

*“The greatest illusion of this world is the illusion of separation. Things you think are separate and different are actually one and the same. We are all one people, but we live as if divided.” —Guru Pathik, Avatar: The Last Airbender*

An email pops up in my inbox. It reads, “Please join Zoom meeting in progress”. I click the link, watch the loading bar waltz in circles, and hold my breath. Up come the faces of my classmates—blurry, pixilated, and smiling. The people whom for years I’ve weathered the torrent of rigor that is IB Chinese with sit silently behind their monitors while the teacher figures out how to adjust some microphone setting. These faces are far away—intangible, unreachable, an illusion of pixels and computer magic—and yet I greet them with a half-facetious, “Hey, I haven’t seen you guys since we all failed that vocabulary test!” Their faces light up with smiles that penetrate the pixels—smiles that, from miles apart, become palpable in my hands and in my heart. Perhaps we aren’t that far apart, after all. In this moment, I realize that dealing with social isolation is not about what we do but rather how we think.

I began to develop this mindset by understanding that we all are going through the same event. While seemingly obvious, it wasn’t intuitive to me at first that everyone, both those I know and don’t, are in the same remoteness. I imagined myself cast from Earth, setting sail alone in a single-person spaceship, drifting away into the

unknown. And for a while, my course was set for the darkest part of the universe. A couple weeks into quarantine, I joined my Chinese class in that online meeting. Confusion and nervousness cracked through each of my classmates' faces in a manner that mirrored my own, and in that communal distress, I found connectedness. What my classmates had that I didn't at the time, however, was glistening brilliantly on their faces—hope. In that meeting, it became apparent that we can be connected not just through distress but also through hope. In that meeting, I felt like I wasn't alone. Suddenly, I looked outside my spaceship and saw millions of other spaceships, scattering the window-view like stars. Somewhere out there were the people I love—those who have cast a light for me in darker times—and they are piloting their own ships. So, now I imagine us all in our own individual spaceships, setting course for who-knows-where, the sun's light shimmering off of our metallic casings so that we may shine like stars. And although we drift into the unknown many miles apart, together we drift as a hopeful constellation.

After developing this mindset, my life in quarantine changed drastically. It was no surprise to me that social interaction would be imperative to my health over a social-isolating period, but I was astonished at the extent to which it was. The beginning of quarantine was like the beginning of summer break for me: I was relaxing, staying up late, and eating whenever I felt hungry. The minor discrepancy between quarantine and summer, however, had made a major difference. What I hadn't

anticipated was that the guidelines restricting me from eating out with friends, going to movie theaters, and going to the gym also led to lethargy, an unpredictable sleep schedule, and emaciation. When I realized that I had to change my attitude towards social isolation to the mindset I have now, I welcomed the problem of social isolation as an opportunity. I used our connectedness through distress and hope to develop a podcast with my friends. In this podcast (appropriately named *6 Feet Apart*), we discuss the ethics and politics of the pandemic while bringing in our stories of social isolation. Over the six episodes so far, we have grown closer through discussing these topics, all while amassing thousands of listeners. Just by talking about this pandemic, we have connected ourselves to many more people than the lethargic, tired, and emaciated person before this mindset could have imagined. Through this mindset, our constellation has gotten brighter.

I leave the Zoom meeting with an awkward wave and a pitiful half-smile. Poetic goodbyes are not my forte, but I know that this goodbye won't be truly permanent. As I close my laptop, I recognize that that Zoom meeting may have been the last time I'll ever see my favorite class together. But to give a poetic farewell would be to pretend that we won't always be together or that we haven't always been together since the last time we physically parted ways. Because we have been. This pandemic has connected us—all of us—in a shimmering constellation that decorates a dark sky. What we lack in physical connectedness, we make up for in our hearts; we are truly alone together.