

(NON)TRIVIAL CONNECTIONS

What is the air speed of an unladen swallow? (A)

I thought I was pretty smart - at least that's what my mother always told me. In particular, I thought I was pretty good at trivia. Certainly I have a lot of random (a polite word for useless) facts pinballing around in my head, vying for space. But playing pub trivia on Zoom during the pandemic has been a chastening experience, quickly disabusing me of the notion that my trove of arcane knowledge is anything special.

Shortly after the pandemic struck, our daughter Alison and her husband Zac, locked down and curfewed in Montreal, came up with the idea of starting a Zoom pub trivia game as a way of connecting with friends whom they couldn't see in person. Alison talked us into trying it, and we've now been playing regularly for over a year.

My trivia chops encompass a wide range of old sports facts and stats - *What was Joe DiMaggio's lifetime batting average? (B)* - and old movies and TV shows - *Name the three sons on Bonanza. (C)* And I sailed into our first game pretty confidently until we started getting questions like:

First observed in 1967, this type of astronomical body was jokingly named LGM-1 for "Little Green Men" due to its eerie emissions of electromagnetic radiation. Name it. (D)

Or: What popular food item was formerly known as a cure for diarrhea? (E)

These questions, not to mention the one about unladen swallows, were not remotely in my wheelhouse. And don't even get me started about "theme evenings" devoted to Harry Potter (sorry, never read a word of it) or Star Trek (sorry, not a fan). On those nights I literally didn't know a single answer. I certainly didn't know:

In Harry Potter, what is the meaning of the name Dumbledore? (F)

Or, In Star Trek, which of the five original home worlds contains a real planet with the potential to support life? (G)

And even things I thought I knew cold - for example, that Yuri Gagarin was the first man in space aboard Sputnik. Except - he wasn't. Apparently his spaceship was called (H). Who knew? Not me.

But Les Quizerables knew. They're a bunch of ringers from Montreal who seem to know ... everything. With their (overly?) cute team name and seemingly bottomless fount of knowledge, they put me and my piddling baseball stats to shame. We're talking about a whole different level here. We're talking about people with PhD's in trivia (I know. I know. There's probably no such thing, but still.) We're talking about the Einsteins, the Gretzkys, the Paganinis of trivia - unless we're talking about ... dare I utter the word ... *cheaters*. We secretly call them Team Google. But really, I don't think they're cheaters. I think they're just, well, weird. I mean who knows:

What is the official name for the blob of toothpaste on a toothbrush? (I) Les Quizerables know. That's who.

That's one thing about Zoom trivia as opposed to regular in-person trivia. It's completely dependent on the honour system. You can't see or hear the other players so they could be Googling away like mad and you'd never know it. There's even a jokey warning at the beginning of each game: "If you resort to Google you may win the game but you'll lose your self respect, oh, and be doomed to eternal hellfire." But really, who's going to sink to cheating at trivia? (Other than you-know-who.)

Unlike regular pub trivia where, I assume, participants tend to be from a certain age and demographic - ie. young people who frequent pubs and know the rules of beer pong - our game has

attracted an eclectic and far-flung group of players from various places in Canada as well as Texas, Wisconsin and even one chap from London, England who stays up until 3 a.m. just to join in.

And there's a wide range of ages and knowledge bases so a gimme to some - *What song includes the line 'Got that ring, just like Toronto' (J)* - is Greek to others (like me.) Maybe ... Drake? Wrong.

And then there's the camel issue. Somehow - no one seems to remember exactly how it started - it's become obligatory to have a question that has at least something, however obscure, to do with camels of all things. Don't ask me why. We're talking trivia here, not rigorous logic.

I have to admit that our team does have a couple of ringers of our own, in particular my wife's niece Wendy and her husband Mark, who live in Burlington. Wendy has an otherworldly knowledge of dates and numbers and knows things she has no business knowing like:

In the movie Christmas Story young Flick gets his tongue stuck to a frozen pole. Where is that pole located? (K)

And, thanks to questions like this, and precious little thanks to me, we actually won once, conquering mighty Les Quizerables.

That was fun. But in the end, of course, it's not about winning and losing (well, maybe just a *bit*). It's about connecting.

