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Let’s be Friends

To all of you, my 390 friends on Facebook,

In the past couple years, the concept of social networking has changed very much. Communicating with your friends is not just calling them up on the phone or talking to them in person anymore. Now it is looking on their pages, liking this and commenting on that. My first encounter with a social networking site was with a Windows Live account, so I could communicate with a cousin of mine in Italy. From there, I got a MySpace (which lasted for about a month), then a Facebook. When I first got my Facebook account, not many people that I knew had one. As time went on though, I added and was added by more and more people that I knew: people that I went to elementary school with, people from my high school, family members from Italy, etc. When I clicked the add button, I never thought about how much I had talked to that person, or how much they knew about me, or vice versa. When I was on Facebook a few days ago, I was looking through my friends list and I was amazed at how many people I was friends with that I have not spoken to/physically seen in the recent past. That is why I am writing to you all today. The idea of what a “friend” is has changed in the past years. In this letter, I hope to remind you all of what a friend really is, and show you how social networking sites have changed our view on this word.

The definition of friend, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “…a person whom one knows and with whom one has a bond of mutual affection, typically exclusive of sexual or family relations…” (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/?attempted=true>). My definition of a friend is someone that you speak to on a regular basis, and who knows more about you than just what your favorite kind of music is, or what school you go to. Recently, it has become obvious to me that people on social networking sites, such as Facebook, add people to their friends list because they have either a) not physically seen them in a long time and want to reconnect, or b) they just met the person, and they want to see what that person is up to. An example of my definition of a friend would be of a person that was in my Italian class at Macomb College, who we will call Jane. Jane had been in all four of the language classes I was in, and during the third class, I added her on Facebook. We talk occasionally, but we do not consider each other friends because we do not know each other that much, and primarily added each other so we could help one another in the class.

Before social network sites became popular, most people met and talked to people face to face. They would go out and meet them for a coffee, go grab lunch, etc. As of nowadays, people do not know how to make friends or interact with people face to face. Let us take a look at a scientific study that was done by the Evolutionary Psychology and Behavioral Ecology Research Group from Liverpool University. The results showed that making friends is actually more difficult than people primarily think of when they use social network sites. Dr. Reader, from Sheffield Hallam University stated that, “…making new friends involves an investment by committing time and energy to another person in the hope that they will provide reciprocal benefits in the future” [(http://www.sciencedaily.com](file:///C:\Users\George\Documents\(http:\www.sciencedaily.com)). On many social networking sites, most people that use them simply click the mouse and become “friends” with another person. To many people, the term friend does not have the same meaning that it had years ago. A majority of the people that we add as friends on Facebook are not friends, but only acquaintances. I agree with the results from this group because I have had personal experience that agrees with the results. A particular friend of mine let us call him Jamal has over 1,000 friends on Facebook. Jamal is a professional choreographer, and meets many people in his work. For a majority of the people that he meets, they become friends on Facebook. He only keeps in touch with a select few, but still has them listed as his friends. What Jamal does, is not considered making friends. He may talk to these people a few times, but they are not what friends are, simply acquaintances. This is prime example of where social network sites are changing the view of what a friend is.

Throughout life, we will meet so many people. Some will stay in our lives, some will come and go. During this time, if we do not have a clear grasp on who our friends our, then how can we ever trust anyone? We have to know who we can rely on, and who we cannot. A recent issue that has come up is having the ability to talk to someone online, but not being able to talk to them in person. In simpler words, it is easier to talk to someone through the computer instead of face to face because you do not have to face that person and see how your comments affect them through their facial expressions. A friend is supposed to be there, with you, through the good and the bad times (almost like a spouse). If we base our judgment of what a friend is by who we add on Facebook, how will our lives turn out? Who will we call when we need help?

Social networking sites can create friendships, but they can also destroy them. I have had a personal experience where a best friendship has turned horribly wrong all because of things that were on Facebook. For privacy purposes, we will change the name of this girl to Lucia. My sister, Lucia and I had known each other since first grade. We all went to the same grade school together, then for high school and college; Lucia went to a different school than we (my sister and I) did. Throughout all this time though, we did not lose our friendship. In some ways, attending different schools made our friendship even stronger. We hung out on weekends together, and spent about every day during the summer together. Three years ago, she began dating the cousin of my sister’s boyfriend at that time. On my sister’s 18th birthday, they broke up, but Lucia kept dating the cousin. As time went on, she kept being involved with this boy, and used her Facebook account to show off what she was doing. She would post pictures of them together, write status updates about what they did etc. These posts slowly began to drive a wedge between not only my sister and Lucia, but also between me and Lucia. As of now, Lucia is still in the relationship, but we barely communicate through Facebook. With this ability to use social networking to interact with others, many people find it difficult to interact with people face to face.

In the past decade, the number of people that use social networking sites has increased greatly. A website called royal.pigdom.com performed a survey to see what age groups use social networking sites the most. According to the site “…only 3% of people over the age of 65 are involved in social networking sites” (royal.pingdom.com). This statistic is true because the people that are this age were brought up when computers were either just beginning to be created, or were not even thought of. As a result of this, they do not feel a need to learn how to work a computer because they are too old, so they communicate with the friends that they have through the telephone or mail.

Many people in this new generation do not have the skills that are needed to communicate with people face to face. Before Facebook and other social networking sites were created, people made friends by talking to them and seeing them physically. Some people even believe that society was better off before all this modern technology came around. If you think about it, in some ways, these people are correct. Young people that use Facebook need to learn how to be in contact with people face to face, but cannot learn these skills if they are being taught in school to keep using the computers, and other forms of technology to perform simple tasks. In the work world, people that are working have to have the skills to be able to talk to one another, but if they do not learn these when they are young, when will they learn?

In conclusion, I would like to go over what I have covered, and reiterate what I was trying to get across to everyone. My purpose for writing is to explain what a friend is, and to show how social networking sites have changed our views what it means to not only have friends, but how to be a friend. I hope that you take the advice that I have shared, and use the evidence that I have included to see how social networking sites have altered our view on friends and make sure that you know who your true friends are.

Best of Luck,

George Formicola

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