
EXPERIENTIAL INERTIA: THE DECLINE IN COMMUNITY- ORIENTED ACTIVITIES

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When I was younger I learned a spiderweb method to develop friendships. I was homeschooled, so I was exposed to far fewer people my age - the vast majority of my relationships formed from church events my family would attend (and I was obligated to join). I would actively seek out as many of the teen nights, "lock-in" overnight stays, and summer events that I could to balance out the less exciting church functions. From a very young age I could tell that religious worship wasn't really where my passion lied, it was in all the non-spiritual experience. By the time I became a teenager I learned that if I could make friends with one person my age who wasn't homeschooled I could sneak my way into their non-church school events. Once I met some of their friends and figured out which ones were similarly like-minded, I would spread out to their friends and begin the process again, continuously shooting out more silk and threading my network together so that I could move fluidly between different people and groups. Eventually I could begin fraternizing with the heathens and pagans of small town Indiana if I just kept traveling down the web.

This has led to my most intimate relationships stemming from my own personal communities, whether they were situational or home-grown. In high school it was the burnouts who didn't care if it was a school day or not, and likely didn't have a job, so I had constant free access to some human contact. Once I went to college I made connections with those same types by regularly floating around the smoking section; it was one of the only ones on the entire Ball State University campus and located right next to the Freshman dorm. It was inhabited by the skeeziest of the Freshman bunch, which was my perfect demographic. This was especially motivated by the fact that I could see the section from my fifth story dorm room, so any time I felt like socializing I could simply look out and observe my available options from above, window shopping for human connection.

Once I graduated I struggled with having my only regular activity be working. Eventually I was able to make friends with a few coworkers and instigated regular trivia nights at a local bar. That inevitably led to the formation of a four-person team who met almost weekly for the Tuesday night game.

Trivia strangely became the grounding force for a number of my connections over the next few years. By the time I left my job for grad school, still at Ball State so that I could maintain my Muncie Local status, I was a regular for Tuesday nights. I had recently started going to that same host's Wednesday night event that was game show style, making it a multi-night event for over a year. Once I met my grad school cohort I bullied them regularly to join me for these trivia nights. Since many of them were not locals of Muncie, like myself, I had established myself as the expert in the area of cool places to be and things to do. Most of my social activity was directly with my grad school cohort but I pulled one of the former work friends into the mix, along with some of the trivia mainstays. My web weaving skills hadn't deteriorated.

I say all this retrospectively, but at the time I wasn't aware at all of how unconventional my approach to making human connections was - it was all I knew and I just presumed it must have been how others connected. It wasn't until the last few years that I started to zoom the lens back and realize how little social capital really exists in people's lives anymore. By this, I mean that people simply don't know where their webs lie, don't know how to stretch to the next silky node to make new connections, and if they were in a pinch wouldn't have a wide net to cast to receive support. Ask anyone, including yourself, and the vast majority would say that meeting new people is a complete mystery; dating is done through phone applications, when people hang out it is regularly at bars where inhibitions are loosened, and just the idea of meeting up with an old college friend could exhaust you for the rest of the week.

This is by no means just the centuries-long erosion of small communities that rely on each other for all basic needs and social functions, and it isn't even just a pandemic-fresh reality in which in-person social interactions ranged from difficult to literally impossible. By nature there are just less opportunities for people to connect with their communities, neighbors, and networks.

Once I zoomed back in on my own life I realized how critical experiential intimacy was to my ability to connect with others, and for good reason. Experiential intimacy is a powerful piece

of relationships. When I think of my old church friends I remember things like playing the card game Mafia together and always getting to be the narrator (I came up with the most unique murder scenarios, maybe a red flag for a 10-year-old, but that's a story for another time), or that time one of the new girls at the lock-in stuck her foot in the toilet for reasons I don't remember. I don't reflect back on the substances used within some of the more skuzzy places I found myself in during my later youth. Instead, I remember the time myself and a group of smokers tended to someone who got beat up at a party at 3:00 AM; he showed up to the smoking section with a black eye and a piece of glass in his fist because he tried to punch his way through his first-story window. That, or the time when me and a friend drove around town stealing the letters off of business signs to spell someone a happy birthday message. I'm not even all that great at trivia, if we're being honest, and yet it was one of the most prominent features of my social life to the point that, for my 26th birthday, I was thrown a surprise party where the host of trivia night made a game show house call. My work friend who was on the original team met his wife from my grad school cohort, first being introduced at a trivia event we attended together.

Hyperbolic as it may be, I also started to see the high value experiential intimacy plays into social capital, mental health, and just the human experience. When people are connected to their communities they have stronger support systems. There is more room for civic discussions and potential for organizing around important causes, which can lead to greater resources for lower-income or marginalized groups, stronger worker rights, and local policy initiatives. When people lose access to those networks they can become socially isolated, disillusioned with life, even targets of extremism and conspiratorial thinking.

