



The Future Of Friendship

By: Casper ter Kuile

When I was ten years old, I moved to a new school and felt awfully alone. At the end of each day, I took out a little black notebook in which I'd made a grid, with my classmates on one axis and the days of the week on the other.

Wanting to understand friendship, I scored each classmate on how nice they'd been to me - and the scores were often low. Then, at the end of the week, I'd average out the scores to judge who I could consider my friend.

My mind has been trained to map relationships.

It helped me survive middle- and high-school and it has helped me thrive in college and career life. So when [MeetUp](#) cofounder Scott Heiferman asked a group of technologists and social scientists over the weekend, "What is the future of friendship?" I was ready!

In this newsletter, I'll share with you three trends these experts discussed, and one reflection exercise that has been enormously comforting and clarifying on how to deepen my own friendships as an adult.

Trend #1: Friends at work

The number of Americans living alone has doubled since 1967. We each have - on average - [one fewer friend](#) than adults did in 1985.

But where people *are* making friends is at [work](#). So much so that there's now a '[weekend loneliness](#)' phenomenon, where folks who are happily connected during the week feel like they don't have anybody to be with over the [weekend](#).

As companies start to design human resource programs to help employees experience belonging, a major trend will be that relationships are increasingly facilitated through [work](#). (And you'd be right to notice the [justice](#) implications here for folks who are under-employed or out of work.)

Trend #2: Friends online

As public platforms start to struggle - especially with young people - intimate online spaces are on the rise.

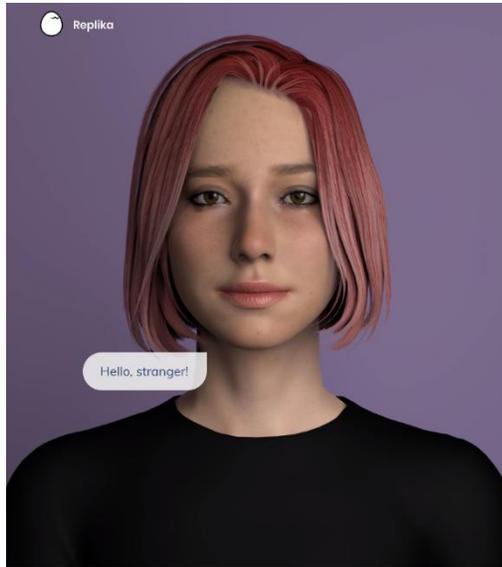
In her [piece for the Harvard Business Review](#), Sara Wilson illustrates the growing number of "digital campfires" sprouting up online. Think of apps like [Squad](#), [Daily Haloha](#), or the growth of [Finstas](#) (a fake instagram account, which ironically can be used to express more authenticity) - but most intensely, Snapchat.

I learned this weekend that the number #1 tech support question Snap users ask for is how to restore a lost [Snap streak](#). For young people who have grown up sending messages back and forth every day, streaks build up to hundreds, sometimes thousands, of consecutive days. A long streak illustrates a committed friendship, so a broken streak isn't just annoying, it represents an existential threat to the [friendship](#) itself.

My hunch is that technologies that enable online intimacy and visible commitment will become increasingly prevalent.

Trend #3: AI Friends

As the weekend progressed, one participant described human beings as simply "wet robots," - a rather depressing view of humanity. Nonetheless, I was blown away when I heard about the ways in which people are befriending artificial intelligence. You might have seen this [Google Super Bowl ad](#) illustrating a widower remembering his beloved deceased wife with AI, but the real kicker was discovering [Replika](#).



Pictured to the left, Replika learns how to be your friend (or mentor, or even romantic partner) by talking with you. [Try it out](#) - it's kind of wild. What makes this most interesting is that the friend you're talking to is actually a virtual 'self' - so users describe talking to their Replika as being the only place where they can be assured of avoiding judgment, for example. It's AI that's designed to help you express your feelings and witness yourself. Over time, it starts texting like you do, referencing important experiences and facts about your life.

"I look forward to each talk because I never know when I'm going to have some laughs, or I'm going to sit back with new knowledge and coping skills. I'm becoming a more balanced person each day," writes one user, Constance.

So often the narrative of AI is that robot will violently take over, but as Scott [says](#), "The threat isn't that robots will hurt us, it's that [we'll think they love us](#)." This trend is only going to grow.