People complain about being sick of Zoom, about being "Zoomed out", but I actually haven't minded it. For someone who can occasionally be, well, punctuality challenged - as in "Sorry, running just a *little* late" - Zoom cuts out a lot of travel time and makes it much easier to be on time for meetings

and such. And my laptop camera doesn't really pick up the fact that my shirt isn't impeccably ironed.

So our trivia game Zooms at 8pm every second Friday and we wouldn't miss it. (You're welcome to form a team and try your luck.) We rush through dinner to be ready for it. We skip Crave and Amazon Prime for it. We even skip Netflix for it.

Like thousands of others, we haven't seen or hugged our daughter in person in many months. And obviously a virtual hug is a poor substitute for the real thing, but Zoom trivia seems a lot better than nothing. It gives us a chance to spend time with Alison and Zac, and laugh and groan and bewail our stupidity when we fail to come up with the most obvious of answers.

And we see a side of Alison that we don't often see in real life. She organizes and hosts these evenings, sometimes acting as quizmaster, and she's confident and funny, and somehow comes up with ridiculous questions like:

In 2018, 12 contestants were banned from a beauty pageant in Saudi Arabia because botox was used to make them look even more beautiful. But these weren't just any contestants. What was unique about them? (L)

Zoom trivia has also become a bit of a social affair. When the game ends people unmute themselves, faces pop up on the screen like on Hollywood Squares, some players linger for a bit and raise a glass, and we end up chatting with strangers whom we would never have met otherwise.

After while the others gradually sign off and we have a few minutes with Alison and Zac to just talk and catch up and, well, connect. And that's not trivial.

The epigraph to E.M. Forster's novel *Howard's End* is "Only connect." Obviously Forster wasn't talking about Zoom trivia, but the human impulse for connection is universal. Alison says "Our trivia night grew much bigger than our original little idea

of connecting with a few friends, but bringing people together is still at the heart of it all."

As I write this, there are starting to be hopeful signs that the seemingly endless pandemic with all its rules and restrictions may finally be starting to lose steam. Life looks as if it will slowly get back to something resembling normalcy. Fingers crossed.

By the time you read this, Zoom may have become a distant memory like FAX machines or VHS tapes - cutting edge technology one day, obsolete the next - (although I wouldn't bet on that.) By the time you read this "social distancing" may just be an unpleasant memory. Unmasked people with proper haircuts may actually be meeting in pubs. The first question people ask will no longer be "Have you had your second shot?"

So, will Zoom trivia carry on after the pandemic finally fizzles out? Or will it lose its *raison d'etre*?

As Yogi Berra supposedly once said, "Prediction is very difficult - especially when it involves the future." So who am I to predict whether Zoom trivia will survive. And, if not, would that be such a loss? Isn't trivia, well, kind of trivial?

A little cursory research - on Google, of course - tells me that the word trivia comes from the Latin meaning a "place where three roads meet". These crossroads were convenient places for travellers to gather, trade goods, and gossip about everyday things - hence "trivialities".

Jump forward a couple of centuries to 1965 and two Columbia University students started organizing trivia quizzes and wrote a book called, yes, Trivia, which became a best seller. They were purists who distinguished between the "flower of trivia" and the "weed of minutiae." Bad trivia, according to them, deals with unevocative factoids like "Which state is the

largest consumer of Jello?" while good trivia should evoke memories and "tug at the heartstrings".

I doubt that our quiz with its silly camel questions meets that lofty "heartstrings" standard. But our trivia evenings have been more than just trivialities for me and I hope they continue, because I'll miss the connections which haven't been trivial, even if it means being semi-publicly humiliated on a bi-monthly basis by Team Google. Sorry, Les Quizerables.

And maybe one of these weeks we'll finally get a question that I know for sure like - *Where have you gone Joe DiMaggio?*
(M)

Only connect.

The Answers: (In case you didn't know)

A. 24 mph; B. .325 ; C. Adam, Hoss and Little Joe; D. A pulsar;
E. Ketchup; F. Bumblebee; G. Vulcan; H. Vostok 1; I. A nurdle;
J. Intentions by Justin Bieber; K. St. Catharines; L. They were camels (you were warned); M. Holy Cross Cemetery in California

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PROFILE KINGSTON

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