

“Your Friend Is Your Need Answered”

A Sermon By The Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, 18 February, 2007
For the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

“It seems to me that trying to live without friends is like milking a bear to get cream for your morning coffee,” said Zora Neale Hurston, an African-American novelist in Dust Tracks on a Road. She went on “It is a whole lot of trouble, and then not worth much after you get it.”

Wonderful image! But what on earth does it mean? I guess she was saying that there are countless opportunities for friendship, but some people are so fiercely determined to go it alone, and flail about in their struggles with life to prove they don’t need help, only to find that isolation doesn’t give much comfort. So you did it yourself and you’re all alone! Whatcha got now?

Those of us who are partnered, who have husbands or wives or lovers or dear friends with whom we share our homes and lives have a head start on friendship—or should. Who is more likely to be your friend than the person you live with? You know being friendly is necessary but not sufficient to that friendship.

We who have partners know our other friendships are modeled after this one. We learn from it what we need and want in an intimate relationship. We find reflections of it in the way we relate to our other friends. Those who live alone have more difficulty creating their own model for deep friendships. They don’t have a partner to help them create and nourish their way of relationship with others, creating a safe place where they can expose themselves when they decide to trust another with their real being.

Of course intimate partnership is no panacea. Those who live with someone who is really not their deepest friend have an even more difficult time, I think, than people who live alone. Struggling marriages are like that. Marital partners try to make friends of their spouses and failing in that, know their marriage isn’t working. It’s not enough to have a partner you can admire or respect. You need one you can show your vulnerability and pain, and be accepted with all of it. Whether or not your partner is a live-in friend, that kind of caring is what we all need from someone, and can get from only a few.

When actress Lauren Bacall took a break from making movies to have children with her husband Humphrey Bogart, she said she had mixed feelings. “I’ll miss Hollywood,” she said. “Of the twenty friends I thought I had, I’ll miss the six I really had.” Bogie and Bacall were a rare Hollywood marriage. They stayed together to death. When Bogie died she put in the urn with his ashes a small gold whistle inscribed “If you want anything, just whistle.” She had spoken the line to him in their first film together, To Have and Have Not. That was a real friendship to model for others. Notice that I said “model,” not by which to judge others. We judge too much for our own good.

New research by a team of European anthropologists studying cultures around the world suggests that you really don’t have a lot of choice in how many close friends you have. John Bohannon says “The sizes of your social circles may be hardwired into your brain.” Those closest to you will number between three and five; the average is 3.3. That’s it. The anthropologists call them “the support clique” from whom an individual will “seek personal advice or help in times of severe emotional and financial distress.”

They call the next ring of people important to you a “sympathy group.” It consists of “all the individuals with whom one has special ties. [They] are typically contacted at least once a month” and they number between 12 and 20 individuals; in the U.S. they average 10.2 persons. You may call lots of people friends, but the reality is that only about three are really important to you, and ten more are significant enough for you to look them up monthly.

We teach our children that they can have lots of friends. We grew up envying kids who seemed to have lots who were what we called “popular” when we were young. We didn’t know that they were just as lonely as we were. They didn’t think they had lots of friends either. We didn’t know that.

Why do we have few real friends, we who want the depth of intimacy and sharing with others? The poet Anais Nin said “Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.” (The Diary of Anais Nin, Vol. 2, 1934-39) Does that explain it? No matter how many friends your mom said you were supposed to have, each real one you made was an entire world with you.

How many worlds do you contain? I don’t know about you, but my life seems awfully full. I don’t have room for many other worlds in it and I don’t want to have lots of satellites revolving around me, either. I had that when I had small children at home. They were like satellites until they spun off.

That’s one of the great joys of parenting. Instead of staying in orbit around you, your kids—if they’re healthy—spin off and never really come back into orbit around you. Never, not even if they come back to live with you. It’s not that you don’t enjoy them but you can’t hold their worlds in your orbit any more. Grown-up kids aren’t satellites. Friends aren’t either.

What are friends? Gibran said “Your friend is your needs answered.” No one can answer all your needs, but a friend answers the unique set of needs that appear in the world you two contain together. Answers the needs, not fulfills them. You may not like all the answers of friendship.

Mark Twain said “The proper office of a friend is to side with you when you are in the wrong. Nearly anybody will side with you when you are in the right.” That of course doesn’t mean that your friend will go down in flames with you when you’re in the wrong. Twain said “It takes your enemy and your friend, working together, to hurt you to the heart; the one to slander you and the other to get the news to you.” (That’s from Pudd’nhead Wilson’s New Calendar, volume II, chapter 9.)

Ouch! A friend will tell you what you need to know, which is not always what you want to hear. In fact the friend is the one who makes sure that you know what you need to know and hangs around to help you deal with it when all the arsonists and firemen have left. Friends have shovels and good-sized (but not bottomless) trash bins. You can dump a lot of you there, and unless you throw in a fair amount of junk and burned out dreams from time to time, your friend is probably not a friend at all, only an arms-length counselor.

