

Re:Focus

simple ideas to help you thrive

by Simon Sinek

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True Friendship

Serious question: Do you know who your friends are? What makes your friends your friends?

Last night I sat on the couch in my apartment with an old friend and we cried together. She is going through a hard time in her career, the same thing I went through five years ago. Fittingly, it was this friend who stood by me as I went through my hard time and now I was doing the same for her. We cried, but not because it was sad; we cried because the more we talked, the more we realized how similar we are, how much our beliefs and values align. The emotional intensity of it all was so overwhelming that we both ended up in tears.

The experience was jarring for me. Not because I minded crying or sharing that kind of experience with a friend. It was jarring because sitting there and feeling what a close friendship is, I realized that a lot of people that I call "good friends" aren't really good friends at all. I realized how readily I use terms like "good friend" or "close friend" with people I'll never have this kind of experience with.

In this age of omniconnectedness, words like "network," "community" and even "friends" no longer mean what they used to. Networks don't exist on LinkedIn. A community is not something that happens on a blog or on Twitter. And a friend is more than someone whose online status you check. A friend is an emotional bond, just like friendship is a human experience. What I've learned is that I've too often confused the weak bonds I have with people I know with the strong bonds I have with friends. This may not seem like a big deal, but it is.

A friend is someone with whom we share deep trust. The strong bond we have with a friend means that person will be there for us no matter what. The reason I made it through my depression a few years ago was because someone was there for me at a time when I could offer nothing in return. The strong bond of friendship is not always a balanced equation; friendship is not always about giving and taking in equal shares. Instead, friendship is grounded in a feeling that you know exactly who will be there for you when you need something, no matter what or when.

There is a difference between vulnerability and telling people everything about yourself. Vulnerability is a feeling. Telling everyone about yourself is just facts

and details. The problem is the more we share about ourselves on Facebook, for example, the more we confuse all that information with having others “get to know us.” Someone can look through our pictures, read our comments and opinions and start to think they know who we are, but they don’t. They only know what they see and read. Worse, the feeling they may have toward us is one-sided.

This phenomenon is called a parasocial relationship -- a relationship in which one person knows much more about the other. This is what happens with celebrities. Because we can read about their public lives in the tabloids and hear about what they are doing on TMZ, we think we know them. But we don’t know anything about who they are. In our modern world, however, we are all celebrities and we all live semipublic lives. Others can read about what we’re doing and who we know and what we like. They can start to form bonds with us, but those bonds are one-sided and they are not the basis for real, close friendship. The reality is those people are acquaintances -- a term we rarely hear anymore.

There are lots of people who tell me they are my friend. They seem to act like friends, but they aren’t really friends. I don’t, and probably won’t ever, share that kind of deep, strong relationship with them.

I have one business relationship who, when he introduces me to people, introduces me as “my close friend, Simon.” Every time he does so, it makes me uneasy, because we’re not close friends. I’m not sure we’re even friends. Another professional relationship, almost from the day we met, would tell me, “this is the start of a long and close friendship.” He acted like a friend too. He would send me e-mails to say hi, call to chat, and he’d want to hang out when we were in the same city. But when we couldn’t agree on the terms of a formal business relationship, all of a sudden my “new close friend” stopped calling, stopped e-mailing and no longer wanted to spend time with me.

As my life becomes even more public, I meet lots of people and I form genuine friendships with some, but most are just acquaintances or professional relationships. The problem is that there are lots of people who think they know me. They think they are my friends. Yet friendship is too quixotic to be formed by a decision. It’s a feeling more like love. You can’t decide to be friends with someone. You can’t request it. It just happens.

The internet is good at connecting people with common interests. We can easily form weak bonds with people online. And those relationships are good and have real value, but strong bonds, trust and deep friendships require physical interaction -- and lots of it.

The lesson I learned this week is more of a reminder. I have too often confused the weak bonds I have with people I know with the strong bonds I have with people who are my friends. When I run the names of the people I call “good friends” through this new filter, I realize that I don’t have as many good friends as I thought. And that’s not a bad thing, because the ones I do have I value even more.