



## Trained

The video telephone software Skype has become an essential part of my daily routine, and it is difficult to imagine just how I managed to keep in touch with all the people in my life in the time before we had it. My children left home to go to school in Canada back in the mid 1990s, when the internet was just getting started, and although we did use email for some communication, the long-distance telephone was our main way of keeping in touch. But given that calling Canada from here in those days cost upwards of \$1 a minute, our telephone time remained limited.

So when Skype came along some years ago, I quickly embraced it, and made sure that all my family members got on board too. My parents, children and grandchildren are (at present) living in Vancouver, so they all have chances to see each other frequently, but the three members of my own generation are spread out about as far as a family can possibly be on this planet! I am in Tokyo, my brother is around 8 hours to the west of me in Germany, and my sister is 8 hours to the east, also in Vancouver. Conversations between 'pairs' are no problem, but it is next to impossible to get all three lined up at the same time. Those conversations have to wait for the rare family reunions ...

Using Skype has become so much second nature for all of us that it really doesn't register as 'long distance' any more. Back when we were using the telephone to keep in touch, the calls were sometimes quite awkward. I would chat with my parents for a while, but it was always difficult to know how to keep the conversation going, or how to close it off. Knowing that it might be a long time before we next talked together always made the dynamics of the conversations difficult. But such awkwardness has now disappeared. I will see the 'green dot' that shows my parents are at their computer, and might call to say hello even though I myself have to get to work in just a few minutes, as cutting it off will be no problem at all; "Gotta get to work; talk later!"

One downside of this easy and free communication is that it has reduced the 'pressure' for us to get together in real life (or IRL, as I should have perhaps written). Because we 'see' each other so frequently now, it doesn't feel quite so essential to organize those family reunions, and that's perhaps not such a good thing. I am going to have to push myself a bit more seriously to organize a free block of time and get on the plane to Vancouver this summer. Computers aren't yet at the stage where you can hug your grandchildren through the screen!

And Skype isn't just for family of course; if you were to inspect my call logs you would find that my longest, and most frequent, conversations take place with the young American artist with whom I am collaborating these days. Jed and I have a number of different projects under way simultaneously, and they all need plenty of discussion to organize properly, so much so that I think it would be pretty much impossible to run this collaboration without such a tool being available.

His daughter is now completely used to the idea that when she wanders into her dad's workroom, he might be sitting there chatting to a face on his computer screen. She will come over and wave 'hello' to Dave, and then get busy with her toys, pretty much oblivious to my presence, watching from thousands of miles away.

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The other day, I was talking with Jed; it must have been mid-afternoon for me, and late in the evening for him. I had my window open and he could hear the sounds of my community - a couple of people chatting together as they walked by, the recorded announcement of a recycle collection truck passing ... sounds that he remembered from his own days of living in Japan.

And a few minutes later, coming through the open window at his end, I heard the long and mournful horn of a long-distance freight train, a sound that in an instant carried me back to the Canadian prairie, lying in bed on hot summer evenings with the curtains wafting in the breeze, falling asleep to exactly that same sound, far in the distance.

That was a half a century ago. Will Jed's little girl have *her* memory jogged in a similar way by that same sound, way off in 2063?

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