

“What Friends Are For”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Reading from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essay “Friendship.”

We have a great deal more kindness than is ever spoken. Maugre [meaning: in spite of] all the selfishness that chills like east winds the world, the whole human family is bathed with an element of love like a fine ether. How many persons we meet in houses, whom we scarcely speak to, whom yet we honour, and who honour us! How many we see in the street, or sit with in church, whom, though silently, we warmly rejoice to be with!

Read the language of these wandering eye-beams. The heart knoweth. The effect of the indulgence of this human affection is a certain cordial exhilaration. In poetry, and in common speech, the emotions of benevolence and complacency which are felt towards others are likened to the material effects of fire; so swift, or much more swift, more active, more cheering, are these fine inward irradiations. From the highest degree of passionate love, to the lowest degree of good-will, they make the sweetness of life.

Sermon: “What Friends Are For”

Once upon a time, two friends were traveling together,
when a bear suddenly met them on their path.

One of them immediately climbed up into a tree
and hid in the branches.

The other, sure to be attacked, fell flat on the ground.

When the bear came over to him,
it nudged him with his snout, sniffing his body.

The man held his breath, and tried to play a convincing corpse.

The bear eventually left and the other man came down from the tree, asking how his friend was, seeing if he was okay.

The other man, getting up from the ground, said, “yeah, but the bear did whisper some advice in my ear. . .”

“Well, what did he say?”

“He said to never travel with a friend who deserts you at the first sign of danger!”

. . . friendship can be a tricky business.

But, it is also one of life’s most worthwhile endeavours, even when we have to work at it to get it right.

Yet, recent research has shown that it’s an endeavour we’re ever-less likely to pursue.

A study published a few years ago found that we, in North America, are suffering a loss in the quality and quantity of our close friendships.

Some 25% of us have no close confidants. And, even for those of us with good friends, the average number has dropped down from four to two.¹

I struggle to square this phenomenon with the rise of Facebook, for the large number of us who partake of this form of social networking, claim scores and sometimes hundreds of people as our “friends.”

Now, of course, most everyone understands that “Facebook friends” are not really the same thing as true friends, or best friends.

For most of us, Facebook is an online snapshot of the web of our lives—a virtual version of the strange and wondrous mix of acquaintances, colleagues, high school chums, long lost loves, or forgotten friends who mingle in cyberspace and, in some strange way, make up our lives.

¹ McPherson, Smith-Lovin, Brashears *American Sociological Review*, June 2006.

While there's much to be said for what Facebook and social networking have done to knit people together in community, it seems that something is increasingly being lost, as we trade personal connections for virtual ones.

While I welcome the ease and immediacy of email, and the ways that Facebook and Twitter allow me to know what my friends are up to, I find myself missing those handwritten letters from friends—the ones that, when they arrived (long, long ago), would require me to truly sit down and savour them as the gifts they were meant to be.

I can't now recall the last time I received a letter like that, or, for that matter, when I wrote one myself.

I hope at least some of you have kept up this important art, because it seems a vital part of tending our most important relationships.

There's something to be said for the care that's involved in slowing down, and carefully crafting a message that speaks from one heart to another.

There's something to be said for the myriad ways that we cultivate the friendships in our lives—because these close relationships can bring us not only genuine joy and companionship, but serve to make us happier and, it's even now clear, healthier.

But, I wonder if we're slowly losing touch with the ancient art of friendship—if we're forgetting what it truly means to be friends.

Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, offered extensive reflections on friendship, suggesting that there are three categories into which friendships fall: utility, pleasure, and virtue.

The first, friendships based on utility, he said, are ultimately shallow and easily dissolved.

These are relationships where there's an exchange, and usually some seeking after advantage on some level.

These might better be called acquaintances—
the people with whom we might chat about the weather
or the final score in the Leafs² game.

These might be the people with whom we transact some friendly business,
be it a barber or the person behind the counter,
who greets us at Tim's each time we come craving coffee.

These are relationships of circumstance,
and when the conditions change, the friendship comes to an end—
usually without much consequence.

That said, honouring these relationships is an incredibly important part
of maintaining our social fabric and moving through the world
with kindness, grace and good humour.

Aristotle's second category is that of friendships of pleasure,
which involve the passions.

Like friendships of utility, these can have a fleeting nature.

They are pursued for the pleasure they bring in the present moment.

When that moment is gone, though, often, too, is the friendship.

Aristotle considered such relationships the stuff of youth, who he felt
“quickly become friends and quickly stop. . . love and stop loving quickly.”

I can only imagine what Aristotle would have to say about Facebook,
but I'm pretty sure he would consider the act of “defriending” someone—the
step of intentionally deleting someone who has previously been a Facebook
friend—as a sure sign of a friendship based merely on pleasure.

When the pleasure no longer serves, the person is no longer a friend.

Now, as you might imagine, Aristotle envisioned a nobler form of friendship,
one he labeled as virtue.

² For non-Torontonians, this is proper, local usage/spelling of the Toronto Maple Leafs hockey team.

Virtuous friendships involve wishing the very best for our friends, regardless of the utility or pleasure it might hold for ourselves.

Such friendships are the kinds that endure, and they're tough to find.

They take a lot of intention and care,
and they take a lot of time.

That's why it's not possible to have more than a handful of virtuous friendships. The demands are simply too high.³

Aristotle's framework for understanding the friendly relations in our lives can be helpful, especially if it summons us to give some serious thought to how these categories play out in our own lives—to ask which of our friendships are based on utility, which exist simply for pleasure, and how many of them inspire us to strive after virtue?

I hope that for each of us more than a few are of the virtuous variety.

