

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / We've Built Our World for Loneliness. We Could Rebuild for Community.

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I'm Ezra Klein. This is The Ezra Klein Show.

So it's cliché at this point to say Americans are getting lonelier.

And you've heard numbers like these.

Between 1990 and 2021, there was a decrease of 25 percentage points.

And the number of Americans who say they have five or more close friends.

25 percentage points.

And that can just collapse into common wisdom.

But man, that's a big drop.

Young adults feel lonelier than the elderly.

You should look at data like that and not just say, oh, that's too bad.

It should make us say, where did we go wrong?

As a country, we got richer and we got much more lonely.

There's been this effort to get us to take loneliness seriously.

And so you get a lot of conversation about loneliness as a malady, as a public health problem, a look at its neuroscience, what it does to our bodies.

But it's also an outcome.

It is the result of a structure.

It is imposed in some ways by a culture.

We make choices as a society about what we value.

We chase our jobs.

We live far from our families.

We move away from our friends.

We spread out into suburbs and into single family homes set back behind fences and lawns.

We sprawl out with automobiles.

We design for atomization and isolation.

And so no wonder we get lonely.

But that raises this deeper question of why did we choose that?

And what would it then look like to choose otherwise, not just as individuals, but as a society, what would it mean to structure for community?

Sheila Liming is the author of the Nuba Hangout, which diagnoses what she calls a quiet catastrophe.

Her view, we're just having a lot of trouble hanging out, being in the presence of others.

And that might sound small, but to lose the skill, to have so much difficulty,

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just spending open time with people we love or even like, that's actually a profound problem. And so the book is kind of a manifesto for hanging out a recollection of what hanging out is like. But I wanted to go upstream of it a bit because I don't want to just say that hanging out is something you should solve

by doing more hanging out, though, maybe.

But we are losing these capacities as a consequence of the structure.

And so I want to think about the structure of social isolation.

Wanted to have a conversation about what would make hanging out easy?

What would make it so we never lost that skill because we were doing it all the time.

What would make that kind of community the default,

rather than a complicated dance of free time and synced Google calendars?

As always, my email as recline show at nytimes.com.

Sheila Liming, welcome to the show.

Hi.

So you write that, quote, it's no secret that modern life is isolating

and that if anything, it looks to be headed in the direction of increased, not decreased isolation.

Why do you think that's the case?

Well, there's a number of factors, I think, that affect the increasing circumstances of our isolation.

Factors such as time, decreased amounts of time that can be spent freely,

especially freely in social scenarios where we are just hanging out with other people,

interacting with them, having conversation with no set agenda or real sort of like goal that's

supposed to guide that.

Another factor is space, both the diminishment of public space, which is something I talk about a lot in the book,

but also the way that spaces themselves or the spaces that we occupy and frequent

seem to grow more and more spread out.

You know, this is the kind of American phenomenon of the suburbs of space and sprawl,

but it's also something that I think increasingly creates these divides between us as these spaces open up between us.

And it's just harder to put ourselves in proximity to each other, especially in public shared space.

One of the things I understand your book is doing is exploring this downstream consequence of isolation,

of loneliness, of atomization, which I think is pretty under explored,

which is that we lose the skill of simply being around one another.

So tell me a bit about how you define hanging out and what it means to lose it not as an activity, but as a capacity.

That's exactly it. Those downstream consequences that you mentioned are exactly what I'm interested in tracing.

I define hanging out in the book as daring to do not much and daring to do it in the company of other people.

Another way to think of this is spending time with others without trying to put too many expectations upon

what that time has to do or what it has to result in or what it has to produce.

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Yet, I would say that hanging out itself is not necessarily a skill. You don't necessarily like excel at hanging out. You either do it or you don't do it. But I think there are certain skills that are built into the work of hanging out itself. So I'm thinking of it in the book as a kind of like social musculature that we have to expose ourselves to these sort of repeated scenarios, you know, with relative frequency, just like exercise in order to keep those muscles active and in order to prevent them from effectively atrophying. One thing I found myself thinking about a lot reading the book is the difference between the kind of time I spent with people when I was a teenager, when I lived in a group house in my 20s and the kind of time I spend with them now, when we get a dinner invitation three and a half weeks in advance and maybe break it two or three times before we ever actually actually make the match. And this doesn't seem to me to be part of your definition, but it does seem to me to be part of a bunch of the stories you tell, which is a sort of formlessness, a space for spontaneity, a way in which hanging out speaks to having the time and the autonomy over your time to just allow things to unfold with another person, as opposed to both being at the tyranny of a tight schedule and a fairly narrowly defined activity. Is there something to that for you? Yeah, absolutely. I think a key part of hanging out is improvisation, like social improvisation, just sort of making things up in the moment with another person or a group of people. And also in terms of music, because I do have a background as a musician and I think about what musicians try to do when they're hanging out and improvising in a similar kind of way. But yeah, it involves both time and space. You have to have that kind of free, open, shared space in which to improvise. You also have to be able to get together with people in a room, and that is something that's difficult, you know? Like you were saying, reflecting on earlier periods of your life where maybe that was easy because you already kind of lived in shared spaces or in very, very close proximity to other people. And then as you age, those spaces get more isolating, they get more contained, and they also get further apart. Like I was just thinking, as you were talking, Ezra, about how I have a friend here in Vermont, and Vermont's not that big, who I've been trying to hang out with for over a year. It's like we keep making these plans and we keep breaking them or something comes and gets in the way. And we don't even live that far apart, maybe 30 miles. It's just like something we haven't been able to achieve, but we keep trying at it over and over again. I want to pick up on something that was in that answer, which is the 30 miles away and broadly structure, right? You can talk about it as space, it can be a spatial structure, a temporal structure. When I talk about the group house, the point of the group house for me, which I loved that period of my life, is that I lived in a filthy, truly a filthy house with three friends. And atmosphere hanging out, that they were just around and their friends were around and their

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partners were around.

And sometimes my friends were around and my partners were around.

It just happened. It wasn't something I had to do. It wasn't something I had to put a bunch of effort into. For most of human history, we lived more with extended family.

We lived with clans. The atomization of this area is pretty unusual.

I have a friend, Zarina Agnew, who's both a neuroscientist and works on community living arrangements.

And something she talks about is whether you have set the default of your life towards community and you take the problems that may come with that, right?

The sink is dirty. Or you set the default of your life towards isolation, towards space.

And we're in an era, and it's an unusual era in human history that we've really, a lot of us at least, have really set the default against community, towards the values of isolation, of having our own space.

How do you think about that structural dimension? Do you think we're in an era of a profound social mistake?

That is an interesting way to approach this subject, and it's what I'm going to have to mull on a little bit here.

But I think a lot of it stems from the expectation of private property and the expectation of what comes with private property in terms of pride and privacy and distance and isolation that you get to choose when you want to be alone and when you want to shield yourself from society.

As I was researching for the book, I stumbled upon this Reddit thread, and it's where people kind of talk and post photos of, like, these houses that they found on the internet, they're, like, amazing looking, and look, there's, like, no neighbors within, like, 40 miles or something like that.

