

My husband and I moved to be near friends

Why does this sound strange to people?

by [Heidi Haverkamp](#) in the [May 5, 2021](#) issue



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Last year, my husband and I sold our house in DeKalb, Illinois, where he had finished the coursework for his PhD, and moved to Indianapolis. Neither of us was changing jobs. (We both work from home, so we can work anywhere.) But in the past few years, a growing list of our dear friends have ended up in Indianapolis. Now, there was more to our decision to move than just this, but the pull of friendship was real—to live in the midst of people who know us, who know our stories, who ask many of the same questions we do about life, faith, and mystery.

Friendship is a rare impetus for a move, I've realized. People tend to move for careers, to live near mountains or the ocean, for family—but not usually for friends. In fact, when we mention our friends as a reason for our move, people seem to not even register the word *friends*. Many folks whom we thought we'd already explained our move to—even family members—have asked a second or third time: *Now, why did you choose Indianapolis again?* I sometimes feel sheepish about it: Were my husband and I so desperately lonely, so little invested in our careers, and so callous

about our families that we threw caution to the wind and got a new mortgage just so we could live near *friends*?

We've been here several months now, and already our quality of life has quietly and remarkably deepened—even in a pandemic—in a way I find hard to explain. We take walks or share meals—outdoors, socially distanced, and with masks—with people who want to talk about things we want to talk about, who make us laugh. We talk about people we know in common and the crazy ins and outs of our work, churches, and families. We remember things about each other from 10, 15, and 20 years ago.

I grew up next to a large university, so many of my childhood friends moved away before I was ten, as their parents finished degrees and took jobs far away. Friendships for me were sparse until college, where for the first time I felt I truly belonged to a community of friends and colleagues. I savored every minute of it. Throughout my twenties, I formed deep friendships with people in the different places I landed—Ohio, Massachusetts, then home to Chicago for graduate school. But as I moved into my thirties, forming deep friendships got harder and, once again, my closest friends scattered to far-flung places. After we got married, my husband and I chose to live close to work and school, not friends. We didn't give up on our friendships, but they changed because of distance—even just an hour's drive.

The American dream—the good life, according to American culture—is about not relationships but accumulation: income, a home, possessions. This includes raising a family, which is certainly about relationships, but the dream is more about providing for your family than enjoying your family, isn't it? We don't really honor or celebrate being with people or enjoying one another's company for its own sake, not the way we honor working overtime, renovating a house, pursuing a sport, or bettering ourselves in some way.

And notice: we focus on bettering the *self*, not our relationships. Friendship is taken for granted, or not considered much more than an accessory, in what most Americans imagine as the good life.

But what if relationships are at the very heart of the good life? What if our happiness depends primarily on the quality of our relationships?

When I was in college, I studied abroad in Scotland. I saw that the values of my new friends' lives were different from those of my American friends. My American friends were obsessed with the future: What courses would we take next term? Where

would we apply to graduate school and in what? Who did we want to be? How were we going to make our mark?

But in Scotland, while one of my flatmates was passionate about becoming a doctor, the other four didn't talk much about their vocational future or take their courses of study all that seriously. For them, the center of life was not "who am I?" but "who are my mates?" Jobs were necessary but not something to obsess about. The nature of one's self seemed obvious, and certainly not as interesting as friends, laughing, drinking, or storytelling.

In the United States, we prize the self as the key to happiness and the good life. Perhaps this is why loneliness has become so endemic. We may have crippled ourselves with our focus on the personal, the individual, the wellness of me instead of us. In Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs, individual physical and security needs supposedly must be met before the need for love and belonging means anything. But I can't help but wonder if we actually need love and belonging before security means anything. What if we even need belonging more than food?

When I was struggling with my life and work as a parish pastor, I bought Gretchen Rubin's best-selling book *The Happiness Project*. It was fun to read her suggestions for increasing personal happiness, including "take time to be silly," "keep an empty shelf," and "imitate a spiritual master." But the tips in her book, or any book I read at the time, didn't improve my daily life so much as my clergy support group, my clergy Bible study, my husband, or my letters and phone calls with friends did.

If you follow any happiness trends, whether in books, podcasts, sermon series, or ad campaigns, the good life is defined in terms of self-actualization: finding a great job, making great money, raising great kids, and generally feeling great, in and of yourself. Wellness seems to include everything from tidying your house, to projecting a positive attitude, to eating a certain diet, to meditation, to skin care, to discerning the right category for your personality (Enneagram, astrology, Myers-Briggs), to serving others, to giving everything to Jesus.

It's not that these things are useless. But the focus is, again, entirely on achievement, accumulation, and self. I have found nothing here about friendship or even just enjoying the company of other people.

The famous Yale course about happiness—the most popular course in the school's history—also sets life's meaning in the context of the individual self. It's called The

Science of Well-Being, and the course catalog describes it like this:

In this course you will engage in a series of challenges designed to increase your own happiness and build more productive habits. As preparation for these tasks, Professor Laurie Santos reveals misconceptions about happiness, annoying features of the mind that lead us to think the way we do, and the research that can help us change. You will ultimately be prepared to successfully incorporate a specific wellness activity into your life.

Here, happiness and well-being are mapped against science and research, requiring weeks of study in order to choose a single activity to be intentionally grafted into one's life as an individual. But what if the "wellness activity" that can most influence our lives doesn't require an Ivy League course? What if it's as simple as making time to enjoy other people? Talking and hanging out, sharing a meal, playing a game, watching some TV—even over Zoom? Is it really so complicated or mysterious? Does happiness really require research and science to uncover its supposed mysteries?

I write all of this as an introvert. In fact, I wrote a whole book about the power of solitude! But the difference between solitude and loneliness is a felt connection to other people, a sense of belonging to something bigger than yourself even when you're alone. Vowed religious hermits (sometimes called solitaries) in Catholic and Anglican traditions are encouraged to stay connected to a community of some kind, whether a monastery, other hermits (a community of hermits is actually not a contradiction in terms and is called a *lira*), a parish church, or just their neighbors. The Desert Mothers and Fathers spent months and years alone in their caves, but one of the strongest values reflected in the sayings and stories they left behind is hospitality: welcoming a guest or fellow hermit to share a meal or conversation, just because—even if you are fasting, praying, or have taken a vow of silence.

There are many ways to find happiness and fulfillment in this life. The most important, and the easiest, may simply be spending time enjoying our relationships and friendships. God told Adam in the garden, "It is not good for you to be alone." Jesus said, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another." In this time when so many are struggling with isolation, perhaps it would do us all good to fall back on this most simple of values for a good human life, a good Christian life—that we simply make time to be with one another, not for any reason other than to be

happy.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Close friends."