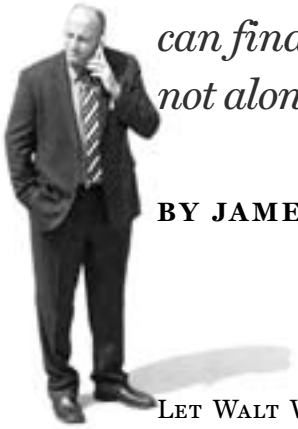
Divided By

In a world so saturated in connectivity that every last oddball can find a poll, a pie chart, or an online pal to confirm that he's not alone, there are still some gaps that can't be bridged.



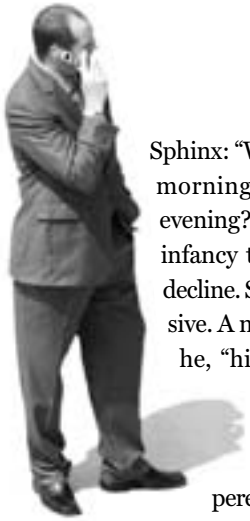
BY JAMES MORRIS

Let Walt Whitman provide the epigraph: "I am large," the poet declared, "I contain multitudes." Ah, Walt, these days who doesn't? And there's not a moment when multitudinous we aren't sounding off about something, a nation of self-anointed experts and bloggers with a toxic addiction to sharing. It doesn't help that there's not a moment when we aren't being *encouraged* to sound off. We're under siege by outlets and divvied up to suit a rampant array of survey and poll criteria: age, income, geography, mood, ailment, enthusiasm (culinary, political, sexual, aesthetic, athletic). We're peered at through the right end of the telescope and the wrong, and mined in the course of a lifetime for all the various *us*-es we become.

There's no longer a survey so implausible that it might not be genuine: "A new Starbucks/Golds Gym poll shows that 68 percent of people who stop for caffeinated coffee at a Starbucks on their way to a Golds Gym have to interrupt their workout sessions for a bathroom break (the percentage is lower for decaf)." That one's fake, but this one's real: "Half of all Americans would prefer to live elsewhere, study reveals." I watched that statement scroll across the bottom of a TV screen while the upper portion gave an update on eight babies born to an embryo junkie. Did the study show that half of all Americans would prefer to live in a bigger house, or six blocks away in a better neighborhood, or in Manitoba or Flanders? Who did the study? A realtors' association? But the ticker had moved on, leaving in its wake the collateral damage of frustration and ambiguity that attends communicating with one-liners, wordlets, and odd acronyms, our thoughts adjusted to the dimensions of our vade mecum screens.

We exist from demographic segment to demographic segment. Those of us itching to live elsewhere might be counted among the restless or the aspirant or the delusional. The categories multiply and break like a struck dollop of mercury. We can be the loved or the lonely, for example, though loneliness is not what it used to be once you're assigned to a group called the lonely. We're voters or not, TV watchers or not, readers or not, male or female or not, parents or not, believers or not, consumers or . . . wait. We're consumers or we don't exist, even now that the wheel of relentless acquisition has flattened from round to oval to right angled. Consumer preferences and aversions are the mother's milk of demarcation. Selves used to be fewer and larger. Three were enough for Oedipus, who was as quick as a *Jeopardy* champ to solve the riddle put to him by the

James Morris is an editor at large of *The Wilson Quarterly* and a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson Center.



Sphinx: "What creature goes on four legs in the morning, two at noon, and three in the evening?" A human being, said Oedipus, from infancy through adulthood to cane-propped decline. Shakespeare's Jaques was more expansive. A man plays many parts in his time, said he, "his acts being seven ages": mewling infant, whining schoolboy, lover, soldier, the justice ("full of wise saws and modern instances"), the "slippered pantaloon" (=tiresome old fool) with "shrunk shank . . . his big manly voice turning again toward childish treble."

> Last scene of all,
> That ends this strange eventful history,
> Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
> Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Not quite everything. Today's shriveled and depleted child might still be a data source, drooling out a response to a TV reporter's inquiry: "How does it feel to be a useless lump?"

I change my mind from day to day about the relative importance of the bottomless list of opportunities for division our age serves up. But which of that teeming number actually matter? I can think of two, for starters, that matter to me. The first is peculiar to our time; the second would have been old hat to Oedipus and Jaques.

