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The Benefits of Asynchronous Friendship

Sarah Shotts

Kindred spirits are not so scarce as I used to think. It's splendid to find out there are so many of them in the world.

—L.M. Montgomery, *Anne of Green Gables*

Some people are dead set on villainizing the internet. It has become a handy scapegoat for everything from loneliness to humanity's disconnection from nature. The internet is not without its flaws. There is online bullying, misinformation, and the concept that a human can paradoxically become a "brand." But most of the arguments I see against the internet forget one essential fact. All human communication systems are flawed. They will always be exploited and misused. That is not the technology's fault. It is simply humanity.

I see the internet as an imperfect tool to communicate ideas and connect with others. Perhaps my lifelong struggle within neurotypical spaces makes me less likely to expect perfection from social frameworks. I grew up in a one stoplight town in rural Mississippi. Social connections were centered on high school football games. I went to one game and hated it. Conversations with my peers often felt like I was an alien from another planet. They would quiz me about how I could possibly prefer reading a book to watching sweaty boys play sports. Without that shared experience they didn't know how to interact with me.

Occasionally I would form a friendship with another bookish soul. They would invariably move away, and I would be alone again. I had never heard of autism, so I had no context for this social disconnection. Having nothing in common with my peers I would often find myself having deep conversations with their parents while kids my age played nearby.

The strongest connections in my life were all forged online. Even my marriage. While I felt like an outsider in my daily life, the internet allowed

me to forge neurodivergent friendships beyond the limits of physical space. Some of these friends are autistic like me, while others have been diagnosed with ADHD, OCD, or synesthesia. While our support needs may be different, I find that neurodivergent friends are more likely to be understanding and accommodating of others. Perhaps that is because we all know what it is like to be misunderstood and struggle to exist within certain spaces.

In many ways I see the internet as a neurodivergent space. It was not made for majority culture. It was invented by nerds and existed long before big business tried to monetize everyone's attention. Most online connection is based in asynchronous communication. While I often struggle with verbal conversations I thrive when given the time and space to compose my own thoughts and share them from the safety of my chosen environment.

Last year I had the pleasure of experiencing an online acquaintance bloom into a deep kinship. It has since become one of the strongest relationships in my life. And it all began as





an asynchronous friendship formed online. I'm sharing a reflection on how this happened and some of the ways the internet can benefit autistics like myself.

The story begins with *The Magic Mundane*, a one-year collaboration with writer and artist Claire Venus. The shape of our project was an exchange of daily photographs, which you will see throughout this article. These were each intimate moments documenting our lives as neurodivergent mothers. The photography project reveals points of synchronicity between the Northwest of Arkansas and the Northeast of England. Our collaboration soon became a container for friendship to grow. Life and art bled into one another.



The type of connection that felt nearly impossible for me growing up began happening intuitively in online spaces. I have always experienced the internet as a tool for discovering like-minded souls. Even before my diagnosis I would form friendships based on shared

passions and interests. Many of these friends would later discover their own neurodivergence.

My personal experience is that we have an uncanny ability to find each other. This is even easier to do online. Technology expands the possibility of friendship to every human who can access the internet. This makes it much more likely for neurodivergent connections to take place. It also includes disabled and chronically ill people who may not find physical spaces accessible. I like to say that the internet compresses geographical space. It makes connections possible that would never exist otherwise. This possibility is how I ended up collaborating with Claire who lives an ocean away.

Shared Interests

Neurotype alone is not enough to kindle a friendship. Shared interests and values are essential. Claire and I initially connected on Instagram where we were both using the hashtag #consciouscreativity created by neurodivergent artist and synesthete Philippa Stanton (2018).

The beautiful thing about meeting over Instagram is that your photography speaks for you. Claire and I never had to stand awkwardly and ask one another, “What do you do?” We didn’t make small talk. We didn’t give each other an elevator pitch.

We saw an image that spoke to us and tapped over to see more. Maybe it was a photo of cherry blossom. Maybe it was a scattering of DUPLO blocks on the kitchen floor. Maybe it was a yellow pram under a vibrant rainbow. Your photography shows what you find beautiful or interesting about the world.

Those early days of connection are fuzzy. I don’t remember the exact photograph I tapped. But it must have happened. We began following each other on Instagram and subscribed to each other’s newsletters. I do remember the first time I replied to one of Claire’s emails. She had written about hypersensitivity and living in a world that doesn’t understand it. I shared that I had always struggled with swimming pools because I can’t stand water in my face.



