To all the mutuals I've loved before

A few years ago, I went to St. Louis for the first time to meet my friend Andrew who, until then, I'd only known through a group chat. I was there for his wedding, along with the other people in the chat, of whom I'd met about half. We spent our time in Missouri visiting local attractions, drinking beer, eating ice cream, and, of course, celebrating Andrew and Laura's happiness. Aside from the ceremony, what I remember most is feeling instantly comfortable with these people I'd only chatted with online. They were exactly who they seemed – not that I was especially nervous, because, come on, we live in the future now.

There are many kinds of relationships you can have online: follower, fan, friend, and everything in between. (Reply guy?) Mostly they go in one direction; followers aren't friends, after all – at least not necessarily. But they can be. I'm talking, of course, about mutuals, those people who, by dint of mutual follows, appear in your life and manage to stay there, sometimes for years.

The idea of *following* someone isn't a construction of the internet, but its connotations are new. (These days, you can join a cult without ever leaving your house.) Following someone means that you want to see more of them, or whoever the *them* is they choose to put online. Receiving a follow in return is sometimes disorienting because it can feel a bit like imposter syndrome: are they *really* interested in seeing the useless treasures of my life? The commemorative Instagrams from birthday parties they'll never attend? The Twitter shitposts drawn from the regular humiliations of being alive?

The emo Tumblr blogs sandwiched between good-ass memes?

These days, you can join a cult without ever leaving your house

This all exists in a kind of emotional DMZ. I am aware of those details from the people I choose to follow, and they feature in my emotional life, but I'm not entirely sure how much I should make of it. I know I'm happy, for example, when I see someone who's wanted a dog for years get one, and I know that I click the like button in sympathy when I see they've undergone some flavor of tragedy. The complicating and uniquely internet factor here is that most of these online people you don't know and might never meet. (Although, you'll probably direct message since mutuals are usually people you share interests with.) It's an emotional affair of sorts, and when this happens over a number of years, it starts to acquire the luster of real friendship. What does it mean to know about the mundane details of someone's life, watching it at a remove but starring in it anyway?

The boundarylessness of the internet has enabled all kinds of connections; a lot of stories now start online. Back in Web 1.0 when I was growing up and the idea of a worldwide connective tissue was still strange and new, there was the idea of stranger danger: that you'd be hurt more by a stranger from the internet than by the people closer to you. Making internet friends then felt like a fraught endeavor because what if they weren't the person they said they were online? Of course, many of them were, and many fears were misplaced.

As 1.0 rolled into 2.0, and as posting about your life went from the exception to the norm, the danger of strangers evaporated – or, at least, people aren't as afraid anymore of meeting other people they've only interacted with online. Online friendships only really work if someone's presence carries some degree of the real person within it. We're not

strangers anymore. Partially, that’s because of online dating, which is where the idea of meeting a random person you only knew about based on what they put online was normalized. The fear of being alone, as it turns out, is more powerful than most of the others. Partially, we just live online now.

That it’s now mundane to have and meet internet friends suggests something deeper has changed in American life, something related to how we befriend people now in the first place. A common refrain about getting older is that, as you grow up, it becomes harder to make friends. There are simply fewer spaces where speaking with a new person is sanctioned, and sometimes life can be too busy already to allow people in. Although the internet can be isolating, it has also allowed people of all ages to bond over their shared interests without the burden of having to be in the same place at the same time. It’s a tectonic shift from the old narratives of lifelong friends being neighbors or those college or high school people you’ve kept up with. It’s liberated friendship from the nuclear family narrative.

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Sometimes the process works backward with those proximity friends from the past who go from friend to acquaintance to Facebook contact you don’t interact with. The assumptions about what friendship is have changed. It’s persistent, it’s performed online, it’s sometimes passive. It’s hard to lose track of people.

I’m still close with those people I went to Missouri with; we chat daily. Anyway, the only reason I know any of them is because the friend who invited me to the group had previously invited me and a few others to his apartment on Twitter where we were mutuals. Now, I can’t imagine life without them.

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