

The Friendship Algorithm

By Dominique Benstead

Through the window, Mt French was shrouded in a white veil, appearing in spurts like a sunlit frosted wedding cake with candles. Waking at dawn was a given these days, Sally thought, as she sipped her green tea in bed.

The ABC radio program was reviewing another “Algorithm.”

“The Friendship Experiment-a focus on intentional experiences for friendship. - To be explored in the Friendship Laboratory.

“Time, Intention, Activity, which equated to making a time to meet people, book a date and keep the appointment.”

Sometime later, as she lined the car up between the two white lines, Sally pondered on this Algorithm, explained as a focus to change the term “Too Busy” into “Meaningful Experiences.”

With a smile, Sally perused her written list of “Purposeful” challenges for her day. She was parked in her favorite wide car park, under a huge canopy of purple jacaranda boughs.

Climbing from the car, looking up with a tingle of wonder, her gaze followed the curve of a branch. There she was, majestic and queenly, with her chestnut crown and malar striped gown. Though not an owl, Sally was enchanted to have the Tawny Frogmouth as her current muse, hidden in the prong of two strong thick limbs.

Today’s first meaningful experience Sally laughed to herself. Well, Athena had her owl, Hera had her peacocks and Persephone had a habit of turning people into owls; she was happy with her Frogmouth.

As a child she had revered the presence of two Frogmouths nesting in a eucalypt in the back yard. Now, in the trimester of her life, she celebrated the presence of this quiet company.

In her head she gave the silent cry of “Battle” from her much loved movie “Michael.” (One did not call out with joy in car parks these days.)

Sally collected her crimson bag, a recycled cushion cover.

Putting her feet on the ground, Sally recalled Bilbo’s meaningful words to Frodo. “It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door. You step onto the road and if you don’t

keep your feet there is no knowing where you might be swept to.”

First port of call was the Op Shop. She met her friend on the way. Not good in small spaces she waited outside. Passing rainbows of clothing racks and shelves of shoes jiggling in anticipation of new adventures, Sally entered the book cave.

1.The Lord of the Rings. The Fellowship of the Ring.

Chapter 3 by J.R.R. Tolkein (1954)

Here was bounty, another entity for the algorithm. Calls of “Pick me, pick me” came forth from the pages held within the weathered bookcases. Sally touched their visible scars.

There were crumpled and dogeared pages, some with creeping water stains from an unexpected deluge. There were, however, some in pristine condition, perhaps carried everywhere as an ally against loneliness and holding forever tears of joy or pain within the covers of friendship.

Sally grasped a battered copy of “Juliet” by Anne Fortier. Having given her copy to a friend. Now they could reminisce about their travels in Siena, especially the contrada on the corner of the wealthy houses. Sally and the shop volunteer shared their travel experiences.

Joining her friend waiting patiently outside amongst the furniture, they marched on with a slow but steady limp.

The council chamber steps were somewhat of a challenge, the desk ladies sharing her laughter and agreed the time honoured skill of one step at a time of childhood could certainly resonate in your seventies.

Her friend waited outside the chemist as Sally consulted with the always uplifting people within as to what she had actually gone in for.

2 Juliet Anne Fortier 2010

The last bastion, IGA’s doors standing wide open like sentinels. The staff always had a greeting with a smile despite the long shifts standing.

Carried along the aisles like a river of treasure seekers, her friend was in her element.

As they joined the queue at the register, Sally’s thoughts returned again to the radio discussion of “The Friendship Experiment./Laboratory.”

“Friendship. A shared space where individuals feel valued, respected and understood for exactly who they are.”

Reflecting on the shops around her, Sally felt people still unconsciously made a difference with a spoken word, giving eye contact, giving simple gestures of acknowledgement that someone was worthwhile,- not a laboratory but a support group in disguise sharing meaningful experiences.

Sally and her friend trundled along the footpath, pausing again beneath the purple bower.

Mission Accomplished.

Loading the car, she raised her hand to the Frogmouth, turning her hand into a pat of her hair. As her mother would say, “Discretion is the better part of valour.”

She turned the feet of her friend sideways and placed her strategically under the branches.

She should guide her home but her own wonky right leg would stymie that return trek today. And, quite frankly, Sally said to herself, her friend had developed quite a wheel wobble and a squeak. She seriously doubted her friend would make it back to her spot beside the bunches of flowers and ornaments without serious help.

The Greek Goddesses had their talismans and amulets to source pathways of challenge to conquer.

Sally had her humble friend, the IGA shopping trolley-a chariot within the portals of Boonah, conquering the daily algorithm of life .