And I was really, really interested in that, about, like, what is that impulse towards thinking about that the dream is actually to achieve some sort of isolation where you would not have to interact with or even see other people if you didn't want to?

And I think a lot of what it comes down to is fantasies of control, that it feels like we are more in control when we can say yes or no to certain kinds of interactions.

Whereas if we are living in close proximity with other people, we have to seed control.

We have to seed control about whether the dishes are dirty in the sink and what things look like and how messy everything is, but that itself comes with its own rewards.

So, like you were saying, it re-orient us towards other priorities, community, having those people in our lives, social situations, and yes, hanging out as well.

Anne Helen Peterson, who is a writer on Substack, had this really interesting post recently where she was writing about the dream a lot of us have of living near our friends.

And this hit me really hard because for the past eight-ish years, both in DC and in SF, I've lived near my closest friend, my best friend from my teenage years.

And now I'm going to be moving away, which is a heartbreak.

But one thing she was getting at or looking at as people talk about the normalcy of this isolation is that it does have a pretty interesting and unusual class dimension.

She spoke to a sociologist who, Jess Calarco, who said that the average adult in the U.S. lives only 18 miles from their mother, that 80% of U.S. adults live less than a two-hour drive away.

But if you have a college degree or you have a graduate degree, you're much more likely to live

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further away from home.

If you're a dual couple with advanced degrees, you're very, very likely to live far from your family. So there's this way that as people get richer, they seem to get more mobile, they seem to atomize more.

And in my experience, knowing a lot of people like that, I think there's a pretty complicated relationship with it.

A feeling then you sort of optimize for life in your 20s and then you have kids and you're like, oh, hell, I have no help.

I'm losing touch with people.

I'm curious how you thought about the class dimension of it.

A lot of your book is also about the academic experience, which is distinctive here, but is very itinerant.

How did that play in?

Well, first, I'm a big fan of Ann Helen Peterson and I saw that same sub-stack and read it as well. Because obviously I was interested in the issue and I was interested in thinking about that as I was writing the book as well,

about how we prioritize or arrange our lives in such a way so as to prioritize or de-prioritize the kinds of social arrangements that I'm talking about.

And that includes being able to get together with friends and hang out in relatively easy and accessible ways.

And I am an academic, as you mentioned, and in the book I talk a lot about the experience of being sort of forced to move all around the United States as I was working on building up towards that occupation and towards that job trajectory for myself. And I sort of didn't realize that aspect of the job at the time.

I think I'd still had this kind of idea in my head that I was going to get my PhD, move back to the West Coast,

and be located near my family, which did not happen.

I now live about 2,300 miles away from my family.

And, you know, in thinking about the itinerant life that comes with academia,

I think part of that relates to what you were just saying about the average American living within 18 miles.

I think you said to their families, you know, residences, but the average American with a college degree living much further away.

And I think part of that has to do with this sense of making the experience of a college education and the fruits of that college education

in terms of degrees or credentials, making it feel worth it by continuously chasing what we were told to expect was supposed to come out of that degree in the first place.

And for some people, that's just ever higher paying jobs.

And that means that you have to relocate far away from where you were raised to cities or to centers of industry where you can find those jobs.

But for other people, I think it's more about continuing to move along this trail of residence after residence and city after city and place after place

to see if you can get that thing that you once dreamed about when you were in a college class at 18

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or 19 years old.

And so, you know, for me, I talk in the book about having lived in a lot of different states over the past roughly 15 years of my life

and how for me that has actually required me to develop certain social habits in order to reorient myself or adapt to a new place every time I get there.

Because without that, I would tend towards the opposite, which is isolation and loneliness.

And I know that about myself and I know that about my own tendencies.

So it's something I've really had to sort of work on very conscientiously.

And something I've come to believe about that tracking kind of person you're describing there is that it is optimized in a strange way for life in your 20s.

Life right when you graduate college when you're pretty free, you probably don't have kids.

You're probably not married.

Maybe you have a good amount of disposable income because your expenses aren't that high.

And the ability to, you know, live pretty autonomously and move around is really great.

And then depending on what your life looks like, and this isn't true for everybody, but at least for me and many people I know, get into your 30s, you have kids.

And all of a sudden you're locked into a certain degree to a lot of decisions you made at other points, your career, maybe the place in which you live, which is near your job.

But it's not set up for you to have a family at all.

You do have a lot of responsibilities now.

You do need help.

You do need thicker kinds of relationships that are there even when you don't have a lot to give them, which I think is a very common experience for young parents.

All of a sudden you can't give to your community and to your friendships and to your social life the way you once did.

And when you stop doing that, a lot of things begin to not evaporate, but it's just not there.

It's not built for this phase of your life.

Kids and family weren't a huge part of the book, even though I think of them as a pretty big part of hanging out.

A lot of the true hanging out I've done is with family.

So I'm curious how you think about that, that distinction between those phases of life.

Yeah, I think about it quite a lot actually.

So even though it's not something that I deal with directly in the book, I would say it's something that was humming along in the background for me as I was writing it.

And one of the reasons perhaps why I don't talk about family as much, even though I thank the members of my own family and the acknowledgments, is that I live very far away from mine.

The other thing that I was thinking about in terms of family is actually the sort of, I would say, porous nature of the way that we understand family relationships and the increasingly dynamic nature of the way that we look at family relationships.

Because we tend sometimes to have narrow views of what constitutes a family. We think maybe first off in terms of the nuclear family unit, which itself does feel or can feel a bit isolating, a bit small, a bit narrow.

And that's how we get that phenomenon I think you were talking about with parents in their 30s,

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feeling like they're locked into these little boxes that they created for themselves out of decisions that were made earlier along the way.

But I'm also interested in thinking about families in a larger, you know, more dynamic sense. And I'm very grateful that when I moved here to Vermont, my partner Dave discovered that he had some family members who were living here.

We didn't think we knew anybody in Vermont. And all of a sudden he found these people who are, I mean, barely related to him technically speaking, they're his second cousins, but they live close to us.

And now I spend all my holidays with these people. I was just hanging out with them on Sunday morning, you know, watching their kids hunt eggs in the park.

And they're wonderful people and like how quickly they invited me into their life, even though I'm not related to them at all, and how quickly they brought my partner into their life too, even though their life up to this point had not included him.

It was very generous and very gracious and very automatic. And now I really owe a lot of the hanging out that I do to them. So I'm very grateful for having them in my life.

I think there's something really deep there. There's very, very beautiful ideas around chosen family. And I know people who live in chosen families that are really beautiful.

And I have elements of that around me myself. But there's also something I think very important about social structures and family, where the element of choice is somewhat removed.

Something that you talk about quite a bit in the book is one of my favorite threads is how hanging out in this kind of deep occupation of time with others.

It's not always great. Sometimes you have conflict, sometimes you're bored. And one of the things about family is that even when it's not great, you do it again tomorrow and you do it again next month.

And the question of whether or not you had a great hanging is not that important. It's not that it doesn't matter at all. And if it gets really bad, obviously things can change.

But it exists a little bit separate to the point of distant family inviting you in in a way maybe, you know, brand new friend acquaintances wouldn't.

It exists sort of separate from the sort of almost tyranny of choice, like what is the best social interaction I could be having at this moment if I'm not having it? How do I find a better one tomorrow?

