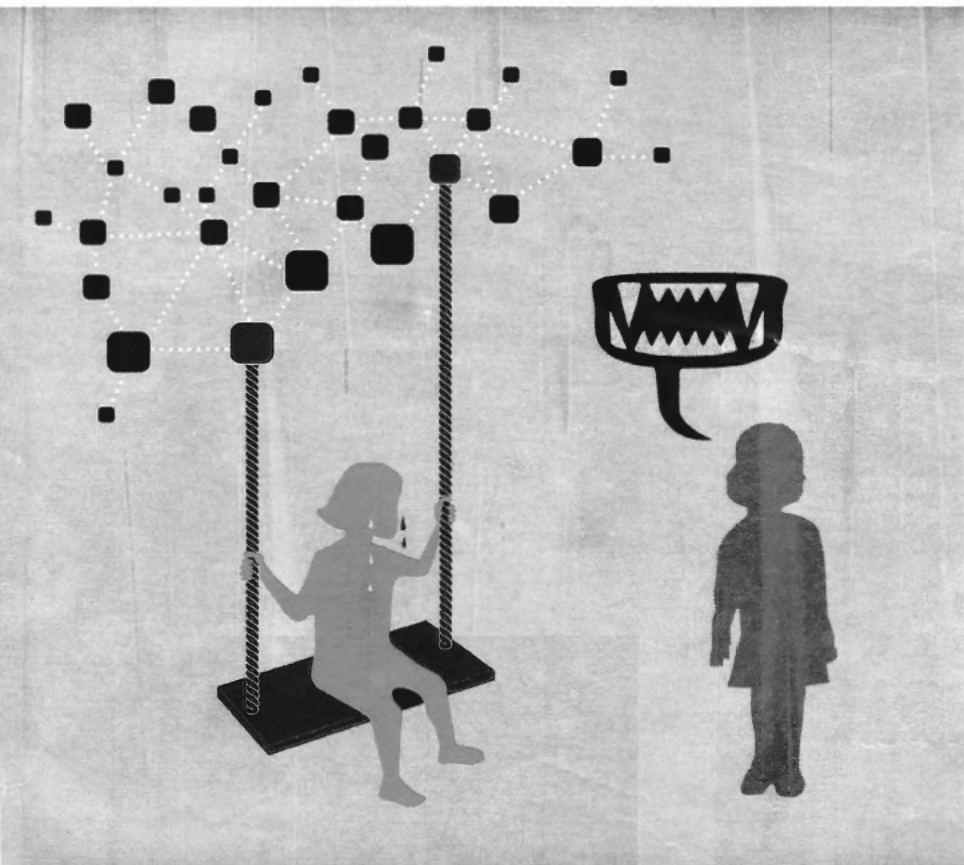


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# attitude



## Mean girl

> Exorcising the past, with one click, on Facebook

>> by RACHEL CLINE

THE MIDDLE-AGED APPROACH Facebook with caution, considering it likely that we will encounter some person from our past with the power to upset us: the übercrush from high school, the best friend last seen heading to rehab or the old enemy we forgot we once had, the mean girl from fourth grade, a pox upon her head.

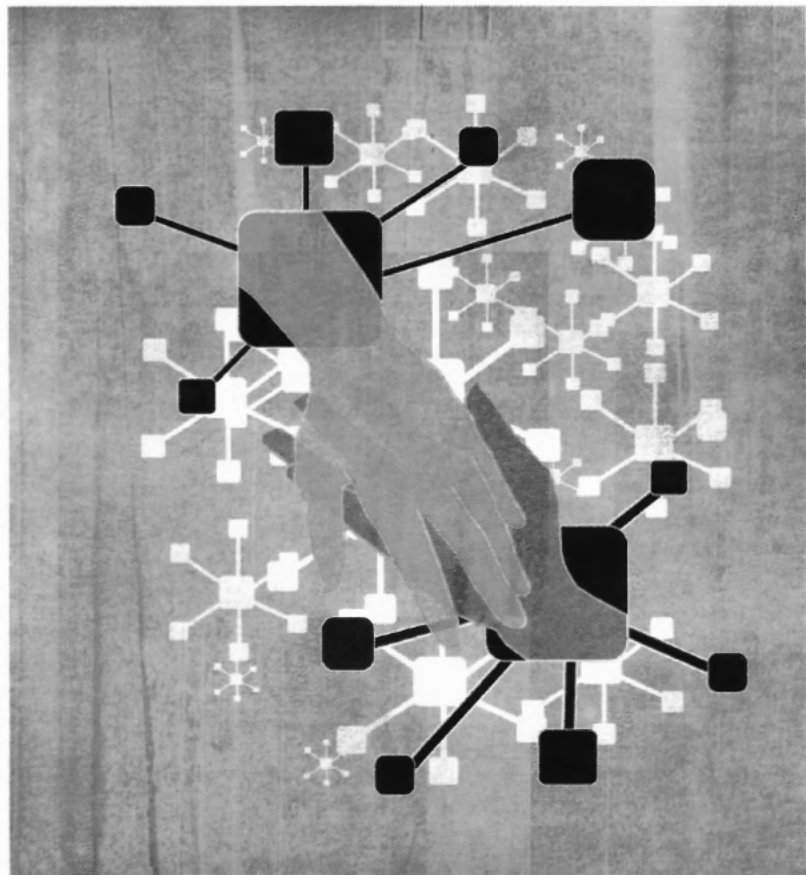
So we wade in. We keep it safe by keeping it simple: At first, *friend* literally means friend, and not that much-too-enthusiastic guy from work or the woman we barely remember from college. Gradually we broaden our horizons, but with care: adding the new mother whose daily struggles would otherwise have not made their way to our ears; the ex-coworker who is starting a new business; and then maybe even our friends' kids—on the



theory that they will show us how to use all those privacy controls. (They won't.) But by then, we're catching on. We're learning the language: To comment is to enter a conversation; to tag, to identify someone in a photo; "fans" join interest groups (fans of opera, say, or of Aretha Franklin's Inauguration Day hat); a wall is essentially the front door of a dorm room; the news feed is where all the comments and tags on all the walls waterfall into our laps. And it's fun.

