

Friendship and its Perils

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September 26, 2021 - USM

Some friendships are deeply meaningful, and only last a brief time. Others seem shallow, with the careless grace of a finch in flight, yet can last a lifetime. What makes the difference? What is the value to each of the different kinds of friendship? When do we receive more than we give, or vice versa, in those relationships?

I had a friend up through fourth grade; his name was Tommy. And then we moved. I think I saw him once or twice after that. A while back, in his 50's he died suddenly from an undiagnosed congenital heart defect.

In fifth and sixth grade, my friend was Dave. We did most things together: riding bikes, sliding down the old railroad hill on cardboard, sledding, fighting with younger brothers. I heard that this last year he was in hospice at home, then kicked the hospice folks out. I know he was in intense pain, and died. Not sure what he died from. In this case the friendship had subsided after those couple of years: differences in personalities, in approaches to school, other things, I guess. But I still thought about him over the years.

I have another friend whom I met in sixth grade, and is still a close and enduring friend – enduring all my faults and neuroses!

In mid-September of this year I got together with friends from college. We spent a few days at a rental in northern Wisconsin: talking, laughing, eating too much, walking. These were bachelor's degree friendships, from the 1970's. We were in the music program together, with shared experiences in band and numerous other ensembles, and classes. The friendships have evolved, mutated over the years. We come together (in person or on Zoom) from Alaska, to Minnesota, to Wisconsin, to California. One of that group died a few years ago. The rest of us get together in person or on Zoom, and think about our friendships, and try to nurture them.

And I'm growing a friendship now, a person I knew in high school but with whom I've had little contact over the years. Each of us tries to figure out who we are in terms of the other. And we reach out with tentative steps: does your humor match mine? Am I too serious for you? What does our physical distance mean, and how is it resolved? And what will this... friendship become?

How can all of these be lumped under the same term: friend? How does that work? And even with just one person, how many different approaches to friendship are there over the years?

According to the Cambridge (online) dictionary, a friend is: "a person who you know well and who you like a lot, but who is usually not a member of your family." Seems a bit limited, doesn't it? Wiktionary says: "A person, typically someone other than a

family member, spouse or lover, whose company one enjoys and towards whom one feels affection.”

So according to both of these, you know the person, enjoy their company, and feel affection toward them. And they’re not a family member or spouse. Well, any of us who grew up with siblings can tell you that often there was *no* friendship there! But as time passes, often the family member may turn into one of your closest friends.

What about working together in a common purpose? For instance, I was part of a brass quintet from 1971, with a year or two off after college, then back together again, until 2006, when one member (a close friend) died, and another moved out of this geographic area. I’d suggest that just getting together for a common purpose on a regular basis formed the foundation of friendships. When the quintet ended, one of those friendships... subsided. It’s still there, but we almost never see each other now.

I know someone who goes out to coffee regularly several times a week. It’s a group of friends, and coffee seems to be the common bond. They’ve lost at least a couple of this group in recent years.

Do you work at friendship? And if so, how? Do you go out of your way to support that person? Do they go out of their way for you? I know you Unitarians: for you, “friendship” means going to the bar on the weekend together, having a few (or six or seven) drinks together while shouting insults to each other. Driving home separately, mostly *on* the road.

What if a friend of yours is sick, lives a long distance from you? It’s a health crisis. How do you support her, aid her in getting medical help? Remember: you don’t know what’s wrong. You’ve heard the symptoms, but they aren’t specific. Kind words aren’t enough. Do you say to yourself: I’m too far away; I really can’t help. Do you try to “order” her to call an ambulance, or a friend, to get them to the ER or urgent care? (That ordering would at one time have been a fairly typical male response.)

A friend of mine died in 2006 of a heart attack. We had been good friends for years, taking road trips every few years, discussing the deep meanings of life, or the relationship that had just ended. Sometimes this friendship involved banter, giving good natured crap. Sometimes that didn’t work so well. I think toward the end there were enough things wrong in both of our lives that we saw less of each other. And I think I could have done a lot better at reaching out to help, even when it didn’t seem wanted.

And I look at my life now, and I wonder if I am reaching out enough. You ask yourself: is that even a friendship anymore? Is it worth pursuing? And that question may be answered differently with each person. It is possible for people to grow apart. Happens

all the time. Often it's given as the excuse for divorce. We have to decide when "we've grown apart," is meaningful, and when it's an excuse.

