

**“To Be Tamed”**

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In *The Little Prince* the fox explains, “You can only see clearly with your heart. What is essential is invisible to the eye . . . it is the time you have wasted on your rose that makes your rose so important.” This is the secret the fox shares with the prince after the prince has tamed him. Is friendship a waste? I don’t think so and I don’t believe that de Saint-Exupery thought so either. His comment is more about how we casually consider the effort it takes to make and retain friends while neglecting friendship’s true value and the effort it requires. The Roman statesman, Cicero, thought that friendship was the greatest gift, next to wisdom and I believe he is correct. Every significant friend I have ever had opened a window into myself, one through which I have seen myself and others more deeply and clearly. And the more I gave, the more I received.

My best friend in high school was Beth LeBlanc. Beth moved to my Chicago suburb when she was 14. I had moved in just the year before. Beth was intelligent, funny, witty, kind, determined, sympathetic, a breath of Southern liberal irreverence in our very chilly, wealthy, Republican, Northern suburb. Beth was also a consummate letter writer. So was I. It was the early 1980’s. Not that long ago, but there was no internet, no cell phones, no answering machines, no video stores, no cable TV. Communication was different, so was time. On summer vacation we exchanged letters, when we went away to college we exchanged letters, not notes, no postcards, letters, long letters describing epiphanies, family, boys, humiliations, loss, religion, politics, the meaning of life, and wonder. The letters led to a deeper friendship that continues today in e-mail form because long letters are exploratory, intimate, and revealing. The letters of our friendship tied us and through this I saw with my heart.

Letters develop shared trust and interest. To ask a friend a question, and then wait for his/her answer, in a letter is an act of vulnerability, patience, and trust. Long letters encourage reflective dialogue, and the best part of all is that they can be held and read and re-read for a lifetime. Sometimes the meaning stays the same, sometimes it changes with time. Always there is the care, the intent, the communion. The exception of course is the flaming letter, the break-up letter, the “we are no longer friends” letter. Hopefully we have more of the former than of the later.

One of my favorite books in my study is *Letters of a Nation: A Collection of Extraordinary American Letters*. When I considered the service for this morning I looked for letters out of this book, letters from long time friends, partners, and colleagues. As I looked I found letters of exploration, intimacy, revelation, letters that tamed two friends. The letters are honest, direct, funny, thoughtful, kind, loving, and unforgettable. While listening to these letters please consider the effort and worth of deep friendships, the invisibility and “wasted time” that makes them so utterly essential for human development, satisfaction, and self-awareness.

Our first letter was written by Abigail Adams and sent to her friend, confidante, political mate, and husband, John. John Adams was a significant force behind the creation of the *Declaration of Independence* and the second President of the United States, as well as a Unitarian. There are significant published collections of their many letters if you want to read more. For this morning I want to share an excerpt from a letter Abigail wrote to John in March 1776:

*Remember the Ladies . . .*

I appreciate Abigail's honesty and directness, her fearless ability to express her thoughts and feelings with her husband during a time when women were more "subject" to men. She writes as his conscious, something a good friend does (carefully). Like Abigail and John, friends are different from one another, but have an agreed upon equality that enhances them both.

Our next letter is from the writer Ernest Hemingway to his friend, the writer F. Scott Fitzgerald. This letter will win no awards for political correctness but I like its honesty, camaraderie, humor, and acceptance. A friend knows, loves, and appreciates us for who we are.

*We are going into Pamplona . . .*

Friends also tell us the truth. This is one of the most challenging and treacherous arenas of friendship and all of us are going to stumble a few times over this one. But we need trusted friends to offer objective opinions, even when, especially when we don't want to hear them. And because they are friends they find ways to say what needs said, nicely. If possible they avoid the topic of partners and parenting because these conversations do not go well. The following is a letter from Georgia "Pat" O'Keeffe to her friend, Anita Pollitzer

*My Dear little girl . . .*

Friends also stay with us, regardless of what has happened. They are with us in anger, sorrow, illness, loss, and prejudice. Sometimes they are our voice. When troubles come, "friendish" people leave and real friends remain. It's a pivotal moment in every friendship. *Letters of a Nation* contains many such letters; an African American WWII serviceman writing home to his sister of the bitter prejudice he finds fighting for his country, the author Henry James (who suffered with depression) writing a letter of hope and comfort to his good friend, Grace Norton, while she suffered through a deep bout of depression.

The following is a letter sent by the writer Edna St. Vincent Millay to The League of American Penwomen after her good friend Elinor Wylie was disinvited from speaking to the group after a member complained that Wylie was divorced and had since eloped with another man.

*Ladies . . .*

A good friend is never forgotten or replaced, and the loss of a friend like this leaves both gratitude for the gift of life, and a permanent sadness. Our final letter is from a serviceman remembering a fallen friend and soldier. This letter, by John “Soup” Campbell, was written and left on the Vietnam Memorial for Eddie Van Every.

*Although it's been fifteen years . . .*

It takes an open heart and effort to create ties. Today we are in the midst of the holiday season. This year I hope you select holiday activities that create and deepen your ties. If you bake or shop or attend a party, do it to further a treasured relationship, to create ties, not because you always do it or because someone expects you to do it (friends will understand if you take a break one year or they will help you do a difficult holiday task together). What is essential is invisible to the eye and slow to develop, like sitting down and writing a letter. There are old friends out there and new friends waiting to be found. We just need to see with our hearts and be patient. Making room for these gifts will not waste our time this holiday season. It will be the greatest gift we give and receive. May it always be so.