

KILROY CAFÉ

Philosophy for the Modern Age

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Friend me if you wish; unfriend me if you will, but my friends are not your friends

finding healthy boundaries in the new media

By GLENN CAMPBELL

It was a little complicated, but I've managed to block all of my Facebook friends from seeing my list of Facebook friends.

Huh? Does this mean I don't trust the people I call my friends? No, it means we've overrun an essential human boundary here and it's time to pull in the reins. No matter how much I may trust you or care for you, my friends are not your friends. We live in different worlds. We have to be free to regulate our own economies.

Social media are now in their Wild West phase. People are euphoric that they can "friend" just about anyone. Via Twitter, we can follow the daily errands of celebrities, housewives and college students. It seems there is no privacy anymore, and most people don't seem bothered by that. Everyone's a voyeur and an exhibitionist.

Ah, but this can't go on forever. Like any new thing, there has to be a backlash eventually, some sort of drawing back. You can't be intimately exposed to everyone's inner thoughts without burning out your own emotional circuits—and being bored to death! There has to be a place where I begin and you end. We just haven't figured out yet where that boundary is.

I believe one of the essential rules is what I just did: keeping my friends from seeing my friends, at least in a single list. This policy occurred to me as I was browsing the Facebook pages of some prominent local judges and politicians, noting their list of friends. Part of me was thrilled at the discovery, but another part was appalled. I shouldn't be allowed to see this information!

In the year I have been on Facebook, it has evolved from a novelty into something important to me. Since I am constantly on the road, it's the only stable community I currently have—at least that I interact with on a daily basis. Some of my Facebook friends have become pretty close to real friends, and I care what happens to them.

But I also find conundrums. I have Facebook friends who are not really my friends, who I have nothing in common with, who I don't fully trust and who have probably friended me in the belief that I am someone other than who I am? What do I do about these people?

Should I unfriend them? Should I refuse entry to anyone I don't already know? That seems draconian. Like most people, I will accept the friend request of just about anyone who asks. I do it because I am open to new points of view, and you can't really know people until you interact with them.

So now I have this community of people I consider my real friends, plus family members I have known all my life, along with strangers and people I am wary of. How do I manage them all, and how do I protect my true friends from people who could be annoying or damaging to them?

I don't have a complete answer yet, but my first step is to hide my friend list. This affirms what I call our "right of association." I believe each of us has the right to communicate with whomever we wish and not be obligated to share that communication with anyone else. This is true even if you have a romantic partner who you trust completely: You may summarize for your partner your exchange with someone else, but the exchange itself is still private.

You can't freely associate with others if everyone else knows who you are associating with. If you did, there would be political problems. "How can you talk to *them*?" one friend might say. The simplest solution is to just close the list to everyone.

This takes some getting used to, even for me. I was beginning to take some pride in the size of my friend list, as well as the prestige of some of my friends. Now, none of that will be known. Do I have 50 friends or 5000? I am no longer saying.

That's not what friendship is about. Each relationship has to stand on its own. If you and I find something useful between us, we will come together, and when the value ends, we will draw apart. Our relationships with others are irrelevant.

On my Facebook page, everyone can still see the comments my friends make—say, about one of my photos—but I'm comfortable with this. Each friend is choosing to go public with his opinions on this single issue. It's like a semi-formal social gathering where my friends can mingle and get to know each other but also have their guard up. Somehow that doesn't seem so bad.

But to parade one's friends around for others to see seems sordid. It is innocent in most cases, but in the long run it's going to hurt the quality of individual relationships.

A friend is a friend, and he needs to be respected for himself.

—G.C.

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