

## OLD FRIENDS (AND I MEAN OLD)

"Hello, friends." This is how sportscaster Jim Nantz begins each broadcast. Since these broadcasts are seen by millions of people, he's unique in having millions of friends, or maybe a bit presumptuous to assume that all those viewers are his "friends", because, of course, they're not.

In fact, real friends in the real world are just not that easy to make, and certainly not that easy to keep. Lots of things get harder as we get older. (You can make your own list.) And it's not just hearing or short term memory or pain-free joints that we lose as we age. We start to lose friends as well. We move. Or drift apart. Or one of us can no longer manage the rounds of golf or sets of tennis that brought us together in the first place. We say goodbye or, worse, the "long goodbye". And new friends can be difficult to come by.

And what is a friend, a real friend, anyway? The term is tossed around pretty loosely these days. When you call someone a friend shouldn't it mean something, well, meaningful?

Donald Trump often refers to the people at his rallies as his "friends". But if one of those "friends" showed up unannounced at his door at Mar-a-Lago in a t-shirt and backwards baseball cap, Trump would recoil in horror. (But I digress. The hypocrisy and horridness of Donald Trump is an entirely different - and much longer - column.)

Of course, these days we can make new Facebook friends with the click of a button - "friends" whom we've never actually met, whom we wouldn't know if we passed on the street, who can "unfriend" us with a single keystroke, as crisp and final as an executioner's axe.

But what about old-fashioned flesh and blood friendships? Are they becoming obsolete, going the way of landlines and

organized religion? And, of course, the pandemic put a major dent in face-to-face relationships as well. But does it matter? In this Tik Tok/Instagram/Pick Your App age, wedded to our phones, do we really need friends at all?

Well, yes. We do.

The recent film *The Banshees of Inisherin* has an interesting take on male friendship, and the profound effect of its loss. Colm and Padraig are middle-aged Irishmen and lifelong best friends. When Colm bluntly tells Padraig that he doesn't want to be his friend anymore because he's "dull", Padraig is baffled at first, and then devastated. When this friendship, a foundation stone of his life is lost, he literally starts to fall apart, with dire - and bloody - consequences for both men. Of course, it's "just a movie" and no doubt exaggerated for effect. Surely a friendship can't be so important that you'd CUT OFF YOUR ... oh wait. I won't spoil it.

A raft of articles and academic studies make the case that close friendships are not a frill or a luxury, but a vital necessity, every bit as essential to human health and happiness as food, water, shelter, the very air we breathe.

There's an ongoing research study - dubbed the Happiness Study - which began tracking the health of Harvard men back in 1938, looking for clues to leading a healthy, happy life. (Yes, just men. There were no women at Harvard in 1938.) Not surprisingly, the study confirmed the obvious benefits of exercise, not abusing alcohol and so on. But, to their surprise, the researchers found that the single most important key to healthy aging is "relationships, relationships, relationships." Close friendships, every bit as much as low cholesterol or good genes, were the best predictor of long term health and happiness.

Subsequent scientific studies have confirmed that loneliness actually weakens one's immune system. White blood cells, which protect against viruses, are measurably higher in people with friends, lower in solitary people. Put bluntly, "loneliness kills". It's as deadly as smoking or alcoholism. So James Taylor - and Carole King - are right. "You need a friend." Or two. Or three.

So, if friendships are so crucial, should we start checking our friendship score the same way we have our blood work done at Life Labs? If dips below the optimal range - whatever that is - what should we do about it?

I don't want to get overly poetic and start comparing a friendship to a delicate orchid, but it takes care and cultivation. It takes time. You can't just snap your fingers and make a friend. Another study found that it takes over 200 hours together to become really good friends. And it's not a new phenomenon. People have been looking for the key to making friends for a long time.

Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, published back in 1936, has sold 30 million copies, and was ranked the 19th most influential book of all time, just ahead of *The Joy of Sex*. (Its "golden rules" for making friends include "Smile" and "Be a good listener" if that helps.)

Even Aristotle, a fun guy by all accounts, apparently had trouble making friends. "Friendship is a slow ripening fruit," he lamented. And I expect he and his pal Plato weren't much good at small talk.