Our lived experience was different, but somehow parallel. There was a kinship there. Over time we began exchanging more and more messages. We wrote about motherhood and travel and creativity. Years after that first connection Claire proposed a creative collaboration. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

Structure and Expectations

Something I love about online spaces is that expectations are often much clearer and more direct than they would be in person. When you view someone's profile you are presented with information they choose to share: their name, their pronouns, and a bit about how they identify or what they do. You are free to follow or click away.



The platform you are using also informs your method of communication. Twitter relies on short bursts of text. Instagram uses images, videos, and captions. Substack publishes long form content with discussion threads for nuanced conversations.

When Claire and I began our collaboration, we decided to exchange photographs of our daily lives each day for a year. This provided a structure and expectation for how our social interactions would take place.

Through my life I have often been criticized for my need for structure. I need to know when the social interaction will begin and when it will end. What will the environment be like? Who will be there? When will we be able to eat? This information equips me to make decisions that support my nervous system and to bring any necessary supports.

Because I've often perceived this need to be a character flaw, I was delighted to hear an author suggest that all neurotypes would benefit from this clarity. Priya Parker, when interviewed by Katherine May (2023), recommends more structured social gatherings. She argues that clarity of purpose and boundaries helps everyone know what to expect.

Online platforms give us the opportunity to create neurodivergent social spaces. Instead of neurotypical spaces with the unspoken expectations they bring, which are unique to each culture. We can structure social interactions with clear boundaries and expectations including the platform, the purpose, the mode of communication (image, text, video), the start and end times, support needs, and so on.

Multimodal Communication

The internet has many powerful tools for multimodal communication. We can choose to communicate through text, image, emoji, audio, or video. This allows individuals to share their ideas while honoring their own access needs and energetic capacity. Many of these modes of communication are non-spoken. Because I struggle with auditory processing I find these alternate methods of communication preferable to spoken conversations.

My autistic son is an Advanced Augmentative Communication (AAC) user. To support him, we have become multimodal communicators. We now use an AAC tablet, hand signs, gestures, song, and words to communicate at home. These modes of communication benefits not only my son, but the whole family. They are particularly useful when someone is overstimulated or dysregulated, but they can also be forms of creative expression.

The primary mode of communication for my collaboration with Claire was visual. There was no expectation or requirement to caption the photographs or to exchange social pleasantries. Because we are both neurodivergent we found this a natural and intuitive container for connection. Early in our project I traveled out of state for my son's autism diagnosis. I realized that I might send that day's image a bit late and sent Claire a heads up. This was the first time I shared a personal update between images. It sparked the first of many meaningful conversations about autism and neurodiversity. It felt like Claire was there with me on the road trip, in the waiting room, and during the hours of hours of paperwork when I felt terrified of ticking the wrong box.

Over time our friendship became a mutual support system. We wrote messages to each other about sick babes and sleep deprivation. We recorded videos of moments of joy: splashing in mud puddles or feeding chickens. We exchanged voice notes about how to advocate for our kids. When we were too tired to find words we might simply send an emoji. We each pivoted to whatever form of communication felt best in that moment. We were creating social connection while meeting our own access needs.

