

Friendship Service

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The Art of Small Talk

by John Howard

I speak about small talk today as someone who aspires to be better at it

New Englanders have a reputation for being reticent and crusty, especially when compared with people from other parts of the country. I've heard it said that there are two walls around people. For some, the outer wall is low and the inner wall is high. Like the song "You call everybody darlin'", this sort exhibits an easy friendliness that rarely goes very deep. For others, the outer wall may be hard to breach, but once that has happened, the inner one is hardly there at all. I have found Mainers to be like that.

In addition, I have found that in Maine people are much better at pleasant small talk than was my experience in my former home. When I return there and attempt to make conversation with people behind the cash register they look at me as if I had two heads.

Some of this art of small talk is learned, or not learned as the case may be, in our families of origin. My brother's wife is Japanese-American and they recently made a visit to Japan. On their return my brother said that he finally understood Sachiko better, having seen the active way people in Japan listen to each other, with much head-nodding and encouragement. I wanted to tell him that, while this may be true about Japan, people do this here as well. For some reason in my family we listen to others with an air of skepticism, as if to agree too readily was a sign of being gullible, of giving trust too easily. And so we were never very good at small talk.

Some people look down on small talk, thinking it cheap and superficial. And some would rather talk about their innermost feelings, skipping right by talk about the weather and such.

I heard a story that illustrates this from a keynote speaker at an AI Anon Family Groups convention. It seems her daughter was in a panic because she had been asked to serve cake at the wedding of a friend. "I don't know how to do this!" she wailed. "It's easy," the friend told her, "You just slice the cake and make a little small talk while you serve it." People in twelve-step groups can get used to a kind of soul-bearing, honest sharing. So when she served her first slice, so the story goes, she said, "And how are you dealing with your resentments today?"¹

Though I may be at ease speaking in structured groups or in front of a crowd, I am often awkward and uncomfortable in one-on-one conversation. And while friendships can start in a group setting, they really don't go anywhere without the one-on-one. Conversation requires listening as well as talking. Though it may sometimes appear superficial, polite inquiries about the daughter in her first year at college, the parent in a nursing home, the loss of a pet, these require that we remember the details of another's life. It's a form of paying attention and is taken as an indication that we care. When we do this often enough, the feeling of caring will actually begin to blossom within our hearts. Sometimes appearing to care can make it so.

My best lessons in small talk have been on the daily ferry commute to and from Chebeague Island where I work. For years I would hide in a book while all around me people were engaged in vivid conversation. What could they possibly have to say to each other, I wondered. Living on an island, don't they know everything there is to know already? Well, no, actually. It's in these conversations that they

¹ Blanche from Texas, AFG convention late 80's in Connecticut

learn all that. Little by little I've gotten much better at conversation myself. Now I often have an open book or magazine in my lap, completely un-read for the entire trip because I've been caught up in the local news. Some folks never sit down at all, and spend the trip standing in the open deck out back, which seems the most sociable place on the boat. In winter, the men especially seem to like to show they can take the cold weather – it's a bonding thing, I guess.

I continue to work on my ability to make small talk because for me it's an exercise in compassionate listening. Being present and available, being willing to suspend judgment and put on hold my own agenda for a moment isn't just an art; it's a skill I can learn. It can turn a stranger into an acquaintance and an acquaintance into a friend.

The Value of Old Friends

by Erica Bartlett

In July, when I started a certification program to become a health counselor, I noticed something interesting on the intake forms for new clients. The ones for children and teens included questions about friendships, but the ones for adults did not. It got me thinking about the difference between the friends I made growing up and the ones made now. And I realized that while I certainly value and appreciate my newer friends, those older ones made during childhood offer something special.

Through Facebook, I have "friended" many people that I grew up and went to school with, although in reality most of them were only acquaintances. I do have one friend I've known since I was eight, and I count myself very lucky that our relationship survived the stormy adolescent years and our divergent paths in college. But ironically enough, that very constancy meant that I never stepped back to consider the value of that connection; it has simply been a given. It took an event unrelated to her for me to understand why those old friends are so important.

It happened in July 2008, when another childhood friend drowned. He was just a year older than me, and it hit harder than I expected. After all, even though he, his two sisters, my brother and I spent our early childhoods almost constantly together, we hadn't been close in years. I'd gone to his wedding, and that of one sister (the other sister eloped, so none of us got that invitation), but that was about it.

When I heard about his death, though, long-buried memories came to the surface. Swimming lessons. Forming our own "Rainbow Club" with my parents' shed as our clubhouse. Going camping on Swan Island. Playing games. Feeding Macaroni the pony at the dairy farm. Catching tadpoles and turtles – or more often, failing at catching them. Dressing up for Casco Day Parades.

And I realized that my sorrow was in part because he knew me in a way no one coming into my life now ever will: as a wide-eyed, golden-haired, fearless girl, but more significantly, as a girl who still had a mother. Losing him felt like losing a piece of myself, something that could never be recovered.

So at his wake, I was grateful when his oldest sister suggested that the four of us remaining get to know each other anew. We managed to arrange a visit a few weeks later, and despite the many years apart I felt instantly comfortable with them because in essence they already knew me, having been present when our identities were forming.

We knew what each others' parents and upbringing were like, how living frugally on teachers' salaries shaped us, and how to play Big Bogle. We could joke about those years, and reminisce freely about those we'd lost – my mom and their brother – without worry that the others wouldn't understand or would shy away from grief. It is a bond I will never be able to form again.