I'm struck by the new divide between those of us who still hoard our privacy as shrewd nations once hoarded gold and those who've erased the boundary separating their private and public lives, who've decided, apparently, that there's nothing so private it can't be, shouldn't be, shared in public. These folks have roughed up reticence and mugged shame, and there's no isolating them by age or class or profession. Consider those who prattle on in a phone booth big as all outdoors. They might be called a species of exhibitionist, but they don't care whether they have an audience or not. They're present only to themselves and to the distant soul whose half of the conversation goes forever unheard at this end.

When I'm asked about my first time, I say that it occurred on Amtrak. I endured the protracted, unbalanced chatter of a guy across the aisle and two rows up who I assumed was speaking to a seatmate both reticent and short. Pioneer cell phoners like him, on trains and sidewalks and restaurant banquettes, were canaries sent early into the mine of unmediated public revelation. The canaries should

have been dead pigeons, but through the miracle of cultural evolution, they—we—adjusted to the mine's bad air. How innocent and how distant the proto–cell phone age now seems in the light of all that's come after. We've fleshed out the phones' mere auditory revelations with the full-body scans of TV and the Internet. Reality TV, of course, is already fossilized and has to keep raising the ante—the prizes, the embarrassment—to keep audiences attentive. Yet these many shows that trade in exposure and mortification never lack for participants missing the screw that might have kept their self-respect attached.

Even otherwise sober folk have felt the need to put themselves out there, if not on TV then on social networking sites in the spaceless space of the Internet—Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, Twitter. I've always taken the urgency of E. M. Forster's wishful-thinking imperative "Only connect!" to be fundamentally philosophical. But what a motto it makes for the hard-line onliners whose goal is fundamentally numerical: With how many friends, pals, associates, contacts, fans, objects, institutions, life forms, can they claim connection? Who except a teenager (or a politician) needs hundreds of friends, or two dozen even, if lucky enough to have six of the to-the-death, flesh-and-blood sort? To accumulate hundreds in air is to traffic in subprime liaisons. These are friends to keep on a tally sheet, not in one's heart, connections to be broken not with scenes of anger and recrimination but with a keystroke.

When so much is noise, and insubstantial, could any name be more appropriate than Twitter for one of these social networking sites? The first dictionary meaning of the noun is "the light chirping sound made by certain birds," but dictionaries will soon have to reference the electronic chirping sound made by certain humans. The Twitter twist is that communications are restricted to 140 characters. Not words, characters. The result is a kind of autobiographical haiku. These are the wan journals of our clickety Boswells: "Approaching toll plaza. Wish I had EZ Pass. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight cars and a van ahead of me. Seven cars now. Six. Five."

Face it: The machines have won. And they did so not by growing Terminator-big and -mean but by going all Lilliputian on us. They became as companionable as puppies, as essential as house keys. They rest on our laps and lodge in our pockets. Even the language of lust borrows from electronics: "Let's hook up!" The machines are emblems of our new freedom. We can order pizza in traffic, porn in church. We can work anywhere now, and network there too. Yet how eerie an airport waiting area seems when full of mute travelers intent on their bright screens—paragons of productivity, Kissins of their keyboards.

The machines record our whims and needs and passions and movements, click by click, choice by choice. They assemble and store our lives and ready them for retrieval by . . . whom? Who knows anymore? We've put our private selves up for grabs, and what we risk surrendering or having taken from us seems more than we care to imagine. We traffick in airy impulses and boast of emancipation while trailing invisible, adamantine shackles. Not that it will matter for long. Soon enough everyone will have died who remembers a time when the machines and their proliferating capabilities did not set the parameters of our lives, when we could drop from the grid and be untraceable.

The second great divide that I think is important is the one between youth and age. I'd say youth lasts for however many decades you embrace possibility without a second thought and say "Of course" to every dare. Age begins the day you say, "Uh, well, maybe not." Other signs come shuffling after—a tamping down of enthusiasm, a diminution of curiosity, a sense that you've seen everything already, and too much of it more than once. The background din that had always been a soundtrack to the foreground action of your life, cradling and indulging it, suddenly claims your whole attention. Minutiae nip and sting. You linger in the drugstore aisles you never expected to visit.

