1

A Meeting of the Minds

When Diana, Princess of Wales, lost her life in a car crash in the summer of 1997, many of us felt a sense of grief and loss—or, at the very least, sadness at the tragedy of a life cut so terribly short. Of course, this was not the only time we mourned the loss of someone we had never actually "met." JFK, his brother Bobby, and his son John, Martin Luther King Jr., Elvis Presley, John Lennon, Kurt Cobain, Marilyn Monroe—we felt that we knew them, in a way, and we experienced a flood of genuine emotions upon their untimely deaths.

It is not only in death that we can come to feel that we have gotten to know, and have come to care about, someone whom we have never "met" in a face-to-face sense. It is, in fact, a common occurrence.[1] From the child who establishes a relationship with a pen pal to the old man who considers Walter Cronkite a kind of trusted friend, from the cancer patient who finds companionship in an online group of cancer survivors to the lover of literature who feels a sense of like-mindedness with a favorite author (or even, possibly, with a favorite character in a novel), there are as many examples of connecting with others at a distance as there are people seeking social connection.

These are bonds that exist primarily in a mental realm, a space that is not created solely in the imagination of one individual but requires two or more minds—a "meeting of the minds"—to make possible, to "activate." These bonds are *sociomental*.[2] But they are no less real for being located in a mental realm.[3] They are the manifestation of an absolutely genuine and often deeply felt sense that despite physical separation, a closeness among

1

people, a nearness, exists; that while the physical distance separating people may be great, the social distance between them may be very small indeed. They represent an experience of communion with another person, one that does not depend on face-to-face meetings to be initiated or maintained.

Sociomental bonds—bonds between people who cannot or do not meet face-to-face—have never been more prevalent, more central to people's lives, and more critical to an understanding of the times and of the social order. But they are still, for the most part, an underground, understudied phenomenon.[4] They can seem strange—even a little shameful. We do not talk about them much, let alone consider their contribution to and impact on our societies, our communities, and ourselves. The implication is that they are not normal, not authentic, or that they exist on the fringe of the social world—odd, false, and inconsequential.

But that is not the case. Connecting with people across distances and even across time is a rather ordinary part of the human experience. A social environment saturated with technology virtually ensures that we will all have extensive knowledge of a whole host of people who are not part of any face-to-face social circle of ours—celebrities, heads of state, historical figures, influential writers and thinkers, pen pals (or phone pals, or e-mail pals), even our own faraway or deceased family members and friends. Through television, radio, books, magazines, and, increasingly, on the Internet, it is likely that we will come to feel that we have "gotten to know" plenty of people in this way. We will probably respond to and resonate with at least some of these people mentally and emotionally. We may even come to care about them—possibly quite deeply—and feel that we have bonded in some way with them. And as all bonds do, these touch and affect us, as they inspire us to view different perspectives on the world, to take on new roles, and to learn subtle but important lessons about "the other." According to John Caughey, each of us makes several hundred connections—some weak, some strong—with others whom we have never met and may never meet (1984: 22).

This book explores exactly how, under what conditions, and with what effect social connectedness takes place in the absence of face-to-face contact. I unfold a theoretical and historical framework for understanding the phenomenon, look at the ways these connections are made and maintained, discuss some of their properties, and look at the benefits, hazards, and implications—the social "fallout"—of the role they play in the Internet age. I examine strong, long-lasting *sociomental bonds*, weaker and perhaps more fleeting *sociomental connections*, and clusters and groupings of such connections and bonds into what I call *communities of the mind*.[5] And I illustrate these concepts and ideas with dozens of the personal, real-life accounts of

sociomental connecting that emerged in the fifty in-depth, face-to-face interviews and the 143 online surveys that I conducted.[6] The result is a look at a type of social bonding that is rarely recorded: the bonds and communities that form among people who never meet face-to-face but still feel undeniably, if sometimes unexpectedly, connected.

Even in face-to-face interaction it is by no means guaranteed that a true social connection will emerge when two people spend time together. "Very frequently," Emile Durkheim reminds us, "those closely knit by ties of blood are morally and legally strangers to one another" (1984 [1893]: xliv). What looks to the observer like a strong social bond (a seemingly "happy" marriage, an ostensibly "close" parent-child relationship) may in reality be weak, neutral, or, for all intents and purposes, nonexistent. Conversely, what may seem *not* to be a bond (a connection that is felt with a deceased person or with a favorite author or actor) may in reality be a strong and meaningful one in the connector's eyes. The assumption that social connections must satisfy certain narrowly determined criteria (such as "containing" a face-to-face component) in order to be truly authentic greatly oversimplifies the phenomenon of social bonding.

For one of the strongest and most compelling components of social connecting is the perception of a connection in a person's *mind*. Even social connections initiated in face-to-face interaction endure periods of separation—often long periods—in which the connectors are physically apart (with an exception being conjoined twins). In fact, though we do not usually think of them this way, the terms *social connection, social bond,* and *social tie* are, in virtually all situations, merely metaphors for the "getting together" of people who are separated from one another. People are not (usually!) physically connected, bound or tied together; rather, we call them "connected," "bonded," or "tied" when we intuit that their relationship is sufficiently strong to warrant the metaphor.[7]

We maintain social connections mentally as a matter of course; we "carry" absent others with us in our minds and hearts. Social connections that are formed when people are *frequently* separated from one another have quite a lot in common with those that form when people are *always* separated from one another. Sociomental connections are "layered," in a sense, above, underneath, and around face-to-face connections—intersecting with and overlapping them to a large extent. Since we all have had the experience of maintaining social connections mentally, it only requires taking the next logical step to consider how we might initiate and then sustain social connections *solely* in our minds.

