

The Meaning of Friendship in a Social Networked World

Alex Pattakos

“What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies.”

This quote is attributed to the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who wrote extensively about the notion and importance of true friendship as a determinant of “meaningful” living.

Aristotle’s view on this matter stands in sharp contrast to what is depicted in the recently-released movie “The Social Network,” destined to become a cult classic, about the founding of the Internet social networking site [Facebook](#). With the advertising tag line, “You don’t get to 500 million friends without making a few enemies,” you have to wonder what the definition of “friends” is in this kind of social networking context. And as you watch the relationships depicted in the film, especially that between founder Mark Zuckerberg and his network of “friends,” it is obvious that they don’t meet the quality standards espoused by Aristotle!

In this connection, computer whiz Zuckerberg and his best friend Eduardo Saverin, also a principal co-founder of Facebook, become embroiled in enough fights, including a nasty legal battle, to establish that there is not a single soul dwelling in their two bodies. The notion of “friend,” of course, is used rather loosely in the online world of Facebook. What do you think Aristotle would have to say about the meaning of—and path to—friendship that has come to popularize the new millennium? Have we gone too far in our quest for connection with others in a world that has become increasingly disconnected even if, according to American journalist Thomas Friedman, it is supposedly “flat?”

And in a world of hyperconnectivity driven by technology that knows no bounds, what is happening to true friendship? Is it dying away? Or are the various social media “platforms” such as Facebook, [Twitter](#), and [LinkedIn](#) simply redefining or transforming our modern-day notion of friendship? If so, what are the implications for life as we know it on this planet? Will we be happier? Will it promote the kind of meaningful existence that Aristotle was seeking and advocating? As I write in my book, *Prisoners of Our Thoughts*, the search for meaning is not only the primary intrinsic motivation of human beings; it is also a mega-trend of the 21st century. From such a meaning-focused perspective, where does friendship fit in? And how might the social media “advances” to which I’m referring here influence, directly and indirectly, the nature of friendships between people and the human quest for meaning?

To be sure, I have more questions than answers, although there are some trends that are worthy of mention on the subject. A recent article in *USA Today* by Mark Vernon, a research fellow at Birkbeck College in London, England, addressed the issue of the social media’s influence and concluded, “Just as our daily lives are becoming more technologically connected, we’re losing other more meaningful relationships. Yes, we’re losing our friends.”

In other words, the joys of real human contact are being replaced by electronic stimuli and “shallow” friendships, that is, “social connections” rather than the kind of true friendships described and espoused by Aristotle. In our post-modern society, there is evidence that while we have plenty of acquaintances, more and more of us have few individuals to whom we can turn and share our authentic selves, our deep intimacies.

Moreover, according to research published in the *American Sociological Review*, the average American has only two close friends, and some 25 percent don’t have any friends! We’re not just “bowling

alone,” to borrow the title from a book by sociologist Robert Putman; we’re effectively living alone in the midst of a socially networked world! Now how ironic is that? Parenthetically, this is an illustration of what I call paradoxical intention or working against ourselves. We have become our worst enemy as we seek to navigate the sea of so-called “friends” that we’ve been promised through Facebook and other social networking sites.

Aristotle once asked his fellow Athenians, “Who would live without friends even if they had every other thing?” Importantly, he believed that good friends were superior to any material possessions one might have. Stop and think, then, for a moment about the quality of friends that we may make online, such as via Facebook, and compare this quality of relationships with other kinds of friends with whom we have actual face-to-face contact—be it infrequent, work-related, social, intimate, or perhaps even loving. Which of these contacts represent meaningful relationships and, by implication, true friendships? Which of these contacts, when all is said and done, really matters the most to you? In addition to feeding your soul, you can feel a single soul dwelling in two bodies?

In his classic work *Ethics*, Aristotle also offered the following ageless wisdom: “The desire for friendship comes quickly. Friendship does not.” This is a very profound and perhaps provocative statement, especially in light of the powerful forces behind social networking. (“What do you mean you don’t have a Facebook page?”) It takes time and effort to build true friendships, relationships through which you are able and willing to disclose your authentic self—close thoughts, intimate feelings, and sensitive vulnerabilities, including fears.

While a social connection on Facebook may be only a click away, cultivating a true friendship is not that easy or straightforward if you believe in and take Aristotle’s advice.

Now, in the spirit of full disclosure, I must admit that I’m a “techie” (formerly called a “nerd”) and have been for as long as I can remember. Among other things, I was credited by the World Future Society with inventing the concept of the “Electronic Visiting Professor,” an innovation in online distance learning when the Information Highway was still a dirt road. I’ve also been a “Crackberry addict” (an obsessive-compulsive user of the Blackberry device), and was an early adopter of the iPhone, which now keeps me “connected” to family, friends, acquaintances, and others whenever I choose to let it. (Note the “I choose” reference; I am very conscious of the need to manage the technology, not the other way around!) I also regularly use most of the social networking platforms mentioned, explicitly or implicitly, here. Moreover, I’m very familiar with the propensity among people today to share themselves online with complete strangers-as-friends, presumably feeling safe in the deceptive shadows of cyberspace.

I also recognize that in today’s busy, fast-paced world, many people are more likely to tell their hopes and troubles to bartenders, taxi drivers, hair stylists, and therapists than they are to the people who are regularly in their lives. In my opinion, this is a sad commentary on post-modern society, for many people seem to have drifted away from true friendships and a sense of “community” and are now living very private, even lonely, lives. It’s time to resurrect the meaning and value of authentic relationships with others. It’s time to refocus on and allow friendships to flourish in meaningful ways, both in our personal and work lives.

“A friend is another self,” Aristotle also told us. True friendships, which admittedly are a blast from the past, are not simply a manifestation of what is being called “social connectivity” in social

networking parlance. No, true friendships are the key to a flourishing, meaningful life, well-being, and a truly connected society and world. Now would you like to Facebook me?