

Grace in the Gray Areas

Face Time

BY KAREN KULLGREN

Warning to the grammar obsessed—the word “friend” will be used as a verb throughout this column. Get over it!

I recently read women in my age cohort are the fastest growing group on Facebook, and I'm not surprised. Our world has become so fractured—we are separated from friends and families by miles, time differences and hectic lives—and Facebook offers connection. At least as important, as we integrate the many parts of ourselves and phases of our lives as we mature, we may find ourselves increasingly looking to the past for some answers, for reminders of who we were before mortgages, parenthood, job pressures, lost loves and the other stuff of life. We reach out to reconnect across the years, across the decades.

Many of my closest friends, as well as acquaintances, are on Facebook, though they use it with varying frequency. I've also found lots of friends from my youth, like my freckled, seven-year-old next-door neighbor from the small town where we grew up. I found three siblings with whom I'd been friends in different contexts in high school and beyond. I found a friend with benefits from college, friends I'd made when I lived in Taiwan and a woman who was once my muse. Now I hear about and see pictures of new hobbies, travel adventures, kids and grandkids, a new musician they like and milestones in their lives, and artist friends share their latest artwork.

My college-age son won't friend me, of course (I didn't even bother asking), but other more enlightened members of my family have. I've posted photos of family get-togethers, and when my dad visited recently, and I

posted some sightseeing photos before he even left; it was exactly 15 minutes before another relative across the country commented on them. Another time, in just a few minutes, I corralled some friends to buy tickets for a popular Wolf Trap concert before it sold out.

Chains of connection can be let loose, with one contact leading to another and another. After my drama club friend found me, he also gave me the email of his sister, who I'd tried to find over the years unsuccessfully. It turns out after many years of living out West, she's now in southern Virginia, just three hours away. We've already seen each other once, and we synced right back up again despite the decades that had passed with no contact. And we were still us, two old hippies, sassy, funny women—just a bit lumpier now, with graying hair covered with strategic blonde highlights, a kid or two and a lifetime of joys and sorrows under our belts. I've already put her in touch with a mutual friend who I'd reconnected with on Classmates.com.

There's dangerous terrain to be navigated on Facebook, too, beyond setting your privacy settings properly and not telling strangers when you're going on vacation so your home will be available for a break-in. I looked at one rediscovered friend's photos and was excited to see one of his mom, whose home I'd been at often (for some wild parties) but had never met. Thankfully I didn't convey my excitement, because I later realized the picture was not his mother but his wife, who was my age. So caught up was I in the past that I did not recognize a mirror image of myself, or did not perceive myself that way! (But that, dear reader, is a topic for another column.)

One thing I haven't figured out yet is whether on Facebook, as in life, you're judged by the company you keep. A childhood friend favors evangelical religious posts of beliefs to which I don't subscribe, and I worry that other old friends or friends of friends who don't know me might make incorrect assumptions about my own leanings. Should I hit that handy “hide” button so her posts don't show up on my wall?

Some acquaintances I friended early on have turned out to be overly frequent posters about not much at all, and their days are numbered before I hide or unfriend them. Is this ruthless of me? No. My time is precious, and I'm trying to enrich and declutter my life, not fill it up with people and information that don't have real meaning to me. But it is tricky.

There are still some people I can't find—a fellow college intern, an old crush or two, and then there's that classmate who, as we got our graduate degrees, told me she was going into (her fingers doing quotation marks in the air) “the State Department,” and she then vanished into spookdom. It's especially hard when people have common names and I have to wade through everything from high-fiving, beer-drinking 20-somethings to midlife men hidden by sunglasses and baseball caps holding up fish they've just caught while I search for the one I know. It's also hard when I can only remember a first name, even of someone to whom I was once close. But I keep trying.

Yes, my time is precious, and I'm not a social network-aholic (not yet anyway!). But now, added into my evenings, I've made room for a little “Face” time. 

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