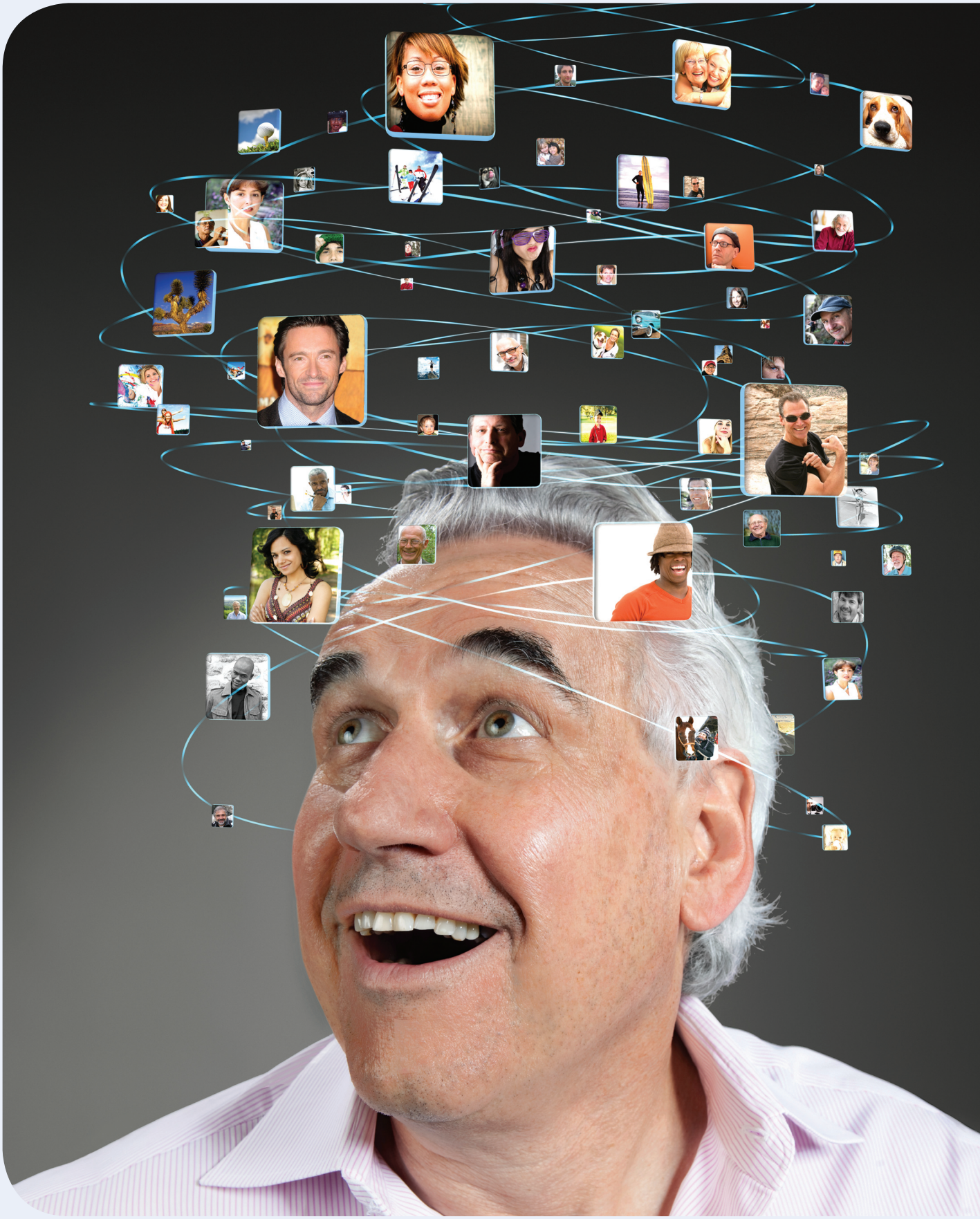

Confessions of a Facebook Addict

They say you can't have too many friends. Who was he to prove them wrong?

By Hugh Delehanty

I realized I had a problem when I found myself, off on a dream vacation, sneaking into the bathroom at 3:00 A.M. to check my homepage. This was no ordinary bathroom: it was a luxurious all-white mini-spa with an oversize Italian-ate tub, deep-purple orchids and votive candles everywhere, at a chic hotel in the Florida Keys. As far as I was concerned, though, I could have been staying in a Motel 6. Because all I cared about at that moment was whether I had acquired any new Facebook friends.

I closed the door gently to avoid waking my wife, Barbara, the lightest sleeper on the planet, and opened my laptop. And there it was, a short sentence that I never expected to see: "Hugh and Hugh Jackman are now friends."

