

On Social Virtues in a World without Coincidence

Social media is a world without coincidence. Any interaction that takes place on Facebook, Zoom, Twitter, whatever it may be is the result of an algorithm and a choice; the algorithm places a suggestion before you, and you choose to follow that suggestion, to interact with someone, or not to.

This gives us the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the coincidental, or the unintentional, and the intentional in our social lives. I want to posit that while friendships can endure, communities are the locus of coincidental interaction, and we cannot recreate that on the internet.

I want to spend time with my certain people (known colloquially as friends), so I create the time and conditions for us to do so. The move to virtual interactions hardly hurts close friendships because we will intentionally continue to carve out time for our close friends.

Ordinarily, our two close friends, Jane and Elizabeth, have dinner together once a week. However, since the Stay-at-Home order, Jane and Elizabeth can no longer cook and eat together as they used to. But because they enjoy each other's company, Jane and Elizabeth still Facetime for approximately the amount of time that it would take them to cook and eat dinner together.

My close friendships are not suffering because I love spending time with these people, and I will continue to be intentional about creating the time for these interactions, regardless of the platform.

In my daily life, when I interact with my close friends, the question "how can I be a good friend?" does not consciously figure in my thought process or my interactions. Perhaps this is because I am a bad friend or not reflective enough, but I would argue that this is a result of the nature of close friendship: there is something easy or natural about the interaction. We talk and we share and we laugh seamlessly. Elizabeth does not need to evaluate her thoughts and intentions when she speaks to Jane because they "get" each other. For the most part, the only intention she must act upon is the intention to spend time with Jane.

What is lost at this time is not companionship with our close friends but unplanned interactions with members of communities.

Our communities require us to interact with people we would never intentionally set aside time for—people who, in many cases, we would honestly prefer not to interact with. We often find ourselves together coincidentally or unintentionally; we do not intentionally carve out time to spend with these people but we find ourselves in the same room. These people are members of the communities to which we belong—offices, classes, synagogues, etc—but whom we don't really spend time with outside of communal gatherings.

Perhaps it is the case in these relationships that neither one of us is particularly fond of the other; perhaps it is the case that Mary enjoys the company of Elizabeth, but Elizabeth is easily irritated by Mary.

Elizabeth, however, tries to be kind to Mary. Although she doesn't really like Mary, she doesn't want to hurt Mary's feelings by displaying her disinterest. Or she wants to be liked by Mary because Elizabeth cares about maintaining her reputation as a kind person and/or Mary's dad's investment bank that she hopes to work at. Or maybe Elizabeth knows that treating Mary well is vital to the wellbeing of their community. Perhaps Elizabeth adheres to an ethical principle that demands she be kind to everyone. For our purposes, I don't think it necessarily matters why Elizabeth is kind to Mary; we have all been Elizabeths who have been kind to different Marys for different reasons.

And we all know that being kind to Mary can require immense effort. We must possess a self awareness of how we are inclined to treat Mary, i.e. not so kindly. We must reflect on how Mary wants to be treated, and we guard our behavior accordingly. Elizabeth must put some other good—Mary's dignity, the welfare of a given community, the summer internship Mary's dad could provide—ahead of her own enjoyment of a particular moment in time. Although she would like to make a snide comment about how unfunny Mary is to her friend Jane, Elizabeth will refrain from doing so and try her best to force a laugh at Mary's joke.

In normal times, as members of communities, we face the challenge and opportunity of coincidental interactions with Marys; in order to maintain goodwill, we must practice our virtues—becoming more patient and less judgemental, among a host of traits. We learn to control our impulsive reactions and to recognize the dignity of others. We learn to appreciate and get along with different types of people, and, if we do it well, we become better people. In some cases, we may even find a Mary who becomes a Jane over time.

Online, I find myself interacting with Marys drastically less often. The possibility of being in the same room or communal gathering space has practically been eliminated. And I hate that I find some relief in escaping my Marys and the type of intention that is required to interact with a Mary.

Because of social distancing, we have fewer opportunities to practice interpersonal intentions.

So, despite my relief in avoiding my Marys, I do not want to lose valuable exercise of virtue that accompanies such interactions. How can we continue to work on our social virtues in social isolation? I want to make two suggestions: the first is perhaps obvious—that we must create time to interact with our Marys. Coincidence does not exist in a world where we cannot bump into people, whose entire social apparatus is determined by a combination of algorithms and decisions, so any interaction is an intentional choice. However, intentionally devoting one's time to a Mary can be difficult. Texting a Mary who always responds can become an insufferable time suck, and Skyping a Mary can be intense, especially without the background of your usual setting to play with.

My second suggestion is taking our good friendships more seriously as the grounds for exercising social virtue or ethical self improvement. We must break beyond the complacency of time intentionality in good friendships and ask ourselves "how can I be a better friend?" Perhaps now is the time when we wean ourselves off the greatest vice of friendship: gossip. If we learn to be more honest, open-minded, and patient with our close friends, perhaps exercising social virtue will become a pleasurable task associated with the enjoyment of friendship, rather than a strenuous task associated with the tolerance of Marys.