

## Marking 'Rita's birthday'

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**Lexington Park, MD** - The world's fascination with Facebook is difficult to explain yet easy to understand. Everybody needs friends. About a year after a gnawing curiosity—and a bit of boredom—prompted me to jump on the Facebook bandwagon I was friended by a woman named "Rita" (and yes, that's her real name). It's possible I might have met her previously. I'm not really sure who requested whose friendship but in January 2012 Rita and I became friends. While I was just getting started on social media, Rita already had nearly 3,000 friends. The 'friendship' was going along fine, I suppose. But then something happened six months later that potentially could have ended it. Rita died. So, that should have been the conclusion of a very brief friendship, right? In the normal world, it would have been. However, in the amazing cyberworld of social media it wasn't. Rita's Facebook page remained open and remains open as of this writing.

When her late August birthday came up—I received the standard reminder—I figured that since it had been posted on her page that she had passed, it would be tacky to offer her a happy birthday wish. However, as a few more of my Facebook friends passed away and their pages were left untouched I began to post acknowledgements. "Happy birthday, (late friend). You are missed." I began to do the same with Rita's page.

What's odd and, I must confess, bizarrely fascinating, are all the friends who post greetings unaware that Rita has passed away. "Sorry I missed your big day." "Hope you had a lovely day." "Happy birthday with many more." "Hope you are well." And the rather ironic "happy belated birthday." One friend always posts a video on Rita's page, one year declaring that the segment "will inspire you to try something new." In an unrelated birthday post, one of Rita's other friends posted, "U still around?"

Without having really known Rita, who apparently was quite an animal lover and passionate about her work, I feel like, through her, I have learned a few things about how technology has changed us forever—in a good and not so good way. For one thing, Facebook is a potentially wonderful way for staying in touch. We know almost instantly when babies are born, when acquaintances have died, when friends' pets have died and when those friends need our prayers, our help, our sympathy. We learn quickly about graduations, prom dates, vacations, hobbies, jobs, dinners and skin rashes. Every snake God ever created that has brazenly slithered into the path of human civilization has had its picture posted on social media. Facebook is an excellent way to reconnect with people with whom we had lost touch, a method to reach out to someone who now lives so far away. As great as all this is, Facebook and other social media falls far short as a substitute for 'in person.' Still, a lot of positive things about individuals' characters and values are showcased on our personal computers and phones. We are all each other's clickbait. I have also come to realize that some people's lives are so much greater than their lifespans.

Happy birthday, Rita. You are missed.

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