

We might also consider whether the nature of friendship has changed in recent times. For example, has it been permanently altered by the Internet and social media? Will traditional friends eventually be replaced by the new “virtual friend”? I don’t pretend to know the answers to these questions, but I do suggest that we start our inquiry by looking at what some of the great intellects have said on the subject.

With friendship being such an essential part of human happiness, you would think there would be an abundance of literature on the subject. Oddly enough, there isn’t. But there are some thoughtful comments, and we can begin with Aristotle. Why Aristotle, you might ask? Because more than most other thinkers, Aristotle had a profound and lasting influence on Western culture. Moreover, he wrote an in-depth treatise on friendship, which, after more than 2300 years, still bears examination.

Aristotle said that a person who took delight in solitude, who did not feel the need for human companionship or friendship, was either a wild beast or a god. That may be a slight exaggeration, but he had a point. You and I are social creatures and very few of us could do without human contact for a prolonged period of time. If Aristotle had gone to the Oracle of Delphi, and asked her to look into the twenty-first century, no doubt he would have been amazed at today’s Internet technology, which has brought us a host of social networking sites, making it easier than ever to have more friends. Take Facebook, for example. Do any of you know how many users it has? The number is one billion (as of October 2012 and doubtless rising).

Before the Internet, landline or cell phones, e-mail — how did friends communicate in those days? If you had been living in sixteenth-century Europe, how would you have stayed in touch with your friends? Well, the way most people did so then was simple. They got together and talked, face-to-face. If your friend lived far away, you wrote letters. Of course, then it took longer to deliver mail; communication generally was much slower. But letters were written by hand and therefore were very personal, each person’s handwriting being unique.

Today, people still talk to one another, but you have to wonder if our reliance on technology is not causing us to lose some of the skills that go into making artful conversation. You have to wonder if we are not sacrificing quality