I guess I should stop saying *we*, though, because it's me I'm talking about. I started maybe a year ago, when I was 51 years old. At first I was so self-conscious I could barely stand it. Was everyone looking? No one? Was I funny enough? Was I too cute? It was just like high school, except that in high school I thought everything mattered, and now I know that nothing does. That was the hard lesson of my forties: No one cares about my life but me. Not really. All that time I'd wasted planning—what to wear and what to say and when to call—was really for no one's benefit but my own.

OK, I'm still mastering that lesson. The point of this story is that Facebook offered me the flip side of its chastening blow: If people don't notice the efforts I make, they're likely



inclination to pun with other punsters, sounding erudite when I posted links to occasional print materials (even just reading periodicals seems a kind of erudition, from the perspective of the ever-ephemeral feed) and indulging my long-dormant music fandom for hours on end over at YouTube—trolling for trophies to tack to my Facebook wall.

Facebook is really about conversation, conversation for its own sake, as a means of relating to other people more than communicating any particular morsel of information. And, in that climate of friendliness, there is room for other kinds of humanity, notably, forgiveness. And forgiveness, despite 20 years of therapy, is something I know very little about.

I WAS THAT MEAN GIRL whose head is poked upon above. As a troubled, somewhat neglected child of 11 and 12 years, I tormented several girls in my class—one so much that I was suspended for two days. In fifth grade! My crime was manufacturing badges that said “I Hate Didi” and

**“Facebook is not the high school cafeteria, where all shame is magnified. It is the ocean, where all flotsam is soon jetsam.”**

to forget or overlook what I do wrong as well. Or if they do notice, and remember, they may also forgive, because Facebook is not the high school cafeteria, where all shame is magnified. It is the ocean, where all flotsam is soon jetsam. If I overshare (or am too negative or strident or glib), the onrush of new posts quickly pushes my clumsiness out of sight.

My Facebook friends are not the same people as my real-life friends (this is a hackneyed observation, I know, but please bear with me). My motley, piebald friends list is truly friendly, inclined to encourage and inquire. They fascinate me in ways my real-life friends don't, simply because

they are having their conversations in public, sharing their lives at a level (of headaches and preoccupations and what's for dinner) that is usually the province of family.

So, after just six months on Facebook, I was playing Scrabble with cousins I'd barely spent five hours with in real life. I was well-informed about the children, jobs and hobbies of people I'd never bothered to telephone and never received a Christmas card from. I was sharing cat behavior anecdotes with my cat friends (something I'd never dared do at work, for fear of turning into that weirdo with the kitty pictures all over her cubicle), indulging my

distributing them to all my girlfriends. At our peacenik private school in New York City, you could get away with almost anything. Our whole curriculum revolved around tolerance of the big-picture variety: Every morning, in lieu of “America, the Beautiful,” the student body sang “We Shall Overcome.” Had I only excluded Didi [not her real name] or pulled her hair, I probably would never have been brought to justice, as it were.

Getting suspended did put an end to my active career as a bully (I was afraid of being sent to public school, where I myself would probably have become bully fodder). But I never apologized or made amends

“**There was no option but to write to her and beg forgiveness, which I did, that very night at one AM. Within minutes, she replied.**”

I couldn't let up. It was in a photograph of a 1969 bar mitzvah (true to the school's principles, the kitchen staff had been invited, along with students and teachers) that I saw a photo tag identifying the little brother of my onetime victim, Didi. Now there was someone whom I had never searched for. On the contrary, when I was back home, if I spotted anyone who resembled her—even if that person was a child—I would cross traffic to escape. If I was introduced to an adult Didi who had the right approximate height and hair color, I couldn't look her in the eye.

But I clicked the brother's name—Facebook makes that easy—and there


she was on his friend list, with a new last name and a life on the West Coast, and there was no option but to write to her and beg forgiveness, which I did, that very night at one AM. Within minutes, she replied.

She wrote that hearing from me had touched her deeply, and that she'd forgiven me long ago—although not without some effort. I stared at the words. The knot in my heart unraveled. Relief set in, followed by tears.

My friends may call Facebook an addiction, complain of its superficiality and fear what it's doing to their children's brains, but all I know is what it did for me. As of that moment, Rachel the mean little girl could leave

the building—there was nothing left to keep her after school. And grown-up Rachel could go to sleep and go back to work, and play again on Facebook, surrounded by friends who seem to like her, and want to forgive her, and don't really care if she was mean 40 years ago, or 40 minutes ago, either. The feed moves too fast for that. ☺

Rachel Cline is the author of *What to Keep and My Liar*. Cline is now at work on her third novel, which she has tentatively titled *Teaching and Learning*.

 **Have you asked, or granted, forgiveness on Facebook?** Tell us your story at [more.com/forgive](http://more.com/forgive).



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