to the next. The importance of understanding ‘actually’ is that it attempts to get at the reality of situations. An unfiltered, unbiased reality that we have a hard time engaging with, and I think part of it is due to social pressure! There is an idea that we have to be efficient, and that there are so many things we must do at all times. This idea goes against the grain of

¹⁸ This section was inspired by the French writer La Rochefoucauld, who was a generation younger than Montaigne. Rochefoucauld focused heavily on the negative aspects of human beings and the things that we do. His negative insights were inspiring, oddly enough, in this section. Many of his ideas focused on the interruption between reality and our perception of ourselves. This is what provided the inspiration for the idea of our inability to value how much time we have because we think we are busier, more important people than we are.

progress. Progress was supposed to make all of our lives easier, right? We have all of these incredible home appliances that cut the human effort out.¹⁹ Washing clothes and cleaning dishes have never been easier in human history. Finding information has never been this easy before; we both have a smartphone in our pocket. We could look up ANYTHING we want, but despite these advancements, and so many other unnamed advancements, we act as though modern life is harder to live than ever before. This is the overvaluation of the importance we hold for ourselves, specifically how good we are evaluating our efficiency. If we were to poll everyone in this coffee shop, I guarantee that the majority would say they spend most of their time doing productive tasks. Then if we were to track them during the day, we would find that most of their free time is not spent on chores, work, or crucial tasks; but rather, they spent at least four to six hours on their phones or watching TV doing absolutely nothing.²⁰ The most pernicious part of this whole diatribe is that we have the free time to engage in the things we find truly important: hobbies we love, books we want to read, new food to eat, and so much more. We have the time, but we have tricked ourselves into thinking we don't, and now we leave much less fulfilled lives because of this vicious trick.”

“There is a lot to unpack there! I will start with that vicious trick you just mentioned. It comes down to a matter of effort, and how much effort we feel like we should spend. I really like

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* has sections describing the fault that most humans possess when it comes to our ability to judge. We are not good at judgment, and we are even worse at recognizing this fault. Tying this idea with La Rochefoucauld help flesh out this section of the dialogue. Furthermore, Freud's insistence that we do not like what is on the inside of our mind and thoughts ties into the idea of constantly trying to stay busy. We need to keep our thoughts at bay because we dislike what they have to say about the way our lives are going at this point.

²⁰ The final aspect of this portion came from Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, where the main character Gregor is so concerned that he is going to be late for work, he hardly notices that in the night he had changed into a giant cockroach. The idea that we are focused on the wrong aspects of life was very striking from Kafka's story, and I felt that it needed to be part of this dialogue. I believe that many people are like Gregor, and we are all missing the fact that we have turned into giant cockroaches, metaphorically speaking, since we spent our time worried about aspects of life that did not matter; like our jobs that we hate.

to play tennis; it is something that brings me joy, and I feel good when I get done with a friendly match. It takes numerous layers of effort for me to engage with tennis. The first is the physical toll of playing a full match. I expend all of that energy, and I am tired by the time I am done. Then there is the effort to get over to the tennis court from my house, maybe a fifteen-minute walk, and I need to change my clothes and gather up all my tennis materials. Then I add up all of that effort to come up with a score in my head, and then I decide if my time is worth all of that effort. Each person is different, and we all have that score that decides if we should take action or not. Most people probably lower their score to an unnecessarily low score. How much effort does it really take to put on my tennis shoes? Not much, maybe a minute's worth of time, and I have a minute to spare. I think part of it is biological, pretty much every animal on the planet is designed to conserve energy when they can because it prolongs survival. There is probably some primal mechanism in our brains that tells us 'no, it's not worth, stay and relax' and we do not know that it is a survivalist part of the brain working to conserve energy. I realize that this might be limited to active options to spend our time. You mentioned reading books and doing hobbies as fulfilling times, but my question for you is watching TV not fulfilling in one way or another? There is a level of entertainment that can be reached very easily when watching a good TV show or movie. If I am watching a show that I really like, I do not feel like I wasted time when I watched three episodes in a row. Part of me is thinking, 'okay, that was not the most productive thing I could have done, but I still am good with the time I just spent.' I think you are prescribing an idea of human potential that is very active in its assumption. Humans are at their happiest when we are actively doing something we adore. I like where your head is, but I do not know if action is essential for human happiness because plenty of people live satisfying lives spending their free time watching TV. I think I know what you are trying to get at. Watching TV is a