I often play the "I remember when" game:

I remember those discussions, years ago.
 Late at night, on campus, in the empty band room.
 Where are we headed? Or
 Do you think she's interested in me? Or
 Are you trying out for Jazz Band? Or
 Why are we in this degree program when life itself seems so futile?

Often you stood by me in disputes.
 And I was there for you.
 And somehow we stumbled on from there, to
 Careers, and marriages, and mortgages.
 And the years passed,
 And still we stood by each other.

Friendship is one expression of a form of love. Or maybe several different kinds, depending. Yes, I know: you guys, watching the football game on your big screen together. You'll never, *ever* use the term LOVE to each other. But will you help pull that friend out of the ditch when the snow slides him in? When your friend has a family member ill, or dying, do you offer support, order in a meal for their family, plow their driveway? Right, it's not love; it's just something you do.

Other languages have different words for love, words that mean different things. Love is complex. You've heard all of that before. As we've been seeing here, friendship also takes many different forms, and sometimes more than one form at a time. So is there a guide to friendship? Some way to tell how to keep a friendship going? At least to the extent that one person can keep a two-sided (or more) relationship going? What is the secret message?

- 1) Pay attention to that person. How are they acting today? Do they seem happy? Annoyed? Angry? Does their attitude seem at odds to what you would have expected from them?
- 2) Ask them: is everything okay? You may get an earful. Or you may get nothing at all – which is always a danger sign. You may need to dig a little to try to get more information.
- 3) From what you've heard, is there something you can do to help? You may want to put that thought on hold if it involved something like punching out their spouse. But there may also be something in that muddle you get about which you can do something.

Note: people have different communicating styles. What may sound really worrisome to you could be the other person thinking: “why did I order a latte? I hate that stuff.”

- 4) Try to do something to help fix what you perceive to be wrong. Occasionally you may find that you’ve really “stepped in it.” You might think that you should have left well enough alone. But those are things you can’t know ahead of time. If it went wrong, apologize, and back off a little. There’s always tomorrow.
- 5) And repeat. Paying attention, and trying to make something better, are very positive steps. Even if they go wrong, in most cases the attempt will be appreciated. Friendship seems to be about paying attention.

Sometimes it can go along for years without a problem, without any issues at all. For instance, the contract is: Bill and you get together, scavenge car parts in the antiques junkyard, assemble them on the 1929 Chevrolet. Drink a 6-pack together while doing it. Climb under or over the car, cut your hand while trying to remove a bolt. Swear profusely. Discuss the lousy green paint match that Ed at the parts place came up with. Call it a great Saturday, go home, and fall asleep on the couch, wondering why your wife doesn’t understand you.

That may work beautifully for years. Then one day your wife announces she’s filing for divorce. Aha! You apparently were putting plenty of time and effort into one friendship, and completely ignoring a more important one. Bill may seem to be “more fun,” “a heckuva guy.” But it turns out, even though it may be counterintuitive, that the one you put more time and effort into is the one that you get the most value out of in the long run. Or as the Little Prince said (Antoine de Saint-Exupery): “It’s the time you spend on your rose that makes your rose so important.”

And believe it or not, this seems to apply to most aspects of our lives: friendships, love relationships, careers, avocations... Malcom Gladwell, in his book *Outliers*, develops a theory that 10,000 hours of intense *attention* (my word, not his) is required for mastery of something. Playing the violin or piano, for example. Ignoring the magic number of 10,000 hours, let’s just say that lots of concentration and attention is required for mastery at pretty much anything, including friendship. Anything worth doing is worth pursuing with focus, *especially* for those of us who find it difficult.

How old are your friends? Are they roughly the same age as you? Are they the folks you met in school, and maintained? Do you have friends who are much older, or much younger? If not, consider it. Different ages have different... sensibilities. Someone 20 or 30 years older may have wisdoms from experience that give their friendship a depth and meaning not yet found in those your own age. And a younger friend – someone in their teens, for instance, or younger – can sparkle in your life, with the newness of creation. They may dance you around the kitchen to a tune you’ve never heard before!

Reach out! The multiple ages of friendships will make you younger, will add years to the happiness in your life! Amen!