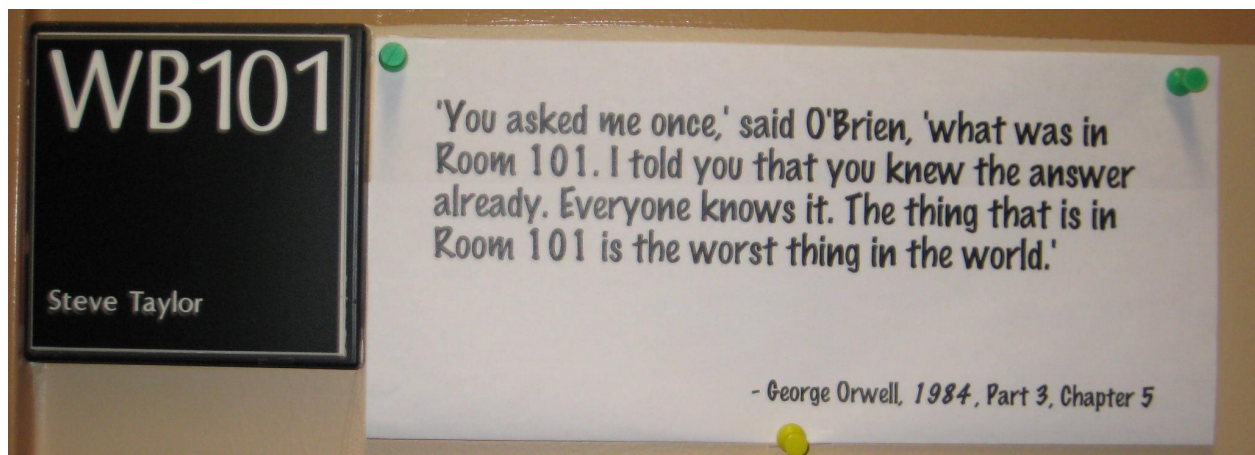# What are you reading?

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Like a lot of people, I've turned to the classics. Perhaps because my office had long been in room 101 (literally, but hopefully not figuratively), I started with Orwell's *1984*. The resonances with Trump's relationship to the truth was a little too on the nose for me, so I put the dystopian fiction down.

But not for long. I soon picked up Huxley's *Brave New World*. The world of the novel has been created for social stability. In it, everyone belongs to everyone else. It is in some way an ultimate expression of a completely communitarian society. That world comes into contact with the "savage" world of indigenous people who lived in places that were deemed to not be worth civilizing and the Savage is brought back to London.

My editorial for *Organizational Aesthetics* last year was about connection. I was surprised to find the communitarian world in which everyone belongs to everyone else to be a world that was surprisingly lacking real human connection. In simple terms, everyone belonging to everyone else also meant that no one belonged to anyone. There were no enduring romantic or family relationships ("mother" is a swear word, although in a completely different way than it is today's USA). No one mourns another's death. Although they hate to be alone, they have – at least in my reading – almost no deep connection to each other.

Of course, there is a certain resonance with our own COVID world in which our primary connecting is online. For me, it is a world in which we seem to be connecting all the time, but there is a lack of depth and I have yearned for a visceral felt connection to others – the sort that comes with spending time together. In *Brave New World*, family relationships and romantic attachments are bad because they are a source of instability and conflict. I am forced to wonder if you can have the sort of deep connection I am interested in without conflict? Perhaps in the short term, but in the longer term is it possible? Is there some sort of paradox of connection that suggests we need the threat and even actuality of

disconnection in order to achieve a really deep connection with others? With our self? With our world?

I have also been experiencing my own dystopian reality in my role as interim dean of the Foisie Business School. I had been managing the typical problems, from the declining enrollments of international students (something most business schools in the USA faced after Trump took office) to mediating conflict between faculty governance and the board of trustees, but COVID brought a host of new issues. It felt more than a little dystopian to generate budget scenarios with 10 and 20 percent cuts in expenses. And it felt absolutely horrible to generate lists of which of our non-tenured faculty were absolutely essential, which were really important, and which ones we could live without in the event we suddenly had to enact drastic cost cutting measures (which thankfully we haven't had to so far) – which were euphemistically referred to as involuntary personnel actions. The process made me feel physically ill. And in some odd way, I also felt more connected to my colleagues than ever before. Perhaps this was evidence of the importance of conflict and disconnection in creating connection? Or maybe I am just not emotionally tough enough to make the difficult leadership decisions.

But the toughest time for me was this past fall. It started the week before the fall term was to start in late August. We had been asking all of the faculty about their intentions for the fall – did they want to be on campus or stay remote. One week before classes there was one faculty member who had not responded. I called her and reached her husband, who told me that she was in the hospital. The preliminary diagnosis was auto-immune encephalitis and she would need to be on medical leave for the fall, maybe longer. We scrambled to find other people to teach her classes. In mid-September, her husband contacted me to invite the faculty to their home for breakfast on Saturday. He thought she would enjoy seeing her colleagues. I went to the breakfast where I found out that the initial diagnosis was wrong. She had now been diagnosed with Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (CJD). CJD is a progressive prion disease in which your brain gradually eats itself. It is always fatal. By that Saturday in September, she could no longer speak. By mid-October she had passed.

The memorial service was done over zoom. I sat alone at home and I was moved as friends, family, and colleagues told stories about knowing her. There were tears and laughter and music and readings. But, it wasn't enough.

I had known her for 18 years. We were not particularly close. But her death was devastating. Maybe it was because COVID-19 has heightened our sense of mortality, maybe because it has taken so much of our emotional capacity that there just isn't enough left, maybe because as dean she was one of my people and I felt somehow responsible for her, maybe for all those reasons.

I needed my colleagues and my connection to them to get through it. But we could not be in the same room. There were zoom conversations and email and none of it was enough. I just needed to be in the same room with people, not to say anything or do anything, just to be in the same physical space, to be together. That is what the pandemic has taken from all of us.

But perhaps it has also given us more insight into our sense of connection. I have some sense that the connection I felt with my colleagues in the memorial service is a very different thing than the connection I feel to close friends or loved ones. Both are rich and deep and for both I have very little ability to describe how they are different. I feel like the connection I have over zoom is real, but qualitatively different than the connection I have sitting beside a fire sipping a scotch with friends. I can't tell you how they are different, only that I want more of the latter and less of the former.