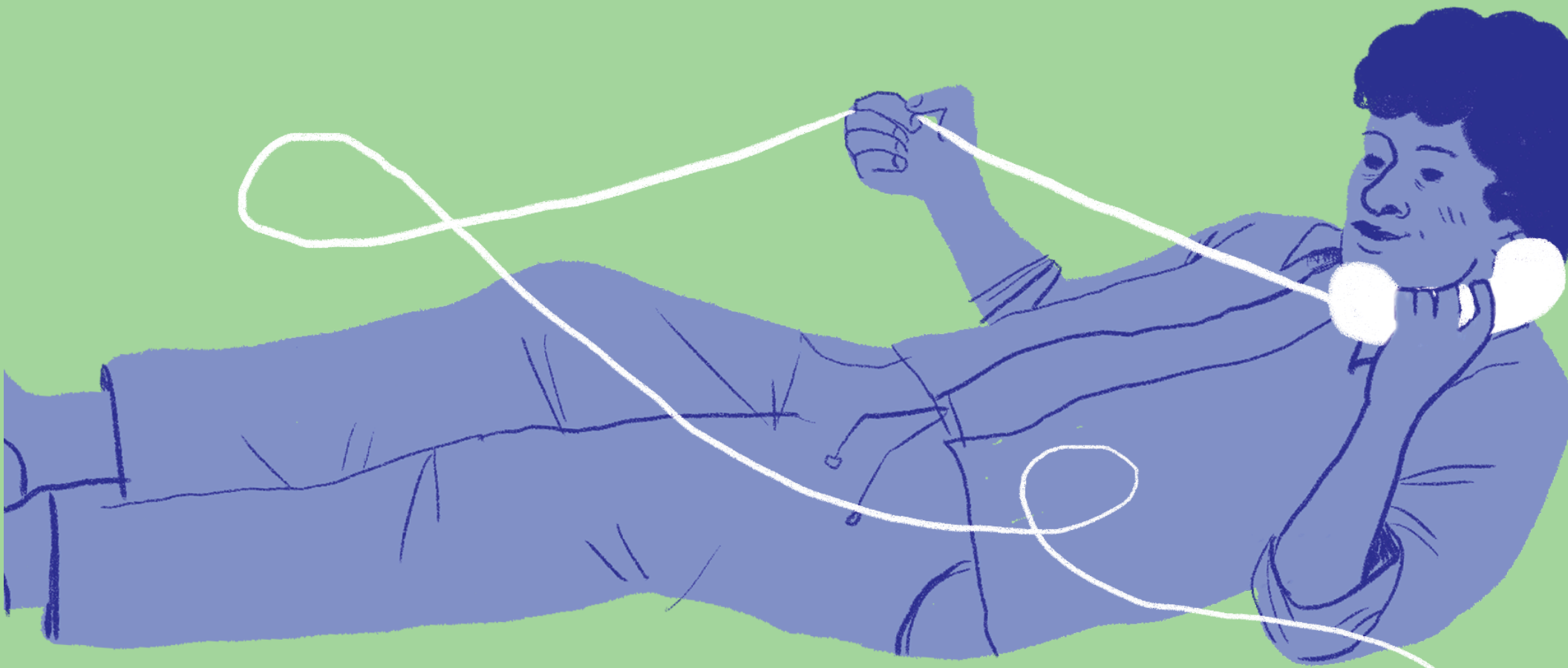




Just a phone call away

Rediscovering the joy of long distance communication

Alaana Kumar, Student Life Editor

At 22 years old, I have lived in four cities across three different countries. With each move has come the grueling process of saying goodbye to loved ones and cultivating a new social circle in an unfamiliar place. While others my age may find comfort in living in one place their entire lives, I find solace in knowing I have acquired something in my childhood that is invaluable: A large network of relationships.

While the romanticization of letter writing, rotary dial phones, and life before technology grew, we tend to forget the ways in which we are fortunate to have this contemporary interconnectedness—one that no generation before us has been able to experience. With the invention of the cell phone, then Facetime, and now Zoom, reuniting with family members, catching up with old friends, or sustaining a relationship from opposite sides of the country is easier than ever—with just the click of a button, lonely nights no longer seem as frightening as they once did.

In the past, a move to a different city meant the end of a friendship; and leaving for university meant only hearing a parent's voice when returning home for the holidays. Now more than ever, students are leaving home to attend university somewhere new. For some, this decision is made easy thanks to the assurance that they will not find themselves completely disconnected from their hometown lives.

With the ongoing pandemic bringing about the rise of Zoom fatigue, it is common to have forgotten the gift that is virtual communication. While Zoom meetings and isolated work environments are not ideal, early curfews and time indoors would be much harder without the technologies that currently occupy

our days.

Ironically, it is those casual Facetimes, three-hour long phone calls to home, and Zoom parties where individuals vent frustrations about virtual life that make the situation a little more bearable, and will ultimately make reconnecting again in-person seem less jarring. Michelle Yu, BCom '16, reflects on how staying in touch with her McGill friends has only strengthened their bonds since graduating, and makes it easier to continue these friendships as time passes.

"I think a big part of what is special with long distance relationships in today's era is the sense of comfort that you can quickly slip back into when you are reunited," Yu said in an interview with the *///Tribune///*. "A lot of that is thanks to social media and technology. We've been given these tools that have allowed us to stay informed and engaged with our loved ones[...] It has really shown that relationships can stand the test of time and distance."

In times of uncertainty, we often cling to familiarity. For students living abroad or university graduates starting a new chapter in a foreign city, reaching out to someone who understands you can help organize your thoughts, and remind you of how far they've come.