How do you think about that question of choice and the structures that aren't so much about choice in our social webs?

That's a really important distinction you're making. Families do have this kind of cyclicity and this longevity built into them.

This idea that, you know, even if things aren't perfect this time around, well, it's okay. We'll get another shot later on. We'll come back together and we'll try again.

And I think that's really important. It is, as you say, very beautiful too and very generous because it does allow for this idea of second chances and third chances and chances maybe even that exist beyond that.

And that's not something that we always extend to our friendships. But one of the things I try to argue in the book is that I think we actually should.

And I do talk a lot about experiences that I've had hanging out that are not ideal, that are

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uncomfortable, that are tense, that are problematic, that are sometimes even verging on what feels like threatening or scary or something like that.

But I also talk about recovering from these situations and trying to find that cyclicity and that longevity even in friendship to keep things going.

Now, of course, what all this requires is time. And that's the hardest thing about hanging out is that it does require time. We have to invest in relationships in order to make it work.

And the more we invest, the easier the hanging out gets. But of course, that all is to start with having and taking time.

It also requires space. So we talked a few minutes ago about the common experience that I've had. I think a lot of people have had of living in a group house when you're younger.

Obviously, families live together less intergenerationally in America than in many other places, although there are many, many intergenerational families.

And at the very least, you often have parents and kids. But then you get into your late 20s, your 30s, your 40s.

And we really have a lot of single family homes, right? We really have a lot of single family zoning for that matter.

You know, I know in the Bay Area of a good number of community houses or co-ops or things like that, but not that many.

So I'm curious about your reflections on that spatial question. It never comes up in your book as a choice for you.

I doubt it really is in Vermont to say, you know, I'd like hanging out to be just a more constant part of my life.

So I'm going to move into a community that has, you know, 60 people in it and the houses are loosely connected or there are eight people per house.

There's a lot less choice in the kinds of living arrangements spatially.

Then you might imagine a rich society built almost entirely around the idea of consumer choice and individual autonomy would have.

And honestly, I find it puzzling because what we have doesn't work that well, but there are very little options to try something else.

I'm curious why you think that is.

Yes, I agree. There is very little choice.

And when you see the alternatives, when they come along, they are sometimes treated with derision in society.

Viewed as like being strange or alternative or just, you know, not right in one way or another, which I think is, you know, extremely unfortunate.

I grew up in Seattle, which has a very big housing crisis these days where real estate is just astronomically expensive.

And these are debates that are going on within the city of Seattle, especially with regards to old neighborhoods that are zoned for these, you know, small quaint charming single family homes.

But could maybe be put to better use if there was a higher density of people being able to live in those neighborhoods.

And here in Vermont, there's a similar situation.

We have a housing crisis here in Vermont as well.

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So when I first moved here and I was, you know, trying to find a place to live and I started out living in a really, really dingy apartment.

While I was trying to figure out what I, you know, a more permanent situation for myself and my partner.

And one of the things I looked into actually was co-housing.

There are co-housing places here in Vermont.

I was looking at a co-housing community in Bristol, Vermont for a while, which I was really attracted to for all of the reasons that you just cited and for all of the reasons that I talk about in the book and hanging out.

What is a co-housing community?

A co-housing community is sort of like, you can imagine it's kind of like condos, right?

So there's these structures of these condos that are built.

Many of them are like physically attached to each other and you own your condo, but your condo itself is sort of small.

And then within the community, there are shared resources like gardens and there's a social hall and there's a community kitchen and things like that.

So you sort of trade, you know, having a lot of private space for having access to these other shared public spaces that are then part of your living arrangement.

So I was interested in the idea, the problem for me was that it was just too far of a commute for me. And so now we're back into the problem of distance again, because I have to report to my job, which is in Burlington, and this was just too far for me to drive, unfortunately.

I am grateful that where I ended up in Vermont, I do have really wonderful neighbors.

And in building relationships with my neighbors, I feel like I'm getting closer to the kind of hanging out that I had envisioned when I started to look into those kinds of housing options.

Something that jogs for me as a memory.

I remember when I was late in high school, probably senior high school, and was going to go to college next year.

And I remember being told by enough people in my life, older people in my life, that I found it genuinely unnerving.

I thought about it a lot.

To enjoy these next four years are going to be the best of your life.

The best of your life.

I heard this so many times, it actually began to freak me out that I was about to have like this was going to be the peak, right?

The peak was coming.

It had a defined window in an end.

I didn't find college to be the best years of my life by any means.

But I have wondered quite a bit if one of the reasons people feel that way about it, one, there's a lot of space and time for you.

You don't have that many responsibilities and you have a lot of autonomy over your time.

But also there's a lot of constant community.

Some of it's annoying.

You don't always like the people.

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The dorms are dirty.

You can, you know, hear people in the next room.

But there is this way in which we have a tremendous cultural pressure on home ownership.

I mean, the number of people I've known who are obsessed with buying a home, even though it's clear to me that economically and in terms of their life, they don't know where they want to be.

They shouldn't get a home.

But they feel like that is a marker of adulthood.

If we have created a cultural pressure towards atomization that in quiet ways has just made a lot of people very unhappy, makes them look back on periods of their life that were more in community, much more fondly.

But at the same time, if you suggested to them they should live in a group house now in their 40s, they would look at you like you're crazy.

If you suggested to them they should be in a dormitory style arrangement, even if they're single.

I mean, that would be a huge step back.

That would be a regression of an immaturity that there's something about the way our cultural stories interact, but also the way the unbelievably rich literature on social unhappiness and loneliness shows up.

It just seems very like an obvious problem, but that is not treated as one. We treat loneliness as a problem, but we don't really treat the social conditions that give rise to it as worthy of any real revision.

Yeah, that's exactly it.

I think in American culture in particular, privacy and private space are synonymous with pride.

They are viewed as the basic ingredients for pride and that it's difficult for you to achieve dignity or to feel proud of yourself if you lack them, which is problematic, of course, on many levels.

And one being the epidemic of loneliness that you just talked about and which I talk about in the book too.

And it makes me think of interactions that I have with the college students that I work at.

I'm a college professor here in Burlington, Vermont.

When new students show up on the campus in the fall, there's often a period of discomfort and adjustment.

I can't tell you how many times I've had a new student, a freshman in my office in the first week or second week of school crying because they're struggling to make this adjustment to a more communal style of living that is less private than what they're used to, maybe less luxurious as well. And also just have some new challenges associated with it. I've coached a number of students through that change a bit.

Just, of course, telling them the things you tell them, which is like, don't worry, it gets better. You're going to get used to it.

You're going to discover fun people and things to do and stuff.

And nine times out of ten, that's exactly what happens.

And the next time I see them again, a month later, they have all these new friends and they're happy and they're excited and they're doing things and the world is opening up to them.

So that period of adjustment usually resolves itself and goes away and things end up being okay for them most times.

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But I'm interested in the discomfort that they experience there right away because I think you're right.

There is something about it that feels just anathema to the way we live in American culture.

I'm Josh Klein.

And I'm Elise Hu.

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Are you familiar with the parable of the boiled frog?

