

Margaret Irving

Lowell Speech- "Happy Birthday, Facebook"

[1] In the span of only 11 years, Facebook has almost completely changed the way people socialize. It was launched just down the street, in Kirkland House in February 2004, and now enables more than 1 billion people around the world to connect. I am 19 years old and was launched in Canada on November 23, 1995. I don't have Facebook.

[2] In fact, I don't have any social media profiles. You name it, I probably don't have it. Facebook. Twitter. Instagram. Snapchat. Pinterest. LinkedIn. Tumblr. I don't think social media is negative- it can be a wonderful tool for communicating and socializing. I'm just not that into it. But, I'm into you.

[3] Up to this point in my life, I have chosen not to use social media for many reasons, privacy and time management prime among them, but most importantly because I prefer to cultivate meaningful friendships and relationships in person.

I get to know people through their personalities, not their online presence. We represent ourselves in many different ways, and online personas are simply one facet of what makes us, us. I want to get to know the part of you that gestures and laughs or cries while telling me a story, because words and emoticons on a screen can never replace that experience.

[4] Of course, being disconnected does present challenges. This is at times frustrating and isolating. Sometimes I don't hear about events or milestones, and I am usually reliant on others to share with me news of upcoming occasions and online trends. I don't see your status update that you have just arrived back in Cambridge or the pictures from your winter break. Unless you show me.

[5] Instead, I have the privilege of you telling me in person, not through a keyboard. I learn about people and create bonds with them actively and face to face. In a world where it seems there is little we don't know or can't find out, I have retained the pleasure of traditional, or what some may consider old fashioned, social communication.

The element of surprise still exists for me when we share or reconnect and I hear your news. It is the face-to-face conversation that creates a shared and memorable emotional experience.

[6] My relationships are based on proximity and interaction. The sharing in our friendship mirrors the contact and depth of our relationship. Sometimes this means losing touch. But I think moving on is a natural process that social media artificially prevents. Do we really need to hear the regular, daily news of someone we haven't seen in years? As we grow, and grow apart, we make memories and share experiences with new friends.

[7] Moving on is okay - as we move from home to Cambridge, and from high school to college, we meet new people. The past few years have been transitional ones for us, with

many new faces replacing familiar ones. Let's focus on getting to know the people in the original Harvard Facebook, who are here with us. Amy Poehler, 2015 Hasty Pudding Woman of the Year, recommended during her 2011 Harvard Class Day speech, "Try putting your iPhones down every once in a while and look at people's faces. People's faces will tell you amazing things."

[8] The Harvard house system is designed to build meaningful ties by placing a group of very different students together. We first get to know each other by frantically refreshing various news feeds on Housing Day to see who was placed in which House. But the magic happens after, when we move in.

[9] Social media can't and never should replace spending time together. It is an alternative when live contact isn't possible- and for that I am grateful. For example, the opportunity to film and share these speeches with family and friends around the world is wonderful, but sharing this speech with you in person is so much better.

[10] As I mentioned earlier, my birthday is November 23. I have been told to never expect anyone to remember my birthday, because I don't have Facebook. I think we can do better.

While social media has improved our lives in many ways, I still believe in the irreplaceable value of communicating in person. In the words of New York Times journalist Thomas Friedman, "get [off] of Facebook and into somebody's face".

[11] If today is your birthday, I probably don't know that. But happy birthday. And I promise, once I know, I won't forget.

[12] Since I don't have Facebook, you can't friend me, but we can still be friends. Thank you.