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BEING TOGETHER BUT APART IS A STRANGE NEW WORLD

My grandson plays Starbound, a video game in its beta version. He plays with four of his friends, all high school seniors. Starbound, he tells me, is not a war game, has little violence in it, but instead is a science fiction game in which you explore the universe. It doesn't have a plot or main characters although you can make up your own quest or persona. The creators of the game have imagined the attributes of various stars and planets, some with civilizations on them, in the vein of the Star Wars movies. The friends play together while each is in his own house, yet they are in communication. Being together but apart is a strange new world. I've discovered a way to make my mealtimes less lonely--messaging with my children on my iPad.

Messaging (or texting) is an entirely new way to communicate. It's less efficient than the telephone but also doesn't require your complete attention: you can eat while doing it. When a long distance phone call was costly, I wouldn't spend much time on inconsequential. I wouldn't phone my mother to say that I'd made a delicious beef stew, but I can message (a new way to use the word "message") that to my daughter. On the four-day Easter weekend, by coincidence not planning, I found myself with no visitors, no events to attend nor duties to perform. I decided to observe a retreat and so did not see a single human being, other than in their virtual form. The retreat was restorative, but I do have to say I was happy to see actual people on Tuesday.

A few months ago Ryan Griffith put texting into play form. I was eager to participate, but alas it was supposed to end by my going downtown in freezing rain. Later I realized that I should have participated anyway, receiving the textings on my own cellphone at home, even if I had to miss the actual, not virtual denouement. There was minimal plot—three people texting to arrange a meeting place.

I did participate in an ancient form of communication, attending Daniel MacIvor's 1998 play "Marion Bridge", set in Cape Breton. Everyone agrees that Cape Bretoners, like Newfoundlanders, are a breed apart.

Thomas Morgan Jones, the artistic director of Theatre New Brunswick and also the play's director, and the general manager Susan Ready stood in the lobby beforehand greeting theatre-goers. They were also there after the play, Jones having invited people in his welcoming speech to give him their response. Making themselves accessible is a good idea. One of the best things about live theatre is just that—all the people are real, not virtual.

An aspect of theatre that I love is the very theatricality of it. The set, for example, was perfect, its simplicity a sight to behold: a bare kitchen with a round table and three chairs, not even

using up the whole stage. It was surrounded by a house-like structure, a house a child would draw, with a door presumably leading to the outside, an opening with a step that helps you imagine it leads to the second floor, a door with the noise of a television aiding your impression that it leads to the living room. A window high up told you that the house is two stories. With only one small room the whole set seemed large, house-size. The designer, Patrick Clark, has long been associated with TNB although he has worked extensively across Canada.

I now make myself stop to appreciate how much the theatre is a work of many people. I realized that if I didn't make this effort, I would miss important aspects of drama. Watching the Super Bowl last January, I appreciated for the first time how important the defense is. Handsome, charming Tom Brady couldn't do anything against the defense. It was recently described to me how important the stage manager is, in this case Jessica Stinson.

In the first moments of the play, the identity of the three sisters had an element of stereotyping. This helped create them in a short time but was also disconcerting. Fortunately, as the play went on, the stereotypes developed into full-fledged personalities, aided not only by the script but by fine acting. In trying to be observant of the craft, I noticed how director Jones moved the actors around on that small stage in a way that seemed natural but not awkward. The exits and entrances were dramatic but not over the top.

On the other hand, I did want to enjoy the story, forget that I was watching a play so did have to let myself relax into the drama. A delicate balance which I managed to attain, I suppose in no small part due to the people responsible for the play's creation and production.