I'm Estette Herndon, the host of the run-up from the New York Times.

I believe so but I wouldn't even remind you.

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There's a David Brooks essay, my colleague David Brooks, from the Atlantic from a couple years ago that has been on my mind here.

It's called The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake.

Ah, yes.

And one of the things he says in that piece is that the nuclear family, this idea of the family with two parents and 2.5 kids and a white picket fence and a house in the suburbs, the period in which that was a norm and a successful norm in particular was very limited, he writes, this wasn't the way most humans lived during the tens of thousands of years before 1950 and it isn't the way most humans have lived during the 55 years since 1965.

So since 1965, mostly we're not in nuclear families. Before 1950, we mostly were not.

There's been a kind of breakdown of the nuclear family that's consistently treated as a policy problem and may be.

But he writes, today, only a minority of American households are traditional two-parent nuclear families and only one-third of American individuals live in this kind of family.

That 1950 to 65 window was not normal. It was a freakish historical moment when all of society conspired, wittingly and not, to obscure the essential fragility of the nuclear family.

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And his argument in this piece is that we've become mentally committed and have built a lot of policy and a lot of culture around a norm that was, if it was ever normal, normal for a very, very short period of time.

And that seems clearly true from the data he offers, but also just incredibly weird.

And so I wonder what you think of then as the norm we should have when we talk about what people should be expecting in their own lives or understanding in their own lives.

What would be a more realistic way to understand like a baseline social existence?

I remember that essay by David Brooks, and it makes me think of a book on a similar topic by a colleague of mine, Sophie Lewis, which is called Full Surrogacy Now.

In that book, Lewis talks about the family unit as a hostage situation, that there are certain compulsions and expectations that come with our life as part of a nuclear family unit that are actually impossible to satisfy.

And part of what results from that is pressure, is strain, is anxiety, is these relationships that become themselves hard to maintain because the standards under which the relationships formed in the first place were not themselves very realistic and not sustainable.

So, you know, in that book and building off of Sophie Lewis's arguments in it, I think that something comes closer to an ideal is something where the family structure is seen as a little bit more porous and open,

as inviting to outsiders and to people beyond, of course, the immediate like structure of the home itself.

And that's part of what, you know, I really try to argue for in the book, which is like hanging out with people outside of that immediate family cluster as a kind of release from the claustrophobia of the family environment.

I think if we think back to the COVID pandemic, many of us will recall how difficult it became to live in relationships that we had even chosen or relationships that we really put a lot of love and care into when that was the only relationship that was available to us.

Or the only people that we were able to actually interact with, and it became really, really hard.

So, if we, you know, continue to sort of enforce that as the standard of society, that kind of small minded claustrophobic type relationship, then we are going to see, you know, similar sources of stress and strain.

And I think as a sort of antidote to that, hanging out can be used to open up the sphere of the family a little bit and put less pressure on everybody.

One of the ideas that I talk about in the book for that reason is even hanging out with strangers, being able to exist in public space and talk to people who you don't already know or don't have an immediate relationship with.

I want to keep a class dimension as I haven't read the Lewis book, which sounds very, very interesting.

But a point Brooks makes and a point I see, and something that when we talk about the nuclear family seems unambiguously true, is that we have this ideal, as you just said, it creates stresses and expectations that are unrealistic.

And richer people, by the way, out of it.

You know, the way David puts it is, you know, richer people basically buy extended family.

They buy childcare, they buy cleaning, they buy, to some degree, even friendship and activity.

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And during the pandemic, we saw also a very intense version of that as, you know, you had a lot of richer remote workers who could be at home and a lot of, you know, quote unquote, essential workers who could be paid to take risks that others were not taking.

So I'm curious about, for you, class and community and hanging out, how those things interact.

Yeah, in the book, in the chapter where I talk about third spaces, borrowing this concept from the sociologist, Ray Oldenburg.

I talk about how third spaces, which are supposed to be those spaces that exist between home and work, are something that becomes increasingly difficult for one particular class, I think, to access, and I think that's really the middle class.

The middle class in America is particularly prone to some of the pressures that come with family life, in part because maybe perhaps they're trying to emulate what they see from more privileged members of society.

Because you're right, and Brooks is right here too, that the rich find a way out of this by basically extending their family structures with the help of money.

So they pay for childcare and they pay for cleaning help and they pay for, you know, other people who become attached to the family unit and help the whole family unit run.

But if you don't have that money, then you are left with the expectations of what a family is supposed to look like without all the extra resources and all the extra help.

And I think that's a burden that falls very uniquely upon the middle class.

And then, of course, you know, down at the bottom among working class populations in the United States, we actually see, I think, some of those more proximate family structures staying intact.

Where we see people living with or living closer to extended members of their family than perhaps we would among middle class and upper class people in the United States too.

I want to talk to you about the age structure of this. I was pretty surprised by this recent study by Cigna that found that about almost twice as many adults aged 18 to 24 reported feeling lonely versus seniors aged 66 and older.

So 79% of young adults and 41% of seniors. And by the way, 79% of young adults feeling lonely.

And that's really bad. And you can attribute some of this to the pandemic. But this structure of young adults feeling lonelier than the elderly was consistent in pre-pandemic research too.

So you teach college students, as you mentioned. I'm curious what you observe about how people in that age group, which I think are canonically and stereotypically understood as the most social.

What kind of trouble they're having socializing, not socializing, how you understand the particular loneliness epidemic among young adults?

Oh, they're having a ton of trouble. And I think it's, of course, partially related to the pandemic and the fact that the pandemic is not completely gone.

But I think it's also related to optics because we have far more ways now and many more mechanisms by which to see what hanging out and social life is supposed to look like for other people.

Which means we have far many more ways and tools for comparison with ourselves against those models that we see.

Whether that is, you know, on social media when it's on Instagram or Facebook or something like that.

Or whether it's on television and talk about reality TV in the book as being one way that we kind of

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eavesdrop on other people's social lives.

Or, you know, various mechanisms, whatever it happens to be, most of them which are attached to a digital interface.

And I think this is partially what makes hanging out hard for younger people.

But at the same time, I also think it's part of what makes the optics of hanging out just look more impossible.

That even when it's happening or even when you have access to it, it's just more difficult to find your way into it.

And as an example, I think about what an average college classroom is like these days when I walk into the room before the start of class.

And generally when I walk into the room at the start of class and there's a lot of, you know, young people and they're getting ready to start class,

it's dead silent and, you know, everybody's staring at their phones and I don't blame them.

And what they're doing is they're talking to people most of the time.

They're talking to someone who is somewhere else who is, you know, going to have a conversation with them,

who's going to talk with them about their day, who's going to help them process whatever's going on in their life.

And I don't think it's a lack of a realization that they could have the same conversation with the person sitting next to them.

I think it's more about a fear of the risk that comes from doing that, that there's this kind of public exposure that's going to happen

or you're going to be judged in the act of trying to start a conversation with somebody you don't already know yet.

Ooh, I think there's a lot, there's a lot of places to go here.

Let me, let me pick this one, which is do you buy the view that it is a substitution, digital social relationships,

that in some ways social media was built off of the social graph, right? Originally, Facebook rolls out at college campuses.

