

## Friends: Because the Heart Cannot Live Without Intimacy

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My first best friend was my next-door neighbor, Ann Stroble. When her mother was mad she called out “Ann Francis Stroble!” Going back farther, to an even deeper entwined part of my psyche is my sister, Joann, just 19 months older than me. I can’t remember a day without her. We grew up sharing a bedroom, clothes, toys, Ann, and in the process wove ourselves together forever. Friendship is like that.

Frederic Brussat writes of his childhood friend

I can remember the scene as vividly as if it were yesterday. My best friend Skipper and I were seven-year-old boys living in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. One day after playing in the verdant valley behind his house, we sat down in our favorite place between two tall trees. We looked into each other’s eyes and promised that when we grew up we would be cowboys out West . . . but circumstances beyond our control pulled us apart. My family moved to another part of the city. Years passed, and I never saw Skipper again . . . Although we never rode the range together, our friendship lives on in my mind. In *Soul Mates*, Thomas Moore writes: “Each friend is indeed a world – a special sphere of certain emotions, experiences, memories, and qualities of personality . . . We are all made up of many worlds and each friendship brings one or more of those worlds to life.” My early friendship with Skipper took me to a world of possibilities. It showed me the value of sharing my dreams with another, a gift I have carried into many of my adult relationships.<sup>1</sup>

There is a delight and romance to friendship. As Dottie said, “Making friends is like falling in love.” I think of the grandeur and ardor of the two small Wisconsin boys – “We will ride the range as cowboys and be friends forever.” Their movie didn’t end that way in real life, but the memory of its creation, dream, and relationship lives on as a gift for this man decades later. “The heart cannot live without intimacy.”<sup>2</sup>

Friends are our chosen partners, not our given family members, but the people we chose to journey with in life to explore our various worlds. For this reason, friends are magical, a balm for loneliness, the foot soldiers in our trenches, our celebratory partners, our sports buddies, our dream-makers, our secret keepers, our reliable critics. “There is nothing like a friendly pat, hug, call, note, visit, meal, trip or outing together.”

Everyone here has made a friend in their life, probably many friends. Engagement in friendship is a fundamental human rite of passage. Humans, like dogs,

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<sup>1</sup> Brussat, 455-456.

<sup>2</sup> Macrina Wiederkehr in *A Tree Full of Angels* quoted in 457.

are social creatures. We wither without companionship, so we continually and relentlessly search for friends. And our friendships keep us healthy. A standard question in the mental health industry is “What are your resources?” This isn’t a question about money. It is a question about support networks, who you call when you are in need, what is your plan that involves other people. In isolation people become depressed and experience poor judgment. In relationship and community, sadness and loss are eased (not fixed, eased), better decisions are made.

In addition, friendships cultivate life-affirming windows on our soul, the many facets of our personality and character. We make friends in order to know ourselves, and in turn to help our friends know themselves (mutuality and equality of friendship). Thomas Moore says that each person is a world – a special sphere, and our friendships often take on these qualities, our practical friend, our funny friend, our creative friend, our subversive friend. Friendships are varied.

I asked you to share with me your experiences with friendship. Thank you to the many people who responded, and there were many. “Friendship” struck a chord. An interesting trend I noted was how many of you wrote about “strange” friends, people unlike you that you call “friend.”

One person wrote of a long-term friendship “Some people who know us both think that we do not have much in common, but we do. Besides our shared lengthy history, I like to think we compliment each other. She is my bitterness, and I think I am her sweetness.” Another person wrote “My strangest friend is my former college roommate, who also introduced me to my husband 47 years ago. She is a major extrovert who always enjoyed taking the most far-out position on any subject. She could swear like a longshoreman and often did as a student.” This person concluded that they were still friends, but she was glad that this friend lived out of town, in Hawaii. Another person wrote to me about a very conservative friend, so different from her, yet a very good mother. She sees this friendship as serving a purpose (sharing in parenting) but not sharing in politics or religion.