Yes, this was the real Hugh Jackman, or at least it looked that way from the picture. I felt giddy and a little flushed. Not because I had any interest in actually relating to Hugh Two (as I later came to call him). In fact, the thing I liked best about the guy was his first name. But I knew that Hugh Two was one heck of a great Facebook "get." Adding his name to my list of friends would instantly improve my Hollywood cred and make it easier for me to enlist other A-list friends. And that's exactly what happened. Within days Richard Gere, Julianne Moore, Warren Buffet, and several other celebrities—well, okay, obvious impos-

Portrait by Chris Mueller

Digital illustration by Bryan Christie Design

tors like "Danzel Washington" and "Turner Tina" don't count—joined my coterie.

Barbara was unimpressed. "You know what you are?" she said the next day out by the pool when I excitedly told her the news. "You're a Facebook slut. Why don't you ever have a *real* conversation with a *real* person?

"Someone like me, for instance."

Ouch. Ever since I had signed on to Facebook a few months earlier, caught up in a nationwide craze that has made boomers the website's fastest-growing demographic, Barbara had been poking fun at my habit. But now she was rolling out the heavy artillery, and I didn't have an answer. I smiled, I prevaricated, I acted cute—all the time thinking, "How can I tactfully slip away and check to see if I have any more new friends?" At that point I was still in a very early stage of Facebook addiction: denial.

How did this happen? How did I transform virtually overnight from a relatively serious person into a shameless celebrity groupie? Throughout my career as a writer and editor, I've met countless A-list celebrities and worked closely with more than a few. I'm usually the epitome of journalistic reserve when I encounter a famous person in my work. But in the bizarre, uninhibited world of Facebook, another side of my personality emerged: the part that likes to appear as if I'm someone I'm really not. And that was just the beginning.

When I first started Facebooking, I felt as if I had stepped through the looking glass into a world filled with people I knew, or pretended to know, sharing their most intimate secrets for all the world to see. I was fascinated by how easy it was to distribute photos, videos, and last night's Jay Leno clips, chronicle the details of your daily life, and create groups of like-minded oddballs (one group called itself "1,000,000 to Get Julian Schnabel to Button His Shirt Up"). Sure, this kind of open forum led to a lot of narcissistic blathering, but it also generated some delightfully off-the-wall wackiness. On Inauguration Day my stepson, Clay, and I got caught in a large crowd and struggled for hours in the freezing cold to get through the purple-ticket gate to hear President Obama's address. The next day a new group on Facebook, called "Survivors of the Purple Tunnel of Doom," detailed the woes of the thousands of ticket holders who had been stuck during the ceremonies in a highway underpass. Another, more tongue-in-cheek group appeared that day celebrating "Aretha Franklin's Inauguration Hat."

What really got me hooked on Facebook, though, was the "friending" thing, the addictive process of making new friends and reconnecting with old ones online. On the verge of celebrating my 60th birthday—and the inevitable intimations of mortality that come with it—I was consumed by an uncontrollable drive to reconnect with everybody I had ever known. Throughout my life I'd always found making friends easy, but I had never been very good at the caring and feeding that true friendship requires. Unlike Barbara, who is a master of nurturing a close circle of friends, I'd always let my obsession with work consume most of my time and energy. Now something inside was telling me to stop and pay attention. Perhaps Facebook could be the answer, a shortcut to reviving friendships that had long since withered from inattention.

Shortly before our Inauguration Day adventure I challenged Clay to a race to see who could accumulate the most friends. Clay was a Facebook newbie, but as a 37-year-old photographer with Facebook-ready friends all over the world, he had a huge advantage, and within days he had chalked up 100 friends and counting. Meanwhile, despite all the media reports about the recent surge of interest in Facebook among boomers, I was struggling to find prospects. For my first 100 friends, I scooped up all the family members my brother Dennis, an early Facebook user, had recruited; dozens of colleagues at work; and a host of writers and editors I knew who were also early adopters. Then it got harder. I checked my high-school classmates on Facebook. (Who are these people?) College classmates? (Ditto.) I trolled page by page through my old address books, looking for e-mail addresses of long-lost friends. (Nada.) After a few weeks of watching Clay pull ahead, I started taking anyone who was a friend of a friend and didn't look like an ax murderer. My most successful ploy was to poach friends from other friends' lists. That's how I landed Hugh Two, who was the friend of a friend from California with more than 2,000 celebrities on his list. I was in Facebook Heaven.

Eventually Clay's interest slackened. When I e-mailed to tell him I had reached 300 friends, he wrote back, "You're such a Facebook stud," and silently conceded defeat. This

What's the Diff?

facebook
FACEBOOK.COM
Thousands of special applications; users can upload unlimited photos.

myspace.com a place for friends
MYSPACE.COM
Member blogs; top artists' songs are sold through MySpace Music.

LinkedIn
LINKEDIN.COM
Focus on professional contacts; minimal personal info.

