



I Just Called to Say I Love You

By Nandini Patwardhan



Credit: <https://www.pexels.com/photo/woman-having-a-video-call-4031818/>

When I was a relative newcomer to the US, I often couldn't make out the words of the songs I heard on my car radio. The songs' beat did not match my sense of rhythm. One song changed all that. It was "I just called to say I love you" by Stevie Wonder.

It reminded me of the Bollywood songs that I grew up humming and admiring for their heartfelt lyrics and soulful tunes. The songs celebrated the many shades of love ranging from romantic love, love between brother and sister, and love between child and mother, to love for a nation, and love for god. Stevie Wonder's song evoked the same emotional response in me.

However, making out the opening words, "No New Year's Day to celebrate..." followed by all that was not, I couldn't shake the feeling that the song was about a dystopian future. I had recently watched a TV movie about the aftermath of nuclear war. The images were searing—a burnt landscape, destroyed homes, rusting bridges, and bands of desperate humans fighting each other in their never-ending search for food and water. Wonder seemed to be singing about the yearning and nostalgia that the surviving individuals might feel as they recalled their old lives.

After paying close attention to the repeating refrain of the song, I felt a wave of relief wash over me. Far from being a song about a dystopian world, it was about a man calling his lover/mother/friend for no reason at all. No excuse, occasion, or nudge needed. He was calling Just Because. He was calling to just say, "I love you."

A few weeks after the COVID-19 shelter-in-place orders went into effect, I woke up with the words of this song looping in my head. I realized that a version of that dystopian future that I had mistakenly imagined had come to pass. Confined to our own

homes, we are no longer able to celebrate the everyday moments or the big events of our lives.

I am a first-time grandmother and I have not held my grandson, who lives thousands of miles away since he was a week old. When will I be able to hold him next? What kind of a world will he inherit? I worry. I feel sorry for him and feel sorry for myself. And I wait eagerly for calls from his overwhelmed and exhausted parents just so I can see him on video.

I feel caged, deprived of almost all the mundane activities that gave shape to my life. I miss getting together with friends, eating out, volunteering, and visiting the library. I can no longer attend group activities or religious services. Planning travel and the joy of anticipation that accompanies such planning, whether to visit family in India or go on a vacation to Scandinavia, are out of the question.

All of these deprivations add up to a feeling of numbness rather than pain. For there is gratitude for the graces that are still within reach—all the basic necessities of life like food, medications, and gasoline for cars. Also uninterrupted are electricity, water, and other utilities. The internet, in particular, is a godsend because it offers a portal through which it is possible to remain in touch with old connections and new developments and make meaning out of both. There is an awareness that others have it far worse, unimaginably so. So, there is humility and a desire to help.

There are many unknowns. How long will this last? How many people will die and how many will lose their jobs and homes? Will there be such a thing as a return to “normal”? There is nothing to organize against, agitate for, or work towards. According to studies quoted in the book “Tribe,” even the adversity of war does not dampen or kill the human spirit if there is a community of mutual care with shared goals. But the dictates of social distancing mean that most people can’t offer or expect mutual care.

What is known induces helplessness—an inept executive branch, a Congress that is still waging the old partisan fights, corporations that are still focused on maximizing shareholder value to the exclusion of all other considerations, and mass media being alarmist and sensationalizing. In short, the ones who have the charge and the power to lead are instead of acting like selfish and neglectful parents.

And that has turned many into covering or angry children. While some struggle with depression and anxiety, others participate in rallies demanding an end to the shutdowns. I think everyone is searching for an agency—the ability to do something to challenge the status quo.

Ironically, my mistaken understanding of Stevie Wonder’s song has come to pass. Birthday parties, Valentine’s days, and summer weddings can no longer take place as they once did. Ironically, I have also found the antidote by doing what Stevie Wonder did in that decades-old song.

I make phone and video calls to friends in my neighborhood and to loved ones who live several time zones away. Most times I don't even have to say "I love you." It is understood. What matters is seeing and being seen, hearing and being heard, and understanding and being understood.

Each call is an act of Love. Even though this is all I can do at this time, it is not nothing. It is something.