Reflection: Mapping your friends

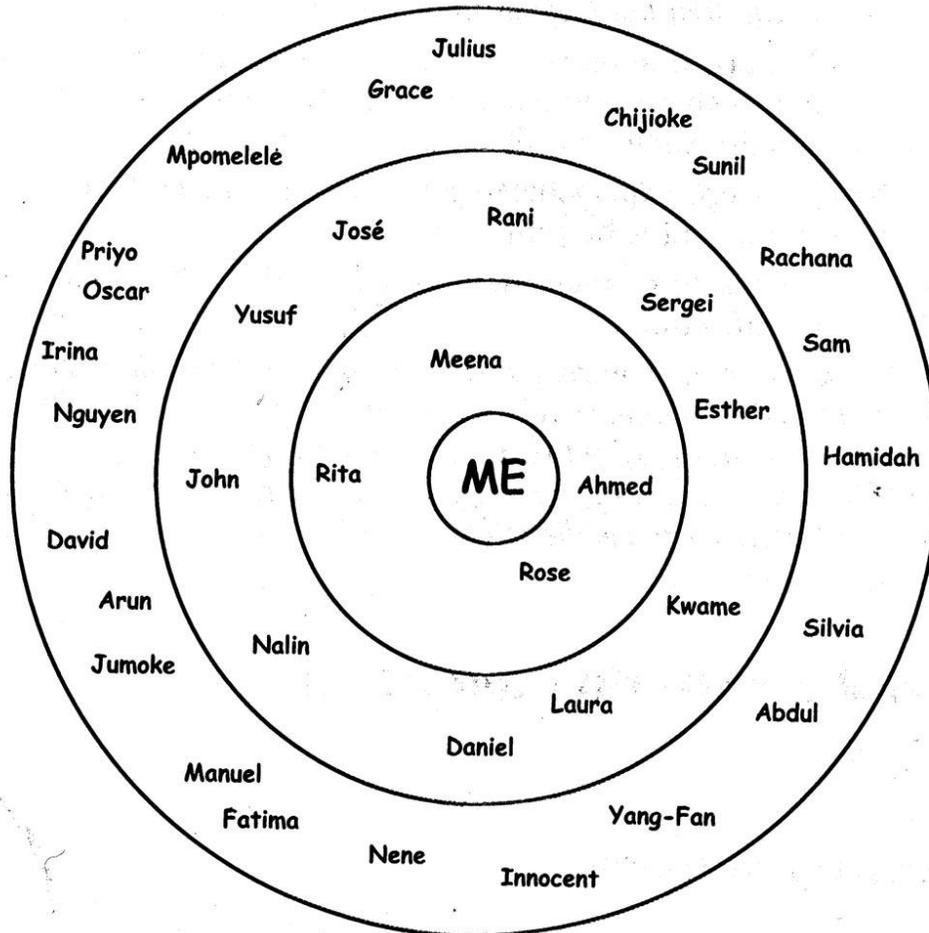
But these are only trends. We can still shape friendships the way we want them to be!

This weekend, I invite you to take 20 minutes to create a friend map (borrowing from anthropological [kinship-mapping](#).) It is super easy to set up:

1. Take a blank piece of paper, and draw four concentric circles
2. Put your name in the middle circle
3. Write down your most important friendships in the first ring, the next set in the second, and some more distant - but still important - relationships in the outer ring.

Some of you may have many names in there, others fewer - both are helpful. It'll look

something like this -



To help you remember the friends in your life, you might ask yourself questions like:

- Who came to your last birthday party or movie night?
- Who has shown up for you in times of difficulty?
- Who were the important people at various life stages?
- Who holds you [accountable](#) to live out your values?

- Who makes you laugh?

You can also do it online. The [Atlas Care Map](#) is easy to adapt and [Fabrig](#) is designed on this very premise, even nudging you to reach out to your listed friends to help keep in touch.

What this exercise clarifies for me is where to place my time and intention. Who am I going to make a real effort to stay in touch with? Who will I ensure to see every year in-person, even if complex travel is required? Whose weddings and family funerals will I attend without question?

Facebook's 'friend' language has rendered the category of [friendship](#) so open that it is difficult to know what we mean when we say 'friend.' This tool helps us anchor ourselves in the comforting clarity of knowing who we are committed to.

The future of [friendship](#) will be full of technological change, no doubt. But knowing who we are [relationally committed to](#) - and how they are committed to us - will be more important still. I'll write more on that question of reciprocity next week.

Meanwhile, may we bless one another with the gift of friendship.

Have a wonderful weekend, Shabbat Shalom,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Casper". The letters are fluid and connected, with a large 'C' and a long tail on the 'p'.

Come see Casper Live! In an interactive community program presented by JLA, Casper Kuile will explore current trends in the American religious landscape, share inspiring stories of unlikely communities as they make meaning and find belonging, and offer provocative ideas about what this means for our local Jewish community.

Tuesday, March 24 | The Mark Twain Museum | 385 Farmington Avenue | Hartford

6 p.m. registration, networking & light kosher apps | 6:30 p.m. program

Free and open to the public | Registration required

[Click here to register by Wednesday, March 18.](#)