

Fostering Friendships - Old, New, Near and Far - Building and Maintaining our Family of Choice

Each of us has a family of origin. We all come from somewhere, or more specifically, a group of people to whom we are connected by DNA. We had no choice when the family of origin assignments were handed out. Our parents decide to have children, we turned out to be those children, end of story. Many of us have families of creation - the people with whom we live as adults in marriage and children relationships. There is some choice involved in those relationships. Hopefully we choose a romantic partner who not only is a supportive and accepting life and love mate, but also is an equal in the lifetime child-rearing responsibilities. In this family of creation, there can still be overtones - echoes of the way things were done in our origin families - influencing how we manage those relationships.

The family of choice of which I speak is one of valued friendships with which we build a network of support, caring, understanding, acceptance, validation, encouragement, trust - all words I think of as synonyms for the word love. This network has many uses in our adult lives, and is different from the relationships we have either with origin family or created family. Origin family relationships may come with obligation (which may be guilt driven) or 'hidden agenda' baggage. Creation family relationships can add the matching luggage pieces responsibility and priorities. With the family of choice, the friendships are as precious as diamonds and they increase in value with every passing year. They take time to maintain, but oh, the benefits they provide! Old friends may know us from before, through our failures and triumphs, through the poor decisions and awkward moments and everything in between. New friends know us now and if they are part of the family of choice, we trust them with the stories of before. And with family of choice, if it's the kind of healthy network we strive to find and sustain, the friendships are usually light in the 'baggage' department. We enter these relationships willingly and sometimes conflicts arise. But if this friendship is within the network I call family of choice, it will quickly become clear to us what needs to be done to either resolve the conflict, or perhaps the time has come to end the friendship, as sometimes happens in life. Friendships don't always last, but an ended friendship is the same as any other experience - not without value, and an opportunity for lessons to be learned. I have had friendships throughout my life that didn't last for a variety of reasons. Ending a friendship is never easy, because we have come to rely on those people for emotional support. And it is a loss, so there is grief/mourning involved. It also implies the possibility that we failed in that relationship. But it's good to learn how to walk away from a friendship when it has become a toxic situation. Even though a friendship ends, its value continues to be of service.

Just the word itself - friend - is a serious word to me. I take caution and care with that word, as I do with the precious diamonds that are those friendships. If I refer to someone as a friend, that's saying something important. For me, being a friend is an honor and a gift. Having friends who value me is an honor and a gift as well. I am thrilled to be thought of as a friend to others and I am blessed to have some wonderful friendships in my life. Recently I had coffee with a friend who told me she considers me as part of her "inner circle" - what she considers her core group of friends in her life. She and I have not known each other for a very long time - we are newer friends to each other. She has known the rest of the friends in her core group for many more

years. So this was special for me, as I consider this friend in the same way.

Friends provide the opportunity to be myself, to share my whole life, to risk trusting someone else with not just the good stuff. A friend can provide help with a problem, companionship for a shared activity, a ride to a medical appointment, advice or suggestions or a million and one other things. For me, there are different friends for different needs. My friendships tend to be as implied in this article's title - old and new, near and far. I have never been a part of only one group of people, but have friendships with people of different ages, varied walks of life, races, religions, education levels, many differences among them. Each of them brings something unique to my life, and I'm blessed to know them all.

I'm just back from my second visit to Seattle, and got together for the second time with a faraway long time friend. She and I met in 1993 at a vacation resort and hung out together along with some other folks for the week we were all there. I never expect to stay in touch with people I meet on vacation, and when that happens (as it has for me several times), it's a nice bonus. In this instance, none of the other group members and I stayed in touch with one another, but this friend and I managed to do so. We maintained our connection through snail mail and the occasional long distance phone call (realize 1993 was before email and cell phones and web cams), but never met again face to face until last year, when I was finally able to plan a trip to Seattle. Since my friend lives in Victoria, BC, I took my passport and myself across the water from Seattle to visit with her. It was good to see her again, and to spend time walking and talking in the way we do when we're in person together. Being together again, even after all of that time in between, it was as if no time had passed. We picked up the thread of our ongoing correspondence, just changed to a face to face conversation. Take a look at the "Photos" section here at this website to see me and my faraway friend.

Another friend and I have known each other since 1979, and have been in touch occasionally off and on ever since. We do the birthday card and holiday card thing, there is an occasional phone call, sometimes a face to face visit, though we have not either of those for a number of years. My father died in September a few years ago and just a few weeks before my birthday. A few days before my birthday, I opened my mail and there was a package from her with a John Mayer cd I was just about to buy for myself! How she knew I wanted that cd and went ahead to send it to me remains a mysterious and magical thing, since we're not in the habit of exchanging gifts. I chose to attribute it to the connection between cherished friends, and this friend knows what my dad meant to me. It made my first birthday after his loss so special in that very important year.

It is always wonderful to make connections with friends, whether long time or just met, in faraway places or right in our own backyards. I have a friend who lives in Alaska, and she sends interesting email with tidbits of her very different lifestyle there. During my recent trip to Seattle, I struck up a conversation with another conference participant who happened to sit down in front of me. At the first break we started talking, and wound up having lunch and talking throughout the day. When the day came to a close, we enjoyed talking so much it was hard to say goodbye, so we considered making plans to get together at another time during my stay there. She called the next day with an invitation to come visit her at her home in the Seattle area and have dinner with her family. I was touched by this hospitality from a new acquaintance. And what a treat to visit with her and have more time to talk together. I attended a conference in Santa Fe, NM in 2006 and struck up a conversation with another participant, and when she and I

decided to go together for lunch, another woman approached us and joined us for the meal. The three of us wound up going for many meals together and had some wonderful conversations together during the conference week. It's always nice to meet and enjoy the company of colleagues in other places - a nice addition to my local colleague network.

Sometimes I make friends with people through introduction, or at the gym, or at a job, or at a club meeting or social event or organization gathering. I find it surprising when people say they have difficulty meeting people. Of course, being an outgoing personality type, it's not hard for me to talk to strangers. But really getting to know someone and allowing them to get to know me, and then maintaining those relationships - that takes time and attention and effort. It's a larger worthwhile investment that yields enormous returns.

Friendships are the condiments that add flavor to our world - some sweetness, a little spice, occasionally some bitterness. They bring different dimensions to the lives we live. They are witnesses to our journeys and share their own with us along the way. Having valued friends helps keep our lives in balance. I'll close with the quote from my girl scout days, "Make new friends but keep the old. One is silver and the other's gold." So true.