And, I hope that at least a few of them are based here in this congregation.

The third principle of Unitarian Universalism calls us to “acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.”

That is, to me, the stuff of virtuous friendship, and it is, some of the most significant work we undertake together in this faith.

In my own life, it has been the deep friendships with people who have repeatedly called me to my best self that I most value.

It is those friendships where I have been shown patience, when I may not have seemed to deserve it, and where I have been lovingly confronted when I needed it most—when I desperately needed to be challenged to change my thoughts, my words, or my deeds.

It's not always easy to let someone serve that role in our lives,

³ I only hope that research showing people to have an ever-smaller number of friends points to people deepening in their relationships, though I somehow suspect that's not the case.

but who better than a friend?

To that point, I've always loved the witty observation from Oscar Wilde that "True friends stab you in the front."

There's humour there, but as is so often the case with effective humour, there's also some element of truth.

Only a true friend can be invited into that tender, sacred space where the hardest things can be said—and, hopefully, heard.

Elsewhere in Emerson's essay on friendship, which I shared with you earlier, he goes on to say:

There are two elements that go in to the composition of friendship, each so sovereign that I can detect no superiority in either.

One is truth.

A friend is a person with whom I may be sincere.
Before a friend I may think aloud.

I am arrived at last in the presence of a person so real and equal that I may drop even those undermost garments of dissimulation, courtesy and second thought, . . . and may deal with the simplicity and wholeness with which one chemical atom meets another.
Sincerity is the luxury allowed. . . ."

He goes on to say that the second element of friendship is tenderness.

We are holden to people by every sort of tie,
by blood, by pride, by fear, by hope, by money, by lust, by hate,
by admiration, by every circumstance and badge and trifle—
but we can scarce believe
that so much character can subsist in another
as to draw us by love.

When a person becomes a friend to me
I have touched the goal of fortune.

Friendship...is for aid and comfort through all the relations and passages of life and death.

It is fit for serene days and graceful gifts and country rambles, but also for rough roads and hard fare, shipwreck, poverty and persecution.

The glory of friendship[, Emerson writes,] is not the outstretched hand, the kindly smile nor the joy in companionship.

Rather, it is the spiritual inspiration that comes when he or she discovers that someone else believes in them, and is willing to trust them.

I think that's what we mean when we speak of having a true friend in this life.

So often, at memorial services, people will stand here in this pulpit, and often overcome with tears, will share how the person we have gathered to remember was to them a true friend.

It is some of life's highest praise.

That it arises so predictably in such sad moments points, for me, to something precious and real.

In grieving the loss of a genuine friend, we are mourning the loss of something—of someone—that was real to us.

Those kinds of relationships are the ones that can be trusted. But, such bonds are rarely forged without some difficulty.

In order to endure and deepen, such friendships almost always withstand some measure of conflict, debates and disagreements, and sometimes pain and lasting upset.

But, virtuous relationships are where we learn the skills and develop the capacity to work through what theologian Martin Marty calls the "scrimmages of friendship."

It's often through these struggles that a friendship is proven—in those moments someone sees all our short-comings, but doesn't shy away—in those moments when someone sees what we might become, and doesn't let us off the hook.

Our truest friends, then, are those people who hold us accountable to our hopes and dreams.

And, that's why when we lose such a partner in our own spiritual growth, we suffer such a horrible loss.

There's a story told of two women in a village who were always at each other's throats.

To the untrained eye, they looked to be mortal enemies, arguing over every aspect of life in their little town.

They argued whether a new school should be built, whether the roads should be paved, and whether and how a bridge should be constructed over the river that ran through their village.

They seemed to always end up on the opposite side of every question.

But, most of the time, through passionate debate, some common ground would eventually be found.

And then one day, when one of the women suddenly died, people from the town flooded the home of the second woman, assuming she would take some delight in the news of the death.

But, instead, they found her in deep mourning. When asked why, she could only bear to say that that day she had lost her truest friend.

In this season of harvest, when we take stock of the blessings in our lives, let us look to the cherished places that our friends hold.

Let us undertake an inventory of those friendships that might be made virtuous with our care and cultivation.

To guide you, I invite you into these meditative words
from the Unitarian minister and poet Max Coots.

Let us give thanks for a bounty of people:
For children who are our second planting,
and, though they grow like weeds
and the wind too soon blows them away,
may they forgive us our cultivation
and fondly remember where their roots are.

Let us give thanks:
For generous friends with hearts as big as hubbards
and smiles as bright as their blossoms;
For feisty friends as tart as apples;
For continuous friends, who, like scallions and cucumbers,
keep reminding us that we've had them;

For crotchety friends, as sour as rhubarb and as indestructible;
For handsome friends, who are as gorgeous as eggplants
and as elegant as a row of corn, and the
others, as plain as potatoes and as good for you;

For funny friends, who are as silly as Brussels sprouts
and as amusing as Jerusalem artichokes, and serious friends,
as complex as cauliflowers and as intricate as onions;

For friends as unpretentious as cabbages,
as subtle as summer squash, as persistent as parsley,
as delightful as dill, as endless as zucchini, and who, like parsnips,
can be counted on to see you throughout the winter;
For old friends, nodding like sunflowers in the evening-time,
and young friends coming on as fast as radishes;

For loving friends, who wind around us like tendrils and hold us,
despite our blights, wilts, and witherings;

And, finally, for those friends now gone,
like gardens past that have been harvested
and who fed us in their times that we might have life thereafter;

For all these we give thanks.⁴

And, so we do.

Blessed Be. Amen.

⁴ Reverend Max Coats, “Let Us Give Thanks” from *View from a Tree* (1989).