The changing Face(book) of friendship

By Al Gini
November 27, 2012

Recently, I attended the funeral of a friend I had known for more than 50 years. I went to the funeral out of respect for my old comrade, but also out of respect for the concept of friendship itself.

I’m “old school.” Calling someone a friend is a big deal to me. In my mind, friendship doesn’t simply result from knowing someone. It isn’t based on growing up in the same neighborhood, attending the same church or even being college roommates, nor is it the byproduct of working together, singing in the same choir or being someone’s regular doubles-partner at the tennis club. You may do all of these activities with people you like. They may be people you sometimes casually refer to as friends, but they are, in fact, acquaintances, people you simply know.

To me, friendship is about intimacy, trust, mutual caring and responsibility. Calling someone a friend is analogous to telling someone you love them. Both pronouncements should be a mixture of reason, emotions, affection, empathy, simpatico and joy. And the key ingredient, the bonding principle, the social cement for all these attributes and feelings, is time: time spent together getting to know each other, time spent getting to know what you like and dislike about each other. Time enough to decide, “OK, now I know a lot about you. And, I know a lot of things that I don’t like about you. Yet, I still choose to call you friend.”

In Twentysomethings: Why do Young Adults Seem Stuck?, authors Robin Marantz Henig and Samantha Henig explore some of the pitfalls of social networking and modern friendship. Simply put, they argue that having 500 Facebook friends should not be associated with true friendship. Constant contact can be exciting, efficient, fun, and challenging; but, they argue, creating virtual bonds “can’t quite take the place of real ones.” Real friendship, like dancing, is a more intimate, face-to-face relationship.

As I said, I’m “old school” when it comes to friendship. Aristotle wrote on a number of topics during his lifetime, including some of his best work on the nature of friendship. I can do no better than leave you with a few of his thoughts:

“What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies.”
“Wishing to be friends is quick work, but friendship is a slow ripening fruit.”
“A friend to all is a friend to none.”
“The antidote for fifty enemies is one friend.”
“Without friends, no one would want to live, even if he had all other goods.”