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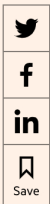
Opinion **Life & Arts**

# The life-long art of making friends

At any age, to encounter someone new with whom you feel a genuine connection is an immeasurable gift



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Enuma Okoro JULY 24 2021

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A funny thing happened during lockdown. In the midst of quarantine I made a new friend. Not a casual acquaintance but someone with whom I really stay connected, share news and ideas, give and receive encouragement, and send check-in messages between our WhatsApp video chats.

The other funny thing is that we've never met in person. Yet. She lives several states away and is a couple of decades older than me. But some time last spring we began following one another on Instagram and, between our posts and captions, we realised we had uncannily similar thoughts and perspectives.

Before long we were exchanging DMs. A month or so after that we scheduled our first video friend-date, and talked for almost two hours. We continue to cultivate our growing friendship.

The experience led me to a more expansive way of living, to be more courageous about acting on friendship chemistry. We all know about romantic chemistry: two people meet, feel a connection and, if both are available, are encouraged and expected to pursue something to see if their initial attraction has any substance. It's what movies, novels and fairy tales are made of. We grow up steeped in the rituals and expectation of romantic chemistry. But friendship chemistry, who talks about that?





Arthur B Timothy, 'Party Frocks' (2019) © Gallery 1957

I love the painting “Party Frocks” by Arthur B Timothy, a Ghanaian-born and London-based architect and painter, whose work often draws on memories from his years growing up in Ghana, Sierra Leone and the UK. In the work, four older women, dressed in cocktail outfits and gold jewellery, hold glasses of wine and pose casually in the middle of a soft salmon-coloured canvas, peering at the viewer as though we are the ones taking a picture of them.

There’s a subtle vibe of familiarity between them, as though they’ve known one another for a long time and are used to being together and exclusive. The women in blue and white dresses bordering the group have fixed, almost practised, smiles on their faces, as if being photographed is a regular and welcome activity. They appear friendly but not necessarily warm. The woman in a green satin-like dress has a somewhat uninviting look on her face, as if questioning who invited us into their clique. It is the woman in the flowery dress holding a white shawl who gazes out with a warm inviting smile on her face. I imagine her open to widening her social circle.

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**We are steered towards the idea that there are no friends as good as old friends**

With their vintage-style dresses, the painting reminds me of my childhood, of watching my mother and her friends gather at consistent points throughout my life. She’s had a group of friends she’s known since they were all teenagers in secondary school.

I was raised by a woman who always made time for her old friends despite working full time and being a mother. So much so that her friends are still a part of my life now. It’s a beautiful thing, especially because even with these old friendships, my mother is still the sort of person who makes friends everywhere she goes.

But for many of us, after our school days, when it is often relatively easy to meet and bond with others, our cultural messages don’t necessarily encourage us to act on friendship chemistry. Rather, we are steered towards the idea that there are no friends as good as old friends.

I love music by Drake and DJ Khaled but their 2013 hit song, “No New Friends” seemed to spark a pop cultural motto among a younger generation that made it seem cool and desirable to keep a tight and immovable boundary around your circle of friends. But with the busyness of work, family and partnerships, I think we all at some point convince ourselves we haven’t the bandwidth to nurture new friendships, because cultivating friendship does require time and effort. Not to mention trust and vulnerability.

And yet to encounter someone new with whom you feel a genuine connection and affinity at any stage of your life is an immeasurable gift. Perhaps because we reside in cultures that from when we are young over-emphasise the pursuit of romantic relationships, we take the extraordinariness of friendship for granted and forget how rare and valuable it is to meet people our spirits seem drawn to platonically.

I do believe age-old friendships are a treasure. There’s little like having relationships with people who’ve seen you through various life experiences and transitions. But the older I get, the more I find myself questioning the notion of a best friend, the idea that one person can encapsulate all the things one needs in friendship to the extent they are better than other friends.



Peter Uka, 'Spunky Vibes' (2019)

At one point or other, our “best” friends can and often do fail to meet our expectations because no one person is capable of being everything you need, not even a partner. In my own experience I’ve learnt that part of the beauty of cultivating different friendships is acknowledging the diversity of people and personalities, and how we can engage with one another on a spectrum of meaningful levels. There are friendships that expand our courage or feed our vision; friendships that revive us or help ground us; friendships that are perfect for laughter and lightness. These elements don’t all have to be found in one

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**It's not about what lies behind, any sense of shared history, but about what lies in front**

I have a friend with whom our primary exchange is to pray together. I have another friend with whom I mostly engage with about creativity and writing. I call them both friends and not acquaintances because of the levels of trust, vulnerability and shared understanding and

commitment inherent in the relationships. But the friendships would never work the same if I tried to swap the context of one for the other. As people grow and continue to have different life experiences and personal developments, our needs and desires change.

I like the 2019 painting “Spunky Vibes” by Nigerian contemporary artist Peter Uka. Three casually dressed men are walking away with their backs to us, along a wide patterned corridor floor with lime green walls. There are no objects in the work. It is just the men walking alongside one another down an endless passageway to a destination we can't see. The man on the left of the canvas seems to peer ahead himself, as if he also can't see the destination. The man in the middle with the peach-coloured shirt is one step ahead of the others, his arms outstretched in a gesture that almost reads as: “Why not?”

The seeming simplicity of the painting is what speaks to me. With nothing else in view, the canvas opens wide to hold the three figures on their way, all open to wherever this journey will lead them. I think of starting new friendships in a similar way. It's not about what lies behind, any sense of shared history, but about what lies in front.

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**It's an interesting time** to be contemplating the idea of new friendships. We've all just spent almost a year and a half in pod communities of family or people we've known for ages. As we venture out again, many of us are probably just thinking about starting to see old friends and extended family members we haven't seen in months.

Who has the emotional energy or the psychological bandwidth for cultivating new friendships? And yet, even in unexpected and challenging times, we experience human connection in ways that can leave a lasting impression on us.





Diana Ejaita, 'Untitled' (2020)

The illustration, “Untitled” (2020), by Nigerian-Italian artist and textile designer Diana Ejaita, was created during the pandemic in response to the peaceful [Nigerian protests](#) on which the army opened fire on October 20 last year. Three young people hold up a fourth who is wounded or dead. The shoulders of the person in a white shirt, standing in the middle, look almost like angel wings.

Last year was a trial by fire for everyone for a variety of reasons across the world. Because of that reality we had to be open to the idea of cultivating new relationships where we might have otherwise not done so: paying more attention to the people with whom we crossed paths, whether it was something as simple as shopping for an elderly neighbour who couldn't risk exposure to the virus, or bearing the literal weight of someone during the protests and riots across the globe.

And it seems almost certain that some new friendships must have come from these encounters. It is not always just those with whom we have the most history that end up being the saving graces, the soul-expanders, the joy-increasers in our lives.

[Enuma Okoro](#) is a New York-based columnist for *FT Life & Arts*

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