complacent choice for someone to make when they could be doing something that makes them a magnitude happier. You want people to be at the highest level of happiness that they can achieve through any means possible, and I find that admirable, but a tad unrealistic. We all make the calculation I just talked about, and we often go the route that requires the least amount of effort. It might seem that this is a negative aspect of human existence; we rather would avoid expending energy than pursuing a hobby that brings us joy. I also do not know how wise it is to make charges against the entirety of humanity from a coffee shop in Manhattan. It seems like a bit of a cheap shot, ya know?²¹

“Quickly pivoting back to our discussion on community and neighbors and such; Community has declined, and you talked about social organizations, but I want to add a more individual personal touch to this. Don’t be afraid to tell me I am wrong here, but Community is becoming rare because we are not socializing in person as much as we used to. I saw some little fact in the news the other day, you know how they will throw in interesting studies sometimes, and it said that thirty percent of Canadians feel disconnected from their neighbors, fifty percent of Americans don’t know their neighbor’s names, and one-third of Britons couldn’t pick their neighbors out of a police lineup.²² Tell me that is not a bit crazy? How can fifty percent of the people in this country not know their neighbor’s names? The mainstream American lifestyle—the nine to five workdays, kids in school—leaves suburban neighborhoods empty for half of the

²¹ This entire section of the dialogue was inspired by Arthur Schopenhauer’s essay “The World as Will.” I do not take directly from the negative aspect of the Will, as Schopenhauer sees it, I do agree with the idea that the Will in that we all have a driving force inside of us pushing us to make our decisions. In this section I highlight the different forms that force can manifest itself. I show that there is a desire for us to do the things we enjoy, and another that forces us to engage in meaningless things. We use entertainment because that force, or Schopenhauer’s Will, is pushing us towards complacency, and away from worthwhile endeavors.

²² This is a reference from a study Bethune talks about in his work.

day, especially since both parents work in many families nowadays.²³ Think about our grandparent's generation, often our grandmothers were just hanging out at home since a lot of women did not work in that generation. They had more time to engage with the neighbors because they were home. Who knows if they actually wanted to get to know their neighbors or even liked them? It could have just been, 'well I am bored, and I know the three neighbors are around so I will see what they are up to even if Becky is kind of annoying,' and this process of seeking out others to soothe boredom still forged strong enough connections to where a community could form on a larger scale. I don't think we can have Community if you can't talk to the person next door. In fact, in this day and age, a good neighbor is someone who isn't gonna bother us!²⁴ I could not go over to my neighbor who got my mail for me today and feel comfortable asking for their support on an emotional issue, heck I hardly talk to him: he is not part of my life, my active life.²⁵ I found out today that he is a pretty decent guy, and I would not mind if he was more involved in my life and I in his. Look at the way you and I live, we both live in single-bedroom apartments and pay too much in rent for those crappy places. We had a desire to live alone, so we didn't have to put up with annoying roommates anymore, but when we step through the door, we turn into hermits practically.²⁶ Then the neighbor becomes someone who, heck, I don't know, and should I trust them? I share a wall with this guy, but I have an uneasy feeling every time I see him. This is not a good feeling to have, and I am positive that you have experienced it as well! It is good to talk to new people, even if we do not agree with them. We can't lock ourselves into the echo chamber of our choice, and the task of

²³ This is another reference from the Bethune study as to why community is declining; nobody is around to form it properly.

²⁴ This is the adaptation of an insight Bethune had in his work. We do not want neighbors to be good social people, we just want to be left alone.

²⁵ A continuation from the previous footnote.

²⁶ An additional adaptation of Bethune's writings on why we are living alone, and how it is hurting our communities at large.

depolarizing politics in this country could start with just talking to the neighbor.²⁷ The point is that Community starts with having relationships with those who live closest to us, and then it expands out from there.”

