



July 2020

I'm over six months into my offline year. That's more than 182 days without the internet! No social media, no email, no FaceTime, no Netflix, no Wikipedia, no Google...you get the picture. Those are all parts of the internet though that I could live without. I don't really miss them. However, at this halfway point, there are lots of other parts of the internet that I wish I could use:

1) Logistics – It's definitely a stretch to say I "miss" online forms and portals, but, as I've written about in previous letters, registering for my grad school classes without the internet proved impossible. I've been able to maneuver around most of the other logistical reasons that I might have needed the internet but it's been a hassle for things like buying bus/plane tickets, getting health insurance reimbursements, and collecting tax forms. In my lifetime, the infrastructure for completing these functions has pretty much all migrated online. Without the internet this year, I've been forced to inconvenience myself and others. Put less cynically, I learnt how important it is to have a network of people I can rely on. It's taken me 30 years, but I'm finally learning to be less independent.

2) Streaming – Two of my friends came out with TV shows this year that I really want to watch but they're only available online. The first is my friend Salina's ceramics show, *Making*. It's on a new streaming service called Eternal TV that one of her friends started. Salina told me that it's not a straight-up ceramics show but has something different about it. I'm very excited to check it out next year. The other thing I wish I could watch is an episode of an Apple TV show I'm in called *Little America*. It's about a gay refugee from the Middle East escaping to the USA where he finds a queer community to call home. My friend Stephen directed it and hired a gay actor from the Middle East to play the main character. However, because of Trump's travel restrictions, the actor wasn't allowed to work in the US. (The story of the episode makes the episode's story a bit misleading. I guess we can't believe everything Apple tells us...) Unable to film in the states, the shoot was relocated to Montreal, and Stephen invited me to be an extra. Although I can't check out the episode yet, James watched it and spotted me. He said I'm just a blur in the background...but a fabulous blur!

3) Communication – Although I'm able to phone Canadian and American numbers with my cellphone, I haven't really been able to phone friends or family who live anywhere else this year. I have a cousin in Australia and my friends in Berlin who I would love to phone more, but without the internet, it's very expensive to call them. I also wish I could join James for some of the video calls he does with his friends and family in the UK. I know he's told them all about my project, but I still feel a bit rude when he's on a call and I walk by with my eyes averted.

4) Research – Especially with libraries and campus closed during quarantine, it has been difficult to access new resources to help me with papers I'm working on. I collected lots of books and articles

before the year began, and – because I can’t download new things to read – I’ve had the time to make my way through what I already have more thoroughly than I probably would have been able to otherwise. It wouldn’t be possible though to keep up with new research if I wanted to stay offline forever. One way I’ve gotten around the issue this year has been with the power of USB-sticks and friends. I’ve really appreciated all the friends and colleagues who’ve put files onto jump drives and shared them with me. I think of it as a personalized offline library. Again, this year has been an ongoing reminder of the good that can come out of relying on others.

I feel like, until this offline year, I thought of reliance as something one turns to out of necessity when independence fails. I was half right – reliance is something we come to out of necessity when independence fails, but now I’m realizing that reliance actually comes first and independence never takes us all the way. It’s like the old saying goes, no single person has all the knowledge and skills needed to build a smartphone from scratch. We depend on others whether we acknowledge it or not. And we can be independent while also dependent. Or rather, we always are both. I mean, I don’t want to be so reliant on others that I lose myself, but embracing the ways we’re all connected can help us fit together more fairly and effectively.

Speaking of which, James moved in this past month! It’s the first time I’ve lived with someone in over five years, but it feels scarily comfortable. I keep thinking that something’s gotta give, but maybe we’re just a good fit. One incompatibility though...James uses the internet!! So there’s WiFi at our apartment now. (Can’t have a wifey with WiFi.) Makes my internetless year just a tad bit more absurd. When I tell anyone that James moved in, the first question they ask is whether that means I have the internet now. I reply, “no, *James* has internet.” Some people then ask whether James is withholding the internet password from me so that I can’t use it. I clarify that I’m not staying offline by making sure I don’t go anywhere with WiFi. (And our password? Askmelater.) I’m not missing the internet so cravingly that I’d compulsively go online if only I had the opportunity – although I have had nightmares where that happens. My parents were already excited to meet James and frustrated that Covid had kept us all apart, but they said that – now that he’s living with me – they *really* want to meet him. My mom’s been telling her friends I’m dating an epidemiologist and she said that everyone’s very interested. It’s funny how much people know about epidemiology now. A year or so ago, I heard the term and wasn’t able to pronounce it. (P.S. I think it’s a good sign when your parents haven’t met your partner yet, and they’re already bragging to their friends about him.)

This month’s challenge is more about reflection than action, but hopefully it can lead to more careful and intentional internet practices and online habits. Thinking about the list of things I included above about what I wish I could do online, here’s CHALLENGE 6: *Make your own list of what you think you would miss about the internet if you spent a year offline.* After making your list, consider why you value the things you included. *Then, try writing down a second list of any online activities that aren’t on your first list but that you spend a lot of time on.* If you’re up for sharing your lists with me, please do. I’m especially curious to hear your ideas for ways to spend less time doing the things you wrote on your second list, or how can you improve your experiences of them.