It's your friends, early Twitter, you know, takes off as people use it to make plans with each other.

Because I feel like people forget this and a lot of people are too young to remember it.

But it used to be hard to text a lot of people at once.

Like that was not an easy thing to do or early texting didn't really have that quality.

And I think the expectation was this was going to make socializing easier, bigger.

You bring up the advent of Facebook parties at your own college where parties became more open to more people.

You could go as long as you had Facebook.

This was all supposed to make it easier to find your people and to be together in real life.

And we don't really seem to see that.

So is your view that the issue of substitution, that people are doing it online instead of in real life?

Or is your view that there's been some kind of other atrophying or friction that has emerged?

I think part of it has to do with substitution, but I don't think that's the end of the story.

We are certainly spending more time online than we used to and we're also becoming more

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comfortable

with the tools that allow us to form relationships within those online spheres or within those channels.

But it's not simply about the substitution itself.

I think it also has to do with the kinds of behaviors that we cultivate when we're interacting online versus when we're interacting in person.

And one of the behaviors I'm thinking about in particular is the power to curate who and how we interact socially.

So I'm thinking about the way that on the internet, if you encounter someone who makes you feel uncomfortable

or if you encounter somebody who does not hold the same opinions as you

or somebody who is acting in a way you don't approve of,

it's very easy to find a way to not have to interact with them.

You can close the browser tab, you can exit the text message stream,

you can block them if we're talking about social media so that you don't have to interact with them anymore.

But we don't have the ability to do that when we are confronting each other face to face.

And in fact, if we do try to do those things, sometimes there are real social consequences that happen.

And I think that's another level of how this is working.

So it's not purely about substitution, but it's also about the way that we train our habits and our behaviors in virtual spaces

in a way that doesn't necessarily carry over to real life.

It reminds me of a distinction that Arthur Brooks, who has made this very unusual in my lifetime, turned from head of a large right-wing think tank to happiness researcher and guru.

But that he made to me that I also was quite wise between anger and contempt.

And he said that anger is a constructive emotion often.

It's an emotion that wants resolution, that it's going too far to say it brings people together.

But when I'm angry with you, what I want to do is have some kind of interaction around that anger, anger is relational.

And contempt is the opposite.

Contempt is, I just can't even, I'm just not going to deal with you, you're beneath notice, right?

You're not part of my circle anymore, you're not worth engaging with.

And something I've thought many times in the years since he said that to me is that the dominant negative emotion online is contempt

and the dominant negative emotion in real interactions is anger.

In real life, you get pissed off at a person, then maybe you have a fight.

I don't mean a fist fight, hopefully.

But those things bring some kind of healing oftentimes or some kind of new space that two of you can occupy together.

Whereas online, I think you get used to saying, well, I'm done with you.

I can't with you.

And I wonder how much if you get more and more used to that online, it becomes your reaction to

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conflict in real life.

Yeah, I also think that we are quicker to get to the sort of precipice of contempt in online relationships than we are in person.

Things develop faster in part because a lot of our guards are down and, you know, sometimes we don't feel like we have to be as careful about what we're saying.

And so we let it fly a little bit more and then we arrive at that precipice that you were mentioning with contempt just a little bit more quickly.

And then it does feel like the only route or the only way forward from that is to shut things down entirely.

I think that's behavior that we see quite a lot of online.

And in the book, I do try to talk about tension and conflict in relationships, especially in the context of friendships.

And I think that that's actually a sort of inevitable component of friendships.

If you are friends with somebody long enough, you will eventually get into a fight with them.

With me, it'll be pretty quickly because I sometimes enjoy that sort of thing anyway.

But I talk in the conclusion of the book about a friend who I've had for a really long time since I was in college.

And I fight with this friend almost every time I see him.

And yet we always come back.

We always get back to a sort of base level.

We always go back to caring about each other, to being close with each other and being still very present for each other in our lives.

Which reminds me actually of an idea from the essay of Susan Sontag.

In her book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, a long essay that she wrote, she talks about how compassion is an unstable emotion.

Meaning that it's something that actually has to be exercised and trained over and over again because it fluctuates.

You can feel compassion towards someone and then it sort of ebbs away in the moment of anger.

And then you have to kind of come back and find a way to reclaim it again.

So I guess in response to what you were mentioning about the divide versus anger between anger and contempt,

I would think about compassion as something that helps to mitigate that divide.

I want to talk about another dimension of digital life, which isn't social media, but actually operates in the real world.

Which is the rise of wireless headphones basically.

And look, you can go back to the advent of the Walkman, which is for people who don't know the original tape player produced by Sony.

So headphones, walking around with headphones, which people worried would be anti-social even at the beginning.

It's a pretty recent invention in human history.

For most of the time that human beings walked around, they didn't have anything else they were listening to and so it was fairly easy to talk to people.

But even when I moved to DC in 2005, and you know, I was in my early 20s, I was single.

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I remember there being or feeling like there was much more open space to just talk to somebody who might be sitting at the table next to you.

Or maybe they're still at bars. I'm not exactly sure I'm not a big bar goer now.

It felt to me like the idea that you would walk up and talk to somebody you didn't know in, you know, what you're calling a third space in a coffee shop, in a park, that kind of thing.

It was live. And even if they wouldn't want to talk to you, it wouldn't be a particularly unusual thing that you did it.

And now, and I don't exactly know, but I think it's sort of the opposite.

I mean, the idea that you would bother somebody while they have their AirPods in.

It's such a larger social ask, and it is overwhelming, so much clearer signal.

Now, maybe it's better. I'm sure a lot of people got bothered when they didn't want to.

But the reduction in just normal neighborly interaction, just like, you know, talking to somebody while you're in the checkout line instead of listening to this podcast, which I hope is what you're actually listening to in the checkout line.

There's got to be a pretty high cost, and it feels like a change has happened even in my lifetime.

Yeah, I think that the omnipresence of headphones has turned casual conversation into something of an intrusion, almost like the way that phone calls now work in our text heavy culture as well, that they feel like an intrusion sometimes.

I do think that there are certainly problematic sides to that behavior, and I just mentioned briefly in the book about a couple of friends that I have here in Vermont who I met while I was hiking.

My partner and I were on top of a mountain and just struck up a conversation with them.

And what's interesting is in that moment, there was actually another couple that was there on that summit with us.

And we had seen the other couple hiking before, but they were wearing earbuds while they were hiking together.

And I thought that was really interesting because they were hiking side by side, but not talking, like each kind of in their own world listening to their own headphone thing.

Despite the fact that, of course, they were together and they were passing other people and there were opportunities for conversation that would have sprung up.

But anyway, the people who didn't have their headphones in became friends that me and my partner now hang out with.

And I think that largely has to do with the fact that we took advantage of that moment when it was open.

But headphones make that harder. They make that act of taking advantage, feel like a risk, like something that might result in social censure of one kind or another.

I think of this often when I'm at the gym because the gym is now a sphere, of course, that is completely ruled by headphones.

And every now and then, there's a moment where I will try to have a conversation with someone because I'll notice something or maybe I want to ask them a question about the machine they've been using or something like that.