Those of us who still watch the major TV networks' evening newscasts know for sure that we've parted company with the 18-to-49-year-old consumer segment so dear to America's hucksters. But the hucksters have plans for us, too. The commercials that interrupt the newscasts' predictable narrative of national failings tell their own chilling tale of personal failings: "Listen up, you dozy lot, at least those of you who can still hear. The warranty is running out on every part in your bodies. Those blurry sightings in your rearview mirror are bodily functions. Your bones are crumbling, joints detaching, skin crimping up, organs hosting the agents of their own undoing, arteries turning solid as bridge cables. Your minds are developing minds of their own." (Under the circumstances, the promise of erectile dysfunction is a blessing.)

Old age plays out on a stage strewn with trapdoors,

and there's no knowing from day to day which of them will be sprung. They release singly or in teams, but the free fall to what lies beneath, so frightening the first few times, eventually loses its power to alarm or even surprise. Sometimes you suffer the hard landing of illness, and sometimes you endure the soft landing of reminiscence, when all of now is automatically measured against all of then, and disappoints. Most days you assume the fallback position of routine, over which Samuel Beckett pronounced a benediction: "The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener."

Still, those trapdoors sometimes make you doubt whether each new day deserves a welcome. A certain reluctance intrudes. It's a counterpart to the reluctance with which the young sometimes face the day. For them, the day is one of thousands yet to come, and their assumption of endless recurrence is reason enough to hide beneath the bedclothes. For the old, there's no endless prospect, only an edge toward which movement quickens or slows but does not stop. Each new used-up day subtracts one from a finite store, leaving who knows how many remaining. The young are apprehensive because so much undefined life lies ahead of them, the old because so little. The difference is that the old are better placed to shed their apprehension, or rather to experience the gradual morphing of the word from its meaning of dread to its promise of understanding.

"If you can hear me, give me a sign."

I once asked Herman Wells, the near-legendary president and chancellor of Indiana University, how he was feeling. Wells was then in his eighties and in visibly poor health. "I feel like a very young boy," he said, and paused, and added, "who just doesn't feel very well." (He lived to be almost 98.) I failed at the time to appreciate how much wisdom there was in that wistful linking of the last part of life to the first, vaulting the middle. Near the end, the most vivid memories are increasingly of the beginning. Distant trivial events have more clarity than the defining moments of later decades, or of last week. However clouded or presbyopic, the old man's eyes that see the world are indeed the same eyes that belonged to the boy—and belong still to the boy—though the eyes through which the world sees the old boy invite alarmed inquiries after his health.

The practical reality, of course, is that youth and age mostly keep to themselves, and why not? I was reminded of that during a recent visit to the Kennedy Center to attend a concert. I arrived just as a busload of eager high schoolers on a class trip began their surge toward the parted doors of the building and its red-carpeted Speerian expanse. I surged right along with them. No choice. They wore jeans and wires, and over the short distance from curb to corridor they bumped and jostled and touched one another, bonding and separating like amoebas. Once they were inside, the liveliness of the group was tamed briefly by a head-on encounter with a second group, who were exiting.

The departing group appeared to be on a class trip of sorts as well, perhaps as residents of the same assisted living facility or retirement community. Some held hands; others took hold of arms or elbows to support or be supported; a few were steadied by canes. They said nothing at all and looked warily at the vocal teens (or maybe at the gray interloper among them). They were dressed in what passes for senior chic these days, practicality trumping dignity—pants for all, the ladies' secured by forgiving elastic, the men's belted and vivid enough to be seen far off on a golf course or in a crosswalk. They moved on enough sneakers to have caused a spike in Foot Locker earnings. And just like that my memory erased 60 intervening years, and I recalled being told by an omniscient nun who channeled Martha Stewart before Martha's time never to wear sneakers—or galoshes, for that matter—indoors, at the risk of blindness.

The frail phalanx bent away from the boisterous young who skirted their flank. The faces of the teenagers were distinct and individual, while the faces of the old seemed chiseled into a sameness—indeed, into the likenesses of an alarmingly extended family. The physical juxtaposition of the two groups was over in less than a minute, but I thought that it could be spun into eternity. I disengaged from my accidental entourage, looked back at the receding seniors, and wanted them to know that my train was, in fact, on their track. ■