Farewell, Office. You Were the Last Boundary Between Work and Home.

Your workplace shaped your identity in ways you never knew.

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The office, for the foreseeable future, is dead. Google and Facebook are telling employees they can work remotely until 2021. Twitter is allowing employees to work from home "forever." A number of big banks are contemplating never fully refilling their office towers in Manhattan. Last week, my colleague Matthew Haag wrote a thoroughly depressing story in which the chief executive of Halstead Real Estate asked him point blank: "Looking forward, are people going to want to crowd into offices?"

Call me crazy, but I'm still thinking: *Yes*. Maybe not today, maybe not tomorrow, but someday. The modern office may be the target of bleak caricature — the lighting is bad, the meetings are long, the only recourse to boredom is filching a colleague's stapler and embalming it in lemon Jell-O (if you work at Dunder Mifflin). But over the coming months, I suspect that those of us who spent most of our careers in offices will grow to miss them.

What will we miss about them, specifically? Camaraderie, for one thing. Maybe it's obvious that offices are social hubs — it's certainly an idea that TV sitcoms and dramas have long grasped — but the numbers are still interesting. Two-thirds of all women who work outside the home, for instance, say that "the social aspect" of their jobs is a "major reason" for showing up each day, according to a comprehensive survey by Gallup.

I'll admit I fall rather contentedly into this group. Until my mid-30s, I was a serene creature of the cubicle. Not being religious, the office was where I often found fellowship; not yet being married, it was where I had a work spouse. For people in that liminal period of emergent adulthood — when they're still schmoozers, rather than machers, to use the sociologist Robert Putnam's memorable distinction — the office can play a crucial and happy role.

And have I mentioned that offices are great places to find actual spouses? A surprising number of marriages start in their fluorescent halls. (Famous examples: Barack and Michelle, Bill and Melinda.) The statistics on this phenomenon vary — I've seen studies ranging from 11 to 31 percent — but even the smallest number isn't trivial, and the most outlandish examples can make for delightful trivia. Southwest Airlines announced 21 years ago that more than 1,600 of its 26,900 employees were married to each other. (Under the perhaps inevitable headline, "Love is in the air.")

But the benefits to office life are more than just social. They are also intellectual. Without offices, we miss out on the chance for serendipitous encounters, and it's precisely those moments of felicitous engagement that spark the best ideas.

Years ago, the productivity philosopher and author Adam Grant pointed out to me that the reason we have Post-it Notes is because a chemist at 3M, Spencer Silver, spent years trying fruitlessly to promote his low-tack adhesive in and around the office — until a churchgoing colleague, Art Fry, finally saw one of his presentations and realized the sticky stuff would be perfect for keeping his bookmarks affixed to his hymnals. Propinquity made all the difference.

Another way to think about this: Working from home rather than the office is sort of like shopping on Amazon rather than in a proper bookstore. In a bookstore, you never know what you might find. You can't even know what you don't know until you wander down the wrong aisle and stumble across it.

But to me, the best arguments for the office have always been psychological — and never have they felt more urgent than at this moment. I'll start with a subtle thing: Remote work leaves a terrible feedback vacuum. Communication with colleagues is no longer casual but effortful; no matter how hard you try, you're going to have less contact — particularly of the casual variety — and with fewer people.

And what do we humans do in the absence of interaction? We invent stories about what that silence means. They are often negative ones. It's a formula for anxiety, misunderstanding, all-around messiness.

"You need time to develop informal patterns with colleagues, especially if you don't know them well," Nancy Rothbard, a professor of management at Wharton, told me. She added that power differences also complicate things, and not in a way I found reassuring. The literature suggests that if a boss delays in replying to an email, we underlings assume he or she is off doing important things. But if *we're* late in replying, the boss assumes we're indolent or don't have much to say. Great.

More broadly speaking, even without an office, there will still be office politics. They're much easier to navigate if you can actually *see* your colleagues — and therefore discern where the power resides, how business gets done, and who the kind people are.

But perhaps the most profound effect of working in an office has to do with our very sense of self. We live in an age where our identities aren't merely assigned to us; they are realized and achieved, and places are powerful triggers of them. How much do I feel like a columnist if I'm wearing a 21-year-old Austin Powers T-shirt ("It's Cannes, baby!") and picking at my kid's leftovers as I type? I mean, somewhat, sure. But I suspect I'd feel more like one if I got dolled up and walked into the Times building each morning.

Rothbard, who's made a study of the borders between our professional and domestic selves, told me she sees this confusion all the time. There are "integrators," she said, who don't mind the dissolution of those borders, and "segmenters," who don't care for it. ("The pandemic," she said, "is a segmenter's hell.") It's hardly uncommon to have multiple identities across multiple contexts, each of them authentic. But remote work makes it awfully hard for segmenters to give full expression to their professional selves, and when they do, it often rattles those around them. "Your kids may see you talking to your employees in a different way and be like, 'Who *is* this person?'" she told me.

But it's young people, I'd argue, who'll miss out most if the office disappeared. Offices are often the very place where professional identities are forged — an especially valuable thing in an age of declining religious engagement and deferred marriage and childbearing. Yes, perhaps that's slightly ominous, just another depressing sign that work has replaced religion as a source of meaning, as Derek Thompson argued so beautifully in The Atlantic last year.

Unfortunately, technology has already collapsed the boundary between work and home. The office, at least, was a solid membrane between the two. And it may possibly be the last.

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