Life together in a digital age

Life together
in a digital age

St Mark's Review

No. 233, October 2015 (3)

Life together in a digital age

The changing face[book] of friendship, fellowship and formation

Geoff Broughton

> We live in a technological universe in which we are always communicating. And yet we have sacrificed conversation for mere connection.
>
> *Sherry Turkle, 2015.*[1]

> The spoken word ... ushers us into another dimension: relationship with other living beings, with persons.
>
> *Jacques Ellul, 1985*[2]

Nomophobia. Never heard of it? Apparently it is a 'thing'. Honestly. A 'nomophobe'—according to researchers at Iowa State University (who have developed the world's first diagnostic questionnaire)—suffers from *nomophobia*, a 'fear of being without your mobile phone'.[3] Of course you've heard of workplace bullying. Recent research demonstrates it is on the rise. Did you know, however, that 'unfriending employees on Facebook' could constitute 'workplace bullying'? This was a recent finding of the workplace tribunal.[4] These comprise just two aspects of life in the digital age that were unimaginable a decade ago when Facebook was emerging from college

Geoff Broughton is Lecturer in Practical Theology, St Mark's National Theological Centre, School of Theology, Charles Sturt University and rector of Paddington Anglican Church.

dormitories in northeastern USA. The changing face of *friendship, fellowship* and *formation* is the focus of this essay.

Crafting a wise and winsome response to technological change is distorted by optimistic naiveté in one direction and ornery nostalgia in the other. French sociologist Jacques Ellul anticipated these twin distortions with this proposal:

> we cannot bring up our children as though they were ignorant of technology, as though they had not been introduced from the first into the technological world … Yet we cannot wish them to be pure technical experts, making them so well fit for the technological society that they are totally devoid of what has until now been considered human. Hence, I think that on the one hand we must teach them, prepare them to live in technology and at the same time against technology.[5]

The technology of social networks accelerates new kinds of connection identified by Sherry Turkle. These connections are altering our conversations, communities and vocations. This essay will describe the kind of *friendship, fellowship and formation* that emerges from digital connections and suggest that *embodied* patterns of relationships remain central because they are humane and holistic.

In a digital world a combination of search engines, home pages, newsfeeds and links regulate what publicly available information appears on our personal screens. This process is invisibly hidden beneath a complex combination of preferences, trends and mathematic algorithms for most people except the technologically curious. While 'free speech versus hate speech' gains some attention, there is limited awareness of how digital interactions are shaping *friendship*, belonging and *formation*. This essay suggests that embodied encounters remain essential for the way we make and mature friendships; engage and enliven fellowship; and develop and deepen formation.

Friending, following, unfriending and blocking: friendship in a digital age

Valuing good friends has always been easier than defining friendship. The broad range of people who might be called a friend encompasses passing acquaintances and someone you've only just met ('I'd like you to meet my new friend') to lifelong companions who have shared intimately life's joys,

sorrows, triumphs and failures. The relational distinctive of a good friend includes friendship for its own sake, without any other (i.e. utilitarian) function. Good friends like to spend time in the company of each other as often as they get the opportunity to do so. Friendships have often been able to survive time and space through other *forms of contact*—mainly writing letters, phone conversations and emails. Some friendships endure with very little contact over long periods of time. Younger people—particularly children—maintain different levels of friendship (e.g. 'best, close, good') while others find it necessary to identify someone as a *personal* friend. Four characteristics of an enduring friendship include: *reciprocity, equality, proximity,* and *preference*. In their absence friendship can be distorted. There are fair weather friendships, pseudo friendships, promiscuous friendships and addictive friendships where people become co-dependent on one another. Before examining the role of digital media in 'mediating' friendship it is worth remembering that friendship has often been threatened in various ways. Friendship is threatened by *selfishness* (a lack of mutuality or reciprocity in giving and receiving); *instrumentalism* (utilitarian relationships); and *individualism* (the pursuit of relationships that do not foster the common good). Contemporary life has challenged friendship in additional ways: *mobility, busyness* and *professionalism* (people enlist the support of a 'paid professional' rather than the friends who have a storehouse of wisdom, pray for you and are always available) and *compartmentalism* (life existing in different spheres or networks comprising work, sport, church etc).