This book takes that step. It shines a spotlight on otherwise invisible forms of social connectedness. And it proposes that there is great value in

such visibility. Children tend to accept rather easily the premise that imaginary friends have a degree of social reality, that characters in books are known by us, and that a pen pal is, indeed, a bona fide friend. But as we grow older, we learn to officially discount such feelings, to push them into the dark corners of our minds. In time, they become disavowed, enjoyed only secretly (as "guilty pleasures") or all but expunged from our consciousness. It is no wonder that they take on the quality of strangeness or, when they visibly erupt, to cause us no small measure of embarrassment.

In the end, though, a greater harm than embarrassment lurks. When we fail to acknowledge (and study) a form of human sociation, we devalue that sociation—and with it, a large portion of existence, a big chunk of everyday life. We devalue our own experiences and emotions. Unwittingly, but inevitably, we end up diminishing important and legitimate parts of ourselves. Yet even as we deny them, we continue to form sociomental connections. In an age in which technology continuously "brings" absent others into our social spheres, our tendency to connect in this way will only increase.

Perhaps this is why, when given the opportunity to speak at length about the connections they had formed with distant or absent others, the people I interviewed seemed happy to do so; indeed, many found it downright cathartic. As I explained the concept of the sociomental bond to them and prompted them to think and talk about such connections, it was as if I was giving them permission to speak openly (and *legitimately*) about such things. Once the floodgates were opened, I often could not stop people from talking. People would contact me again and again after the interview to tell me about "just one more thing" or one more instance of sociomental connectedness that they had just remembered. Both the "high-tech" people I interviewed (twenty-five people who felt comfortable incorporating a wide range of technologies into their lives and thus did so) and those who were more "low-tech" (twenty-five who felt less comfortable with technologies such as computerization and shied away from them) told me about numerous sociomental connections that they had formed. In fact, only two individuals (one high-tech, one low-tech) told me that they did not feel they had formed any at all.[8]

The overwhelming majority of the people I spoke to related many more instances and types of such connections, and described many more emotions in response to them, than I could have imagined prior to the start of my research. A man just graduating from college described the "invisible bond" he felt with all of those who had ever attended his small, all-male high school, a young career woman told me about the special kind of kinship she felt with an established woman in her field that had

developed as she read the older woman's books and articles and learned about her life, and a prospective parent movingly shared his profound sense of "already knowing" his as-yet-unborn baby. Stories such as these—and the others found in these pages—shaped, much more than reflected, my thinking, and they taught me just how important it is to give voice to such experiences.

I noticed the same thing among the people I surveyed online. In each of the six different types of online groups I looked at (groups centered around soap operas, sports, science, literature, religion, and the experience of being in an age-related grouping, "Generation X," which correlates roughly to being in one's twenties in the 1990s), I heard numerous stories about online connections that had been made and which felt absolutely genuine but about which connectors tended not to speak. People told me about connections both fleeting and long lasting, both meaningless and deeply consequential, and both narrow in scope and "multiplex" (encompassing various social spheres and arenas of social life). Again, it was as though I had opened a gate through which people's thoughts and emotions were finally free to flow. "I thought I was the only one who felt this way!" was something I heard frequently, as their stories tumbled out.

When we keep these kinds of connections and processes hidden, we not only devalue them (and ourselves), we are prevented from seeing a bigger picture. We are blinded to the "less conspicuous forms of relationship and kinds of interaction" that, Georg Simmel tells us, "produce society as we know it" (1950 [1908]: 9). In effect, we treat the tip of the iceberg—the visible, physical, face-to-face relationships among us—as the most part worthy of attention. We ignore and relegate to the realm of the insignificant that which is hidden from view. As Simmel also points out:

> [T]he whole gamut of relations that play from one person to another, and may be momentary or permanent, conscious or unconscious, ephemeral or of grave consequence . . . *all these incessantly tie men together*. . . . They account for all the toughness and elasticity, all the color and consistency of social life, that is so striking and yet so mysterious. (1950 [1908]: 10, emphasis added)

An appreciation of the hidden, inconspicuous, but very real ways in which people mentally "come together" to form bonds and communities can help us see the bigger picture of society: a more detailed social landscape revealing a wider palette of colors, more delicate shadings, and ever-changing contours.

None of this is to say that face-to-face contact is, or should be, decentered, or that connecting at a distance is somehow equivalent to or preferable to face-to-face interaction. It is not. We need face-to-face interaction. It is crucial to our intellectual and social development, it allows for the development of richer contexts between people in which more intricate details and meanings can be shared, and it provides certain satisfactions that are impossible to technologically replicate.[9] We would not want to conceive of a world in which face-to-face interaction was considered unimportant, unsatisfying, irrelevant. But that is not to say that *every* social connection requires a face-to-face component in order to become established or nurtured. A "meeting of the minds" can be just what a particular situation requires. Our individual "portfolios" of social connectedness should, ideally, consist of a healthy mix of face-to-face *and* sociomental connections in both dyadic and group forms.

This book, then, is a conceptual and an empirical examination of social connectedness and a critical component of it—the sociomental—that is frequently overlooked. Modern social forces—the speed and complexity with which our lives often move, the high rate of geographic mobility, the fast pace of technological change, the stress of combining work and home lives—often physically separate people from one another. Yet we stubbornly, inventively persist in finding ways to forge the social connections we need and desire. We have a remarkable capacity for connecting with others—for forming social bonds and communities across great distances and throughout time in the Internet age.