"You realize that the friendships and supporters you held on to in the past can provide a unique perspective on your issues, [...] because of that history and shared experience you hold together," Yu said. "Being able to pick up the phone and video call an old friend, who really knows you, on a bad day is a massive relief. Maintaining old relationships [...] through time and distance is vital in providing us a reflection of ourselves, [...] and our past as we move through new experiences and challenges."

In recent years, studies have found that couples who have conquered long distance relationships have seen long-term benefits, including deeper communication, increased perseverance, and the understanding of what sacrifices one is willing to make to sustain a partnership. A 2018 survey found that long distance relationships are more manageable than most people think, with 60 per cent lasting through the distance period. Over time, long distance friendships have become just as common, with many believing childhood bonds are some of the most valuable.

I often find that in times of homesickness, exchanging updates and old memories over the phone with family and friends can help ease the symptoms. These conversations serve as a reminder of where I came from, all that I have to return to, and why I set out for new adventures in the first place.

For current university students, these long distance relationships with high school friends are also an important reminder that all students are experiencing unprecedented ways of learning. I find it helps to connect with old friends who are attending different schools, to remember that students across the globe are missing out on pivotal university experiences.

As a student in my final semester, I am fortunate to have friends who have shared McGill experiences with me over the last four years. For first year students, this is not the case. Nora Delahaye, U1 Arts, currently lives in her childhood home in Hong Kong, and has never attended McGill from Montreal. Joining a sorority and cultivating long distance friendships has helped her feel less disconnected from campus life.

"AOII [Alpha Omicron Pi] helped me connect to Montreal and to the University, [...] and to feel a part of something, [...] in a sense, it's given me a McGill social life." Delahaye said in an interview with the //Tribune//. "These long distance relationships really helped me get involved [...] Without this network, I wouldn't know about so many campus clubs and activities that are now operating online [...] because I never experienced them in person."

The benefits of long-distance connections are not necessarily restricted to virtual companionship; sometimes they can help introduce you to new people who also live where you do. Meeting someone through a mutual friend already provides some common ground, and can help break the initial awkwardness when getting to know someone. Delahaye finds that since her sorority helped her connect with fellow students nearby, she's less anxious about her eventual move to Montreal.

"The sorority even helped me connect with other [AOII] girls in Hong Kong, and we're great friends now." Delahaye said. "I'm a lot less stressed knowing that if I have a problem, [...] I have people to call, and I have people to travel and quarantine with. It's a lot less scary now that I have this network."

Major life changes like the move to a new country can take a toll on one's mental health, as they often feel isolated. However, many around the world are tackling these same feelings of uncertainty, and having a network of support, whether in-person or virtually, can serve as a valuable reminder of these common experiences. "I find comfort in the [AOII] network [...] It's helped my mental health to have friends I can confide in that are going through the same challenges as I am," Delahaye said. "With the time difference, [...] distance, and lack of communication it's really hard for U1 students to feel supported right now, [...] but this network has really made me feel cared for."

In addition to maintaining long distance relationships for support, having a network of contacts across the globe can serve as an asset when looking to cultivate career opportunities. For young adults today, networking is one of the

main pillars for success. Marilyn Ahun BA '15, co-founder and VP mentorship of the McGill Black Mentorship Program (MBAA), explains the positive impact of virtual networking and how a pool of mentors around the world can help students feel more comfortable making big life changes.

"I think the beauty of having it [networking] virtually is that you're able to connect with people who are in places that you might want to be," Ahun said. "They're living in that country, they're doing that specific work in that place, [...] so they can give you a direct account of what is going on, [...] versus someone who used to live in that country and is now in Montreal [...] who] can still give you a lot of help and information but it wouldn't be current information on what it is like to work in that place."

For many entering the hypercompetitive job market, finding a like-minded mentor who can relate to their experiences is a challenge, especially for BIPOC individuals. Virtual networking, through services like the MMBA, makes it easier for Black students to connect with someone who will give them advice on how to navigate through the process. These unique networks of cultural familiarity help students to create a sense of community within their working environments, but also in cities where people of colour are often underrepresented.

"If I just look back at my personal experience when I was at McGill, [...] I was maybe one out of four or five Black students in my program cohort," Ahun said. "I had little idea what to do after graduating [...] Having anyone's help would have been extremely helpful, [...] but I think what would have been additionally helpful is having someone who is Black who could guide me through it. Of course anyone who has worked in psychology could give me great advice on how to work in psychology, but only a Black person who has worked in psychology can give me advice on what it is like to be a Black person in psychology."

Whether it be joining an alumni network, sorority, or fraternity, reaching out to family members abroad, or making connections through mutual friends, these unique relationships provide opportunities for both personal and professional growth. While it may not be obvious in the short term, maintaining relationships can only help in the long-run.

Moving to a new city with no support system can be daunting. The lingering fear that I am missing out on important milestones is eventually replaced by new memories, and virtual communication has, in some ways, given me the best of both worlds.

I often joke that Facetime is the closest thing we have to teleportation. While celebrating birthdays through Zoom was new for most people this year, I was accustomed to the experience long before the pandemic. Over the last eight years, my cousins have never cut a birthday cake without me celebrating with them online. And while it's not the same experience, I can say I saw them smile on their birthdays—an irreplaceable memory.

With graduation on the horizon, I am preparing for my next move, and reaching out to my large network of relationships has reminded me that I have support no matter where I end up next. Goodbyes are always bittersweet, but seeing my closest friends start preparing for their next adventures, I am reminded that we are always bonded by our shared experiences over the past four years, and I find comfort in knowing it is not the end of our journeys together. My long distance friends will always be my escape from reality, the ones I call during the good days and the bad days. Having a worldwide network of family and friends will always be something I am grateful for, because while I have experienced homesickness, I have never truly experienced loneliness, and that is a gift like no other.

