

Friendly reminder from life's cluttered contact list

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By Kate Holden

Dr Johnson said a day was wasted if he hadn't made a new one. Borromini, the glum Renaissance architect, kept a strict list of seven and one had to drop off before another was allowed on. Henry Miller, down and out in Paris, calculated that he needed 14 a week in order to feed himself. Lady Gaga has 10 million, 4 million fewer than Michael Jackson, who can't enjoy them any more. Like many of us, I can never work out if I have too many or not enough.

Comment [AC1]: Use of the first person.

Friend. A noun and a verb. "Kith" next to our "kin". It's uncommon but not advised to navigate life without them. We love our friends, we amass more and more, we are insatiable for friends. But what about quality and quantity?

Comment [AC2]: Engaging introductory paragraph, offering the perspectives of some famous people on the topic.

Comment [AC3]: Poses a question for the reader to ponder.

Friends are probably one of the most expansive commodities in the universe. They're not like saucepans, you can't really have too many to fit. But sometimes I feel I have overstocked, there are such numbers to keep up with, I can't email enough and, god help me, I certainly don't have time to actually see them. These days it might be months between clapping eyes on my closest, oldest and dearest friends. If we do finally write the familiar "oh my god how long has it been" email it takes a further exchange of dozens of messages and a delay of several weeks before a coffee is crammed into a busy day, at which we furiously report on the doings of the past year and then, bulletin delivered, leave exhausted, vowing weakly to keep up better communication — more emails. We are all so ridiculously frantic and I languish in an uncertain state, overwhelmed by the number of wonderful friends I have, and too busy to enjoy any of them. The social atomisation of my age group doesn't help, certainly: with every person I know coddled down with baby and demanding job and zooming ever closer to Melbourne's amazing elastic boundary (edging towards Castlemaine), it's not often I have a spare five hours to devote to public transport just to pop in for a cup of tea. I am not there when they have crises, or to share celebrations. I will be an absent aunty to my friends' babies. And me? It is possible to be entirely lonely with a contact list of hundreds.

Comment [AC4]: Development of a strong voice in the piece and sense of the writer's personality.

There are real friends who make you zing with joy and tell your best jokes, and there are duty friends you see because it's too awful not to. There are friends you pick up as you go, nice people to share some time or an interest with and there are friends you keep because they know where the bodies are buried and other friends who sneak into your life though you have nothing in common, they just stick around. There are gangs of friends and single ones no one else knows. There are legions of friends you only know as a username and icon, and others who are just names in your address book from years ago. There are friends on your online page you don't know at all. There are people you've known all your life who suddenly change values, and that's a scary one because you have to wonder if it's them who've unforgivably changed, or you who's got stuck; or if you ever really knew them in the first place. There are friends who haven't changed since they were 12, only grown grey at the temples. There are friends you'd die for and friends you didn't even know had died.

And what are they for? To reflect, to provoke, to make you more "you" or make the "you" you are more? To share memories or make new ones? To pass the time or to be enjoyed for themselves or for what you are when you're together? Some friends bring out the best in me; I have others because it's not about me, they're just smashing people. We collect friends but it's impossible to keep them all. Not like saucepans, more like biscuits in a cupboard, they can go off. Fatigue, neglect and attrition: it's time to clean out my contacts list with regretful deletions, and only long-forgotten emails saved in folders to remind me that we ever shared those good, character-shaping, day-enlivening, soul-comforting times. I feel as though I'm burying someone.

But I'm lucky to have friends at all: can you imagine the desolation of having no one to call, no one to complain to or be joyous among; no one to tell big news or confess sadness to? It's a day not wasted but lessened if it doesn't feature a friend, even if just in your thoughts. As the good Dr J said: "A Man, Sir, should keep his friendship in constant repair."

Read more: <http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/friendly-reminder-from-lifes-cluttered-contact-list-20100806-11n7s.html#ixzz2RjB2IQiZ>