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# What Online Communities Leave Out: Unlikely Friendships

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# What Online Communities Leave Out: Unlikely Friendships

## **Abstract**

"Not long ago, a study was conducted to see how quickly Americans make decisions about other people regarding the potential for friendship. The answer: between two and four seconds."

Posting about the beauty of unlikely friendships from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/what-online-communities-leave-out-unlikely-friendships/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, online social networks, friendship, community, individual differences

## **Disciplines**

Christianity | Sociology

## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# in things

November 27, 2018

## What Online Communities Leave Out: Unlikely Friendships

Donald Roth, Justin Bailey, and Matthew Arbo

As we gather as communities and (sometimes) eclectic groups of people to share a meal around the holiday season, we are reminded of the blessing of not only friendship but also unlikely friendships; the people who have come into our lives through either unusual or specific circumstances—but not because we would have “run into” them in similar social media circles. Sometimes it’s the unlikeliness of a friendship that increases its beauty, and three members of iAt’s Editorial Board (Donald Roth, Matt Arbo, and Justin Bailey) share their experiences.

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### Donald Roth

Between specialized online communities and the pervasive polarization of our current societal moment, there are powerful social pressures for us to seek friendships only among those who share virtually every viewpoint with us. I hear this contrasted with the “good old days” when you just had to learn to get along with the people who lived with and around you because that was all you had. Without diving into the merits of either perspective, I will say that I have been deeply blessed by several friendships that I have formed based on the old-fashioned norm. When I think of those, the one that jumps out at me as one of the more “unlikely” by the contemporary metric is the friendship I have with Ian Kitterman.

Ian and I roomed together when we both spent a semester in Washington D.C. in the Fall of 2005. We have different religious perspectives; he is interested in both the

emergent movement and Eastern Orthodoxy while I am staunchly in the Continental Reformed tradition. He tends to be more progressive while I tend to be more conservative. He is one of the gentlest people I know while I can be a bit brash at times. Nevertheless, we shared (and continue to share) a certain intellectual curiosity and range of nerdy interests that allowed us to become good friends by the end of that semester.

Frankly, I don't know if we would have kept in touch had that been the only semester when we were in contact. I went back to Dordt to finish my last year, and Ian went on to law school at Georgetown University Law Center in DC. While I had no specific intention of ever going back to DC, I was also looking to go to law school after college, and Georgetown was one of the schools that accepted me. When thinking about a faithful response to the Lord's leading, a significant factor in my decision to go to Georgetown was the fact that Ian would be a year ahead of me, someone who could give me advice and commiseration through the crucible ahead.

Throughout the four years that I lived in DC, Ian and his wife Bekah became close friends of both me and my wife. Despite having different outlooks and dispositions on many things, we shared a love of many of the cultural experiences that DC had to offer, and they became one of the couples we most enjoyed going on adventures with. I won't forget kayaking the Potomac with Ian or going to the National Arboretum or trying out different restaurants with Ian and Bekah. I am sure they won't forget driving Erica and me to Ikea prior to our marriage and watching us fight our way through the decoration of our apartment (and yet still go through with getting married). The Kittermans are one of our favorite memories from living in DC, and I deeply treasure everything that my unexpected friendship with Ian brought with it.

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## **Matt Arbo**

I first met Paul Smith in my high school years. His family lived just a few miles from our house. For reasons I now forget, he showed up one day for church and from then on his parents would bring him any time we gathered. Paul was a large person in every sense of the word. He spoke and laughed loud. He relished being in on the joke.

I vividly recall hearing Paul shout my name at the top of his lungs from the very far end of my high school's hallway; then I looked over to see him waiving his hands and sprint-walking towards me, a bit of breakfast lingering on his chin. It was a spectacle. Being a petty adolescent I was of course embarrassed by these displays. Everyone stared. I would try to quiet and calm him down. It took many months before I could smile at the

shout-downs. I suppose at some point I came to see that he was simply excited to see me. I was his friend.

Paul became more and more a part of our family's life. He often came over to watch professional wrestling, his personal obsession, or to raid our pantry. It was far more fun watching him watch wrestling than it was watching the wrestling itself. I think he became quite fond of our family. From his point of view, we saw each other a lot, so we were friends. Because Paul had no filter, you knew exactly what he felt, and he felt everything strongly.

Paul was an unlikely friend, you see, because he suffered from a range of disabilities. Though I don't know what all afflicted Paul, I knew many people did not know how to be around him. He was just "too much" for them. Too unpredictable. Too large. The truth is most people shun the company of individuals with disabilities because they are confronted with a life they cannot explain and because they cannot long endure the reminder of their own privilege. I suppose that captured me, too, in the beginning.

In the end, it took Paul dying for me to realize that he had become my friend. He passed suddenly in his sleep from complications with one of his diseases. Paul was only 16. I remember the funeral. My dad preached. The parlor was full to capacity. In my bed later that evening I wept bitterly the loss of my friend. I mourned him. He had been an unlikely friend, yes, but my friendship with Paul Smith was joyful and unlike anything I've known since, or likely will ever know. I know he gave me far more than I gave him.

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## **Justin Bailey**

Not long ago, a study was conducted to see how quickly Americans make decisions about other people regarding the potential for friendship. The answer: between two and four seconds.

When I first met Joshua over a decade ago, that is about how long it took. We had been sorted into the same "spiritual formation group" in divinity school. Due to apparent differences in temperament and theology, we didn't click. I was a cautious Calvinist with a bent towards conservatism; he was a charismatic Anglican with a fury for justice. He was bright eyed and hopeful at the beginning of his program; I was about to graduate and honestly a bit burned out. In any case, I sorted him into the category: "I'm sure he's a great guy, but I'm not looking to make any more friends." He made a similar decision.

Five years later, our paths crossed again. Upon striking up a conversation, we learned that both of us were in the process of applying to doctoral programs. With two schools

in common, I lamented the fact that our applications would be in competition. He replied that it might instead be an opportunity for collaboration.

His prediction came true. We ended up not only in the same program but also in the same housing community. He was still a charismatic Anglican and I was still a cautious Calvinist, but both of us had been chastened and challenged by the intervening years.

We fell into a rhythm of life together. One of my favorite memories from that period of life was a weekly practice we had. I preached regularly on the staff of a local church. I would send the manuscript for the weekly sermon to Joshua by Friday, and he would arrive on my porch on Saturday with a half sheet of comments. He didn't just make me better as a preacher; he made me better as a person, expanding my perspective and enlarging my imagination.

Our briefly shared history may have brought us together, but it was embodied practices like that one that made us brothers. Morning prayer. CrossFit. Shared meals. Reading each other's work. Talking together through doctoral seminars, comprehensive exams, and academic despair. We had animated conversations with real disagreements. And yet, his friendship was one of the greatest un-looked-for gifts that I have ever received.

I still preach regularly, and I often find myself wondering what he would say about the sermons I preach these days. I definitely miss those half-sheets of paper. And I am thankful that friendship can transcend first impressions.