And there's this whole song and dance that we have to go through where we first realize we're trying to communicate with each other and then take out our headphones and turn off what we're listening to and then have the beta conversation and go back to normal.

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And it's really awkward. So I know that headphone use developed in part as a response to the awkwardness of living in the modern world, where we are just assailed by sounds all the time that we don't get to curate or control.

I know that it developed in response to that. What's interesting is that it also makes social interaction more awkward too, because it makes it so that you have to take a step back in order to start that whole thing again once it starts running and you realize that somebody's wearing headphones.

I want to think a bit about the changing attitude towards social risk and particularly for children because the kids getting to you in college, there were kids before that and they were younger and their parents had more control.

And my producer, Annie Galvin, who was working with me on this episode, she made me aware of something that made me feel that either I have gone crazy or the world has gone crazy.

So there's this conflict over sleepovers in social media, apparently, and this hashtag no sleepovers started by a psychiatrist on tic-tac caught on.

And he says in this video, sleepovers often provide the right opportunity for kids to get into things that are way over their head, whether they want to or not.

And I don't know. I'm not saying every sleepover is great, but the level of trying to protect kids from any kind of socially awkward scenario, whereas I got into tons of stuff I shouldn't have gotten into at sleepovers, including teeping houses, which was probably not my finest moment as a person.

But that was important for those relationships and for being a kid. And a lot of parents seem to have defaulted into an almost terror of social awkwardness or misbehavior or danger for their children, which at least seems to me to be contributing to this much larger danger of terrible teen mental health and self harm. But I guess to hold this on the sleepover saying I'm curious what you think when you hear that this fight over sleepovers.

Well, first of all, I was not privy to this conflict. So this is the first time I'm hearing of it. And I do find it kind of interesting. Awkwardness is part of our emotional landscape.

There's no real way to avoid it. It's just something you're going to run into at various points in your life anyway. So I think the idea of shielding anybody, a kid or anybody else from awkwardness is itself sort of silly, because that awkwardness is just going to take place all the same under different circumstances.

But yeah, like you, you know, you made me think back to childhood sleepovers briefly. You made me think back to summers when I was a kid, when I would go to a sleepover at a friend's house that would end up lasting like three days or something like that.

You know, when we didn't have school and I would just sort of continue to exist in this other family's life for a few days and my parents knew where I were and they were okay with it and vice versa would happen our house too.

But I do think of the sort of improvisational behavior that resulted at those sleepovers, none of which was, you know, dangerous enough, I think, to really count against us in the long run.

But a lot of which I think was formative for the relationships that I had with my friends at that age and also for the person that I was working on becoming, you know, which is a slightly more autonomous individual as I was growing up and aging and everything.

So the risks of sleepovers, that's an interesting subject to me and it's not one I had been exposed to until now.

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But risk is interestingly a big part of your book. I would say that an unusual number of the stories, given what I would have expected, involves some level of risk.

There's a story on a New Year's Eve where you fall in with a bunch of strangers and you're going bar to bar and then eventually to a house party and you realize at the end, you're somewhere maybe you shouldn't be or at least you don't know how it's going to turn out.

It turns out okay, but there is a real element of fear there. You talk about an academic conference where a more established academic puts you, let's put it this way, like in a situation you shouldn't have and tries to do you some, I think, reputational harm.

There's a story about almost falling off a mountain and dying that, you know, and even when we talk about AirPods and, you know, a lot of people didn't want random guys coming and hitting on them or random people coming and talking to them.

So there is this interesting way in which the downside of a more openly social and spontaneous life is a fair amount of risk and even sometimes real harm. I'm curious how you think about that.

Well, I'm not sure about the real harm part. And that's something that I do try to explore in the book is thinking about what do we fear when we are afraid of these types of risks?

What are we concerned is going to happen? And what I conclude, at least in many cases, is that the risks themselves are pretty minimal.

Now sometimes we're talking about real bodily harm or risks, but I think those are in pretty extreme examples and cases.

And they're probably more linked to, you know, the fears that we have partially developed from the stories we've heard and maybe even from the media we've consumed than they are from personal experience.

I think when we're really talking about social risks, what we're talking about are pretty minimal things like momentary rejection or feeling like we're not included in something or feeling like, you know, we don't get to participate or come along with something.

And those are things that can certainly hurt in the moment, but they're also things that we get over if we, you know, simply just try again and put ourselves out there once again.

There are experiences that I would say don't necessarily need to last all the time or to do us permanent harm.

I think sometimes what we're afraid of is that, you know, they might, but in the long run that happens pretty rarely, I think.

So much has changed over the past few years.

Oh, yeah, the shift to remote work, supply chain demands, sustainability concerns, it can be tough for leaders to keep up, but we're here to help.

I'm Elise Hu.

And I'm Josh Klein. We're the hosts of Built for Change, a podcast from Accenture.

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One of the chapters is about hanging out at work.

And I think that the story of that chapter is both really important for the book and a little bit distinctive to your kind of work.

It's about academic conferences.

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So I wanted to talk a bit more about the workplace because for a lot of people, that is the majority of hanging out they do.

The place where they most often see the same people repeatedly in an atmospheric way, work together on tasks, have some small talk, occasionally go out for a drink after work.

A lot of that was disrupted profoundly by the pandemic in ways that many people like having remote work and also there does seem to be a cost in loneliness and not building the kind of deep and collaborative and friendly relationships people have at work.

I think it's interesting that a lot of the major media representations of hanging out, they take place in workplaces like the office or Parks and Rec.

How do you think about the workplace and the good and the bad of that being such a central site of socializing?

Gosh, I miss small talk at work.

It's not something I get to experience very often these days anymore because of the constraints that were introduced to office work during the pandemic have not really left us.

We're still living with the residue of a lot of that, I think.

During the pandemic, obviously, workplace culture, the ability to just gather informally and talk to people around a coffee maker, around a printer or something like that was certainly curtailed.

We didn't have those same opportunities.

Many of us were working remotely and we couldn't have that casual small talk that helps to sustain relationships in the workplace.

Recently, I was in Pittsburgh where I was visiting with a friend who's also a former student of mine, somebody I taught when I worked at the University of North Dakota where I was before I moved out here to Vermont.

This student who's now in her late 20s and has a job and everything, last time I'd been talking to her, she had been mentioning that she didn't love the job, she loved the work, but was sort of finding her way into the job.

It was a little hard.

So this time when I was talking to her, this is about two years later and I asked her how the job was going, she's still in the same place and she said, oh, it's so great because I made friends at work.

And now I have these people that I know I can go in and I'll see pretty regularly and I'll talk to them and that has enhanced the quality of the work that I'm doing on a daily basis.

And I think that's true for so many of us.

But what makes it difficult is that the arrangements of work have really shifted.

They've shifted during the pandemic, of course, and then they never really shifted back, at least not entirely.

There's been that ongoing debate over getting workers back into the physical workplace and having them use the space of the office versus those who would like more autonomy and the ability to work from home.

But at the same time too, one thing that has happened as a result of that debate and that ongoing discussion about working conditions is that hours and schedules have shifted.

So some people use their physical workspace but they don't use it all the time or they don't use it consistently or they use it for a few hours and then they leave or only on certain days of the week.

