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We start the fall semester this year in a new world. Our work environment, our habits, the way we interact with colleagues and students have all changed within a short period.

When the state of emergency forced us to stay within the confines of our homes, we were told to wrap up the semester with what technology we had available to us and to the best of our ability. With only a couple of weeks left to go, we delivered our classes online, had the students write the final exam in some fashion, and then it was all over.

For those few weeks it did not matter if online teaching was our preferred way of course delivery or not, it was just a quick remedy to an immediate problem. But then virtual communication started to slowly settle in as a new way of life, replacing human interactions. Seminars and conferences were moved online, and suddenly a new world of possibilities opened up. I am now able to

listen to a fantastic talk by someone from across the globe from the comfort of my home. It is better for both my pocket and the environment: I travel less and have immediate exposure to an amazing array of topics and mathematicians.

Over the summer, we learned that our classes at Dalhousie University will be offered online this semester and probably the next one too. The Atlantic Association for Research in Mathematical Sciences (AARMS) has taken the initiative to coordinate between Atlantic universities so that many of our graduate courses are now open to students from across the Atlantic region. As a result, our students have access to a much wider variety of courses than they normally would. Moreover, international students will not even need to be on campus to attend courses; they can do so from their home country!

These changes seem exciting as they offer us a glimpse into a possible future with a new set of opportunities, new ways of learning. In this new future, classrooms, offices and research centres seem like redundant luxuries. They can all be replaced with a good laptop and a good Wi-Fi signal. And why not? Why shouldn't we sit in front of our home computers for the rest of our careers and talk to our screens?

I look back to when the global pandemic hit us in March: from one day to the next, we moved all our operations to our home. With a family of two school-age children and two professors, our daily routine changed into a quick breakfast followed by the four of us scattered in separate rooms attending school on Zoom or preparing and giving virtual lectures, taking short meal breaks in between, always tiptoeing to avoid interrupting a recording session. The system worked perfectly to cover the essentials of school and university.

When the academic year was done in April, and before the world had caught up with all the possibilities that virtual technology had to offer, the uninterrupted periods of research were incredibly rewarding. However, as everyone settled into this new routine, committee meetings, seminars, student meetings and research collaborations gradually moved online. For the kids, recess, student clubs as well as many other extra-curricular activities were also being held virtually. And there were the additional non-mandatory and creative online activities: social activities, family reunions, birthday parties, music events. Soon we were spending all our hours in front of our computers, or worried — in the brief periods away from our rooms — if we were missing an important online event. While we were all at home together at all times, we were each on a separate island.

These days, home does not feel like it did before. It is no longer a private sanctuary far away from my workspace. I can no longer say: I will not be in my office today, so let's meet tomorrow. I cannot leave my office and take a few hours to think about something: I have nowhere to go.



The chickens, new additions to our household during the pandemic, cluck away and go about their regular day while I struggle to find the fine balance between my personal and professional life. (Photo by Susanne Retter)

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But the biggest impact on my professional life has been that I am no longer able to participate in in-person conferences, workshops and research-getaways. While many organizations like BIRS (Banff), MFO (Oberwolfach), AMS, and CMS among others have adapted their events so they can be attended virtually, nothing can replace their most valuable offering: getting away.

Getting away is what I miss most about my pre-pandemic life. The opportunity to leave from my work place and be at home. The opportunity to leave my everyday life behind and enjoy a mathematical getaway: mingling during coffee breaks, getting up at 4 am in a hotel room to get some uninterrupted work done, having a week where you work with a new group of people on a new problem in a new place.

While I value the know-how that I have gained in the past few months, and I feel increasingly attached to my home as the months roll by, I do long for the days when I could easily get away. I wonder if I will eventually learn how to be away while I am here at home, and if this way of life is here to stay.