The close connection between friendship and the spiritual life has a long history. In Scripture God enters into friendship with people—not as an 'equal'—but always with a degree of reciprocity (*cf.* Exodus 33, Isaiah 44, James 2). In the Gospel of John, Jesus reclassifies the nature of the relationship with his followers as friends rather than servants (John 15).[6] For some of the mediaeval and mystic writers, God is friendship (see, for example, Aelred of Rievaulx, whose reflection on spiritual friendship is indebted to Cicero).[7] Human friendships play a significant role in the biblical narrative, such as the friendship of David and Jonathan or Ruth and Naomi. Biblical wisdom prioritises the enduring value of friendship (Eccl. 4:7–12). Friendship is a central aspect of Christian discipleship because friends are people through whom we are discipled into Christ.

What are the possibilities and pitfalls for friendship in the digital age? In his recent encyclical, Pope Francis named the contemporary concern of many:

> When media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously. In this context, the great sages of the past run the risk of going unheard amid the noise and distractions of an information overload. Efforts need to be made to help these media become sources of new cultural progress for humanity and not a threat to our deepest riches.[8]

While Facebook friendships share many of the characteristics of traditional friendships, Facebook has changed the face of friendship in significant ways. Personal conversations have become more public. Personal preferences comprising mundane images (e.g. 'selfies' and food pics) alongside more intimate details previously deemed private (e.g. 'no longer in a relationship') are readily accessed by a wide range of friends (followers, friends-of-friends and the public). Some or all of this will be 'liked' and commented upon. In the past an insecure person would spend money on their friends so that they would be liked. On Facebook an insecure person can simply spend their money to sponsor or promote their image and even purchase 'likes'. The ever-present dangers to friendship of selfishness, utilitarianism and individualism have evolved, adapted and flourished in the digital age. Ellul warned against the devaluing of language for propaganda and its diminution of friendship more than a generation ago, noting that 'language is a call, an exchange. It is not true that language exists only to communicate information ... if we spoke only to convey information our relationships would be greatly impoverished'.[9]

The shadow of digital friendship is the destructive potential of online conflict (such as personal vitriol i.e. flaming, trolling, bullying and cyberstalking). James KA Smith has likened the impact on his adolescent children to Foucalt's idealised prison where 'the space of the home has been punctured by the intrusion of social media such that the competitive world of self-display and self-consciousness is always with us. The universe of social media is a ubiquitous panopticon.'[10] Measured against Cicero's ancient definition ('agreement on matters human and divine, with charity and

goodwill') Facebook friendships fall considerably short of the mark![11] To be fair to those Craig Detweiler has called 'digital *iGods*' (companies like Facebook, Apple, Google and their famous founders), the blame must be shared around.[12] There have been wider social forces at work during the last couple of generations that have widened the gap between Cicero's *Good Life* and Facebook friendships.[13]

In the first place, capitalism has made us greedy and prone to devaluing relationships as another commodity to be bought and sold. Second, an increasing number of office, leisure and home environments are designed around the digital age (such as communication devices, computers) rather than embodied human interactions. Machines produce until they break and are then repaired or replaced. Humans need spaces to think and reflect, if life and relationships are to be meaningful. Yet too often friends are treated like another piece of equipment. Third, reliance on technology produces another equally sinister effect on our lives. Competency and efficiency (what computers and other machines are good at) is more highly valued in a digital age than compassion and relationships (what humans are good at).[14] The enduring characteristics of friendship noted above (*reciprocity, equality, proximity,* and *preference*) are now expected to deliver digital-like competency and efficiency at the expense of essentially human values of compassion, integrity, love and justice.[15] The cultural forces of capitalism, mechanisation and advances in technology make it more difficult for us to navigate friendships in the digital age.

