

“FRIENDING”

A sermon by the Reverend Dena McPhetres

Imagine for a moment, if you will, that you live in rural New Hampshire, like the poet Robert Frost did for a time. Imagine the rolling hills, the green fields and forests, the gardens eked out from rocky soil, the centuries-old stone walls edging the pastures. Imagine you are in such a garden hoeing the rows of beans and the hills of squash, when you hear a friend call from the road. Imagine this, if you please, so you can more fully hear the meaning in Robert Frost’s poem, “A Time to Talk.”

“When a friend calls to me from the road
And slows his horse to a meaning walk,
I don’t stand still and look around
On all the hills I haven’t hoed
And shout from where I am, What is it?
No, not as there is a time to talk.
I thrust my hoe in the mellow ground,
Blade-end up and five feet tall,
And plod: I go up to the stone wall
For a friendly visit.”

This poem speaks to my central belief about friendship: friendship takes time. To have friends, and to be a true friend, one must turn from the work at hand and make time for friendship.

In our fast-paced world, where “friending” can happen with the click of a mouse, (sometimes with people we have never met in person), I wonder about the place of friendship in our lives. How do we find and sustain friendships in the 21st century?

Has electronic communication affected the essence of friendship? Does social media enhance and strengthen our ties with friends, or does it distract us from a deeper sharing of ourselves with others? And what is the enduring spiritual significance of friendship?

In 1841, Unitarian Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote in his essay “Friendship:”
“friendships form when the divine spirit in one individual finds the divine spirit in

another, and both deride and cancel the thick walls of individual character, relation, age, sex, and circumstance. . . . I do not wish to treat friendships daintily, but with roughest courage. When they are real, they are not glass threads or frost-work, but the solidest thing we know.”

This description implies that the unifying bond of friendship surmounts any barriers that the differences between individuals might pose. The spiritual bond between friends is more solid than disagreement or differences.

Emerson was not referring to interspecies friendship, but I can’t help thinking of Owen and Mzee, the baby hippopotamus and the ancient giant tortoise who formed an unlikely friendship at Hallers Park in Kenya in 2004. Do you know about them? You can google it and watch them on You Tube!

What makes friendship different from any other type of relationship? “The Roman poet Cicero called a friend a ‘second self,’ and the philosopher Aristotle said that friendship is ‘a single soul dwelling in two bodies.’ ”

Anne of Green Gables, my favorite character from children’s literature, was always on the lookout for what she called “a kindred spirit.” Anne, spelled with an ‘e,’ came from an orphanage as a young girl and was adopted by an old spinster and her brother on Prince Edward Island in Canada. Anne had lived a lonely life up until then, only making friends with an imaginary little girl she saw in the mirror.

Soon after her arrival at Green Gables, she asked her adopted mother, “Marilla, do you think that I shall ever have a bosom friend in Avonlea?”

“A – a what kind of a friend?” Marilla responded.

“A bosom friend – an intimate friend, you know – a really kindred spirit to whom I can confide my inmost soul. I’ve dreamed of meeting her all my life.”

I suppose nowadays, we would call that kind of friend a “BFF,” best friend forever, in online jargon. Not everybody has this close of a friend.

There are different kinds of friends we find in life named according to how close

we are to them: best friend, close friend, casual friend. Or we refer to them according to where we met them: work friend, neighbor friend, school friend, church friend, online gaming friend.

What is it that makes a friend different from an acquaintance? It is the degree to which you know and trust one another. An acquaintance is someone you don't know very well. A friend is someone you know and who knows you. A friend is someone you can be yourself with, someone you trust and accept as they are.

A casual friend is someone whose companionship you enjoy, but you have not yet shared your innermost thoughts and feelings. A close friend is someone with whom you can be vulnerable, and take risks sharing your thoughts, feelings, beliefs and uncertainties.

Emerson wrote that "a friend is a person with whom I may be sincere. Before him, I may think aloud."

Dinah Craik wrote, "A friend is one to whom one may pour out all the contents of one's heart, chaff and grain together, knowing that the gentlest of hands will take and sift it, keep what is worth keeping and with a breath of kindness blow the rest away."

Can you remember the first friend you ever had? How did you meet? What bonded you as friends? I remember my first best friend who I met in kindergarten. We only knew each other for one year and then she moved away. It broke my little heart, I loved her so much. It was my first lesson of loss in the world of friends.