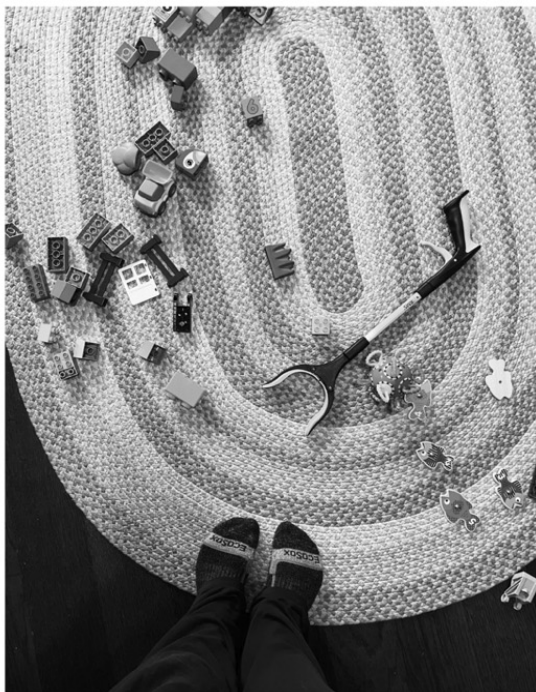
Reduced Social Drain

Even enjoyable social gatherings are quite exhausting for me. Local meet ups and events are often in overstimulating environments. Auditory processing difficulties make it hard to follow conversations, particularly if people are masked. Discussions move at a rapid pace and by the time I've formulated a response the moment is gone. There is a constant need to read and analyze body language. And I've become increasingly aware that while I can make eye contact I do so in an atypical way. After COVID isolation I have found eye contact to be increasingly draining. The cumulative effect is leaving social events overstimulated and careening toward total shut down. The recovery period can last for days or weeks.

By contrast, my ongoing communication with Claire has largely been a source of creative energy and emotional support. I rarely feel drained by our social interactions because they allow the flexibility and freedom to connect

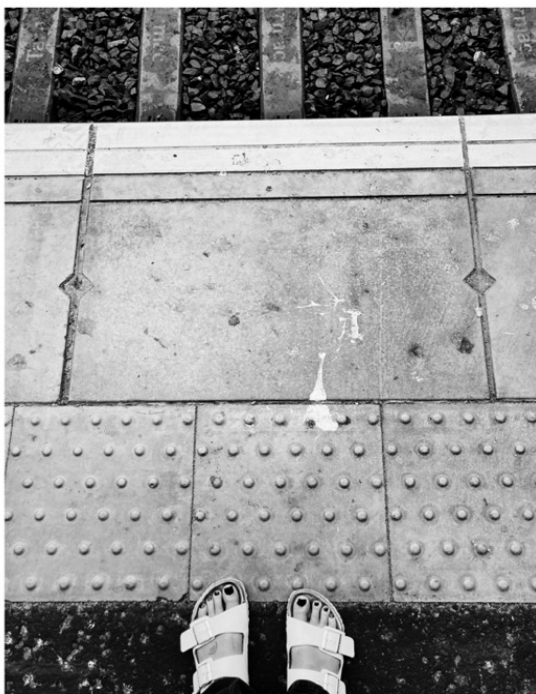
while meeting my own support needs.

I would be remiss to exclude live video from this discussion as pervasive as Zoom conference calls became after 2020. But I must point out that live video is not asynchronous. Therefore it is not part of the type of friendship I am discussing. I find Zoom calls to be socially exhausting, doubly so if I am on camera, because I am constantly analyzing and adjusting my own facial expressions.



I have discovered one way to make live video asynchronous. That is viewing the recording instead of attending live. Sometimes Zoom recordings even include a transcript which can help with auditory processing difficulties. This is one way of making Zoom calls asynchronous and transforming them into a neurodivergent space.

Finally, asynchronous friendship does not require you inhabit the same temporal space. Without



the pressure to respond in real time this social framework eliminates the headache of managing conflicting schedules and time zones.

Claire and I live an ocean apart. Our daylight hours are not well aligned. When it is 6am for Claire it is midnight for me. By the time I wake up half her day is gone. If we only attempted to connect during real time conversations opportunities would be few and far between. Over the course of our collaboration we only attempted this once, to record a podcast episode about our collaboration, and it was quite tricky to work out logistically. It wouldn't be sustainable on a consistent basis.

Asynchronous friendship means the freedom to respond when you have the energetic capacity. It means the flexibility to choose when and how you communicate. And the ability to kindle friendship even if you aren't able to be in the same physical space.

Last year I scheduled and canceled play date after play date with local friends due to kids getting sick. Meanwhile Claire and I carried on with the business of building a friendship. All within this container of sharing a single photograph each day. After one year of collaboration Claire is one of my dearest friends despite being 4,294.33 miles away.

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Sarah Shotts (they/she) is an autistic artist and non-binary mother who resides in Northwest Arkansas. Shotts earned their Masters degree in Applied Drama from Goldsmiths University of London. Their undergraduate studies encompassed both Fine and Performing Arts at Mississippi University for Women (MUW.) Shotts is now an instructor of theatre at MUW where they have been teaching for ten years. Their current body of work, *This is My Brain on Motherhood*, is an exploration of their lived experience as an autistic mother and a contribution to the ongoing neurodiversity movement.