

From the Kitchen

3 February 2010

Sitting here at my kitchen table, dog at my feet, mug of tea and shortbreads in front of me, I've drifted into thinking about connections – connections with people, places, pooches ...

I have relatives in Europe and the USA, and possibly in South America. There are people I know through travelling and writing and there are people I know through connections on the internet. Some of these connections intersect, split and join in unpredictable ways.

This web existed long before the one formed by strings of zeros and ones now increasingly wrapping around the globe. In the mid-seventies, in a camping ground in Budapest, I met someone whom I recognised from a photo I'd seen some years earlier, and he recognised me from the same photo, half-way around the world. We had a mutual friend who had never been out of Australia.



More recently, with relatives visiting us from Europe, there were several instances of unforeseen connections: the relatives talking with a waiter in a restaurant and discovering that his parents live near where our relatives now live; the relatives being introduced to acquaintances of ours, only to realise that they had already met, years ago, on holiday in Hong Kong.

When my wife and I drove around the Coromandel Peninsula in New Zealand, we came across someone about whom a friend in Melbourne had told us but, although she knew that this person lived in New Zealand, she did not know where.

Although the internet allows almost instantaneous connection with millions of people, it makes it no easier to really stay in touch. Posting things on a blog is not staying in touch in any personal way. 'Letters' still need to be written and sent, whether by email or snail-mail. And letters need to be answered frequently enough for there to be meaningful contact.

In the mid- to late 1970s, I did the 'blog' thing on paper. I wrote daily accounts of my thoughts and impressions as I travelled in Europe. These were snail-mailed to someone in Australia, photocopied and snail-mailed to a number of family members and friends, much in the way a list service works these days. When I came back (after a 3½-year absence), people said they'd read and enjoyed the unfolding account, but the physical absence for that period meant that I no longer felt connected to some of them, or they to me.

I came back with an address book full of contacts from my travels. Most of them never heard from me again. Maybe, if there had been email back then, they would have. But then, I didn't hear from most of them either.

With a presence on Facebook and Twitter because it's my only way of receiving information from some writing groups, I keep getting requests from people like Millie Average, Amber Snorter and Abigail Missfit, to be allowed to 'follow me'. What possesses these people (if they *are* real people) to request me to let them read my non-existent posts? What does this say about their connectedness with people in the non-digital world?

Writing a weekly blog such as this is interesting. It's not quite like having a story or a poem published in a book, other than (in the publication case) not knowing who reads it or how many do so. There's the possibility, and hope, that there will be responses from readers of the

blog to stroke my ego. If I think about why I do it, it's partly for that, but mainly as a simple excuse to write as I please, without having to fit in with a publisher's likes and dislikes.

Even if thousands were to read this blog and I had books published and selling well, I can still only have meaningful social intercourse with a relatively small group, and that means making an effort. It is possible to stay home, sit at this table and write, post or publish it, and pretend this keeps me connected. The only connection would be with myself and my thoughts and feelings. Like much of what seems to go on in cyberspace, it would be a facsimile of connectedness.

Reading a lot of others' work can also substitute for connectedness – I can delve into their ideas, but it is nothing like sitting down with someone over a cuppa and getting to know them through an exchange of words, smells, smiles and raised eyebrows. Emoticons just don't do it for me.