These “strange” friends seemed so pivotal to so many of you. The “strange” friend introducing you to your spouse – seems that friend knew something. These friends aren’t really strange at all though – they are one of our many worlds. I sometimes have this experience - when I reconnect with a friend that I haven’t seen in a while I experience joy at uncovering a buried part of myself again. I think of it as uncovering a mirror inside of myself. When this friend is with me a part of myself is mirrored back and explored, which, even if challenging, is life-affirming and enriching. And then when I don’t see this friend for a while, it is like a sheet is draped over the mirror, which feels a bit lonely, and I don’t see or know this part of myself as clearly. No two friends are alike and we all have many complex and unexpected (even hidden) parts of ourselves. There are also different friends for different seasons in our lives. One of you wrote, “Whereas, as a teen and an immature young adult, I was often seeking a friend who would affirm my OK-ness, I am now engaging with friends on a mutual level. The intensity is still there, but we are coming together as adults, still vulnerable but open to the wonder of listening, sharing and valuing (in addition to needing) one another.

For the most part friendship is easier than falling love. Generally, there is no sexual relationship to figure out, no family or in-laws to contend with on a regular basis, no business partnership and shared accounts to balance, no shared living space – the sort

of living together that both supports and, ironically, confounds and disrupts intimacy. Friendships are easier, more comforting, less challenging. I have a best friend who I love and share with my deepest and darkest hopes and secrets. At yet, if we lived together we would make each other crazy, and we would no longer be friends. It is good to be able to stand close to the mirror and then back away.

With this said, friendships require effort. As Dottie writes, “Making friends is an on-going effort, especially as you get older; so many friends are lost to dementia or death that you have to keep reaching out and widening your circle.” Someone else wrote, “Friendships are indeed organic and need care and feeding.” Another person wrote, “Part of being alive is interest in and capacity to develop new friends.” Yes! Part of being alive is engaging with others and self in the way friendship creates.

And yet, living in a mobile society, the care and feeding of friendships is harder in a new geographical, time management ways. One person wrote, “the value of friends is more important than I might have imagined before in my life. I’ve made career moves before, but I seem to have become less flexible with age. In addition, I find that I leave more dear friends behind me each time I move . . . probably why I feel less flexible.

Another person wrote, “The hardest thing for me about maintaining friendships is time. Having matching time and location. One of my friends who lives in Minneapolis and I have agreed that it is too painful to not be able to just met for lunch or breakfast or a walk. And we are willing to wait until we can see one another again – maintaining the friendship by knowing we are in agreement.”

About four years after I moved to Cincinnati I had two very good friends that I made here (and I struggled to meet and make friends here) move out of town. I actually refused to try to make any more new friends for about a year. I was simply too broken-hearted and angry and tired - tired of leaving precious pieces of myself with other people and then having them move away. I had too many draped mirrors within myself. True friends are precious and rare.

Friendship relies on mutual respect and sharing. I am friendly with many people. I have many acquaintances. I love many people. I care about and for many people. I listen and talk with many people. But I mutually share with very few people, four to be precise. These four are my best friends. I have another tier of former good friends who I don’t see but can mutually share with. Everyone else is on a continuum from acquaintance to friendly or friendish, maybe a friend in progress, but not quite friends.

One person wrote me on this point and said, “Anyone who claims to have several dozen friends is kidding themselves. Hopefully everyone has at least one friend (even if it is their spouse – several of you said this). Those who can honestly say they have 3 - 6 real friends are very lucky people. A friend is someone you can’t say no to – unless a no would be good for them. When a friend says “No” to me, it’s a real signal that I have gone astray.” Someone else wrote, “My feeling is that a person is truly lucky if he/she has a handful of folks in the ‘true friends’ category, by which I mean people one can talk with about important things and feelings, confident that one will not be ‘judged.’”

You also shared with me how much you learned from friends: “their individual journeys over the years have helped me prepare for my own journey and I hope I in turn have helped them” and “my friends have taught me manners, caring, compassion, determination, tolerance, and much more.” And “I have learned a lot about friendship . . . to listen to what they have to say and to allow them to say it without judging them.”