And with all that inconsistency, it's really difficult to develop work relationships.

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It's hard to have that small talk and those casual interactions and it's hard to just run into people in the hallway.

That's something that I'm still experiencing at my workplace, even though we are back to full instruction on campus and things are sort of back to normal in that sense.

I do wonder how big the cost of that is.

So when we talk about work relationships, it's easy to hold to that conceptual box.

But when I think about my own life, I moved to D.C. when I was 21.

The people I got to know were my function like cubicle mates at the American Prospect.

We used to go out to the Black Rooster, which was a nearby bar almost every day, which I'm not saying was the healthiest behavior.

They became my good friends and through them I became friends with their friends who did not work with me.

I then had this sort of sprawling network of friends in D.C. who I loved and who I love.

It's through them that I met my now wife.

And so things that begin as work friendships don't always stay there.

I mean, that is really porous.

You get to know somebody at work and then you get to know their friends when you come to watch a football game at their house on the weekend.

And there's a lot that is good about remote work.

I work remotely now and I actually like it quite a bit.

But I worry that given how bad isolation and how many decisions to go back to the points we were talking about at the beginning of the conversation

we've made towards atomization to atomize our work lives too is in a world where we're already seeing really, really profound consequences of lonesomeness.

I mean, that might be a bigger trauma or a bigger social cost than I wonder if we realize.

Yeah. In this way, I would say that the issue of working in offices or onsite actually compares to the issue we were talking about earlier with headphones.

There are certain pros and the pros include more autonomy, a little bit more control, the ability to curate what one experiences in certain situations.

But then there are cons and the cons are loneliness, lack of attachment to the social world around you.

And sometimes I think that can manifest too as lack of attachment to one's own job or feeling like they're not connected to something bigger,

that they're merely just kind of toiling away by themselves in isolation.

And that is a very alienating feeling.

And I think about that a lot too.

My partner these days is full remote and works from home.

And when I come home from campus and I talk to him, I see what his workday has been like in his energy level

when he sees me come in the door and he's sort of like an excited puppy and he wants to talk about like everything that's happened during the day

because he hasn't had the ability to do that with anybody.

And I worry about the social consequences of that too.

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And I also worry about our ongoing connection and investment in our jobs, particularly in the companies that we're working for as a result of that.

I think across a lot of the domains we're talking about, what you're describing, is a choice we often make away from short term annoyances.

In the short term, your family and living with other people can be kind of annoying.

In the short term, having a lot of people around you at work can be kind of annoying.

In the short term, there's all kinds of things about social relationships that are annoying.

In the short term, having strangers interrupt you while you're on the street or in the checkout line can be kind of annoying.

And one of the great things about a society with a lot of choice and technological possibility is we're really good at getting rid of annoyances.

And when somebody gives you an opportunity to get rid of something that is routinely annoying, you typically take it.

But when you begin to remove so much of the friction of life, you end up robbing yourself of experiences that require a fair amount of annoyance to get to something deeper.

I think family is probably the best example. That's not that I find my family annoying, you're all wonderful.

But there's a lot in our social lives that does work like that.

A lot in every relationship that works like that.

As I guess I'd like to hear you talk about that trade-off a bit more because it is present in your book.

I mean, it's something that was unexpectedly there, at least for me.

And I wonder how much you understand the underlying dynamic of this as being about, we keep trading off short-term comfort for long-term meaninglessness or emptiness.

Yeah, that's a big part of it.

I think you're right in thinking or in describing it as a kind of trade-off that we opt for short-term or we might even think of it as instant or close to instant gratification at the cost of what we can achieve in the long-term.

And I would argue that hanging out is all about the long-term.

It is about crafting relationships, putting time and energy and investment into relationships so that that kind of social interaction can come to us more easily.

And without that kind of burden that like, well, we have to make this right

because this might be our only chance that we get to try to do this for a year or multiple years or whatever it happens to be.

So it's about developing that musculature so that it's easier to get back into the moment and back into the behavior itself,

which is a long-term process and it's not something that can be accomplished instantly or in the short-term.

Psychological studies have taught us over the years that when people are very, very distracted, they tend to make less good decisions.

They tend to opt for short-term rewards instead of long-term rewards.

And I think that's part of what we see in contemporary society is that with a lot of distraction and stimulus and constant input,

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we are often driven to opt for those short-term rewards, even sometimes at the cost of what we might achieve in the long run.

I wanted to prompt you to tell a story that you tell in the book that moved me quite a bit, which is a little bit of a strange story because it isn't about hanging out with another person in person.

But can you talk a bit about the letters, the Finnish author Tove Janssen wrote to her friend during World War II,

what the context for them was, what they were like and what they did?

Absolutely. I'm quite obsessed with Tove Janssen with her writing, with her art.

I've never read a book by her that didn't completely change my worldview or my life and I'm just really impressed by her intellect.

But I talk in the book about her letters that she wrote to a friend named Ava Kanakova over a period of really about eight years while the two had been separated as the result of incidents relating to World War II.

So Ava Kanakova was of Jewish extraction.

She and her family ended up fleeing Finland, which was sort of experiencing a lot of the turmoil of World War II during that moment.

And Kanakova and her family relocated to the United States.

Tove Janssen, who had known Ava Kanakova through their mutual art and creativity, was forced to keep in contact with her friend through letters.

And about two years ago, or maybe about a year and a half ago, I can't even recall,

I started reading this collection of letters, which is just really, really stirring and beautiful.

Wonderful writing from Tove Janssen, but just shockingly intimate.

The way their relationship forms on the page, but also the way their relationship sort of stays in motion

and stays current through the act of letter writing.

Now, what's especially interesting about this whole thing is that on both sides,

Tove Janssen and Ava Kanakova were often not receiving each other's letters.

So they were writing them to each other constantly.

Sometimes Tove was writing to Ava Kanakova in the United States about every single day.

But she wasn't always receiving replies back.

And so the letters are not necessarily like current in the way where they're like updating each other on changes on their lives and things like that.

They're sort of more like these diary entries from the letter writer who's sort of speaking into a vacuum.

They don't know when they're going to hear back from the other person

and they don't know what's going on with the other person.

There's a while when Tove Janssen doesn't even know if Ava Kanakova is still alive.

But she keeps writing these letters to her and she has these very, very intimate ways of keeping her memory with her, of talking about walking through the streets of Helsinki and imagining that her friend is by her side.

And then eventually after years and years of correspondence and a very, very long separation, they did eventually reunite

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and got to see each other again after that long period.

One of the things that story made me think about is the possibility or the experience perhaps of hanging out with another person alone.

So I've always been jealous of people who were in more letter writing cultures.

When you go back and read old books about kind of any figure, you read these beautiful letters.

These amazing kind of acts of self-processing.

Writing a letter to somebody else doesn't this weird way seem like hanging out alone because you have this imagined audience and so you talk as if to them but you have this focus of attention for yourself.

And I always wonder what biographies and figures from our era are going to be like.

It's going to be this endless like and Elon Musk put a poop emoji, you know, in the text thread to so and so.

But a couple months ago or, you know, over the summer, I broke my hand and all of a sudden I couldn't really text.

