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Personal Essay.

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In late February, just two weeks before Elizabethtown College – like others around the United States – moved online as a safety measure amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, a colleague and I returned to campus after presenting on online teaching at a local conference.

She drove, and I sat next to her in the passenger seat – a distance no longer allowed between people.

“You know,” I said, “I don’t think I could teach fully online. I’d miss the social interaction too much.”

My comment surprised me for two reasons:

1. I am not an especially social person.

I would rather spend a night in with a juicy television show or a good book. I’d be happy if all of my social interactions could take place with one or two friends at a time, having meaningful discussions over coffee or on a walk outside.

At work, I avoid social engagements like receptions, celebratory lunches or end-of-semester gatherings out of a minor social anxiety. *Who will I sit with? What will I eat? What if I arrive, and no one is there? What if I arrive, and a lot of people are there? Will I be able to survey the room and leave if I want to? Or, will people see me? What will we talk about?*

After a while, the energy and grading time lost to worrying don’t seem worth it.

2. Aside from the occasional celebration, I don’t find academia to be an especially social work environment.

Unlike my friends who teach in the K-12 educational system, my colleagues and I don’t have a dedicated lunch period where we congregate in a faculty room. Without set working hours, we follow our own independent teaching schedules. While this flexibility is a huge perk of my job, it makes it difficult to grab dinner or suggest a spontaneous happy hour after work.

When the semester is in full swing, it’s hard to find the time to even ask a colleague to coffee at the small on-campus café.

My colleagues often say we need to “break down the silos.” I would benefit from simply breaking down the walls in the building where my office is located. My most frequent and meaningful work interactions occur with the students I teach and advise, and with the colleagues whose offices are in the same hallway as mine.

We were only a few days into our Spring 2020 online pivot when my colleague and co-presenter texted: “Our presentation turned out to be prophetic.”

And so did my feelings about remote teaching. Even now, having completed the spring 2020 semester teaching remotely, I still don’t think I could teach fully online.

But it’s not because of the course work.

Given the right circumstances, I could function well as an online teacher and remote worker. I teach writing, which translates well to an online format. At home, I take an actual break for lunch. Without the time and energy lost to a commute, I work more efficiently.

Yet the thing that still holds me back from fully committing to online teaching is the social experience, however limited, at work. I find myself missing the casual interactions with my colleagues and students. I want to pop my head into a neighbor’s office to chat or run into someone while I make coffee in the break room. These impromptu meetings provide an opportunity to ask questions about teaching methods or how to handle a tricky classroom or department situation. In a remote environment, these once simple interactions become a series of emails or phone calls, which lend an increased formality and urgency to the situation. I was lucky to isolate with my parents during Pennsylvania’s shut down orders, so I wasn’t completely alone during this time of social distancing. My parents are interested in me and my work, as are supportive friends who ask about the move to remote learning. But, even so, I don’t think anyone cares as much about the daily goings-on of a teacher except for another teacher.

Like many of my colleagues, I rely heavily on my job for a sense of purpose and intellectual stimulation. But as a single woman who lives alone (though, recently, with a dog), I also depend on my job for social interaction. I’m so drawn to workplace sitcoms like *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Parks*

and Recreation, 30 Rock, and Younger. In part, I relate to the protagonists, each one a single woman who places a great deal of importance on her job. But I also love the message these shows convey: work can be a second home, and your colleagues can become something of a family.

I know there is danger to this idea. A job won't return your loyalty; a career won't keep you warm at night. But these weeks of remote work have taught me there is also a danger in not embracing this idea – even a little bit.

For a long time, I've felt ashamed at the large place my job occupies in my life. As more of my friends married and started their own families, my dedication to and passion for my work felt trivial in comparison. I've berated myself for the melancholy I experience each May when the semester ends, and I feel, at least initially, adrift. Earlier this spring, I tried to rationalize my feelings as I, crying, left an eerily empty and quiet campus on the last day before our online pivot.

Being away from campus has made me cherish, even more, the colleagues who have gone out of their way to check in with an email or text message to ask how I'm feeling and encourage me to enjoy a glass of wine after I looked particularly weary during a video meeting, who have invited me to Zoom in place of talking in the hallway. And I like the version of myself who has responded to these invitations with openness and who has, on occasion, reached out, too.

I'm not likely to change many of my work social habits any time soon, but I hope some of these quarantine habits follow me when I return to campus. That, in place of a text asking, "how are you?," I knock on a colleague's door. That "Can we Zoom?" might become, "Can we go get coffee?"