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The Three Faces Of Facebook

I did not know what to tell her in the moment. As I was on my way home from a quick lamb kebab dinner—not hurrying, not sauntering—a former neighbor, Veronique, asked me for my assessment of Facebook. "My son wants me to join Facebook," she told me, "but I don't know that I want to." My mental wheels obligingly started to turn. I assured her that Facebook can be an extension of e-mail. I added that it can also be a place where groups notify you of important events. Then, I pointed out that—well—Facebook can be gossipy and boring. What do you mean?—she must have asked. What do I mean?—I surely asked myself. Meanwhile, Park St. Red Line was beckoning. "You just have to be there" is never a really helpful thing to say, and yet nothing else was coming to mind, except—the idiotic quizzes. "What I meant—all these idiotic quizzes on Facebook," I assured her with a shrug that was meant to telegraph: you can avoid the quizzes. "Well, uh…" I said, eyeing the traffic light, "…what about your son? Which son?" (Victor, I was guessing.)

"Willy," she said.

And we were—or rather she was—onto another subject.

On the subway platform, however, it occurred to me: there is more to the boringness of Facebook than the interminable, incomprehensible quizzes that you can avoid anyway. I was still nagging at myself to produce a thorough answer to Veronique's "What do you mean?" back at home in Dorchester. Why—I asked myself—did I join Facebook? A suggestion of superficiality embedded in the very name "Facebook" might have warned me off—or not. There could easily be a part of my frequently introspective self that seeks out superficial socializing—foolishly, I'm afraid, since my superficial socializing skills are next to non-existent. But, I recalled, I was not seeking out superficial socializing. I was not seeking out Facebook, for the very reason (incredible, but true) that I had not heard of Facebook. In fact, I initially joined a Facebook *group*, MCC-Boston, at the urging of the pastor of MCC-Boston (or Metropolitan Community Church, a ministry for GLBT people). I had been on the verge of leaving the church, primarily because I was doubting the sanctity of Jesus Christ and possibly the existence of Christ, particularly his miracles and Beatitudes. Even if my faith in Christ had been unshaken, I had not found many ways to participate in MCC-Boston or meet the other members of the church. An MCC-Boston Facebook group, I thought, *might* bring about a discussion of the New Testament that *might* catch my interest, renew my faith, or revive my desire to have a faith, any faith. No such discussions happened. So, why didn't I drop Facebook at that point? I don't recall. What I did do at that point was create a profile for myself.

Now we pause for station identification, or rather, more specifically, self-examination, and here is what I conclude: I was still hoping to connect, as in "Just connect" (E.M. Forster), or—more desperately—as in "I hope that someone gets my/message in a bottle." (The Police). Despite the disappointing inactivity of the MCC-Boston Facebook group, I was hoping that my own profile would generate connectedness—to what people, I could not articulate. Usually, when I set such an indefinite course, I go in

unproductive circles. In retrospect, I did go in a few unproductive circles. I "friended" Facebook Friends of Facebook Friends (a writer, a political activist, a literary agent) who caught my interest but did not keep it. Is this a flaw in my character, or a flaw in the structure of Facebook? I cannot say. I can say that I did make one exciting connection I did not expect to make, the Facebook Friend of a Facebook Friend across the Atlantic Ocean. His mix of playfulness with introspection is what got my interest. His posts are all enthusiastically, emphatically stated; his use of cute applications to show friendship is not original, but it is nevertheless endearing. Nor is this all he presents—due to a Facebook application called Notes. In these Notes, he presents a serious, introspective side, describing the feel of autumn or addressing his shadow side. Here a flash of Wordsworth, there a flash of Jung, making me wonder, if I wrote Notes, what would I want to write about? An engaging person I would not have met in a non-Facebook course of events.