Fellowship

Changing patterns of friendship are paralleled by changing patterns of belonging (*fellowship*) in the digital age. The lead article by Keith Clements names this challenge by asking what 'life together' in the digital age becomes. Several articles in this journal edition explore and expand on that challenge. Briefly noted here are the patterns of belonging on Facebook that are based on affirmation (e.g. 'likes') and algorithms. When combined they ensure that preferences are reinforced by displaying increasingly 'like-minded' friends and followers. Online networks have seemingly perfected the 'homogenous unit principle' observed by church growth proponents that 'like attracts like'. The seduction of these virtual communities is the ease with which challenging, alternate and even prophetic voices are simply 'blocked'. Face-to-face interactions within an *embodied* community are more honest about

difference and more compassionate in conflict than the digital community, where differences, disagreement and conflict can be eliminated with a 'click'.

The influential philosophy of Martin Buber, especially his landmark work, *I and Thou,* endures by distinguishing between two basic words: I-It and I-Thou words. Writing fifty years before the digital age, Buber articulated the crucial difference between 'the world as experience' (which belongs to the basic word I-It) and 'the world of relation' (established by the basic word I-Thou).[16] Buber described three different 'worlds of relation' (life with nature, humankind and spiritual beings), yet he highlighted the life with humankind, because

> Here language is perfected as a sequence and becomes speech and reply. Only here does the word, formed in language, encounter its reply … I and Thou do not only stand in a relationship but also in firm honesty ... the moments of relation are joined here, and only here, through the element of language in which they are immersed. Here that which confronts us developed the full actuality of the Thou.[17]

Friendship is a good example of the I-Thou relationship because it demonstrates reciprocity and mutuality between two subjects. Buber also cites three other relationships where I-Thou exists: education between teacher and student; clinical–pastoral counselling between the 'genuine' psychotherapist and patient; and the between the Church (synagogue) and 'those charged with the spiritual well-being of their congregation.'[18] The final section of this article will address Buber's concerns by outlining a theology of embodied encounters.

Intellectual, moral and character formation in a digital age

How is intellectual, moral and character formation evolving in the digital world? The idea of formation shares the same trait as friendship: valuing *good* formation is easier than defining it. As a theological educator I have long been concerned for the formation of candidates for ministry—mostly for ordination within the Anglican Church of Australia. A series of inter-related questions shape that formation: How might we effectively help people from different backgrounds to develop their practical ministry capacities? How can we identify key groups of people to work with in their local contexts? How can we do all this in a way that generates hope and a sense of possibility

across the Church, and in the process attracts a wider pool of people wanting to serve the Church and world?

Jesus' model of ministry formation is on display in the Mark 8–10. In these chapters most of Jesus' instruction to the Twelve was occasioned by events (e.g. Mark 8:14; 10:13–16; Luke 13:1; Matt 26:50–56), disputes (e.g. Mark 10:45), challenges (e.g. Mark 2:18–22; 10:1–10; Matt. 17:24–27), observations (e.g. Mark 4:1–40; 12:41–44), questions (e.g. Mark 9:11–12, 38–41; Luke 11:1ff) and comments (e.g. Mark 13:1–37). Jesus continually seized the learning moments in the middle of life, ministry and mission with the twelve disciples:

> Almost anything could become grist to Jesus' mill—personal or group failure, inappropriate ambition and conflict among his followers, the presence or appearance of small children, a prostitute or sick person; everyday objects and activities in the home, fields or countryside… Jesus relied mostly on dialogue, not presentation… He also encouraged nonformal learning (Mark 9:33–37), often when he was eating and drinking with his companions (Mark 14:17–21).[19]

This highlights the importance of conversation in forming Christian maturity and taking training and formation out of the classroom and into the everyday spheres of life. The heart of Christian formation is the integration of the knowledge of God with the lived experience of faith. Christian formation shapes the intellect, morality and character by making connections between faith, learning and life. This kind of formation is necessarily a spiritual journey because learning involves transformation and not merely the transmission of information. The Christian practice of formation and transformation (of the individual) has always been through conversation and in community. Conversation—integral to intellectual, moral and character formation—is most effective within a Christian community where convictions are demonstrated.