“I have to agree Community starts with our neighbors, but it does not end there, obviously. Socializing is a really important part of the changes I think we would like to see. People need face-to-face interaction, almost like we need air and water.²⁸ Did you know that sufficient amounts of socializing strengthen the immune system, can help you survive severe medical issues like a heart attack, and helps balance your hormones?²⁹”

“I also heard that if you have a tight-knit group of friends who you hang out with and eat and shoot the breeze with that it can add fifteen years onto your life compared to someone who is a loner.³⁰”

“Exactly, socializing is super important for human health and wellbeing, but there is a loneliness crisis going on in this country. A lot of people have declared the age we live in is the communication age because we have so many different ways to contact people we know. I think a lot of people would like to start with social media being the cause of this decline, but I do not think it is the only boogeyman at work here. You mentioned the way that we live aids in the decline in our tendency to be friends with our neighbors, and I think that car ownership and having to commute a far distance for work also hurt the chance for Community to become

²⁷ Engaging with people from other beliefs structures, religious or political for example, can lead to a decreasing of partisan tensions in society because we learn to better tolerate those individuals. This is a finding from the Bethune article.

²⁸ A novel comment from Bethune based on studies showing the need for human connection.

²⁹ Another point from the same section of the Bethune article, further showing the importance of community and in person communication and interaction for humans.

³⁰ An additional scientific anecdote from the Bethune article.

established.³¹ If we all have our car, why go to all the trouble to come up with a carpool schedule, to go back to your idea of our calculation of effort. Carpools are difficult to form since you might work on one side of town while I work on the other. Car ownership means that we do not ride public transportation often, obviously, it is different for us here, but the country as a whole does not rely on public transportation. I remember back in Kansas, when I was a little kid, there was a bus system in my hometown, but not many people used it and it was a bit run down. A carpool and utilizing public transit would offer an opportunity to socialize with people, but that is not the way it shakes out for many Americans. It is a missed opportunity, honestly.

“As I said early, some people call this the golden age of communication. The proliferation of the internet has led to multiple forms of fast and reliable communication through various media. The internet and social media especially do nothing in terms of expanding our social networks.³² The whole purpose of social media is to do just that, but there is a difference between the number of followers you have on a social media account, and those followers hardly ever translate into new real-world social connections. Internet integrated communications only make communicating with people we know in person more effective. There is this specific idea on how many social connections any one human can have, and it is called ‘Dunbar’s Number,’ and the way that this works is that the human brain can only effectively handle one hundred and fifty social connections.³³ This approximate number is reflected in the size of hunter-gatherer tribes,

³¹ A note from Bethune that because we do not work where we live, it is another reason why there is a difference in the quality of community.

³² This idea is influenced by Kafka. Gregor was a fairly antisocial person, and the impact of his absence from the world was felt only by his family and briefly his boss when he did not show up for work. Social media does no real good for human socialization. It allows us to stay in our rooms, and for all the outside work knows we could be giant cockroaches, and the way that some people engage with social media and the internet, it is hard to see the difference. The preferred medium of communication for some people in this country is digital, which goes against the very nature of humans.

³³ An interesting sociological idea that humans have limited brain capacity to engage socially with people. Dunbar’s number is an actual idea, and then the next sentence is a continuation of this idea with specific examples. All from the Bethune article.

agricultural villages, Amish communities, and it is also the size of effective military units. Dunbar's Number shows that the amount of followers you have on social media does not translate into real-world connections and that it cannot possibly translate into real-world connections because our brains do not have the capacity to keep legitimate social tabs on that many people. The infrastructure is infinite to reach out to people, but the capacity to have meaningful connections is not.³⁴ When we try and connect with someone online, we do not build a feeling of closeness, which is the very goal we are striving to achieve when we try and connect with someone online. We can only achieve that goal in its entirety if we meet up with that person in the real world. The point that I want to get across is that the distance between individuals has grown in certain ways. My point about car ownership is that we are constantly by ourselves as we drive long distances to go to our job, and social media puts an unbreakable barrier between us and the desire to have genuine connections with other people. This all adds to our discussion of community and neighbors, the technologies that were designed to make the world a more integrated and connected place have helped drive it farther apart than we could have ever imagined³⁵. It drives us away from the people who live next door, and it was designed to bring us together, that is the irony.”