I gradually "friended" a few other writers, so that now I am connected to a small group of writers on Facebook. If I want to resuscitate the draft of a novel, I could address a thought or a question—or, OMG, both—to a novelist I have "friended" on Facebook. I don't know that I *would*. This Facebook Friend had once written, in a column, about a café in Boston where a writer could spend little and work uninterruptedly for a stretch of hours—a wonderful workplace for a writer. In a message on Facebook, I referred to this bit of information in her column and would she tell me the what and where of the café? She messaged me back that she would not. Unimportant, and yet—would I, months later, compose another, weightier message to the novelist on Facebook? Possibly, possibly not. Nevertheless, because of this networking site, Facebook, I *could* send a message to the novelist. Another writer on Facebook has recommended, on my Wall, that I focus on cultural criticism rather than memoir. Since I am interested in all different forms of writing (in the beginning was an interest in the novel), this was a truly significant recommendation. Meanwhile, I have joined writing-related groups on Facebook. One such group sends me announcements of scheduled readings with profiles of the authors who are reading. In that way, Facebook functions a bit like a DayMinder, reminding me of important events I might otherwise lose track of, amid who knows how many other demands.

Then, what frequently does happen on Facebook is the gossipyness and boringness I pointed out to my former neighbor. I think of gossip as an exchange of sensational information that has meaning only to those few people exchanging the information. If Facebook is purportedly about *expanding* the social network, gossip surely *contracts* the social network. Important: I do not mean to conjure up an *Andy Capp* image of housewives chatting over a fence about a neighborhood rumor. The sensational information could be about a reality—not rumor—of universal—not parochial—importance. An instance—

A Facebook Friend posts that he is getting married. I know he means he is getting married to his boyfriend. I know that he has co-founded a book club with his boyfriend—something that, I feel sure, is not casually done. I deduce (but do not know)—already a long-term commitment here. Nevertheless, I figure that only a few Facebook Friends of this Facebook Friend could reply to the brief, minimally informative post, and that

is what happens. While a part of me congratulates him on this bold step, another part of me feels that he is only generating gossip—sensational exchange of information among a few—rather than a conversation about, for example, the institution of marriage that many Facebook Friends could participate in. (Well, Thomas Hardy, if he were alive and on Facebook, might say something about the institution of marriage.)

The "news feed" on Facebook can certainly present far more cryptic posts than a sudden announcement of a same-sex marriage, like a Facebook Friend's post about dancing in the kitchen—appealing and yet mystifying too, like the mist obscuring long-lost Brigadoon. More than once, I have wondered, what is this Facebook Friend talking about? Bafflement quickly leads to boredom, and attentive reading becomes skimming, sometimes less than skimming. Being baffled brings me back to those idiotic quizzes. A Facebook quiz that I have noticed asks something like "How well do you know this person?" I'd wonder, do you really need a Facebook quiz to answer that? I'd think about Facebook Friends of mine and ask myself, how well do I know most of them? Not well. One Facebook Friend is the fiction editor of a local literary magazine, and himself a writer of fiction and poetry. But do I know his place of residence or "day job"? No. Another Facebook Friend used to attend the same yoga classes that I used to attend. I suppose he is applying to colleges, but do I know which colleges? No. While I am a member of Grub St. Writers, I do not know well those Grub St. staff and instructors who are Facebook Friends of mine. I do not have to consult a Facebook quiz to discover how well I know another person. Why does this quiz exist? I have noticed other, even more bizarre quizzes, like a quiz that asks, "How Nazi are you?" 'What the f—k?' is all I could think of when I ran across that one. Overall, a part of me thinks—and says—"idiotic quizzes on Facebook"—but another part of me thinks, Facebook, quizzes and all, is clearly filling a societal need, and so the question that needs thoughtful answering is, where does that need come from?

My sense is that Facebook is doing several different things, to fill a societal need. Indisputably, it is that self-described social utility connecting individuals to other individuals. It did connect me to that playful yet introspective Facebook Friend across the sea. It did enable me to create a network of writers, which has sometimes provided guidance and direction in an unstructured, unscheduled endeavor. No doubt, it has enabled others to create a network of people in the same profession. Also, it has allowed me—and others whom I know—to renew relationships that were fading or extinguished. I can think of four or five Facebook Friends who, after a long time offstage or beyond, have made a dramatic re-appearance in my life. For now, these re-appearances stay online, but…who knows what on-earth connection could come from an online connection?

