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RECONNECTING: WHAT WE LOSE WHEN WE STAY HOME

Is going to the office good for our wellbeing? Michael B Friedman offers a psychological perspective on the part-time city

WORDS BY KATIE PUCKETT



“Human beings need to have contact with other human beings to survive. One of the things that work does for us, leaving aside just making a living, is to bring us into contact with other people” Michael B Friedman

Whenever Michael Friedman and his wife visit a new place, they get on the first public bus that comes along. “It gives us a sense of the people and a little bit of connection,” explains the 79-year-old, an adjunct associate professor at the Columbia University School of Social Work and founder of the policy centre at the Mental Health Association of New York City (now Vibrant Emotional Health). “We get great satisfaction from just being outside in the community watching people – you don’t have to have a strong connection to have a sense of connectedness.”

This is one of the kinds of connection that he fears people miss when they no longer leave their homes to go to work — the low-grade but constant encounters with strangers that supply the mood music of our daily commutes. What will the loss of such people-watching opportunities mean for human wellbeing? “We are creatures that are by nature social. Human beings need to have contact with other human beings to survive. One of the things that work does for us, leaving aside just making a living, is to bring us into contact with other people.”

Friedman has been wondering how we will fulfil the need for in-person socialization if more of us work from home. “One of the psychological issues that has been highlighted by the pandemic is **social isolation** and its subjective counterpart, **loneliness**. There is research that indicates that

both have a harmful impact on physical and mental health. Working alone via video conferencing is not the same as social isolation, but video conferencing certainly isn't the same as being with people."

In particular, there's no inconsequential chit-chat or physical contact, no hand shake or perfunctory kissing of the cheeks or hello hug: "Small talk and touching both satisfy human needs. People will need to go out to replace the social contact they have lost — where will they go? To houses of worship or political clubs? Could be. To places that provide liquid social lubricants? I have no doubt. Will this contribute to more alcohol abuse and just plain stupid behaviour? Hmm."

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Beyond socialization, work also contributes to our sense of identity, and place is a key component of this — the sense memories that bind us emotionally to organizations and differentiate periods of our lives. Friedman went to Columbia as an undergraduate and attended graduate school there too. "When I went to teach there, I used to love just going to take a walk across campus. It was nostalgic, a part of my personal identity. All schools and businesses have a 'rah, rah' quality that's connected with the place."

This is of course one reason why corporations invest in glitzy offices and universities build campuses, and Friedman wonders how it might challenge our mental wellbeing if work was to become permanently **detached from its physical moorings**: "Our sense of connection and identity are facilitated by the imagery of places that are important parts of our life."

Beyond the need for social contact and a sense of identity, "getting out into the world is essential for our mental health because it can be a corrective of our distorted inner perceptions", says Friedman. He gives the example of low-level depression, which can lead us to obsess over minor things. "You get into a mindset that's reinforced and reinforced because you're in the same place. I find that when people ruminate like that — as I do from time to time — if I can get the hell out, I suddenly have a different sense of the world. Getting out of your own space helps you get out of your own head." He remembers a Cornell psychiatrist who came to speak to his students about severe paranoia in older people: "Often they're afraid to go out and so one of the things he recommends is that they get a dog, rather than a cat. You've got to walk the dog; with a cat you can just stay home."

There are wider consequences for social cohesion too — the **density of city life** plays a vital if unrecognized role in gluing society together. The real world acts as an antidote to the perspectives that we get from news reports and social media, says Friedman, and we already have a foretaste of what happens when we can no longer agree on what's true. "In the United States, we not only have a political divide; we have a divided perception of reality. People are increasingly locked into their own communities where their sense of reality is repeatedly reinforced. But there's a challenge to your sense of reality every time you walk out the door. You sit at your computer forming one sense of the world, and then you go outside, and it doesn't compute."

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He experiences this often as he walks around Baltimore — after 60 years in New York, Friedman and his wife moved there in 2019 to be nearer their grandchildren. He is pleasantly surprised to discover a different side to a city that is typically shown as troubled and racially segregated. “The newspapers present Baltimore as a viciously racist city with poor Black people living one place and suffering lots of homicides and crime, and wealthy white people living someplace else and enjoying the fruits of their privilege. There’s truth to that. But when I take a walk past the lovely outdoor restaurants right on the harbour, I see that 50% of the people there are Black — the city is 60% Black. That’s a racial mix you don’t get from the newspapers. It’s a great thing to get out into a world that isn’t quite what you think it is.”

Michael B Friedman is a retired social advocate who continues to write about mental health and aging, and advocates for the needs of older adults as a volunteer. michaelbfriedman.com