“I'm gonna be honest, Rob, you started to confuse me a bit there during that last point. I was not sure where you were headed for a bit, but now it makes sense. Technology should have only helped strengthen communal ties, but it did the exact opposite, it pushed away and deeper

³⁴ This reference, along with 35 and 36 are all from the Bethune article. The idea was to integrate his findings into the dialogue. Very similar to citations, but because it is a dialogue I felt the footnote format was a better way to reference material than in text notations.

³⁵ This idea is directly inspired by Ivan Ilyich from Tolstoy. Ilyich has no genuine connection with anyone, and his existence suffers because of this. It is extremely unfortunate for Ilyich, and it makes his death painful because of the realization. The shock value for the reader is inspiring to make sure we do not live a life like this. We do not want to get to the end of existence, and feel that you never knew anyone, and social media and digital communication are only helping this take place even more so.

into our smartphones. We are not designed, biologically speaking, to communicate through any medium outside of verbal or non-verbal forms of communication in person; in fact, 7% of communication comes verbal or written words while the remaining 93% comes from non-verbal body language.³⁶ The quality of communication is shot when we try and do it over text or social media, we need face-to-face interaction! It goes back to the idea you mentioned earlier about actually doing something. We communicate all the time, but we are not communicating; it is the difference of superficiality compared to authenticity.³⁷ If we use our body language for the vast majority of our communication, then when we text, it is not real communication. It is not quality communication...

“You know what just hit me?”

“Based on your body language, it would seem that you seem surprised by something, and you are going to tell me, right?”

“Yes, I am going to tell you! Of course, I will tell you, what would be the point of me saying ‘you know what just hit me?’ if I’m not going to tell you? That was a dumb question. Anyway, what just hit me was a common thread through our discussion so far today. It is the idea of quality. You touched on it earlier with your views on the way people spend their time: they are not spending their time in a quality way in your eyes. Then just now, our discussion on communication and its ties to Community showed that both of these things are lacking quality. It is the scarcity of quality that we find so troublesome.”

³⁶ Interesting study findings from the Tarcinado article. They are here to add a bit of research depth to the dialogue beyond philosophical considerations.

³⁷ Another finding from the Tarcinado article.

“So, Leo, you are saying that the lack of quality in these aspects of life leads to the problems we are all facing?”

“That is exactly what I am saying, but it is not as simple as you just made it seem to be. Quality is everything, in a certain way. Nothing is truly enjoyed if it lacks the quality to some degree. The question is now what is quality? We know quality when we see it.³⁸ We know a quality friend, we know a quality conversation, and we know a quality community experience. It is something that we can feel inside of ourselves, but we cannot control quality.³⁹ The difference between something that is quality and something that is not, is a stark divide.⁴⁰ I do not think designer brands are a good example when it comes to quality. I do not want to tie this idea to excessive monetary value means an item is more quality than others. Quality is an interactive experience, and I believe that there are different variations of quality depending on who we were to ask. That is why you can't tie money to the idea of quality. Price is reactive of quality, not the other way around.”

“If I am understanding what you are trying to say, you are saying Quality is the yardstick with which we measure all things in life with?”

³⁸ The idea of Quality is directly influenced by Robert Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. A book that focuses heavily on the history of philosophy in general, specifically looks at the idea of Quality and its role in human existence. Pirsig divides the world into three main categories, which all of human culture and advancement fall under: rationality, emotionality, and Quality. This trinity focuses on Quality being the bridging force between the opposing rational and emotional aspects of humanity. The idea that we can see Quality when it is there, and that we are aware of when Quality is missing is central to Pirsig's thesis. Quality is the measurement that humans use to understand the value and worth of an idea, thing, art, music, etc.