These communities of formation create and sustain the places and relationships where intellectual education, moral formation and character transformation happens.

The centrality of integration, conversation and community in the task of formation reflects a participatory approach. Formation does not simply teach, but must model a relationship to life, learning and a way of being in

the world. Formation shares many traits of the Christian practice of hospitality. It is no coincidence that a common formation practice among great teachers (from Jesus' parables told over a meal, to Luther's Table Talk, to Bonhoeffer's underground seminaries) is feeding the mind, the body and the spirit simultaneously. Knowledge and character are more naturally integrated with this approach to formation. The best teachers are aware of the 'hidden curriculum': that who the teacher is in and out of the classroom speaks just as loudly as what they teach. It is of concern, therefore, that face-to-face conversation and community are being displaced by the digital world in *formation* as well as in friendship.

The democratisation of knowledge in the digital age has been a wonderful gift to many. Numerous students at St Mark's National Theological Centre in Canberra have access to theological education through online classrooms that were unimaginable only five to ten years ago. Yet the 'knowledge economy' has particular challenges for those in the business of formation.[20] Ellul, who died prior to the onset of the digital age, anticipated two specific challenges:

> There is too much [information]. That is the first difficulty. The second one is that with the multiplication of information the things which are fundamental are drowned in a quantity of things which are not important.[21]

Formation, as noted above, has always involved more than the transfer of knowledge. In the digital age the rapidly expanding access to a vast repository of online resources has emerged (Ellul's 'first difficulty'), but it has also limited the potential of conversation and community for holistic education and formation (Ellul's 'second difficulty').[22]

Tim Challies diagnoses these consequences of the digital age as theological—what he calls 'digital disincarnation'. In a digital age where friendship, community and conversation are *mediated relationships*, formation becomes more distracted (*cf.* Ellul) and more gnostic.[23] Intellectual, moral and spiritual maturing requires a patient, enduring community where conversations can negotiate conflict instead of the bullying and blocking that is characteristic of conflict online. Perhaps Augustine of Hippo's vision of friendship best describes the face-to-face community and conversation where mature formation flourishes:

> All kinds of things rejoiced my soul in their company—to talk and laugh and to do each other kindness; to rend pleasant books together; to pass from lightest jesting to talk of deepest things and back again; to differ without rancour as a man might differ with himself; and when, most rarely, dissension arose, to find our normal agreement all the sweeter for it; to teach each other and to learn from each other; to be impatient for the return of the absent and to welcome them with joy on their homecoming; these and suchlike things, proceeding from our hearts as we gave affection and received it back, and shown by face, by voice, by the eyes, and by a thousand and other pleasing ways kindled a flame which fused our very souls together, and, of many, made us one.[24]

Augustine's insight is that conversation between good friends sharpens intellectual development (e.g. reading and discussing books together); resolves moral dilemmas (e.g. teaching and learning from each other); and fosters spiritual maturity (e.g. to talk of the deepest things). There remains an indispensable role for embodied encounters for both friendship, fellowship and formation in the digital age.

A theology of embodiment for the digital age

Discipleship and ethics must rediscover a theology of the body in the digital age.[25] Nietzsche offered a withering critique of Christianity for despising the earthly body, which resonates with the contemporary danger of courting friendships and cultivating formation in the digital world only:

> I want to speak to the despisers of the body. I would not have them learn and teach differently, but merely say farewell to their own bodies—and thus become silent. 'Body am I, and soul'—thus speaks the child. And why should one not speak like children? But the awakened and knowing say: body am I entirely, and nothing else; and soul is only a word for something about the body ... There is more wisdom in your body than in your deepest philosophy.[26]

Here I can only sketch where others have laid the foundations for a more robust theological account of bodily existence.[27] First, the wisdom literature in Scripture places human speech-acts within the framework of God's speech and our relationship with God and service to others, promoting speech that is wise, measured and honest. A key biblical text that sums up many of these features is James 3:17: 'the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy'. Performing this single text faithfully in the digital age is challenging and must be disciplined by face-to-face conversation.

