

About friendship and burgers

This week The New Oxford American Dictionary has announced its 2009 Word of the Year: unfriend. If you're not familiar with the Ins and Outs of social networking , or don't have children, it means: "to remove someone as a 'friend' on a social networking site such as Facebook." The dictionary offers the example: "I decided to unfriend my roommate on Facebook after we had a fight." Hmmmm.

I'll leave the surface arguments and perspectives about the use of un-friend vs. de-friend, the verb vs. adjectival form and the like to the etymologists and lexicographers. I'm curious about the deeper psycho-emotional-spiritual experience of "unfriending."

When you unfriend someone, there's no dialogue, no conversation and no discussion. You choose their name, click on a command and poof!, your friend(ship) is instantaneously deleted. As for how your "friend" reacts when they find out, I guess that's their problem. Such is the nature of online friendship. In and out – quick and easy. As for connection, trust and intimacy? Go figure.

So, here we go again. The arguments supporting how one can so easily create community, connection and communion in social networks, where deep trust and intimacy become the glue that binds one's friendships again appear specious – only to be proffered by those who have some underlying personal/emotional need to make them.

Intimacy vs. the mundane

From what I read, hear and observe on social networks, true and real intimacy, connection and communion are the exception that prove the rule. Friendship for most is casual - the banal, desultory, and mundane exchanges, or the rehashing and banc-and-forth of common ideas and information in an effort to (1) connect, (2) feel seen and appreciated, (3) massage one's ego, (4) feel secure and un-abandoned or (5) disengage from what one should really be engaged in – is not the stuff of True and Real Friendship.

How does it come to be that I would choose to delete a "friend" in the blink of an eye? And what is that friendship like in the first place? What's the foundation on which I've built such a friendship? Intimacy, trust, and connection. Really?

As loudly as one argues, True and Real Friendship cannot be created over the ethers. The appearance and perhaps momentary "connection" that one feels with an online "relationship" is no different from a real-time "long-distance" relationship. And we know that many if not most long distance relationships don't work out in the long run, especially when the two partners eventually come face to face for the long term. Why?

Personal-ness

In a word – personal-ness. The one most-important building block of a conscious, healthy and strong relationship is emotional connection – the emotional connection that kicks in when two folks are sitting face-to-face, knee-to-knee, eye-to-eye and heart-to-heart. An emotional connection – the good, the bad and the ugly – that arises when "physical space and contact" are the ground of connection - a ground

that, for all intents and purposes, is lacking in social networking. That's not to say a "feel-good" emotional substitute is impossible; it's not; but it is a substitute - the type of "feel-good" feeling one might experience in the initial throes of an affair, or when ensconced in an alcohol or drug "high." But it's not the True and Real interpersonal-ness that occurs in personal connection - thus, one major reason one experiences little to no remorse or discomfort in "unfriending" someone. The "void" makes it easy. There is no True and Real emotional connection - a "human" factor - in a "void." There is no "safe zone." In fact, there is no True and Real Friendship with the "friend" one is "unfriending." Imaginary or superficial friendship, perhaps; but that's all.

Oh, and the kicker? Burger King has just unveiled its new offering - the Angry Whopper. BK has aligned with Facebook, creating an application to help promote its new burger. Instead of encouraging folks to join Facebook, and create new "friends," Burger King's new Whopper Sacrifice Application offers you a free Whopper if you "unfriend" ten folks from your friend list. Friends and friendship - so ephemeral, elusive, and expendable!

The spiritualist Joan Borysenko writes: "We cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch."

Without heart-felt, intimate and True and Real emotional connection, friends and friendship will continue to erode into superficial, casual contacts - "friends" that we would just as easily "unfriend" for a hamburger! Pass the ketchup, please.

How sad!

So, some questions for self-reflection are:

- How do you generally communicate with folks at work? In person or electronically (even when in-person is very do-able)? How about with your partner/spouse or children during the day?
- How do you differentiate between True and Real friends and casual friends?
- Do you have trust issues with any of your friends?
- Are you usually emotionally available when folks need you? Are your friends emotionally there for you?
- Have you "dropped" a friend, or been "dropped" by a friend recently? Why? What was that like for you?
- Do you ever feel lonely, isolated or depressed?
- All things being equal, if you had the chance, would you tell your online friends when you're coming to their city or town and ask to see them in person? If they came to your town, would you invite them to dine with your family? If not, why not?
- Do you avoid face-to-face conversations?
- In what other ways do you avoid emotional connection with others?
- Are you addicted to Twitter, Facebook or other social networking sites?
- Do you have more online friends than "real-time" friends? If so, why?

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