

Shared lives: The challenges of friendship

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Friendships are possible only if we are willing to make space for another person in our lives. But this is risky and sometimes gets messy, because the very people we are initially delighted to make room for in our lives can hurt and disappoint us as the friendships unfold. Then our inclination is not to create space but to close it off and protect ourselves by writing our friends out of our story.

That's how it was with my friendship with Jim. Jim was one of my dearest lifelong friends, but it's surprising that our friendship ever began—much less continued—because Jim and I were startlingly different from one another. Aristotle said that too much dissimilarity between persons makes friendship impossible. Jim and I proved him wrong—though not right away. I met Jim on August 28, 1965, our first day at a high school seminary in rural Missouri. I remember it vividly because I immediately knew that no one could ever confuse one of us for the other. Jim was an outgoing, charismatic, energetic Italian-American from the south side of St. Louis who loved adventure, was never afraid to take chances and was pretty good at getting into trouble. Growing up in the suburbs of Louisville, I was much more reserved than Jim (well, everybody was), liked routines more than adventures and thought "playing it safe" was not a bad way to live. Still, I had a hunch that if I made room for Jim in my life, it would be good for me.

But little did I know how much this friendship would challenge me. Of course, no one enters a friendship thinking of ways it might go wrong; friendships are based in attraction and carry a sense of possibility. We are drawn to some persons more than others because of something we see in them. It can be their personality and temperament, their outlook on life, their goodness, their sense of humor or, as with Jim, it can be because they clearly are not who we are. But we also open our lives to them because we believe there is something promising in the friendship. We don't know what the friends will ask of us—or where the friendship will take us—but we risk investing in it because we believe that sharing life with these persons will bless us.

And it usually does, but not always in the ways we anticipate. Friendships are morally important because they draw us out of ourselves and teach us how to care for others for their own sake. Friendships create obligations and responsibilities because a friendship is a promise to attend to another's well-being over time. At first this is easy. There is nothing we want more than to be with our friends because we are enlivened by the goodness we see in them and by the love we receive from them. But friendships are living things—they are graced by unpredictable adventures—and this means that friendships don't always soar; sometimes they plod along, sometimes they stall, sometimes they stop for a while and sometimes they die. What does it mean to seek the good of a friend then?

It is easy to sentimentalize friendship, to think that friendships should always be uplifting, comforting and relatively easy relationships. But this is a silly and shallow view of friendship because it fails to recognize that our friends are just as flawed and fractured as we are. Jesus commands us to love our neighbors, and sometimes friends can be the hardest neighbors to love precisely because we know them so well. In friendships we see the other person's goodness—we see the image of God alive in that person—but we also become intimately aware of his or her shortcomings and weaknesses, of imperfections that may never disappear and struggles that may never end.

This was certainly true for Jim and me. As we moved from high school to college to graduate school, Jim changed in ways that were hard for me to understand. Though we were members of the same religious community, his life moved in directions that excluded me. He developed new friendships that left me questioning the status of our own and made me feel marginal to his life. As our interests increasingly diverged, it was harder to find what connected us. I began to wonder if the friend

who was once a stranger might have become a stranger again.

But it worked both ways. I changed in a way that was extremely hard for Jim to accept when I left the religious community the two of us had belonged to for over 30 years. Jim was baffled, hurt and angered by my decision, particularly because he heard about it before I was able to tell him myself. He felt I had abandoned him at a time when he wasn't certain about his own future. But then Jim did something wonderful. Instead of counting his losses and moving on without me, he reached out to me. He would not let a decision he found hard to understand destroy a friendship that, despite all its turbulence, had always been a blessing and a gift. In his inimitable way, he continued to love me whether through a surprise phone call on a Saturday afternoon, a memorable meal at a Mongolian restaurant in Louisville or by showing up at my wedding on a sultry July morning in Green Bay.

I tried to do the same for Jim by giving him the time and space he needed to discover who he was, by being patient with him and by being with him when he was seriously ill. I wanted him to know that I loved him.

Friendships are narratives of hope, but they can be sustained only by a generosity of heart and spirit that enables the friends to work through the struggles and setbacks that mark any real relationship, in order to recover its original grace. Generosity of heart and spirit means that friends will not allow each other's very real failures and shortcomings to obscure the good they see in one another. Without this generosity, our vision of the other grows twisted and distorted and our recollection of them grievously selective. We forget the good that attracted us to them in the first place and are unwilling to acknowledge that along with whatever misdeeds we can trace to them, there is also a narrative of love, kindness and undeserved goodness and support.

Rooted in humility, a generosity of heart and spirit nurtures compassion, mercy and forgiveness, as well as a healthy sense of humor. It frees us to be patient with the foibles of our friends because we are honest enough to acknowledge our own. Lacking this virtue, we are much more likely to judge our friends harshly and ungraciously instead of charitably, because we think better of ourselves than we should and not nearly as well of them as they deserve. It is an essential virtue for friendship, because through it friends give one another the time each needs to struggle, to grow, to repent and be forgiven and to experience from one another the love of a God who never gives up on any of us.

Isn't that the heart of the matter? Christians think differently about friendship because their understanding of friendship is rooted not in rosy accounts of human perfectibility but in a God who remains ever faithful to us and who never, no matter how egregious our failings, writes us out of the story of divine love. Imitating such a scandalously uncalculating love is daunting; it demands not only that we stand by our friends when they are struggling or discouraged or suffering, but also that we do so when others have abandoned them and given up hope in them.

What does it mean to seek the good of a friend when a wrong he has done has removed him from the community? What does love require of us when a friend is in prison? Or when everyone else has turned against her? What is required of spouses when the bond of love in marriage has been irreparably broken, and the partner who was thought to be a lifelong companion has become more an enemy whom it is easy to hate than a friend whom we are given to love? These are not easy questions to answer. But Christians must wrestle with them as they navigate the challenges of friendship because they have been befriended by a God of limitless love and are disciples of one whose life, death and resurrection should make it hard for them to close their hearts to anyone.

My friend Jim died in January 2006. In the life of our friendship we celebrated one another's gifts, rejoiced in the life we shared with one another and hopefully made one another better. Yes, Jim sometimes turned my world upside down—but he also left it immeasurably graced. I learned from him that what Augustine said was true: friends are God's gift to us and God loves us through them. But Augustine also said that friendships are "schools of love" and sanctifying ways of life, because by faithfully seeking the good of one who, like ourselves, can be both companion and stranger, heartfelt friend as well as occasional enemy, we help one another along on our way to God by growing together in the love of God.

Jim was always full of surprises. Perhaps his most blessed surprise was teaching me that sometimes salvation comes to us from the person we are most tempted to write out of our story.