Besides this, Facebook is providing entertainment. The games, the applications, the quizzes—all are providing entertainment. Nothing wrong with that, of course. I'll watch a Red Sox game or read a Robert Parker detective novel for no other purpose than entertainment. But—there *can* be too much of a good thing. It makes me think of the Duke's speech to the Dragoon Guards in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Patience*:

…toffee in moderation is a capital thing. But to *live* on toffee—toffee

for breakfast, toffee for dinner, toffee for tea—to have it supposed that you care for nothing *but* toffee, and that you would consider yourself insulted if anything but toffee were offered to   you—how would you like *that*? (Green, ed. 220-221)

The Colonel replies, in that case, even toffee would get monotonous. I second that. An application like "LivingSocial" or a game like "Kidnap!" can make for an amusing pastime with a little brain-benefit, but a game called "Mafia Wars"? Or "Farmville"? These games merely come across as pointless pastimes, in which nothing remotely real is gained.

Assuredly, entertainment on Facebook can provide more than mental sugar. If there's entertainment that aims to educate, and then there's entertainment that aims only to distract, then some entertainment provided by Facebook falls somewhere between the two—for instance, the "Kidnap!" game. In this game, a Facebook Friend "kidnaps" you to the city that this Facebook Friend has chosen as headquarters (say, New Orleans). To "escape" the city, you need to answer a question about it, an answer readily found on a "cheat sheet" linked to the "Kidnap!" game. Upon answering the question correctly, you "escape" and go back to your own headquarters (say, Stockholm). So, "Kidnap!" provides both an amusing pastime, like "Clue" or backgammon, and information about cities around the world. Granted, the information is trivial; this is not an educational experience on the level of a documentary by Ken Burns, but it is educational. It is an educational diversion.

Finally, I sensed, Facebook makes people *feel* connected, where there is only a slight connection. The name of a book, *The Lonely Crowd*, came to my mind. (Why?, you might well wonder. My father, a history professor at the University of Massachusetts/Boston, was a friend of David Riesman, who wrote *The Lonely Crowd*—thus, my awareness of the book, which, though renowned, does not have down-through-the-ages fame, like, say, *The Divine Comedy*.) I had not read *The Lonely Crowd*, but it seemed possible to me that the concept of a "lonely crowd" might have bearing on the Facebook phenomenon. A vague light-bulb moment—but I followed up on it.

I quickly zeroed in on the three social character types described by Riesman: the tradition-directed character, the inner-directed character, and the other-directed character. The tradition-directed character is connected, desirably so or not, to the traditional rules and roles of a culture. So is the inner-directed character, but with significant changes. The inner-directed character is *less* focused on behavioral conformity, *more* aware of other traditions, *more* flexible in adapting to changing requirements, and, above all, is able to balance "the demands upon him of his life goal and the buffetings of his external environment" (Riesman 16). In sum—the inner-directed character, while still very much guided by the tradition of a culture, has to develop a distinct sense of self. The other-directed character—a 20th century American type, according to Riesman—focuses on the actions and wishes of others. For the other-directed character, approval from others is the "chief source of direction and chief area of sensitivity" (22).

If the tradition-directed type—or even the inner-directed type—can find groundedness in the "ritual, routine, and religion" of the culture (11), the other-directed type can find no certain ground at all. For this person,

I suppose that a social utility such as Facebook provides a ground. Facebook provides a sense of community, but it is only a *sense* of community, a feeling of community rather than an actual community of people you see and hear. So, while it is providing genuine connectedness and (occasionally educational) entertainment, Facebook is also providing an illusion of groundedness. If we assume that Riesman's account is correct, then this illusion would be still much in demand by a 21st century Americanized world of frequently un-grounded other-directed character types.

Connectedness, entertainment, and illusion all at once…

O brave new world, that hath such a social utility in it! Or is it?

Works Cited

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