

REQUIEM FOR THE DEPARTED VIA ZOOM

Richard A. Gershon, Ph.D.

Professor Emeritus, Western Michigan University

As I look into the screen of my iPad, I see the grid of faces that are my family. On January 1, 2021, Dr. Janet Perrigo Brown (former Professor of Nursing at the University of Vermont) and my mother-in-law, passed away. She had been in declining health the past several months made worse by having contracted Covid-19. To know Janet Brown is to know someone who was meticulous about her own passing with a strong attention to detail. From detailed funeral arrangements to be followed to multiple versions of her will over the years, she was a person that didn't leave anything to chance. We were working on draft 16A of her will at the time of her passing. The plan was for my wife and I to be with the family during her remaining days. The state of Vermont, however, was in full lockdown and would require us to be quarantined for two weeks upon entering the state. So entering the state was not an option. Nor could my wife's immediate family be in attendance either. Most hospitals restrict the number of visitors that can attend to a patient at one time. We, as a family, found ourselves relying on Zoom conferencing technology as a way to gather by her bedside. Our Zoom connection enabled the entire extended family to share in a common space; albeit, virtually for those final hours.

As I stared into the iPad screen, I was reminded that in times of crisis, necessity is the mother of invention. It so happens that technologies and innovations that emerge during a war time environment are often later introduced into the private sector in modified form. Consider, for example, that during World War II, technology innovations like radar, rocketry, synthetic rubber, the all American Jeep, and even duct tape helped the Allied forces win by allowing their militaries to wage war on a global scale. Since then, each of the said products have taken their place in the mainstream of business and consumer use. The same can be said for natural disasters. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the first generation of aerial drones were deployed in order to search for survivors and assess river levels. In the years that followed, climate change and the confluence of hurricanes, tornadoes and forest fires have created altogether new technologies for enhancing disaster preparedness, resiliency and risk reduction.

Today, we are fighting a very different kind of world war. The enemy is an unseen pandemic whose viral effects are proving as deadly as any pitched battlefield. The Covid 19 pandemic disrupted the world's economy by forcing the closing of schools, business and government agencies throughout the world. But like a war or natural disaster, necessity has sparked a new set of educational tools for online instruction. For the first time, educational institutions ranging from Universities to grade schools were forced to adapt and modify their approach to classroom instruction. Whereas, on-line instruction and degree programs were well-established at most Universities; they remained the province of a highly select group of instructors and academic

programs. During the first set of weeks of the Covid-19 outbreak, educators were forced to learn the basics of on-line instruction in a short amount of time. For most instructors like myself, the beginning weeks were like drinking out of a firehose. But steadily, over the course of a year, we the educators throughout the world made the transition and adapted our classroom space to the new requirements. The transition to online teaching is an example of what economist Joseph Schumpeter calls "creative destruction." By that, he means, the disruptive process that accompanies the work of the entrepreneur and the real consequences of technology innovation. Once a disruptive technology is fully introduced and becomes adopted, there is no going backwards. Creative destruction sets into motion a number of intended and unintended consequences. One of the very real consequences for the field of higher education and professional training is having to say good-bye to traditional views that classroom instruction can only be taught in person. This is a sobering admission from someone like me who got his start as a high-school instructor in northern Vermont. As we look to the future, on-line instruction and degree programs now represents a viable training platform for tomorrow's students and working professionals.

Similarly, the Covid 19 pandemic disrupted both large and small businesses alike. It forced the relocation of working professionals from a dedicated place of business to a person's home, apartment or remote setting. Prior to Covid-19, the term "telecommuting" was an idea in principle that applied to some working professionals, but never got the full support of mainstream business. At issue, in the telecommuting debate, was whether people working at home could be trusted to work efficiently, be productive and not game the system. Now suddenly, the question of whether people could be trusted to work at home was a moot point. The home office would undergo a major redefinition in terms of set-up and design. The new office environment would require a desktop or laptop computer, a high-speed Internet connection, Zoom (or equivalent) conferencing capability and a cellphone.

In my classes on media management and telecommunications, I sometimes describe videotelephony as the holy grail of electronic communication. When people can easily speak and see each other via a phone or computer (add to it the possibility of high resolution graphics) - we will have achieved a major shift in business and personal communication. To be sure, video telephony is not a new idea. The first generation of videotelephony was developed by such companies as Skype and Apple Facetime. And similarly, dedicated videoconferencing facilities for business have been in place since the late 1990s. But the Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a major tipping point in terms of the organizational and personal use of video streaming services like Zoom, Webex, Microsoft teams and others like it. What became apparent over the course of a year was the level of success and productivity accomplished by many working professionals operating from home or remote settings. Such productivity and efficiency is perhaps another example of creative destruction. It has forced many business enterprises to reconsider the need for massive building infrastructure and office space going forward.

One of the other important takeaways is the demise of the morning flight and routine two-day meeting in places like Chicago, Dallas and cities like it. They are no longer needed. Those days are gone forever. And so we say good-bye to that too.

Dr. Janet Perrigo Brown at age 90 was symbolic of a passing era. She was the consummate educator and old-school nurse who developed one of the first Nurse Practitioner Programs of its kind in the state of Vermont. She was a predigital person who liked the vestiges of higher education including the traditional lecture, graduation ceremony and protocol. She would not have understood or approved of such things as on-line classroom instruction. When I first met her, I introduced myself and said, "Hi, I'm Rick Gershon, please call me Rick. To which she replied, "I'm Dr. Brown please call me Dr. Brown." She liked old family photo albums and the gathering of loved ones around the Thanksgiving table.

In a sense, we say good-bye to Dr. Janet Perrigo Brown but we also say good-bye to an analog way of doing things in both education, business and professional life. In 1982, author John Naisbitt coined the term *high tech - high touch* to describe the importance of finding a natural balance between technology that keeps us personally engaged with our work and family and the high touch skills of life, the latter being activities that keep us connected, creative, and energized. Running while listening to music is one such example. Zoom conferencing technology is high tech-high touch in its most essential form. In the days following the passing of Dr. Brown, we would gather as a family in a type of virtual wake. As I look into the screen of my iPad, I see brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, uncles and aunts and all the kids. This became a time to support one another; to share in small conversations and remembrances. There was humor and there were tears. But most of all there were stories. And that, Dr. Brown would very much have appreciated.

Richard A. Gershon, Ph.D. is Professor Emeritus at Western Michigan University. He is the author of *Media, Telecommunications and Business Strategy* (Routledge, 2020). Dr. Gershon is currently working on a new project entitled: *Freedom of Expression: We the People in the Digital Age*. He can be reached at: <https://www.rgershon.com/>