"We're moving to Nova Scotia!" This was the excited announcement from my friend Michael, who'd just landed a dream job in Halifax. He was one of my closest friends, and I was pleased for him. But secretly, from a purely selfish perspective, I'd almost hoped that he wouldn't get the job. Of

course, we'd still be friends, but I knew that realistically we'd be seeing a lot less of each other. The situation would change. And it did. And I felt a sense of loss. I knew that friendship wouldn't be easy to replace. (Much worse was losing my best friend, Frank. But that deserves a whole column for another day.)

To make matters worse, making friends seems to be harder for men than for women, particularly older men (and, kicking and screaming, I fall into that category.) Women just seem to be naturally better at the whole friendship thing. Maybe they were born with a friendship gene which men lack. In another survey, four in ten women said they had received emotional support from a friend in the last week, compared to one in ten men. Frankly, I'm surprised it's even that high for men.

My wife is part of a bunch of different groups - a bridge group, a book club, a lunch/coffee group, several daily walking groups, a monthly dinner group called "Gaggles" (don't ask me why.) These groups are made up exclusively of women, all of whom, to a greater or lesser degree, are her friends.

I have no such groups.

The closest thing, I guess, are various tennis groups. We arrive, play, and go home. Now and then we have a beer. I like these guys. We're friendly, but - not to offend anyone - I wouldn't call us close friends. Making friends is simply more of a challenge for men. But we shouldn't feel guilty about it. According to an NYU study, it's not our fault. It's our nature.

We're all born with two sides of ourselves: the hard side which is stoic and independent and masculine and the soft side which is vulnerable and interdependent and feminine. Growing up, boys receive messages about repressing their soft side, not showing vulnerability, "manning up". Admitting to needing friendships is seen as a feminine thing, and therefore a

weakness. Maybe things are changing now, but in my generation - (a.k.a. The Dark Ages) - admitting to needing close friendships makes men uncomfortable. It seems, well, almost unmanly.

So what are men to do? How do we overcome our upbringing, our genetic reticence, embrace our "soft side", and make new friends?

There's no shortage of advice from Mr. Google. It amounts to "Put yourself out there." Take a class - in anything. Volunteer - for anything. Join a club. Join a choir. Play pickle ball. Go to the dog park or the playground (which would involve, presumably, acquiring a dog, or a child.) Play Dungeons and Dragons (really!?) Join Bumble BFF.

Bumble? News to me, but I learned that it's a dating site - swipe left, swipe right, find a match. Bumble BFF works the same way, except you're not looking for love, but for a BFF - a Best Friend Forever. It's the "modern way to create meaningful friendships! Just post your profile and ..."

Wait a minute! Post my profile!!? Troll the internet looking for a "friend"?! I'd feel silly. Or creepy. I just know I'm never going to do this. Not in a million years. I'd sooner join the Seniors Centre and take line dancing. (I took some flak for poking gentle fun at the Seniors Centre in a previous piece. Don't get me wrong. It's a wonderful place. I may give it a try - just not today.)

But just when I'm pondering my low friendship count and wondering if I should get my white blood cells checked ...

"Hey, old friend!" It's Bruce, my oldest friend. I've known him since kindergarten. This is how he starts every call or email. Somehow, we've kept in touch for over 70 years.

Bruce has a unique gift for friendship. He could have run a bar like Cheers, where everybody knows your name. He keeps

in touch religiously with a group of old high school friends (and I mean old). He organizes get-togethers. He moderates a chat group and prompts ongoing discussions about, well, almost anything. He binds us together.

Without Bruce, because I'm naturally lazy, (and, some might, say grumpy and anti-social) I'm sure I would have lost touch with most of these people long ago. Thanks to him, I haven't. Last fall he invited a dozen or so of us to his house in Ottawa for a mini reunion. We actually sang the old school song. I know that may sound corny, but looking around the room, sensing the warmth and bonhomie, I realized these people are, well, my friends. And I'm grateful for that.

So, I don't want to make this sound as if I'm forlorn and friendless. I'm not. I'm fine - friendship-wise. But there's always room for more, so give me a try. I'm usually free for a Chez Piggy lunch. Just don't look for me on Bumble BFF.

So that's it for now, friends. And thanks for your friendship. You know who you are. Or at least I hope you do.

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