At even the smaller base level people are able to have more fun and joy in life with regular, rich experiences - the book *The Power of Fun* by Catherine Price suggests that people today engage less in what she describes as "true fun," which is when some activity provides the experience of playfulness, connection, and flow simultaneously. The ability to connect with others in a playful and engaging way is how we form bonds, create lasting long-term memories, and just enjoy what we do from day to day.

I don't know why I feel the need to convince you of this, but experiencing life with others is just good for you.

One of the last bastions of social capital and opportunities for fun are experiential markets

that can only be truly enjoyed within a defined, specified community. Think of the markets that really got hit by the pandemic: concerts (no live music to look back on with others), record, book, and board game stores (no one to engage in your preferred activities), bars (no trivia nights), and even church. Once I lost access to those types of experiences I had to get creative; I worked on a music podcast with people I was close to, I joined a local record stores Patreon page, and I even started going to an online version of trivia night hosted by the same guy from Muncie (thank you for that added morale boost when I needed it, Mikey).

In 2021, right as I was able to get my first COVID vaccine, I realized that I had reached a craving point sans experience with others. I thought back and remembered that for years prior I had told myself that it would be fun to try improv but I'd always say "maybe eventually" when it came up in my head. This was around the time it was clear that there wasn't always a "maybe eventually" available.

I started attending classes and workshops at a local black box improv theater in Cincinnati (aptly named Improv Cincinnati, great marketing). After getting through the first two classes I was already getting into a Dungeons and Dragons style team (nerd) and was learning about who had stuck with improv throughout the more challenging pandemic window. I started to connect with my classroom cohort and would hang out with them outside of classes, drinking coffee in the nearby outdoor plaza.

This has become my proverbial personal watering hole where I make new friends, engage in routine practices and rehearsals, schedule my free time around, and simply stay active physically and mentally. The running joke is that an improv theater is like a cult (or a church if you want to avoid bastardizing the whole medium) - they want you to show up every week, tithe to the gods (your improv coaches and teachers), study the forms, and preach the importance of being in the moment to the point that an improv exercise like zip, zap, zop should be a spiritual awakening. However, once you tie the parallels together you notice that the fun in church and improv are the same; it isn't about the prayer or the exercise, it's an excuse to be around people engaging in a like-minded activity.

Given my long history of spider-webbing socially, I felt I thrived in this environment. I would meet one person I liked at the theater, they would invite me to a different practice or show, I would meet new performers, I'd expand my performer rolodex and eventually have hundreds of people I barely recognize and knew how to interact with on a somewhat personal level.

Eventually I felt like I was integrated into a community of people more than I was doing silly-silly-fun-times, but that base was what fostered the community growth. That was even more clear by how many others intentionally sought out classes and workshops, pandemic or otherwise, and verbally suggested it was to meet new people and make new connections.

Something crucial to me that felt very similar to grad school was the intentionally scheduled nature of these events. It was challenging to pull myself away from the obligations of classwork, a thesis, an internship, volunteer research opportunities, and the vast ocean of expectations unless I had my Tuesday and Wednesday nights, seven o'clock sharp, that I prioritized. Today, my schedule is much like the rest of the world; obligations for work, constant barrages of text and emails, paperwork, housework, appointments, and everything between makes it impossible to feel present in the world. That is, until my Sunday 5-7 improv rehearsal where I put my phone on silent and shake eights. In a world of calendar invites, highlighted notebook schedules and constant distractions from those expectations, forcing experience into my routine allowed it to not get lost in the shuffle of daily monotony.

Once you become that ingrained into a community it isn't that you could just easily identify someone you could perform with in a ragtag comedy show - you also might know someone who is looking for babysitting opportunities, might need a new roommate, could let you crash overnight if you drank too much at the bar, knows some of the other fun local opportunities you could engage in together to expand your social radius. For me, even over the last few months as I was preparing to move I was able to connect with a real estate agent through the theater and was given boxes from fellow performers, and even the actual theater itself, to pack. The experience of being present, playful, and connected didn't just create the textbook definition of "true fun," it fostered an intimacy that could solidify lasting connections.

Experiences give a reason to congregate, a structure to thrive in, and a memory that can be traced back. Those memories can hold an emotional weight strong enough that they could anchor you to someone you only met one or two times in your entire life, or could even lead you to the person you inevitably marry. Having something that structures your social capital forces you to stay consistent, not letting life stressors or society's standards of busyness prevent you from accessing your needs and the very experiences that make up your personal history. It can be easy to get stuck in the isolation of a sticky cobweb, but I would encourage anyone to see what happens when you break past the old adherence, travel down the silky spokes and discover what may be tethered to the next radius.
