

# On A Crowded Planet We Are Becoming More and More Alone

Last week, a number of events led me to realize how personally isolated we are becoming.

I recently purchased an E-Z Pass to pay the toll for the Pennsylvania Turnpike. When I drove through the tollbooth, and my transponder was recorded, it struck me that I would never again be talking to an attendant – not even to exchange pleasantries.

Earlier that day I moved money from my savings account to checking. I achieved that online, without any assistance from a teller. Later that day, I stopped at a self-service gas station, swiped my credit card, pressed the requisite buttons, filled my tank, took my receipt, and drove away.

That night I perused a football message board, and added a post to a topic. I logged into Twitter, and tweeted a few links to articles that I had bookmarked the previous day.

Just before bed, I went into amazon.com to look up a few items that I was considering purchasing. Had I made the purchase, I would have clicked on the items, paid for them electronically, waited a few days, and received the items at my doorstep when I returned from work.

The next morning, while I was working with a client, I needed to contact Microsoft. So, I participated in an online chat session with a technical assistant. We exchanged text messages, attempting to resolve the problem.

Incidentally, I was assigned that client via email. My contractor emailed me the information of the client, and her technical needs, and I drove to her home to work with her.

Additionally, another company emails me every few months to hire me for computer projects. They email me all the prerequisite information. I have never met anyone from that company. Originally, I responded to a Craigslist job notification, they called me, and hired me. After each project, I fill out the payroll information through the internet, and they mail me the check.

At no time during any of the transactions I mentioned, did I come into the presence of another person. It is amazing that in so many ways today, with a population larger than ever before, we are coming into less physical contact with our fellow citizens.

People download books to their computer tablets without ever going to a bookstore. Attendance for online schools is increasing, which means learning without classmates. Self-checkout lines enable customers to pay for their groceries without saying a word to any cashier. You can both order your meal and pay for it on kiosks placed on your restaurant table. Meanwhile, fast food restaurants may someday replace every human employee with robots. Good luck flirting with one of those, guys.

Even within the family unit, I have visited homes where families are together, and yet they are essentially estranged. One parent is on the phone, while another watches television. One child is texting someone, while another is on the internet. Some play video games by themselves, or against internet opponents they will never see nor meet.

Will society and the individual both pay a price for our increasing physical isolation? And, how many tollbooth, cashier, newspaper, and restaurant jobs will be lost because of our insistence on convenience?

In the long run, we may produce a society that is more convenient, but I do not believe it will be healthier for the individual or our culture. When we separate ourselves from each other, and disengage from society, we may also lose our humanity in the process. Perhaps that is why we are becoming less patient, more unforgiving, and coarser with each other. After all, the self-service, automated world requires neither kindness nor understanding.

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