

The New York Times

December 6, 2012

Thanks for Not Sharing

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London

LET us ponder oversharing and status anxiety, the two great scourges of the modern world.

The third, by the way, is the safety obsession of today's "wuss generation." But I'll leave that for another day.

So let us absorb the mass of unwanted shared personal information and images that wash over one, like some great viscous tide full of stuff one would rather not think about — other people's need for Icelandic lumpfish caviar, their numb faces at the dentist, their waffles and sausage, their appointments with their therapists, their personal hygiene, their pimples and pets, their late babysitters, their grumpy starts to the day, their rude exchanges, their leaking roofs, their faith in homeopathy, their stressing out, and all the rest.

Please, O wired humanity, spare me, and not only the details.

It is tempting to call this unctuous ooze of status updates and vacation snaps seeping across Facebook and Twitter and the rest information overload. But that would be to debase the word "information."

Now I was determined to get through 2012 without doing a peevish column, not wishing to appear cantankerous or curmudgeonly, determined to be sunny and youthful as the times demand, but everyone has a tipping point. Mine occurred when I came across this tweet from Claire:

"Have such a volcanically deep zit laying roots in my chin that it feels like someone hit me with a right cross."

Good to know, Claire.

I was just recovering from that when I found Deanna tweeting that she had "picked up pet food" and was heading to "the dreaded consult on colon stuff. The joys of turning 50." As for Kate she let the world know the status of her labor: "Contractions 3 minutes apart and dilated at 2 cm."

Social media does not mean that you have to be that social.

And then there was a Facebook post from Scott telling Addie how she is "my lover, my heart" and — my own heart sank — his "best friend." It is very fashionable these days to call the love of one's life one's best friend. I cannot imagine why. Surely one has best friends in part in order to be able to talk to them about the problems with one's loves.

What is this compulsion to share? Sometimes, of course, it is just a mistake, the wrong button hit, or mishandling of privacy settings on Facebook. But there is a new urge to behave as if life were some global high-school reunion at which everyone has taken some horrific tell-all drug.

My theory is this. Humanity has always been hardwired to fear. That is how we survived. But the fear used to be of wild beasts prowling, the encroaching Visigoths, plague, world war. Now, in the pampered present, all that anxiety has to find a new focus. So, having searched long and hard, and helped by technology, we have come up with being anxious that our status might be falling or — the horror, the horror! — disintegrating.

Number of Twitter followers shrinking or not growing as fast as your friends'? Status anxiety attack begins. No e-mails or texts received in the past 78 minutes? Status anxiety attack accelerates. Got unfriended or discover by chance on LinkedIn that your 29-year-old college roommate is now running an agribusiness fund out of St. Louis that has assets of \$47 billion and owns half of Madagascar? Status meltdown kicks in.

The only antidote, the only means to push that status up again, it seems, is to keep sharing more and more. Here I am — the posts and tweets and pix say — a being not anonymous but alive. I overshare therefore I am.

As you have seen, dear reader, oversharing and status anxiety are twinned phenomena turning humanity into crazed dogs chasing their tails.

I thought reading snail mail might provide some relief only to open a letter today from my dentist reminding me that I am due for a visit to the hygienist (I know, I am oversharing here.) The letter went on: “Surveys have shown that the first thing people notice when they meet is a smile. If you would like some advice on how we can help you improve your smile then please ask at your next visit and we’d be happy to advise you on the best solution.”

Being in a dark mood, I imagined some advice like: “After long reflection, sir, we are sorry to inform you that the best solution would be to change your face.”

Aaah, well, I decided to go up and see my 15-year-old daughter who, astonishingly, had her laptop open and was on Facebook. “I can’t believe this girl from camp,” she said. “She’s so in love she shares everything.”

“Like what?”

Adele read a couple of Amanda’s recent posts: “Lying in bed wearing my boyfriend’s sweatshirt wishing I could be with him.” And: “If I could reach up and hold a star for every time you’ve made me smile the entire evening sky would be in the palm of my hand.”

We laughed. You have to.