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Facebook can be a conduit of grace

by James Martin

Soul Seeing

It's easy to make fun of Facebook. It gobbles up time and takes us away from our work. It encourages us to post inane photos (I'm not immune to this temptation) -- for example, what's on our plate at Applebee's ("Mmm, baby back ribs!"). It invites people to boast of their accomplishments or popularity. ("Can't believe 10 people showed up for my book-launch party!") It fosters navel-gazing, solipsism and even hypochondria. ("Sore throat again.")

Worst of all, it takes us away from one-on-one contact with live human beings, and substitutes virtual relationships for lasting ones. That's the most damning critique of Facebook. Rather than post a "Happy Birthday" message on a person's wall (which I do almost every day -- though not for the same person), it's probably better to call them up. Five minutes of real time is better than an hour of Facebook time. The other night a friend noticed that I had just posted a comment on his page, and he called me.

"I figured you'd like to talk with me in person," he joked.

"Oh, I can't talk to you now," I joked back. "I'm too busy posting on your page!"

But like many other social media sites, and more broadly the Web itself, Facebook can also be a conduit of grace. Surprised? Of course not. You know that God can work through any medium, even ones that are supposedly tearing us apart. The easiest way to illustrate this is with a story.

A few months ago I noticed a Facebook page for "alumni" of the Ridge Park Elementary School, in Conshohocken, Pa., of which I myself am a proud alumnus. And the other day one of my childhood friends posted a handful of color photos that I had not only never before seen -- but that showed something that I had entirely forgotten.

Snapped on a field behind our school, clearly during recess, the photos show my friends and me in the process of building a human pyramid. The first snapshot depicts us readying the pyramid; the second the triumphant success; the third, our tumbling over one another as the pyramid collapsed. The photos were taken on what must have been a cool day in early fall or late spring, since some of us are wearing lightweight jackets, others are in short sleeves. I would guess that it was the fifth grade.

I can't describe how moving it was to see these photos. It was as if God were giving my soul a window into a day that I had long forgotten. I felt like a time traveler as I stared at those images, taking in all the details. With a start, I even remembered the pants I was wearing: blue-and-green striped bell-bottoms -- way cool in 1968!

What shocked me most was this: Each photo showed me with a huge smile on my face. What a blessing to be reminded of this moment that I had utterly forgotten.

God is with us all the days of our lives, blessing us with friends, touching us with warm and funny moments, accompanying us throughout our hours. But many of these moments are so fleeting, so evanescent and seemingly so unimportant that we don't remember them at all. I'll bet that on that day in the fifth grade, all we did after recess was talk about our pyramid: how we had always wanted to do it, how much fun it was and how we laughed when we all fell on top of one another. Maybe I remembered it for a few days. Then I forgot it. For 40 years.

That photo got me thinking about the other graced moments that we can forget. God is always looking out for us, in our struggles as we try to build something, in our triumph as we sit atop the pile, and in our failures as we collapse on ourselves. God is always aware of us. But we're not always aware of God. And sometimes, even if we are, we forget it immediately afterward.

So that photo was a surprise. Even more surprising, it came from a supposedly shallow social media site. God is at work at all times. And everywhere.

Even on Facebook.

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