³⁹ Coming back to Tanner's points on the Stoic idea of control and melding it with Pirsig's ideas on Quality. In a way we cannot control Quality. Pirsig insists that Quality exists on its own outside of direct human influence. Humans can produce works that have Quality, but that ordinance is outside the control of the producer. It exists like other metaphysical notions do. Our job is to accept the lack of the control in terms of quality, thus the merging of Stoicism and Pirsig's thesis.

⁴⁰ This is the furtherance of reference 38. Humans have a strong ability to tell when Quality is missing, and that is what makes quality so appealing. We enjoy when we see it in action, and it is the unspoken nature that Quality possess that makes it enthralling. For something to be Quality, it does not require the permission to do so from a person. It is Quality on its own.

“Yes, precisely! Quality is the final measuring stick. The part that I am having trouble getting out is the part on how we know what quality is. You can’t define it, but you know it when you see it. It is something that we can pick up with either our intuition or our senses. Quality can be physical and mental at the same time. I can see a quality good, and I can encounter a quality experience, sometimes they can happen simultaneously! If we can somehow include quality in the tasks, we engage in I think we could solve so many problems. There are a lot of aspects in this world and this life we live that lack quality. The best part of quality is the flexibility.”

“Is it too flexible though? You are making it seem that quality is in the eye of the beholder, and if this is the case, then how can we apply quality on a large scale? I do not know how this is possible on a community level, for example.”

“I don’t think that we should have committees on quality whose job it is to figure out what is acceptable quality and what isn’t. If you want to watch quality die, then we will make quality committees. A committee is a great way to kill just about anything worthwhile. The way that I am currently thinking about this is that quality should be at an individual’s discretion. The large-scale benefits of quality will be an accumulating process. If you, and I, and everyone else in this coffee shop were to apply our highest level of quality to every situation we find ourselves in then imagine how life could change. This is how quality snowballs into something that can be seen in a community. Quality efforts in our interactions with those around us will improve relationships with friends and neighbors alike. I don’t think that I am just asking for people to give a crap because I could see how it might come across that way. Quality and giving a crap are similar, but giving a crap is below quality. In order, to have Quality you need to give a crap, yes, but it is not THE solution to the quality problem. Quality is the ideal we wish the world could be, and quality is comforting. Think about when you get a quality London fog; it is so obvious the

difference than some cheap, drive-thru version. That is what I am trying to say, really, quality is felt, and it lasts and creates more quality wherever it goes. You drink a quality London fog during the day, and that makes you happy, thus raising the quality of your mood which impacts the interactions of others in a higher-quality manner, and so forth! Do you get what I am getting at, Rob? Do you see what's what here?"

"I do see what you are getting at, and it is very interesting indeed, but I still have practicality questions. How can this be taken on and integrated into society? What would that even look like, an overall increase in quality? It seems like a very nice thought, but I do not know how much will change in reality. Life in this culture seems to remove quality at every chance it gets. Look at the way we design our cars. Look at how everything comes in plastic. There is nothing less quality than cheap plastic rubber ware, and every person in the country has a set of plastic tubs that they can never find the lid too. That is certainly not quality. Items are built cheaply and break. I do not see a lot of quality in this world, unfortunately, Leo."

"If you want to accept mediocrity then that is your death sentence. Making more room for quality in our lives should be one of the easiest things a person can do. It is the way that you think things should be done. It is what you want! That is the beauty of dispersive quality. Try and do things according to your best interest and you surely could make something quality as a result."

"I think you are starting to reach a little bit now; this just sounds like an Epicurean Rodeo to me."

"An Epicurean Rodeo! Wow, that is a choice statement if I have ever heard such a thing! Rob, my friend, you always do this! You can't accept something so simple because it is simple.

This New York lifestyle has you a bit highbrow when it comes to the ideas you like to engage in. If you didn't see it in this week's copy of the *Atlantic* or *New Yorker* it does not have any staying power. You are allowed to just think freely without elite support. This is a false sense of quality, and you think that my version is a bit too everyman for it to have any merit.”⁴¹

“Ah, Leo, you get fired up so easily. I do not think I am snobbish, for starters, but snobbery is a tough trait to see in oneself clearly, so I will take your word for it. I think that it is getting time for us to get on with our day. We have been sitting and chatting for a long time. I need to do some chores back at my place.”