AARP.org
AARP.ORG/ONLINECOMMUNITY
Profiles of members in your area; discussion groups on topics ranging from health and family to money and leisure.

twitter
TWITTER.COM
Short minute-by-minute updates let users follow one another's daily activities. —*Leslie Quander Wooldridge*

MORE ONLINE
Learn how to join, what to expect, and how to avoid networking pitfalls—at **aarpmagazine.org/lifestyle.**

PREVIOUS SPREAD: ADDITIONAL PHOTO CREDITS ON PAGE 66; PREVIOUS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: AUTHOR PHOTO BY CHRIS MUELLER (2)

wasn't the first time I had heard that term; it is a fairly common honorific among men in Facebookland. Coming from Clay, though, it was especially gratifying.

Meanwhile, Barbara was completely losing it. She couldn't understand why I had given up so much of my precious spare time to get lost in an obsessive quest that, in her view, was about as life affirming as channel surfing. She compared my dalliance with Facebook to the sorry pursuit of a middle-aged playboy who gives up a perfectly good life just to see how many notches he can add to his belt.

To be honest, Barbara had a point. Gone were the Sundays when she and I would take long walks in the park or visit museums or have a quiet dinner at our favorite bistro down the street. I'd even abandoned my true passion—oil painting—and hadn't finished reading a book in months. One Sunday after I had wasted the whole day on Facebook, Barbara tried the tough-love approach: "I hate to say this, honey, but you really need help. There must be a shrink you can talk to. This little habit of yours is not that great for our marriage."

I agreed to look into it. But instead of going to a therapist, I turned—where else?—to Facebook. On the Facebook site I found a test to determine whether I had what is known as Facebook Addiction Disorder (FAD). The test included 20 questions, to be rated on a scale of increasing addiction from 1 to 5. Among them: How often do you fear that life without Facebook would be boring, empty, and joyless? (I said 3) And: How often do others in your life complain to you about the amount of time you spend on Facebook? (5) I ended up with a score of 70 on a scale of 100. The diagnosis: "You are experiencing occasional or frequent problems because of Facebook."

I wasn't certifiable yet, I guess. But as time went by—and I crossed the 500-friend mark—I started feeling I was caught in an endless game of diminishing returns. Oxford anthropologist Robin Dunbar, Ph.D., has concluded that the cognitive power of the human brain limits the size of the social networks we can sustain. In other words, he says, the outside limit for human friendships is roughly 150. As soon as my circle of friends exceeded the Dunbar number, I learned, the experience became less intimate and more like watching TV.

I was also surprised to discover that, as my list of friends grew, my personal posse of seven or eight people who commented regularly on my posts didn't expand proportionately. Plus, keeping everybody entertained with amusing anecdotes and personal chitchat was taking up a lot of time that could have been better spent having coffee with actual friends.

Then a funny thing happened: Al Pacino accepted my friend request. Some people thought he was an impostor, because his profile disappeared without notice a week later. But his final post was a classic: "Al Pacino has become a friend of himself."

Whether it was coming from the real Al or not, the quip rang true. Was someone trying to send me a message?

Finally I cried uncle and turned to a therapist friend, Florence Falk, author of *On My Own* (Three Rivers, 2008), a groundbreaking book on solitude. She reminded me that there were no shortcuts to building strong friendships, digital or otherwise. "First, you need to look inside and figure out what's missing in your life—what hole are you trying to fill?" she said. "Then ask yourself: Is Facebook the right kind of place for you to make deep, intimate connections?"

By now the answer was obvious. No matter how many conquests I made, Facebook was never going to satisfy my need for intimacy and love. So I started easing myself away. I stopped doing Facebook at work, and I limited my exposure on nights and weekends. I felt blissfully liberated. It was a thrill to have private thoughts again—and the time and energy to "friend" myself.

I've started painting again. Next Sunday I'm planning to plant some peonies in the front yard and stock the fish pond with baby koi. Maybe I'll even read a book. As for Barbara, this summer we're planning to celebrate our 25th anniversary in the Adirondacks. I already know what my gift to her—and myself—will be: six nights, seven days, no Facebook. ■

Other Addictive Facebook Apps

All networked out? There are hundreds of other fun things to do on Facebook, such as:

CAUSES

Recruit friends to raise money for your favorite charities with this application, which processes donations by credit card—and also posts the names of top fundraisers... like you!

BEATLES QUIZ

You always thought you were a little bit Ringo, but your friends say you're a little bit George. Settle the question with this app, which determines your true inner Beatle.

WE'RE RELATED

Find family members who are Facebook users and build a virtual family tree. This application helps link distant relatives, making it easy to swap pictures and stay in touch.

BIRTHDAY CALENDAR

See your friends' birthdays in calendar format, and send online cards from a selection of more than 1,700. You can receive e-mail and cell phone reminders, too.

SCRABBLE

Challenge your vocab-ulous friends to this online version of the beloved board game (and they won't see you checking the dictionary in between turns!).

—Audrey Goodson