I also had a neighbor friend from pre-school through high school graduation who was a friend of convenience, I guess. She was the closest neighbor in my same grade. We spent lots of time together, but I never felt entirely safe with her. She was critical, and I never knew when she would make fun of me. I wish someone had told me that true friends don't act that way. It took me many years to figure out that I had ingrained an acceptance of people who don't treat me well — a harmful lesson that took me quite awhile to unlearn.

Fortunately, I found a best friend in fifth grade who counteracted that subtle poison. We were true friends through high school and helped each other stay sane

through all the weird peer pressure of adolescence.

Although I enjoyed being part of groups of friends through music and theater, dance and karate, family camp, school and collegial circles, it seems that I keep just one close friend from each important era and activity in my life. Perhaps that shows the introvert side of me.

Perhaps, like you, there are friends from my past I might like to re-connect with through using the new tools of electronic communication, and some I would definitely not. Perhaps, like you, there have been turning points in my life when I have deliberately shed some friends who turned out to be “fair weather” friends, and were not available to me when life got hard.

There are different expectations we have of different types of friends. There is an art to friendship and there are skills that can be learned. Making and keeping friends requires skills of initiation and follow-through. It takes time and attention and kindness. Friendship demands honesty, self-revelation, loyalty, respect, trust, affirmation & encouragement, availability, support, assistance, and love. Friends laugh and play together and also know when to take each other seriously. Friends keep in touch.

As technology has changed, our ways of keeping in touch have changed, too. Before the advent of the telephone, people maintained friendships solely through letter-writing or visiting in person. After we got the telephone, some worried that the absence of facial expressions and body language would cause difficulties in communication. But people just got better at listening closely to someone’s tone of voice.

When we got email, some worried that there would be more misunderstandings in electronic communications because we not only didn’t have facial expressions and body language, but we also lost the tone of voice. With texting, some worry that people will forget how to speak and write in full sentences and paragraphs. Some worry that we will lose our capacity for long conversations. I guess time will tell.

Author Lynne Baab did some research in this area and found some consistent generational concerns. The people in their fifties that she interviewed expressed concern that “people in their twenties and thirties might not be able to sustain marriage and parenting relationships, because they’re so used to communicating using technology

(and not in person).

“The glib, brief and trivial nature of so much online communication might contribute to superficial relationships. (The people in their fifties worried): Can people in their twenties and thirties have long, intimate conversations? Can they share their deepest feelings?”

The people in their twenties and thirties that Lynne interviewed, pointed out that “they learned how to have close friends before the age of rampant electronic communication. However, these young adults expressed concern about teenagers: with the proliferation of such brief messages in text messages and online posts, will they be able to engage in the kind of deep conversations that nurture true friendships?”

“The dozen or so teenagers she interviewed, were also quite confident of their own ability to handle that challenge. They said the frequent, brief updates they send and receive through texting and online social networking make it possible to be in face-to-face conversations from a point of connection. They already know the details of their friends’ lives, so they can dive into deeper topics when they speak with each other.

“Several of the teenagers, however, said they were worried about twelve-year-olds getting cell phones and joining social-networking websites. These older teens worried that younger children don’t have the wisdom to know how to deal with the impersonal nature of electronic communication, which they said is evidenced by the amount of cell-phone and online bullying that goes on among younger teens.”

In a whimsical opinion piece about Thoreau and Twitter in the Wall Street Journal this month, Peter Mandel imagined himself sitting down with Henry David Thoreau to show him the fictional PodPad – a combination internet platform, phone, writing slate, security camera and baby monitor – all in one!

Thoreau suggests in response, as he wrote in “Walden” in 1854, that “a man is rich in proportion to the number of things which he can afford to let alone.” He said, “inventions are wont to be pretty toys which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end.”

I tend to agree with Mr. Thoreau. I’m one of those people who reluctantly got a

computer in 1991, when she was quite happy with an electric typewriter with the nifty correcto-tape built in. The only reason I signed up for email in 1996 was because I was separated by 3,000 miles from my partner during the year of my internship.

I resisted going from dial-up to cable connection internet for a ridiculously long time. Same goes for the acquisition and use of a cell phone. I still refuse to accept or transmit text messages. And this past Wednesday was the first time I even looked at Facebook!

