

Circle of Friends -- A Look at Friendships in Adulthood and Later Life

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Many of us never stop to think how important the friendships in our lives are. No matter how close family ties, there are occasions when good friends supply us with the strength and support we need to face difficult challenges. Recently, over a two week period, my parents experienced the deaths of three life-long friends. Each of the individuals had impacted their lives considerably and as I pondered the extent of their loss, I thought about my own circle of friends.

We choose our friends. Some friends cross our life paths frequently or at least intermittently, and mutual appreciation is savored as "precious exchanges" take place. Other friends come into our lives for a short while before we lose contact. They may help us see another point of view; teach or give us courage to achieve a goal, or to face a challenge. Many friends are chosen because of similar interests; other friendships are cultivated because their perspectives are so different from our own. Friends of all ages are a must! They enrich our lives by introducing us to their passions, enthusiasm, and experiences.¹

Many seemingly "chance encounters" provided by friends have resulted in critical opportunities, like choosing a an occupation, mate, or place of residence. Twenty years later, our lives dramatically transformed from where we started, we may be unable to recall their names.

I am reminded of a story my father tells of a chance meeting with a fellow in a steel mill in Pennsylvania. The steel worker told my father he had a job offer in the Hawaiian Islands, and was going to ask his girl to marry him. They were scheduled to leave on a steamer at the company's expense the following month. My father, intrigued, asked the name of the company and went home to locate Hawaii on the map.

The next week, my father ran into the steel worker again. The man said his fiancee would not leave Pennsylvania, and he wasn't going to be able to take the job in Hawaii. Excited about the possibility of adventure and employment, my father contacted the company. The following month, at the age of 21, it was my father who was on that steamer crossing the Panama Canal bound for the U.S. territory of Hawaii. I have that friendly stranger to thank for my birth and childhood in Hawaii.

Friends provide a bridge to a better quality of life.² The good friends in our lives are on our side. This doesn't mean they always agree with us, but that they have our true interests in their hearts. They bolster us, are tolerant of our weaknesses, share skills and knowledge, perpetuate our values, watch over our children and our parents, provide nourishment for our bodies and souls, and seek us out because they like our company. With friends, you don't have to do anything or be anything you are not. With a friend, one can be oneself.

Thinking about my parents' recent loss, they most surely were bruised by the new felt emptiness, but certainly not destroyed, nor really astonished. "Who is next?" had crossed their minds. Yet even with their wide circle of friends of all ages, the worth of "old friends" rises above others.³ In

Ecclesiastes we're reminded that the value of lifelong bonds is the true value of friendship. "Forsake not an old friend, for the new is not comparable to him: A new friend is as new wine; when it is old, thou shalt drink it with pleasure." Death will continue to thin our forests of friends, and one wants to learn how to cope with those losses.

Each individual adapts to a comfortable sociability throughout life. People have different sociability needs,⁴ and herein lies a critical key to coping with a friendship loss. The loss of a special friend cannot be made up with numbers of friends or new friends, nor can any other facet of an individual's life replace or diminish the uniqueness of the lost individual. What sadness this makes us feel. Yet, what joy this brings us! For in our lives and with this person we were able to capture the very essence of friendship. No one will ever bring it back, yet no one can ever take it away. It is ours to keep, to give away, allow to seed and nurture anew. It is our gift now. How will you use this precious gift? What did your friend teach you?

References

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OCTOBER 1997