Review of 'Friendfluence: The Surprising Ways Friends Make Us Who We Are.' By Carlin Flora. Doubleday. 276 pp. $25.95

Good friendships, formed in adolescence, according to psychologist Carl Pickhardt, give individuals a capacity to forge and sustain other relationships, including romantic ones. "But we have a funny culture," Pickhardt adds. We think people "know how to do friendship, but it's not always true."

Carlin Flora agrees. A former staff writer and feature editor for *Psychology Today*, Flora acknowledges that friendship is an amorphous concept. Nonetheless, she reminds us that friendship plays "a powerful and often underappreciated role" in shaping our sense of self and the direction our lives will take. Drawing on the latest research in psychology, *Friendfluence* provides a charming and informative examination of the impact of friendship at a time in which family relations and social structures have been scrambled.

*Friendfluence* doesn't always go deep. And some of Flora's claims are not persuasive. She asserts, for example, that friendship is "the most stable and the most flexible of the relationships we have through life" and then indicates that children make and drop friends frequently and that adult "networks are remarkably unstable." She indicates, without evidence or elaboration, that American culture discounts and doubts the benefits of friendship. And she seems, at times, to conflate friendship with professional collaboration.

*Friendfluence* is not a how-to book. Nonetheless, it is awash in arresting insights with practical implications, many of them counter-intuitive. People connect most easily, Flora reveals, when they share a dislike of a third person, even if she (think Kim Kardashian) or he (think Donald Trump) is not actually known to either friend. Apparently, time with friends is even more enjoyable than time spent with spouses or children, perhaps because the latter is associated with duties and pressures, like changing diapers and paying the bills. And hanging out with friends, or even imagining that they're right there with you, can reduce blood pressure.

Flora also investigates the down-side of friendship. Measuring the length of "deviant conversations" between pairs of adolescents, she writes, predicts, with a high degree of accuracy, whether the individuals will be anti-social or successful. Some kids, to be sure, may be pre-disposed to talk more and seek each other out, but since it is impossible to separate the impact of nature and nurture, it makes sense to assume that both are at work. Women have more friendship conflicts than men, Flora suggests, because they're more prone to "totalizing" relationships and perceiving them as, to some extent, rivalries. And at all stages of life, Flora claims, we are not all that likely to be honest with close friends about their flaws and faults.

Finally, Flora provides a timely, savvy, and judicious assessment of the role social media plays in friendships. Recognizing that it is too early to measure the long-term impact of on-line relationships, she cites evidence that they facilitate the spread of information about a host of subjects ranging from late-breaking news to sales at the supermarket, often reinforce ties that bind and often correlate with frequent socialization in traditional settings. She counsels skepticism about claims that Facebook interactions substitute for or crowd out more intimate conversations and shared experiences. Nor is she at all certain that the new media has caused a decline in the number of people Americans turn to discuss "important matters."

At the same time, Flora concedes that social media can stoke unhealthy emotions. The more time individuals spend on Facebook, for example, the more likely they are to conclude that other people are better off than they are and give voice to general unhappiness. Heavy users, moreover, tend to be more narcissistic, aggressive, anxious, sleep-deprived and depressed than people of a similar age and income who use social media sparingly or not at all.

Unfortunately, Flora does not adequately address other important concerns about social media connectivity. Cyberspace culture can, it seems to me, eviscerate or eliminate complexity in the name of brevity. In conjunction with iPhones and iPads, it can make us incessantly interruptible and annihilate the present. It can transform our understanding of privacy. And it may well feed an inclination, already pervasive in the twentieth century, to define reality as role-playing, and feed what Christopher Lasch called "the banality of pseudo self-awareness" by encouraging friends to be who they pretend to be, or who they want to be, or, worst of all, who they think they are.

"I was always looking outside myself for strength and confidence but it comes from within," Anna Freud once observed. As Carlin Flora knows, these qualities (self-esteem, a healthy sense of identity, a capacity for intimacy) -- the sources of strength within -- are not present (or accessible) all the time. We won't find them, in ourselves or in our friends, unless we know what we
are looking for, how significant the search is to us, and commit the time and energy to it.