I guess I'm one of those people who is visually overwhelmed by the variety and speed of electronic communication. I put limits on it, so I can stay sane and . . . present to real life! So, imagine my surprise when Beryl showed me Facebook this week. Yes, I did find it visually overwhelming, but I also had one of those fun experiences of re-connection. I noticed that Beryl and I had a mutual friend who had posted pictures of her daughter's recent wedding.

Before I knew it, I found myself saying, "Oh look, Ibbly got married! Oh, can I write to her mom from here?" I left Beryl's office with a mental note to tell my dad that his best friend's granddaughter got married.

So, I get how the interdependent web of relationships can be nurtured and strengthened through communicating online. But I'm also skeptical that people can have over one thousand "friends," as some do on Facebook! What kind of friends *are* these?

I asked one of our church members, who uses Facebook a LOT, to enlighten me. She readily admitted there are pros and cons to the use of social media.

First, the drawbacks:

- The time-vacuum - the games, newsfeed, political discussions, looking at friends' profiles and updating your own can take HOURS out of your day.
- The addictive nature - it's hard to stop using it, so hard that software has been designed to limit how much time you spend on Facebook. People get huge chunks of their life back by installing such programs as "Chrome Nanny"!!
- Facebook can give you the illusion that you have more friends than you really do. It

can feel like a real “social” life, when in fact you’re really not getting out much and maybe should.

- The phenomenon called “online disinhibition” – people say and do things in cyberspace that they wouldn’t ordinarily say or do in the face-to-face world. The online disinhibition effect can bring out behavior that we didn’t think we were capable of, and then we have to deal with the consequences – the harm we have caused others.

Now, the benefits:

- Reconnecting with old friends.
- Keeping up to date with current friends.
- Asking for support and receiving messages of love when you are having a bad day.
- Posting a question and receiving good advice on a problem.
- Breaking the isolation of a major life change, like moving to a new city or having a baby or being divorced or widowed.
- Finding like-minded people to discuss the state of the world.

Of course, there are some similarities between online friends and “in person friends” that impressed me right away, during my short initiation to Facebook in Beryl’s office. Here are some things I notice are true both on Facebook and in person:

- You can choose your friends. You don’t have to friend everyone who asks you!
- You can get rid of friends you don’t like without telling them.
- You can look at your children’s friends and see if they are good or bad influences.
- You can make new friends and keep the old (“one is silver and the other’s gold,” as the Girl Scout song goes).

When I asked my excellent primary research source in the congregation: Do your online friendships feel any different than your in-person friendships? She said,

“Yes. Facebook is easy, it’s fast, it’s done at your convenience, and you can choose what you want to respond to and what you don’t. Most real friendships don’t work that way. Are Facebook friendships even anywhere close to real friendships? No; I really don’t think I ever thought they were supposed to be.

“Will these Facebook friends come over and make me a cup of tea when I’m sick? Will I make and deliver dinner for my Facebook friend who just had a baby or lost a parent? Probably not. That said, I have had some really neat exchanges with people through the Facebook network.”

This is what I think: Friendship takes time and attention. There is chemistry to it, an art, yet the skills of friendship can be learned and practiced. If social media helps us learn the skills of staying connected, and allows us to be there for a friend in need, then it is a tool that can be used for good.

If electronic communication influences us to veil our thoughts and misrepresent our intentions, manipulate our knowledge of others and conceal our true identity, then it is a tool that can be used for ill. As Thoreau said, “They are but improved means to an unimproved end.”

It behooves us to take up the tools of communication with care and to use them with integrity, for true friends are to be cherished in this world where we often feel too much alone.

I did not ask my primary research source to offer a testimonial about her faith community, but she did, unprompted, when she was comparing online friendships to those in the real world.

She wrote, (because of course this interview was conducted via email!), “Every time I go to church, I feel like I connect with people in a much deeper, more organic, more real way. There’s really something special about being in communion with other people, in breathing the same air, sharing the same room, walking on common ground.”

If you’ve been feeling lonely in recent days – I’m so glad you made the effort to come to church today. If you are feeling like you could use a friend, I invite you to think back to a time when you felt cherished. Bring to mind the person who made you feel that way.

And try this simple meditation from the Dalai Lama. As you breathe in, say to yourself, “May I cherish myself.” As you breathe out, say, “May I cherish others.” Who

knows? Maybe it will bring a new friend into your life! Maybe it will be someone in this room.

REFERENCE:

Friending: Real Relationships in a Virtual World, Lynne M. Baab, InterVarsity Press, 2011.