And so I started communicating with some friends and family through voice notes and they got long and it turned out lots of people are doing this before me and I'm an elder millennial

and only figured this out very late but I was really struck by how intimate that experience was because, you know, you'd sit there and record for five or 10 or 15 or 20 minutes, something about your life and your thoughts and it is this weirdly deep experience and then you would give the other person the attention when they brought that back to you.

And it was solitary but it was also communal.

So I'm curious for your thoughts about what are the structures or mediums in which we hang out productively or intimately with another person alone.

What kinds of things give rise to that and then what kinds maybe don't.

Yeah, writing is certainly one of those channels.

Writing is the act of trying to create a record of your understanding of something and that is true of a letter as much as it's true of a book or a poem or any other form of writing. The difference, of course, with a letter is that you presume you have some kind of very specific audience

that you're writing for.

But with the example that I brought up with Tovi Jansen, you know, that audience was very, very far removed

and she had no idea when the audience was even going to receive and read the letter.

So it did become, I think, this kind of act of like record keeping of thinking about what was going on with her personally of responding to what was going on with the war, processing those events, processing a lot of trauma and struggle that came out of the war too, and then doing it for the sake that, well, eventually somebody else may be able to read this and join in the processing with me so that we can do that together.

And I think that's part of what we do when we hang out in these more intimate scenarios, you know, one-on-one as we try to process things together and we bring someone into that work with us.

You know, I grew up in the 1990s, which was really like the telephone generation

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for teenagers my age at that time.

And I think about how much time I used to spend on the telephone at that age.

I was lucky enough that, you know, I had my private line that my parents got me, which was like a rite of passage for teenagers at the time periods because we didn't have cell phones.

So I had like my private house line and I used to have like four, five, six hour long conversations with people on the telephone back then, which was all about getting to know somebody and having them help me process something, whether that was, you know, related to relationship turmoil or friendship issues or stress at school or whatever it was.

And I think there's some real value in that, but it's increasingly more difficult to achieve.

I think when we interact in those kind of intimate scenarios now, we do so through shorter little bursts, you know, we take little bites of that intimacy, but we're not necessarily doing it in long sprints.

Maybe like we did back in the day when I was having five hour telephone conversations.

I really feel that too.

I really like the telephone.

I seem to be, it seems to be something that marks you as older now.

And I was struck when the pandemic happened and so much moved to Zoom that a lot of things that would have once been telephone calls moved to Zoom too.

And I, maybe this was just me, but I found it was harder to achieve intimacy there.

Something about seeing the other person a little bit blurry, their reactions a little bit delayed, people talk about Zoom fatigue.

Eventually I just stopped doing that, stopped having the camera on.

And it's interesting because I see a version of it in the podcast too.

If we could be in person today, that would be the best thing.

There is a channel of information and intimacy and connection you get in person with somebody.

But if I can't be, I won't put on the camera

because I think it's actually deeper to not have that distraction.

Somehow seeing somebody digitally is worse than not seeing them.

Even if seeing them in person is better than seeing them digitally or being on the phone.

One, I'm curious if any of that connects for you,

but two, why you think maybe the phone gives rise to an intimacy that maybe texting doesn't or some other mediums don't?

Well, I think there's a lot of intimacy contained in voice itself.

We hear these fluctuations in somebody's emotional state as we listen to their voice.

And we sort of hear them doing that work of processing

that I was talking about in one way or another when we talked to them on the phone.

So I think that's part of it.

But you're right, there is a kind of distraction that comes with the visual element.

And at the beginning of the pandemic, you know, I like you and like so many people,

I was excited about being able to use the Zoom technology

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to maybe check in with people I didn't get to talk to too often and see how they were doing and see things about their life.

But there was often, I noticed a kind of stilted quality to that kind of interaction.

Along with the sort of expectation about how much time it was supposed to take.

Zoom meetings, I don't know if you guys recall, you know, if you had the free version, it came with a sort of timer where you couldn't meet for, I think it was 40 minutes, right, that it would cut off at.

And then if you had the version that you were paying for, of course, you could go longer.

But I remember that affecting some of those interactions that I had with people in the early days of the pandemic, thinking about that timer kind of counting down, but also on the reverse side, the expectation that the whole time had to be filled as well.

Because it's like, well, if we signed off after 32 minutes, then that means it wasn't as good of a hangout or something, as some kind of commentary on the relationship.

So I think the visual element combined with the digital infrastructure that created the visual element in the first place did put some added pressure on that form of interaction and the intimacy that would come from it.

By contrast, the phone still feels so long form is a way to think of it in writing terminology.

It feels so open-ended, you know, that there's less structure to how a call has to work, how long it has to last.

And of course, now that we have the ability to move around while we're talking on the phone too, there's this more kind of like free form and free range quality to it that gives it that added dimension of intimacy.

I think it's a good place to end.

So I also found a question.

What are three books you would recommend to the audience?

Okay, I'm prepared.

I have three, and they're all relatively recent, but very different in terms of contents.

So my first recommendation is a book by Teju Cole.

It's called Black Paper, and it's actually a collection of articles and essays by Teju Cole combined with some lectures, but it's the lectures I'm really into.

The book was published in 2021, and the lectures that are adapted and included in it are from 2019.

That's when he gave these lectures publicly, but they're really wonderful.

They're quite beautiful.

And in a number of lectures, he's thinking about concepts like ethics in the modern world.

And there was a moment in one of the lectures where I noticed him talking about ethical sensibilities,

which he argues require periodic exercise.

And that just reminded me of thinking about hanging out.

So that's my first recommendation from Teju Cole.

My second recommendation is a very difficult book, but worth it if you have the stamina.

It is a book by Lauren Berlant, the famous critic and theorist who unfortunately passed away just recently,

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and this was published posthumously in 2022.

The title of it is *On the Inconvenience of Other People*.

And in that book, Lauren Berlant, from a philosophical angle, basically tries to unpack the phrase from Sarge that hell is other people.

And thinking about that phrase through the lens of inconvenience.

And one of the things that Berlant argues very eloquently is that inconvenience is itself political because it registers along this spectrum of political affects and feelings,

but it also invites an awareness of political expectations, rights, privileges, freedoms, etc.

Okay, and then the third book is lighter reading, but still very wonderful and very fun, which is a novel called *The Hair* by Melanie Finn, a Vermont writer, published in 2021 by the wonderful small press out of Columbus, Ohio called \$2 Radio.

And this book is basically a feminist gothic thriller.

It is super fun. It's very dark. It's gorgeously written.

And it was on my mind because I'm actually teaching it in a class this week.

So I get to reread it. I read it a couple of years ago when it came out, and now I'm rereading it again. Sheila Leiming, thank you very much.

Thank you, Ezra.

This episode of the Ezra Klein Show is produced by Annie Galvin, Jeff Gale, Rache Karma, and Kristen Lynn.

Fact-checking by Michelle Harris, Mary Marge Locker, and Kate Sinclair, mixing by Jeff Gale, original music by Isaac Jones.

Audient strategy is by Shannon Busta. The executive producer of New York Times Opinion Audio is Annie Rose Strasser.

And special thanks to Sonia Herrero and Christina Similuski.