Dottie noted, “It’s very painful to lose a friend.” I appreciated her added insight, “We can all be quite dumb with people.” Interestingly, few of you shared your experiences with me about losing or leaving a friend, probably because it is so painful. A couple of weeks ago I was reminded of this pain while on a pastoral visit. I had gone to visit an elderly member of our congregation. By coincidence the oldest son was home. I asked the son about his “resources” to help him care for his parent. This opened up a flood of tears from the son. His best friend, not even fifty, had died three years ago of a sudden heart attack. He was so sad he couldn’t stop the tears. They just slid out. True friends are irreplaceable. Another member wrote me “My sister was also a soul-mate until she died three years ago, and I miss her, as was a local friend of fifteen years who died last year.” A true friend has died and a mirror is draped. We keep the memories and the relationship and the love, and it is a permanent loss.

One person noted that it is sad when an adult friend’s bad choices “make it necessary to distance yourself.” That happened to me fifteen years ago. I still miss and think about this friend. I wonder if I should have been more patient, more forgiving, less judgmental, less afraid for her. I don’t know, but I think about her and miss her.

Someone else here told me the fascinating story of how two friendships ended over a house. She and her husband discussed and signed a formal agreement with two other friends to renovate an old house. Ultimately, the friends did not speak to one another. Even worse, they all had to continue to live in the house for five years until the investment was recouped. From this she learned not to mix housing or business with friendship.

One of the most devastating experiences is to be betrayed by a friend, like being betrayed by a part of self. I remember after my Grandfather Dittmar died, my grandparent’s best friends, the Hills, stopped visiting my Grandmother because they said, “it hurt them too much.” This was unexpected from life long friends. My Grandmother was doubly devastated, by the death of her husband and her friends who would no longer visit. Sometimes friends don’t stand by us.

I have a friend; I’ll call her Mary. Several years ago Mary’s husband, Bob, had an affair with Mary’s best friend. Wow. The devastation of this. Bewildering. Note to self, if you are going to have an affair, never ever, ever, ever have it with your best friend’s partner. Months later I asked Mary which was the worse loss, her husband or her best friend. This was no easy question because Mary loved and loves her husband and friend. She paused and said, “I’m not sure. It might be my friend.”

The loss of a friend is a blow because as Carol so beautifully shared with us, “real friends are there with us in the trenches during the worst times of our lives. They make the awful times bearable.” We count on them to stick it out with us, and most times, gratefully, they do. “I’m sorry your hair is falling out. I’m just happy you’re alive.” Magically true, stabilizing words during the pits of chemotherapy.

Someone else wrote to me explaining “At one time I was feeling badly about myself and I would call my friend and say ‘tell me one good thing about myself.’” How beautifully vulnerable. Only a true friend can be trusted with that question – someone who knows your good and bad and cherishes you just the same. And acquaintances can’t satisfyingly answer that question. Only a friend can: a spouse, a sibling, a best friend – a true friend. A friend knows you and loves you anyway, which, as the Beatles sang, is why we “Get by with a little help from my friends.”

Another member wrote to me “When parents are listening to the wind at the mouth of the cave (their deep sorrow/depression), their friends come by and pull them back from the edge. That’s the way I feel about my friends . . . These friends have shared in our sorrow and, thus, lightened our burden. While they cannot solve things, they can listen. It helps lighten the load. I don’t seek sympathy, but seek understanding . . . someone to go with me along this journey.”

We all want some good company on the road, the journey of life. We need mutual, respectful friends, to mirror back our personality, to learn from, to give to, to stand with us so that we may become fully human in our journey of life. Remembering that “There is nothing like a friendly pat, hug, call, note, visit, meal, trip or outing together,” I encourage all of you to contact a friend and do as one of our members learned to do from her friend. Say “thank you for being my friend for another year.” And if you are mourning the loss of a friend, send a prayer or thought of gratitude, that you were graced by a marvelous friendship for a time. Know that you have the power to keep the goodness of it with you. May it always be so.