



DON'T TAKE THEM FOR GRANTED: Friendship, like a garden, must be cultivated, otherwise it dies of neglect

Friendships are the gilt on the gingerbread of life

GLIMMERS of hope on the horizon for all of us living in social paralysis, separated for too long from much-missed friends by Covid. As someone wryly observed, "There's not a lot you can do about family, but at least you can choose your friends".

What is a friend? Someone you're naturally drawn to because you may have interests in common or inherent empathy with them. Conversely, they may be chalk to your cheese, but are fascinating, stimulating company. Every tentative friendship is a voyage of discovery, but some perish on the journey. We are naturally social creatures, gravitating towards others we instinctively feel in tune with. Most friendships follow the same trajectory. At first, mere acquaintance, then, casual company; next, growing empathy, finally, close and supportive. All of this with the option of withdrawing or opting out at any stage. A favoured few make the cut to trusted confidante, maybe only half-a-dozen in a lifetime.

Friendship they say, like a garden, must be cultivated, otherwise it dies of neglect – and every friendship requires two gardeners. Regrettably, in the course of our lives, many friendships wither, as age, stage, diverging paths, circumstances and time distance us. The 'best friend' of our childhood is rarely the same one in adulthood. As we mature, we seek balanced relationships. True friendships should be reciprocal, not one who leads and one who follows – though I seem to have accumulated a coterie of more than usually bossy friends whose efforts to galvanise me out of my sloth-like

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post-lockdown torpor I find extraordinarily irritating. But they mean well and I'm grudgingly grateful for it. Everybody should have at least one critical friend who reins in one's wilder excesses with sage advice, or the paralytically brusque statement: "Catch yourself on."

Losing touch with friends has been the bane of this pandemic. Covid has afflicted us with a kind of social lethargy that postpones the phone call or card in the post that keeps us connected. My flabby resolve, "Must ring. Must write," becomes a long-finger exercise that never gets done, until it's too embarrassing to do either. And of course, with life more or less still 'on hold', there's little news and communication dwindles to "Me and mine are all right. How are you and yours?" with the limp addendum, "Must get

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together when this is all over...." as a kind of insurance policy against the friendship fizzling out. Like all relationships friendship needs to be tended and nourished, otherwise the weeds of neglect will soon smother it. True, the fluctuating currents of life carry us like rudderless boats in different directions, but in acquiring a new friend, one oughtn't to discard the old. The gift of someone's friendship is a precious thing that ought never to be devalued. Nobody ever complains of having too many friends. Problems arise when not all of one's friends get on with each other and a bit of judicious social juggling is necessary. Loyalties may be questioned and a fractured friendship leaves an abiding scar of regret.

I see my friendships as the gilt on the gingerbread of life. Friends fulfil many purposes, generous with their time, advice, practical help and the occasional scold. The fortunate will have at least one they can call on in a crisis, who'll selflessly abandon all else to come galloping to their rescue. The self-centred fail to appreciate that this is a reciprocal service. Never has the old adage been more true, "When trouble happens (as it inevitably does,) you know who your friends are". Each of us, whether we admit it or not, has in mind a mental hierarchy of friends – a bit like the heavenly choirs of angels. The skill is, never let friends know which rank they occupy on the scale – otherwise you'd not have a friend in the world.

Anyway, to friends old and new, past and present, my craven apologies for my selfish neglect of you. I'm a lazy so-and-so but I mean well and I'm trying. Many of you would agree, I'm very trying.

ON THIS DAY

JULY 13 1921

Belfast's Bloody Sunday

A REIGN of terror and alarm, such as never before experienced in the history of the city, prevailed over a wide area of Belfast during Saturday night and Sunday. As a result of the appalling conditions of the night and day, no less than 11 persons are known to have been shot dead. Well over 100 persons were wounded.

The entire Nationalist district from the Grosvenor Road right up to the Shankill Road was practically in a state of siege. In the afternoon similar conditions prevailed over a wide area from the Old Lodge Road to North Queen Street and right down York Street which is almost entirely inhabited by Catholics. Rival snipers kept pitting away at each other with almost ceaselessly energy while armoured lorries patrolled the streets firing indiscriminately. Military armoured cars were also on patrol but their presence did not create the same alarm as was occasioned by the frequent passing of the cage lorries which were manned principally by the Special Constabulary.

In certain districts the streets were literally swept by the fire of the rival snipers and Crown forces and it was absolutely unsafe for anyone to be out of doors. Many of the victims were shot in the vicinity of their own doors. After Curfew the portion of the district embracing Albert Street and Falls Road were surrounded by a cordon of police armed with rifles and civilians were prevented from leaving the area. Unionist snipers kept firing continuously towards the Falls Road.

Police Patrol Ambushed on Falls

THE disastrous outbreak originated with a tragic incident in Raglan Street on Saturday night when Constable Thomas Conlon of Springfield Road barracks was shot dead and a comrade, Constable Edward Hogan, a native of Derry, as well as a Special Constable, were seriously wounded. The official version of the affair is that the police went to conduct a raid when they were ambushed. The account given by the local people, however, throws a different light on the matter. They state that around midnight the street was entered by a lorry containing Crown forces who were singing as they approached.

THE all-Ireland Truce of July 11 1921 did not prevent a massive upsurge of violence in Belfast. The local IRA claimed that they had successfully ambushed a police raiding party on the Falls Road. Twelve people were killed by gunfire and 150 Catholic houses burned by mobs over the Truce weekend. Following this 'Bloody Sunday', Hamar Greenwood announced that 'armed semi-civilians known as B Specials' would be removed from the streets while the A (full-time) Specials were disarmed.

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