



I've been writing a lot, lately, about the ways that social media tends to emphasize, and maybe even enhance, our various divisions – be they social, political, religious, or what have you. I have a friend who calls it the “Facebook Effect,” this unfortunate phenomenon that emboldens people to say things online that they would never, ever say – in language they would never, ever use – in person, face to face. Far too often in FB “discussions,” reason becomes ranting, passion becomes pissiness, and what started as communication ends as alienation. Sometimes – especially during election season – just scrolling through my news feed can be an exercise in despair.

But what's been on my mind this week – vividly – is the way in which social media can also help heal divisions... and even broken hearts.

I woke up last Friday morning to find two FB messages telling me that an old boyfriend of mine from college had died of a heart attack the night before, at age 46. For you readers out there who think 46 sounds oldish – or is in any way a reasonable age at which to depart from this earth – I can only say... you'll learn. (I would also remind you that a 46-year-old man is several years *younger* than perennial sex symbols Brad Pitt, Tom Cruise and George Clooney. How's that for perspective?)

After my initial shock at the news of G's death – the shaking and the nausea and the pounding heart — I immediately clicked over to his Facebook page. (As with so many old college friends, we had reconnected on FB in recent years.) It seemed like the natural thing to do... the obvious place to go. G had been living in Atlanta for years, and there was no way I could rush to his doorstep with condolences and a casserole for his wife and kids. Facebook gave me a place to

be. Gave *us* – G's friends – a place to be. A place to mourn together.

And mourn we did. When I got there, I saw that I wasn't the first to arrive. It was only about 6:30 am, but people had already come to G's page, posting written tributes and pictures. Lots of pictures. There was the G I remembered, the one from college, lanky and handsome in a tuxedo at the SAE house... There he was as a 12-year-old boy with two big brothers and a funny haircut... and as a 40-something dad with his own 12-year-old boy. Still handsome... still so young. How could this young, handsome man be gone? He wasn't one of our grandparents. Or one of our parents. He was one of us. How could this be?

As I write this, a week has passed. I still visit G's FB page every day, but things have settled down over there. Nobody's posted anything new since his memorial service in Atlanta a couple of days ago. That seems a shame to me. A week is such a short time to mourn a life. I know that for his family and close friends, things will not get "back to normal" any time soon. Never, really. For their sake, and for G's – but mostly, I guess, for my own – I will keep checking in... maybe with a thought here, a memory there. Maybe just to sit and look at pictures... and remember. For me, it's like keeping fresh flowers at his grave.

(I wonder, in years and decades and centuries to come, what will happen to all the FB pages of the dearly departed? Will their loved ones take them down? Will Facebook? Or will they linger on in perpetuity, an ever-expanding archive of poignant cyber scrapbooks? Perhaps one day, anthropologists and historians will study them as artifacts from an ancient culture. Imagine how much more we might know about the Founding Fathers had they been on FB. Their favorite quotes! Favorite authors! And we could finally lay to rest that "Christians or Deists?" debate...)

I'm so grateful to Facebook for enabling me to know G again, as an adult, with all that time and space between us... for giving our mutual friends an easy means of alerting me to his death... and, especially, for giving us a place to celebrate his life... together.

There's another bright spot in my virtual life that I feel compelled to share. I'm a member of a "secret" Facebook forum for theology geeks. (Yes, people, I'm interested in the study of God. Deal with it.) The group was started by another graduate of my alma mater – an Episcopalian who's half Jewish (on his father's side) and living in Hollywood. (I know! Who knew they had churches out there?) We have members from all over the country – and several abroad – at very different points along very different spiritual journeys. Among our regular participants, we

have a devout Catholic who's gay, a pagan practitioner of Wicca who also happens to be gay, a divorced mother of four who's a Mormon, a cheerful atheist who's fascinated by God talk, a Methodist minister, a delightful Muslim, an Anglo-Buddhist... and me, the Accidental Presbyterian. (I am told by my theology group that there's no such thing – what with predestination and all – but I stand by the title.) Not only are we a motley crew, but there's absolutely nothing about our group – on paper, anyway – that would conjure the word “harmony.” And yet, that's exactly what we've created.

Oh, I'm not talking about the

“let's-all-pussy-foot-around-the-sensitive-subjects-and-just-make-small-talk” kind of harmony. Yuck. How pointless and boring and unenlightening. No, I'm talking about that challenging, complicated, *sublime* level of harmony that interweaves many different threads of melody, and sometimes even veers into discord, only to resolve on a sweeter, richer note than the one where it started. As anybody who's ever sung in a choir can tell you, that kind of harmony takes practice. You have to know your own line of melody well – and hold it – even as the other lines swirl around you. You have to hear the other lines – really hear them – even as you're singing your own. When it all comes together – when the blend works – the sound can be out of this world.

As you can imagine, we have plenty of hot debates on this forum. Adrian, the conservative Catholic convert, and JoeCo, the progressive Wiccan, never agree about anything. (Abortion? Nope. Gay marriage? Nope. The nature of God? Not hardly.) But they make each other laugh! Jason, the Jewish-Episcopalian, can get so deep in the scholarly weeds that I'm sometimes ill-equipped to follow. But then he'll post an irreverent “Coffee with Jesus” cartoon, and I'm right there with him! I'm convinced that Marca the Mormon was my twin sister in another life. (Scratch that. Presbyterians don't believe in reincarnation.) Jim, the gay Catholic, is one of the finest, most faithful Christians I have ever encountered. Heather the atheist doesn't buy into any of it, but her wit and wisdom keep us all entertained and thinking.

I've been trying to figure out why this forum works so well – why we all *get along* so well – despite our very real and significant differences. I put that question to the group, and here's what a couple of folks had to say:

JoeCo: “I think the people drawn here, as diverse as we are, are committed also to mutual respect and compassion for others... and we all are genuinely interested in learning from the differences between us rather than converting anyone to our points of view.”

Real Life in the Virtual World

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

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Aaron: "We truly respect each others' differences. We don't diminish them in any way, minimize them, or pretend they don't exist. However, we also get that behind our differences lies a tremendous shared conviction in the love of God, and the inherent goodness of the spiritual journey... that asking questions and keeping an open mind are critical to living the good life (as Socrates might say)."

Indeed. I would also add that we tell a lot jokes.

"A minister, a priest, and a rabbi walk into a bar...."

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