



Out of Touch?

For our final story this year, I'm going to reach back about a month, to a day in mid-November when I was sitting at my Mac after lunch, doing some bookkeeping work. I was planning to finish that up quickly, then head downstairs to the workshop to get back to the carving work, but as it happened, my afternoon took a different turn.

A small IM (instant message) window popped up in one corner of my screen, notifying me that one of my 'contacts' had sent a short message. It was from my son-in-law loan over in Vancouver, checking to see if I were perhaps 'free'. I typed something in reply, and a minute or two later we gave up on the typing, switching over to a video phone call instead.

When the camera came alive, and I could see his room on my screen I saw that my daughter Himi was there too. It had been quite some time since I had had a chance to talk with them, because with two pre-schoolers in the house their life is pretty busy these days, but it turned out that they had parked the kids with their grandmother for the night, and seeing by my 'status' icon that I was available, had called to chat for a bit.

I (happily) put aside thoughts of going to work, and the three of us had an enjoyable conversation. These video conversations can sometimes be a bit disconcerting, because the person at the other end never seems to be looking directly at you. They are of course looking at your *image* on their screen, but that is not the same location as the camera lens, so the end result is a bit cock-eyed. One soon gets used to this though, and the three of us chatted away happily for quite a long time.

We talked about everything under the sun, but one particular part of the conversation sticks in my mind. They are a young couple, very busy with children, jobs, and community activities, and - knowing that I live alone here and sometimes don't meet other people for days on end - loan wondered if I was 'happy' with my life.

I of course protested that I was indeed, that my days were full of fulfilling work and achievement, and that I went to bed each evening to sleep as soundly as any baby.

'But how could I be happy without friends?' was the next question, and I tried to assure him that the life I am living here is of my own choice, and - by definition - suits my personality. I did have to admit though, that I did miss some of the social interactions that I had enjoyed when living in Canada, most notably long evenings spent with friends having dinner and knocking over a bottle or two while setting right all the problems of the world. That sort of casual social interaction at home doesn't really exist here in Japan, and even though I have lived in this house for more than ten years, I have yet to enter the homes of any of my neighbours on this street.

To loan - who grew up in a traditional part of Europe where daily life is filled to the brim with interactions with family, friends, and neighbours - this is inconceivable, and despite my insistence that I am content with life, seems to still hold reservations about the matter!

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Well, if this conversation was anything to go by, he needn't worry about my 'isolation'. I said that we had a long conversation, and I wasn't kidding. The call history on my computer shows that we spent three and a half hours on the call, which makes it the longest phone conversation I have ever had in my life, I am sure! And we only quit because Himi-chan was falling asleep at the desk (it was by then past one in the morning for her.)

It's going to be very interesting over the coming years to see how this new video-telephone technology plays out. As we move to having larger and larger screens in our homes, combined with ever-faster internet connections, it's not so farfetched to imagine that I may indeed be enjoying evenings 'together' with friends here in my home in years to come!

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