“I suppose you are right, Rob, we have been talking so long that the rain stopped. I did enjoy the babble even though you think the individually spread quality is an Epicurean rodeo. I am telling you quality is the basis of the world we want to build. It creates stronger communities, better neighbors, and more engaging interaction. This chat was a quality chat. You can feel it in your bones, you were engaged and thoughtful throughout the whole deal. That is quality, my friend.”

“Hm, maybe you are right, but maybe you are not! It is hard to give you the satisfaction even if you are.”

“That is lovely to hear, Rob, truly! Anyway, if you need to get on to your chores, I suppose that I will mosey on out of here. I think I am going to take a stroll and mull over this

⁴¹ This is a continuance from the previous footnote. An example of how people will try and force Quality, but as Pirsig expertly states; Quality exists at the cutting edge of existence. It is the front of the train that is driving between reality and nothingness. Quality is what drives humans to strive for a life well lived. Just because there is social status on an object or newspaper does not mean it is truly a Quality newspaper.

whole quality business some more before the next time I see you. Rob, do me a favor, will you? Talk to your neighbor the next time you see them.”

“I can do that Leo, no problem, it was good to see you.”

“Yeah, it was good to see you too, Rob. You take it easy now!”

Robert watched Leo walk to the door, and head out onto the street. The sun had begun to shine rays down onto the wet pavement. The smell of rain on asphalt was strong and sweet. Leo is a peculiar guy, Robert thought. He gets so excited so easily any time that an idea grabs him. It is a quality that is admirable; however, to be passionate is to find the things in life you favor and engage with them wholeheartedly. As Robert walks down the street, he thinks of what he is going to say to his neighbor the next time he sees her. Clearly to just say hello would be disrespectful to their afternoon conversation in the slower side of Manhattan while the rain came down, and the smell of coffee wafted lazily through the café. People focusing on computers trying to talk to someone, somewhere else, missing out on the beauty of the community of coffee lovers all around them. We often find ourselves caught in the trap once it is too late. Hopefully, if we all add just a bit of quality to our lives, next time Robert walks in that shop he will hear the hum of conversations bouncing from table to table. With that thought, Robert smirked and began his walk home as well.

Annotated Bibliography

Bethune, Brian. "The End of Neighbours." Macleans.ca. August 09, 2014. Accessed April 09, 2021. <https://www.macleans.ca/society/the-end-of-neighbours/>.

Cook, Gareth. "Why We Are Wired to Connect." Scientific American. October 22, 2013. Accessed April 13, 2021. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/why-we-are-wired-to-connect/>.

Freud, Sigmund. *Civilization and Its Discontents*. New York: Norton, 1961.

Huxley, Aldous. *Island*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1975.

Kafka, Franz, and Katja Pelzer. *The Metamorphosis and Other Stories*. Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2017.

Kerouac, Jack. *The Dharma Bums*. Penguin Books, 2018.

McClay, Wilfred M. "Why Communities Decline." *Modern Age* Spring, no. 2019 (June 17, 2019). Accessed April 8, 2021. <https://isi.org/modern-age/why-communities-decline/>.

Montaigne, Michel de. *Montaigne's Essays. A Selection*. 1911.

Pirsig, Robert M. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: an Inquiry into Values*. Vintage Books, 2014.

Rocheffoucauld, François La, and Philip Dormer Stanhope Chesterfield. *Maxims and Moral Reflections*. Melbourne: Lothian, 1906.

Schopenhauer, Arthur. *Essays and Aphorisms*. Penguin Classics, 2017.

Tardanico, Susan. "Is Social Media Sabotaging Real Communication?" Forbes. April 30, 2012. Accessed April 13, 2021. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/susantardanico/2012/04/30/is-social-media-sabotaging-real-communication/?sh=96285522b62f>.

Tanner, George. *Stoicism: A Detailed Breakdown of Stoicism Philosophy and Wisdom from the Greats: A Complete Guide To Stoicism*. 1st ed., CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017.

Tolstoy, Leo. *Death of Ivan Ilyich*. Broadview Press, 2016.