



Jerry's Lakehouse. I live in the house with you.

By Laurel Moffatt

A few months ago, my husband and I were planning a family vacation. An epic road trip across America. And like many travellers these days, we went looking for accommodation on Airbnb.

In choosing a place to stay, there were the practical considerations of location and size, but after that, it was all about appearance. Rustic. Refined. Cutesy. Elegant. Modern. Traditional. No matter your tastes, there's a place to suit.

It's the pictures that you hook you and grab you in. The old adage of not judging a book by its cover is meaningless on Airbnb, covers are all you have to go on. That, and reviews.

Knowing that every potential guest is a judger of covers, Airbnb instructs potential hosts to take 'captivating photos' to make their listing stand out. Use natural light. Clean and declutter. Fluff and fold. 'Think about highlighting special features like the gourmet espresso machine'.

The purpose of the photos is to attract a potential guest using as a lure what meets their idea of beauty. Beauty without the messiness of real life, or the presence of a host.



Which is why, when my phone pinged with a link to a listing in Texas for ‘Jerry’s lakehouse. I live in the house with you’ I did not at first really consider it. Jerry’s Lakehouse did not look like the listings that I had ‘hearted’ on my phone. There were no baskets of matching, folded blankets, no bowl of lemons in the kitchen or vase of fresh flowers on the table, no descriptions using words like ‘cozy, cute, or insta-worthy’.

[sounds of outside, near a lake? Water lapping, car driving up, car door opening and closing, walking up porch steps, screen door to a porch opening and closing - all the sounds carrying through the next paragraph]

Jerry’s Lakehouse. I live in the house with you is exactly what it says it is. It is a lake house belonging to a man named Jerry. And yes, he lives in the house with you. The honesty of the listing is arresting. Other listings allow me to imagine myself as the sole occupant of a pristine, anonymous space, un-lived in by others. In contrast, Jerry’s Lakehouse invites a person to stay, well, with Jerry, in his lakehouse. It is his home. It is Jerry’s space. It’s his front porch with his couches, it’s his living room with his dog, it’s his shower curtain with pictures of giant fishing lures on it. It all looked very clean and comfortable, but it isn’t anonymous. It’s Jerry’s.



Airbnb listings like Jerry's Lakehouse are part of the short-term rental economy. This used to be a subset of the sharing economy until it outgrew it. In 2013 the short-term rental economy was worth about \$15 million globally. By 2025 it is projected to be worth \$335 million.

With the growth of this industry, there are side-effects. While Airbnb meets the needs of many travellers, there is evidence that the presence of Airbnb properties *en masse* can have a negative effect on a city. It can strain the housing supply, further diminishing the number of homes available, and thereby drive up rental prices. It can change the retail landscape of neighbourhoods to cater for tourists rather than residents.

And it can disrupt or further disintegrate social connections in a neighbourhood, particularly when a city has a high volume of listings. The irony of the sharing economy is that its purported aim of connecting people may end up doing the opposite. That said, I don't think this is the case with listings such as *Jerry's Lakehouse*.

It is the disintegration of social connections that Dr Vivek Murthy, the US Surgeon General says directly contributes to the current crisis of loneliness. And loneliness, Murthy finds, is the root cause underlying a suite of epidemics: depression, anxiety, violence, alcohol and drug addiction.



The fight against these epidemics is often fought in the health and wellness sector, another booming economy. A lot of money is spent each year around the globe on wellness, across diverse categories of physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, and social wellness. In 2020, it pretty much blew the short-term rental economy out of the water at \$4.4 trillion dollars. And the greatest share of money spent in the area of wellness is the category of beauty, personal care, and anti-aging.

[sound of money being spent - cash registers, or beeping of card transactions]

A whole quarter of the wellness economy, over a trillion does every year, goes to the appearance of wellness, rather than to the heart of it. If the way we spend our money across the globe is any indication, then, a bit like Airbnb, we tend to put a lot of value in the way something looks rather than how it actually is. And despite the amount of money we pour into wellness in the desire to be healthy and well, we do not seem to be making much progress. Our rates of depression and anxiety continue to rise, while suicide remains a leading cause of death in countries such as Australia, the US and the UK.

