



The New Face Of Friendship

The Dutch psychologist and priest, Henri Nouwen, had much to say about what makes true friendship possible in describing friendship as a dance. He wrote:

“Intimacy between people requires closeness as well as distance. It is like dancing. Sometimes we are very close, touching each other or holding each other; sometimes we move away from each other and let the space between us become an area where we can freely move.

“To keep the right balance between closeness and distance requires hard work, especially since the needs of the partners may be quite different at a given moment. One might desire closeness while the other wants distance. One might want to be held while the other looks for independence. A perfect balance seldom occurs, but the honest and open search for that balance can give birth to a beautiful dance, worthy to behold.” (Henri Nouwen. *Bread for the Journey*. Harper: San Francisco, 1997.)

Our contemporary challenge is in how we keep the right balance in an age of instant communication, global networks, and Facebook.

Friendship is an art

Friendship is an art, and it has been described by many as an art that is fast being lost in the face of acquaintances masquerading as friends, of time that flies so quickly that one is out of touch within moments of someone posting personal “news.” A friend is someone with whom we can share our solitude, who can live with us in times of silence, who can weep with us when we grieve, and rejoice with us in our gladness. A friend is more than a therapist or a confessor: at times a friend can heal us and offer us the gift of forgiveness.

With a friend we can be still and know that God is there with both of us.

But Nouwen also wrote:

“We will never fully know the significance of our presence in the lives of our friends. That’s a grace, a grace that calls us not only to humility but also to a deep trust in those who love us. It is in the twilight zones of our hearts where true friendships are born.”

Every good relationship between two or more people, whether it is friendship, marriage, or community, creates space where strangers can enter and become friends, where differences are accepted, because good relationships are ultimately hospitable. And it is the gift of listening that true friendship offers in this act of hospitality.

Listening is paying full attention to another

Listening is much more than allowing another to talk while waiting for a chance to respond. Listening — when it is part of friendship — is paying full attention to another and welcoming him or her into our very being.

And when the one being listened to starts feeling deeply accepted, they then begin to discover their own self. So then the gift of listening, and being listened to, calls forth a truer and more authentic self in both persons, and this is the crux of genuine friendship. We both become fully human.

Friendships through social media

But can the culture of Facebook give us the confidence that builds trust, which allows us to be truly known? Or is it fostering a plethora of masks, of personas, which reduce our capacity for true intimacy and give a false sense of one's own true worth? The tragedies of young people taking their own lives because of online bullying, of family members being "unfriended," and of spouses being "unpartnered" through the vehicle of social media cause immense anguish.

As therapists we see the wounds that accompany such public betrayals. Yet we have also heard stories of old friendships becoming reconnected, of siblings living on opposite sides of the world sharing photos of their children, of former classmates sharing remembrances of times past on a high school or college Facebook page.

It has been said that therapists are "paid friends." And sometimes that is the truth. Sometimes it is the very lack of friends or community — or the grief of lost or broken relationships — that bring clients to see us and to talk about their inner selves in the safety and confidentiality of a therapist's office.

But we also see the powerfully healing dimension of friendship in the lives of those with whom we work — a friend who accompanies a grieving parent whose son has died suddenly to their first appointment with a therapist; friends who come alongside couples struggling to hold their marriage together and give ongoing support as they rebuild; a new friend made at an AA group for a client seeking to change a long-time pattern of abusing alcohol; a friend who invites a lonely newcomer to Canada to their faith community for fellowship; a friend who wipes away the tears of a young woman who has suffered a miscarriage after two years of trying to become pregnant; friends who volunteer to help a couple with a disabled child have an occasional break.

So there are both old and new faces of friendship, and for this grace in our lives we need to always be thankful.

by Diane Marshall, M.Ed., RMFT

"In the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures. For in the dew of little things, does the heart find its morning and is refreshed."

Kahlil Gibran

"Don't walk behind me, I may not lead; don't walk in front of me, I may not follow; just walk beside me and be my friend."

Albert Camus

"Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind. "Pooh?" he whispered.

"Yes, Piglet?"

"Nothing," said Piglet, taking Pooh's hand. "I just wanted to be sure of you."

A.A. Milne, Winnie-the-Pooh



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