Second, as Emil Brunner argued, the essence of truth is *encounter*.[28] Without embodied encounters, people cannot know the deeper truth about themselves, another person or God. Paul Tournier also explored a theology of the whole person—with a particular focus on face-to-face conversation—anticipating by several decades the renewed focus on theological anthropology. Only in the spontaneity of an embodied encounter, according to Tournier, 'is the flash of honesty, the moment of transparency, that overwhelms and transfigures the climate of our relationship with other people'.[29] Embodied encounters are more honest, more transparent and therefore more formative.

In the final chapter of *Will You Be My Facebook Friend?*, Tim Chester suggests a series of contrasting statements structured in this way: 'through Facebook we … ; through the Gospel we … '. While these are helpful in a general sense, they can be strengthened and sustained by the embodied encounters grounded in a theology of the body outlined above. Chester observes that 'through Facebook you can show your face or image to the world'. A theology of the body remembers that through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, *God is physically, bodily with us*. Chester writes that 'through Facebook we can recreate ourselves. We can recreate our own identity to win the approval of other people'. In embodied encounters, through the life of Jesus the man of Nazareth, *God reveals the truly human, earthly life*. Chester laments that 'through Facebook we can promote ourselves'. Christians embrace the particularity and limits of our physical bodies because in the death of Jesus on the cross, *God embraces living and dying*—the inescapable pattern of all bodily life. Chester understands that 'through Facebook we reveal our "face" and look at the "faces" of other people'. Our embodied existence finds hope in the bodily resurrection of Jesus by which we 'face' our mortality and live fully in our bodies, knowing

that beyond the death and decay of our present body a future body awaits.[30] Even our encounters in eternity will be embodied, making them more holistic!

The embodied life has always been humane and holistic because the physicality of what happens in me and to me is constantly evolving and always evident. Christian theology, through the doctrine of the incarnation, affirms that people are 'at home' in the body and announces that they ought to be hopeful about the body through the doctrine of the resurrection. In conclusion, it is *embodied* encounters—theologically grounded in the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ— that offer more humane friendships and more holistic formation.

Endnotes

1. Sherry Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age,* Penguin, 2015, introduces her latest research by stating that 'I've been studying the psychology of online connectivity for more than 30 years. For the past five, I've had a special focus: What has happened to face-to-face conversation in a world where so many people say they would rather text than talk? I've looked at families, friendships and romance. I've studied schools, universities and workplaces.'

2. Jacques Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1985, p. 12. A consistent theme in his many books such as *The Technological Society* (1954), *Propaganda* (1962), *The Political Illusion* (1967), *Critique of The New Commonplaces* (1968), *Autopsy of Revolution* (1971), and *The Technological System* (l980), and in scores of articles, is the central role played by technology (*la technique*) in modern society. *La technique* is the attempt to rationalise and to make efficient all the workings of human society.

3. Ana-Paula Correia and Caglar Yildirim, 'Exploring the dimensions of nomophobia: Development and validation of a self-reported questionnaire', *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 49, August 2015, pp. 130–37, at p. 130.

4. Misa Tan, 'Facebook unfriending constitutes "bullying", says workplace tribunal', *The Sydney Morning Herald, http://www.smh.com.au/business/ workplace-relations/facebook-unfriending-constitutes-bullying-says-workplace-tribunal* (accessed 25 September 2015).

5. Jacques Ellul, *Perspectives on our Age: Jacques Ellul Speaks on His Life and Work.* edited by William H Vandenburg, trans. Joachim Neugroschel, New York, The Seabury Press, 1981, p. 117.

6. R Paul Stevens, 'Friendship', in idem and Robert Banks (eds), *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*, Downers Grove, IL, IVP, 1997, pp. 435–42.

7. Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* (Cistercian Fathers Series No. 5), trans. Mary Eugenia Laker, Kalamazoo, Cisterian Publications, 1977, p. 22: 'Aelred proposed beginning the consideration of friendship by taking Cicero's definition as a provisional working model. Cicero had described friendship as: 'Agreement on matters human and divine, with charity and goodwill.'

8. Pope Francis, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, §47.

9. Jacques Ellul, *Humiliation of the Word*, Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1985, p. 16.

10. James KA Smith, *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works* (Cultural Liturgies), Grand Rapids, MI, Baker, p. 146.

11. Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, pp. 137–76, describes declining empathy in digital friendships.

12. Craig Detweiler, *iGods: How Technology Shapes Our Spiritual and Social Lives*, Grand Rapids, MI, Brazos Press, 2013, pp. 73–78, 131–36

13. Cicero, *On the Good Life*, Ringwood, Penguin, 1971, pp. 172–227 ('Laelius: On Friendship').

14. Jacques Ellul, *The Technological System*, New York, Continuum, 1980, p. 312, notes the impact on formation where 'education and instruction no longer have anything "gratuitous" about them, they must serve efficiently'.

15. Here it is worth noting the significant differences between βιος and ζωη.

16. Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1970, p. 41.

17. Ibid., p. 56.

18. Ibid., pp. 178–79.

19. Robert Banks, *Reenvisioning Theological Education: Exploring a Missional Alternative to Current Models*, Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1999, p. 106.

20. David Brooks, 'The Big University', in *The New York Times, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/06/opinion/david-brooks-the-big-university.html* (accessed 7 October 2015), argues that 'technology is also forcing change. Online courses make the transmission of information a commodity. If colleges are going to justify themselves, they are going to have to thrive

at those things that require physical proximity. That includes moral and spiritual development. Very few of us cultivate our souls as hermits. We do it through small groups and relationships and in social contexts'.

21. Berta Sichel, 'New Hope For The Technological Society: An Interview with Jacques Ellul', *et Cetera*, Vol. 70, No. 3, July 2013, p. 324.

22. Turkle, *Reclaiming Conversation*, pp. 211–248, calls this 'attentional disarray'.

23. Tim Challies, *The Next Story: Life and Faith after the Digital Explosion*, Grand Rapids, MI, Zondervan, 2011, pp. 97–134.

24. Augustine of Hippo, quoted in Brian Frost and Pauline Webb (eds), *Celebrating Friendship: An Anthology*, Westminster, Epworth, 1986, p. 10.

25. Geoff Broughton, *Restorative Christ: Jesus, Justice, and Discipleship*, Eugene, OR, Pickwick Publications, 2014, p. 152: 'embodied action is demanded by Jesus' earthly, political life, the physicality of his death and, most fully, with his risen life. Reconciliation and justice might be conceived in the imagination and articulated through conversation but they are enacted in and through the body'.

26. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, trans. *Walter Kaufmann*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1976, part I, ch. 4.

27. Lauren Cassani Davis, 'The Flight from Conversation', *The Atlantic http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2015/10/reclaiming-conversation-sherry-turkle/409273/?utm_source=SFTwitter* (accessed 9 October 2015) summarises the prescriptions of Turkle, which, alongside other voices, points in the same direction: 'carve out "sacred spaces" for conversation in day-to-day life—no devices at the dinner table, study and lounge spaces that are wi-fi free. Abandon the myth of multitasking for good—it is neither efficient nor conducive to empathy, she says—and instead embrace "unitasking," one thing at a time'.

28. Emil Brunner, *The Divine-Human Encounter*, London, SCM, 1944, p. 35, 'God creates a counterpart, face to face with Himself '.

29. Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons*, New York, Harper and Sons, 1957, pp. 128–29, 136: 'true personal relationship, of the sort that makes the person, involve both choice and risk; it lays one open to a reply, and to the necessity of replying in return: it is a dialogue'.

30. Tim Chester, *Will You Be My Facebook Friend? Social Media and the Gospel*, Farington, 10Publishing, 2013, locs 350–84.