

Like most people, I don't like dining on crow, humble pie, or any other dish comprised of my own words. But unlike most people, I spout off publicly on a regular basis, so it seems only fair that I de-spout publicly, too. When I change my mind about something, the stand-up thing to do is to say so. I guess.



So let's just get it over with, already: I joined Facebook. And I like it.

I've long been a critic of the whole MySpace/Facebook culture, based on... well, not much, really, other than my general (and, I know, tiresome) wariness of all things modern, trendy, and techie. My baby sister, almost a decade my junior, has been talking up the joys of Facebook for a while, only to get the condescending, big-sisterly brush-off she's been putting up with all her life, bless her heart.

But last time she was here for a visit, in a moment of weakness I allowed her to set up an account for me. No harm, no foul, I figured. I could always shut it down later. I then went off to the movies, forgetting all about Facebook. A couple of hours later, when I returned home, I had 30-odd "friend requests" stuffing my inbox. I'm not sure, but I think I actually blushed. Childhood companions, long-lost college pals, current comrades... all sorts of people from all over the place! Not teenagers speaking in that cryptic text-talk, either, but honest-to-God grown-ups with jobs and families, all greeting me warmly, in complete sentences, inviting me to a swingin' party that had been going on without me for... well, who knows *how* long?

I've never been one to turn down a party invitation. I was hooked.

That was a few weeks and 90-something "friends" ago, and I'm still hooked. The honeymoon phase has subsided a bit – thank goodness, because the initial romance was too intense – and Facebook and I are settling into a nice, cozy relationship.

Of course, that relationship is not without its hazards. Facebook is, at best, a pleasing momentary distraction... at worst, an all-consuming, time-sucking addiction. And then, there's the whole premise behind it, which is understandably off-putting to some.

"Why on God's earth would I need a computer to connect with the people around me?," UK writer Tom Hodgkinson asks in *The Guardian*. "Why should my relationships be mediated through the imagination of a bunch of supergeeks in California? What was wrong with the pub? Far from connecting us, Facebook actually isolates us at our workstations."

Theoretically, I agree with this assessment. It *sounds* right. Only, here's the thing... I haven't been feeling isolated at my workstation. In fact, I'm feeling more connected than ever. Is it just an illusion? Do virtual communities provide a false sense of camaraderie, keeping us from tending to our actual relationships? I decided to ignore the experts (not that anybody really *is*

yet) and take my question directly to the people. I told my Facebook "friends" via my Facebook "wall" that I was writing this column, and asked them to share their thoughts.

First up, The Naysayers – those who, for whatever reason, have a Facebook account, but aren't happy about it...

Friend #1, upon learning I'd joined FB: *"Oh my Lord, not you, too! If you don't have anything better to do, go to a bar, have a few, and talk to some real people!"*

My response? Would that I could! Alas, I am the mother of a small child, and I can't go traipsing off to my favorite watering hole every afternoon at Happy Hour. And even more germane, perhaps – I'm a naturally sociable person who works from home in a very solitary profession. I have no officemates, no break room, no peeps to do lunch with. For self-employed

people like me – and there are more of us every day – Facebook is a virtual water cooler. (And for full-time stay-at-home moms, I'm guessing it's an oasis in the desert.) People who go to "the pub" daily probably have no need of Facebook, it's true. But who *are* these people, and how does one get that gig?

Here's another friend, who grudgingly joined FB under peer pressure: *"I don't like Facebook. It's too post-intimate, too faux-immediate. I'm not sure I actually want to know what you are doing RIGHT NOW. You're probably lying, anyway. On Facebook, everyone is great, or at least ironically great. I find it exhausting. But I still keep checking my live feed, just in case someone posts that they are miserable, lonely, poor and that profile pic is from 20 years ago. Then I will believe."*

This friend makes a valid point. But as I perused her post, I realized that I *like* Facebook for the very same reasons she *dislikes*

it. Again, I think this has something to do with my work. As a columnist and blogger, I spend a lot of time discussing Touchy Subjects – politics, religion, and the like – in cyberspace, with people I don't know. Because these people are basically anonymous, they feel they have license to be inconsiderate and rude. Things can get pretty unpleasant. Facebook, on the other hand, is like this light-hearted soiree, where everyone's acquainted on some level, and therefore on their wittiest, breeziest, most charming behavior. I don't know if they're lying, and I don't care. Nor do I care that they're not pondering deep philosophical questions. It's totally superficial, and I like it like that. I've got enough serious, somber people keepin' real in my life. Give me banter! Clever repartee! Sparkling commentary! And keep it shallow, please.

A good friend from high school, with whom I've recently reconnected (thanks FB!) concurs: *"I love it. It is pretty non-committal. You just read about people's comings and goings and opinions. Comment if you want to, or don't... unlike email where you feel compelled to reply. People don't tell too much or spill too much. It's surface stuff, but it is still interesting and entertaining."*

Hmmmm... there's probably something to that "non-committal" thing. Intimate friendships take plenty of time and emotional energy, right? Who has much of *those* to spare anymore? My cousin Ginny, with whom I used to correspond *maybe*

twice a year before Facebook – and who spends most of her time and emotional energy raising three young boys – brings up a related issue:

*"I would love to know why we are all more apt to communicate with friends in a public forum vs. private email, etc... and, are we truly more connected (as I feel) or are our connections artificial and fabricated behind a wall of safety?"*

Excellent questions, and worthy of lengthy discussion. Unfortunately, I have neither the time nor space for that. (Another friend suggested that Facebook would make a great dissertation topic, and he's right.) I'm trying not to dig too deep here, trying to stick with the Big Themes. In that spirit, a favorite pal from college (we'd lost touch 'til FB) goes right to the heart of the matter:

*"The best part of Facebook is getting to see what people are doing through their photographs. I guess that's why I post so many. Sort of like sending out way too many Christmas cards just so you can get a bunch back."*

He also lamented, on his FB wall, the fact that "Say, Say, Say" is no longer the number one song, as it was 25 years ago.

That's Michael. I'd know his wacky sense of humor anywhere. And, God, how I've missed it. Which brings me to one of the best things about Facebook, if not *the* best thing. It offers you this amazing gift – a little glimpse into the lives of people who were once – to varying degrees of importance – part of *your li* fe. Oh, how they've changed. (They're adults! With careers! And children!). But oh, how they *haven't*.

The cute drummer you crushed on in college now has a lovely wife, three kids, and works as an appraiser... but is still completely bizarre. The man you worked with ten years ago is still a blazing intellectual... but now he's a Christian, too, and has a new joy about him. Your little sister's best friend from first grade is still hilarious in a sweet, off-kilter way... and has a teenage daughter who looks just like her...

While you weren't looking, things changed *and* they stayed the same. Life went on, and, according to Facebook, it was good. It *is* good.

Is that the entire story? The whole truth and nothing but the truth? Of course not. And that's okay by me.

Now that I'm settling in with Facebook, we're spending less time together, which seems healthy. I no longer treat it as a fabulous, never-ending cocktail party. (Because, really, who can keep up that pace?) Now it's more like a friendly place to drop in, briefly, once or twice a day – for a laugh, a smile, a kind word or a familiar face.

Most of us don't grow old in our hometowns, anymore. We don't live out our days with our extended families nearby, work for the same company all our lives, attend the same church. Many of us don't even know our neighbors, much less have a neighborhood pub.

The 21st Century can be a cold, lonely place. Facebook makes it a little less so. No matter how postmodern our lives become, no matter how "virtual" our relationships, one thing never changes: Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name.