I’ve been getting lots of helpful feedback about my previous letters, and one thing I’ve heard a few times is that some of you want to hear more about me and my experiences. In this letter, I’ve tried to do that, but it’s hard because I’m also trying to stay focused on the internet. In order to expand a bit – although still in relation to the internet – I decided to write a bit about one of my favourite things:

POETRY. Just the word turns a lot of people off – possibly because of that lazy or out-of-touch English teacher who tried to cram Shakespeare’s sonnets into your teenage head. Before you tune out though and start skimming the rest of the letter, I want to assure you that I have a very generous understanding of what can be considered a poem. One of my favourite poems I ever came across was what’s called a ‘found poem.’ Found poems are the kind where someone takes text that already exists for some other reason and re-frames it as a poem. They invite us to think about the *extra*-ordinary meanings that ordinary texts can carry. This particular found poem is also a ‘list poem,’ a genre of poetry that’s made up of lists. When I lived in Hastings-Sunrise in Vancouver, I found this poem on the sidewalk and brought it into the Grade 11 English class I was teaching. The found/list poem had been someone’s shopping list, but it had just two things written on it: “2 cheeseburgers” and “smokes.” One of my students pointed out that if whoever made the list can’t remember that they want a couple cheeseburgers and a pack of smokes, maybe they don’t.

I’ve always loved poetry. At seven, I wrote my first full-length poem – a rhyming story about hitting my shoulder, losing my thumbs, and having them reattached with rubber bands. Although I wrote that poem offline, I don’t know if my interest in poetry would have taken off if it weren’t for the internet. Some of my earliest memories online involve a website where users were presented with an assortment of words they could slide around – like the magnetic poetry words people have on their fridge. There was a certain time limit during which we could rearrange the words into a poem. Once satisfied with the resulting poem (or when time ran out), we had the chance to submit our poem for some sort of monthly contest. I don’t think I ever won (and I may have been the only poet competing who was under ten), but I remember that the website had a semi-scam to make everyone feel like a winner. After submitting several poems, they presented users like me with a “special offer” to sell us copies of the poems we’d written as a printed book. I remember wanting to buy it because, well, I was a vain kid. And a printed book of poetry seemed more prestigious than just having some poems on a website. I don’t know if I realized that everyone on the site got that same offer, but either way, I was lucky not to have access to a credit card at that age.

When I was a bit older, my love of poetry moved off of the internet and into face-to-face spaces. At eleven or twelve, my parents signed me up for drama classes to help me overcome my speech impediment (AKA my gay accent). I started memorizing poems to perform – a habit that I still love to annoy my friends with. When I moved to Vancouver after high school, I helped start a series of poetry gatherings called “Cage Fighting” that ran for almost a decade, and when I became a teacher, I taught poetry to my high school students. Here in Montreal I’ve helped run Zine-making classes, garden poetry evenings, and a poetic manifesto workshop. When I first wrote poetry as a little kid, I didn’t have a community to share poems with in person, and the internet allowed me access to a space where I could get excited about writing poetry and have opportunities to share it with others. Once I had in-person communities, I didn’t rely on the internet as much anymore – although it was very helpful for inviting people to poetry events I was organizing. After sharing poetry in-person, I also realized that although I do love poetry, I especially love hearing poems read aloud. And I love reading poems to other people. My memories of sitting together with friends and friends of friends, sharing poems we liked or wrote or found, sharing silence, sharing thoughts – these are some of my favourite memories. There’s something very lost and found about sharing poetry.

The last few weekends, James and I have found (and lost) ourselves on the balcony at 2 am more than once creating more of these memories – joined by Audre Lorde, Leanne Betasamosake

Simpson, Mary Oliver, Joy Harjo, Al Purdy, Billy-Ray Belcourt, and whoever else we can carry. Billy-Ray Belcourt's poetry collections often explore the internet. They also include themes like indigeneity and colonialism, love and relationships, racism and trauma. However, it's because they relate to the internet that I can get away with choosing one of them as this month's recommendation: *This Wound is a World* was Billy-Ray's debut collection. When I first read his poetry a couple years ago, it was on his website. He posts poems there that often get revised into the pieces that end up in his books. I've gotten to hear Billy-Ray read some of his work in-person now, and I was supposed to go with my friend Jayne to hear him again last month, but the event was canceled or moved online – which unfortunately amounts to the same thing for me this year.

Beyond just sharing his poetry over the internet, much of Billy-Ray's work is intimately tied to his experiences online. Many of his poems – like one from this collection called “Okcupid” – describe his attempts to connect with people using the internet. I'll end this month's letter with one such poem. It's from *This Wound is a World* and is presented as a found poem, re-framing an online conversation Billy-Ray may have had on the gay hook-up app, Grindr. He's on the right:

THERE IS NO BEAUTIFUL LEFT

a guy like u doesn't belong on grindr lol
1:54 am

there is no beautiful left
last week i choked up every time i spoke
this is the closest i'll get to speaking my language
1:55 am

are u lookin for a man with an ocean in him
2:12 am

once upon a time
i only fuck men who know i am beautiful for all the wrong reasons
2:12 am

[the past pours itself onto my feet]
did it hurt when you dropped us from the sky, nikawiy
2:20 am

what is the cost of falling into a body like yours
2:25 am

my safe word is *amen*
2:27 am

Amen,
Aron Rosenberg