We have continued our visits when possible, coordinating when the oldest sister is in state. This summer was particularly lovely, since it included a trip to Crescent Lake, where we had our first swimming lessons over thirty years ago, but this time with their children and my brother's daughter, coming full circle. It was then that we decided to go camping at Swan Island again next year. I don't know if we'll have any scavenger hunts or Muppet plays or games of badly-played baseball. But I'm sure we'll sit by a campfire, fireflies dancing around us, basking in the glow and cherishing our old and now renewed friendship.

Friendly Highs

by Rick Kimball

As I approached a recent transcontinental flight, I determined to spend part of it meditating on friendship in preparation for today's service. This was appropriate, I felt, because Tirrell and I had tickets on United, which for years bragged of its "friendly skies."

Moving through security, I was told to take everything out of my pockets, and stand with my hands raised against the wall to allow a full body, see-all, show-all scan. "Isn't this a little too friendly?" I wondered, but I did not ask aloud for fear of inviting an even friendlier full-body pat-down.

"Maybe whoever runs that screen wants a friendship with benefits," I thought, using the vocabulary of the sexually youthful and free. This led me to reflect on what a friendship without benefits might be. Why would you want and how could you have a friendship in which you gave and received nothing?

When we entered the plane, the friendly United people greeted us with smiles, then told us where to stuff our luggage and ordered us to strap ourselves in and stay put until they said we could move.

I sat obeying orders and wondering what I might say to this congregation about friendship – until I reached into the pocket on the seat back in front of me and pulled out some answers. Among the two thousand items offered by the Sky Mall magazine is a plaque that picks up on the theme of the song calling you, my lover and/or my friend, calling you “the cream in my coffee.” “You are the cheese to my macaroni,” the plaque declares, “the bacon to my eggs, the jelly to my peanut butter, the gravy to my mashed potatoes, the ketchup to my French fries” and more, and no, I am not making this up.

I concluded that the friendly folks at United were missing a grand chance to move, as the best of friendships do, into the realm of the spiritual. If I were a United pilot, I would invite my passengers to ignore the contents of the pockets on the seat backs in front of them along with their drop down video displays and their computer screens and to look out the window instead at the friendly skies. “Flying is about connection,” I would say, “just as the friendly skies are, just as friendship itself is, just as spirituality is, the connection that draws us out of self and to each other and further, hand in hand, to all. So take a friendly god’s eye view, look out through that window into the mystery, and connect with all that is and will be, in and around, below and above, and beyond the passing clouds.”

Then, as my plane moved toward twilight or dawn, I would ask the passengers to look out again. “Watch the mystery,” I would say,” and when you sense that transformative yin-yang instant of light turning to dark, or night becoming light, then reach out and push your call button. I will announce the point when all your lights are on, and then we can talk about our feelings. If your seatmates disagree with you about when to hit the call button, then speak with them to resolve your differences, searching deep enough beneath the superficial to become true friends. For there in the warm, transforming connections of friendship, and there in the miracle around us and not in your screens or your Sky Mall, there floats the wonder of the

spiritual, and there lies the richness of life. Thank you for flying the spiritual skies of United. Thank you for joining me in my spiritual high.”

Later, after landing the plane and wishing my passengers and crew a friendly good-bye, I would send an e-mail to the corporate office suggesting a new United Airlines slogan: “God is our friendly co-pilot,” it would say, “but watch out, it’s a UU god.” Well, I am not a United pilot, so when I get home today I will not offer that suggestion. But maybe I will send an e-mail asking if there’s an age limit for pilots.

Friendship Quotes

" A friend is one to whom one may pour out all the contents of one's heart, chaff and grain together, knowing that the gentlest of hands will take and sift it, keep what is worth keeping and with a breath of kindness blow the rest away." – Arabian Proverb

“A friendship can weather most things and thrive in thin soil; but it needs a little mulch of letters and phone calls and small, silly presents every so often - just to save it from drying out completely.” – Pam Brown

“Friendship is unnecessary, like philosophy, like art... It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things that give value to survival.” – C. S. Lewis

“Friendship... is not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learned the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learned anything.” – Muhammed Ali

“I have friends in overalls whose friendship I would not swap for the favor of the kings of the world.” – Thomas Edison

“It is one of the blessings of old friends that you can afford to be stupid with them.” – Ralph Waldo Emerson

“It takes a long time to grow an old friend.” – John Leonard

“Two may talk together under the same roof for many years, yet never really meet; and two others at first speech are old friends.” – Mary Catherwood

“Misfortune shows those who are not really friends.” – Aristotle

“One loyal friend is better than ten thousand family members.” – Anonymous

“Make new friends, but keep the old, one is silver and the other gold.” – Girl Scout song

“It is not so much our friends' help that helps us as the confident knowledge that they will help us.” – Epicurus (341 - 270 BC) Greek philosopher.

“The friendship that can cease has never been real.” – Saint Jerome

“Some people go to priests; others to poetry; I to my friends.” - Virginia Woolf

“Most of us don't need a psychiatric therapist as much as a friend to be silly with.” - Robert Brault

“I value the friend who for me finds time on his calendar, but I cherish the friend who for me does not consult his calendar.” – Robert Brault

“A true friend is one who thinks you are a good egg even if you are half-cracked.” – Anonymous