How about a minister? Don’t expect your minister to be your friend. Friendly, yes, but close intimate, no. Strong ministers have huge trash bins, and people dump a lot of stuff there from time to time, burned out dreams and personal pain and defeated hopes. But it’s not reciprocal. Ministers are arms-length counselors. If they try to be more than that with their congregations I think they spread

A friend will seldom loan you serious money or anything else of high public value, like her reputation. If she does, pay it back quickly. If it is the reputation, guard it as if it were your own soul, but keep giving it back to her. Holding it away from her too long is dangerous to your friendship.

The 18th century essayist Joseph Addison said he once loaned money to a friend with whom he was accustomed to having long discussions. Soon Addison noticed a change in his friend's behavior. Before the loan they'd disagreed with one another on many things but after the loan the borrower agreed with every position Addison took. One day when they were talking about something on which Addison knew his friend had previously held a contrary view, he exclaimed "Either contradict me, sir, or pay me my money!"

Gibran said "let there be no purpose in friendship save the deepening of your spirit." If you borrow from your friend you transform her into your banker. You know the purpose of the banker's relationship with you. Watch out for making your friend too useful. "Business, you know, may bring money but friendship hardly ever does" said Jane Austen. (Emma, 1816) The friendship may not survive the purpose you ask of it.

Don't expect your friend to cook too much for you. (Is being a chef really the purpose of your friendship?) Or clean up after you. (Do you want a maid or a friend?) Or run your errands too frequently. Men who ask their beloved secretaries to buy flowers for their wives should be divorced by the wives so the wives can marry the secretaries. Wives seldom appreciate the good taste of secretaries even when they're polite about it. Be wary of politeness. It may warn you about the impending end of a friendship.

"Let your best be for your friend," said Gibran. "If he must know the ebb of your tide, let him know its flood also. For what is your friend that you should seek him with hours to kill? Seek him always with hours to live." To do less than that is to transform your friend into an entertainer who is valued less for the depth you share in your friendship than for his usefulness when you have nothing better to do.

Jim Moore, a famous New York restaurateur had dear theatrical friends who frequented his place after their shows. As they grew older and began dying off Moore missed their visits so much that one day he made a pilgrimage to the cemetery where several were buried. He stopped at each grave, complaining at the unhearing occupant for his thoughtlessness in dying and leaving him behind. When he got to the grave of his dearest friend, the great showman George M. Cohen, he unwrapped a big salmon and thumped it on the headstone. "In case you don't know," he shouted, "Today's Friday and I just want you to see what you're missing."

You don't have to take your best to the grave. The good thing about friends, even when they die and are gone, is that you can remember them and laugh. If they were friends and not just people with whom you were friendly, you'll probably do that, and you'll weep some too.

The bad thing about surviving the deaths of friends is that if you survive too many you notice that you're getting to be all alone. It's hard to lose people from our ring of sympathizers. It's so much harder to lose those from your inner circle, your "support clique," your gang of 3.3. Their losses tell us to be lonely, and who wants to be lonely?

My wife Mary and I have many times discussed which of us will die first. She keeps telling me that she intends to beat me to it. She says she doesn't want to be around when I'm gone. I think she doesn't want to pick up after me after I'm gone. My study is usually a dreadful mess and when it isn't because I've just cleaned it up, it will be a mess tomorrow. That's how I live with ideas. They're good friends of mine too, and I hate to let go of them.

In the letting go of dead ideas as of dead friendships, a piece of you dies. I think that's why it hurts so much to lose someone close, and hurts doubly when the friend you're losing doesn't have the good grace to die, but just leaves and walks away from your friendship alive, perhaps with anger. The death of a deep friendship is harder than the loss of a life. In both a piece of you dies but if a friend just goes away it's as if you know a piece of you is walking about somewhere on earth and you don't know where it is. We have memorial services to help us let go of those we love who die. We don't have good rituals to let go of friends who desert us and go on living somewhere else.

During the Second World War, the composer Oscar Levant was called up for the draft. The examiner, aware of Levant's sensitivity, asked him "Do you think you can kill?" Levant replied "I don't know about strangers, but friends, yes."

Ah me, we too. Be careful. Be gentle, first with yourself and then with all the people you love. "Friendship with oneself is all-important," Eleanor Roosevelt once said, "because without it one cannot be friends with anyone else in the world." Be a friend to yourself, love yourself, and then you can love others." If you don't, you can't.

It's okay to be angry but even more okay to let the anger go away. Friends do get angry. You probably get angriest with yourself. Next to themselves, best friends do anger with each other best of all. The realest of best friends do it and come back for more of the love they share the most with each other.

Dick Weston-Jones @2005

The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Hillsborough, NC

1710 Old NC 10, Hillsborough, NC 27278 (919, 644-0567), www.uuchnc.org
Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, Minister; phone 919, 932-7447, dwj@wuurld.org