In Murthy's opinion, the antidote to the problem of loneliness is not medication, but human connection. Murthy believes that humans are hard-



wired for connection, which is ‘as essential to our well-being as food and water.’

One of my favourite Shakespeare plays is *Richard II*. It’s not as popular as his other plays, and makes it to the stage far less than plays like *Hamlet* or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. One of the most poignant moments in the play is the moment when King Richard sees he’s losing support, and could lose the crown as a result. For a moment, Richard sees himself as he really is, beneath the trappings of royalty. He says to the few supporters who remain, that “I live with bread like you, feel want, / Taste grief, need friends”. Richard II, like each one of us, is hard-wired for friendship and connection rather than distance and isolation. Both Shakespeare and Murthy lead me to think so, and, if I’m honest, so do the biblical accounts of the incarnation of God and his arrival on earth over 2000 years ago.

The line from *Richard II* works for Christ just as it does for us. Like us, he ‘lived with bread’, felt want, tasted grief, needed friends. Every time I read about him I am struck by the fact that he showed up, but especially by the ordinary, everyday way in which he did. From biblical accounts, if we judged him by his appearance, he wouldn’t have stood out. He wasn’t cute or insta-worthy. Judging by looks alone, we’d probably scroll past, and wouldn’t even consider ‘hearting’ him on our phones.



And yet, I'm always surprised by the immediacy of his presence everywhere he went, the fact that he physically reached out and touched people and could also be reached and touched in turn, knowing as he did that we are in such deep need of connection - human to human, and human to God. And then there are also the descriptions of how in his life and death, he was lonely and rejected in order to bring about the deepest connection possible: the one between God and the people he made for connection.

My family and I ended up taking a different path through Texas, so I didn't find out how it worked staying with Jerry at his lakehouse. But, in the weeks and months since first seeing the listing of Jerry's Lakehouse, I find myself returning to his listing, but not because of the photos. I go back for the reviews.

Unlike many Airbnb listings I've seen, *Jerry's Lakehouse. I stay in the house with you* has a perfect 5-star rating. Most of his guests have also left effusively-positive reviews.

What stands out, review after review, is not the fresh flowers or fluffy towels or the gourmet espresso machine. It's the host, Jerry, and the kindness he shows his guests. This may sound like a strange prospect for some. I recently spoke to Jerry and he told me that when some people find out that he lives in the house too, they cancel their booking. It's not what they want.



But, then you read the reviews, and hear how guest after guest leaves surprised by the gift of presence, of time, attention, and kindness. It makes me wonder what if, even if it's not what we think we want, it's what we *need*? Connection with others, and the gift of one another's presence. Maybe *this* is the truly beautiful thing.

The last review of *Jerry's Lakehouse* is from December. His guest left 5 stars and some kind words about Jerry. Jerry responded, thanked him, and mentioned that 'somebody left a beanie here, I'll put it aside.' For days I wondered why Jerry didn't offer to post the beanie to him, and then I realised. Maybe he knows they're coming back.

Links:

More numbers about the worth of the sharing economy:

<https://www.pwc.com/hu/en/kiadvanyok/assets/pdf/sharing-economy-en.pdf>

"The Airbnb Effect on Housing and Rent," *Forbes*, Feb 21, 2020,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/garybarker/2020/02/21/the-airbnb-effect-on-housing-and-rent/?sh=689e049e2226>

Small Wonders Podcast - Season 1 - Episode 4



Vivek, Murthy, M.D. *Together: The Healing Power of Human Connection in a Sometimes Lonely World*, <https://www.vivekmurthy.com/together-book>

But perhaps you'd rather visit Jerry's Lakehouse than read these articles? If so, follow the link to the listing for his place on Airbnb:

https://www.airbnb.com.au/rooms/40640814?source_impression_id=p3_1645644949_RQZGKBoac9nWRVZH