

Friendship: Why Bother?
Rev. Kathleen Ellis
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Rabbit and Porcupine, two friends in our Russian tale, were walking and talking, talking and walking. They forged a friendship by spending time together, facing obstacles together, and giving good advice when it was needed.

We began learning how to make friends when we were kids. For example, an essay written by Alison Krupnick,¹ describes how she and her preschooler snuggled up every afternoon and read the book *How to Be a Friend*. The characters were all green dinosaurs. Her daughter Melanie led their conversation:

"What are those girlies doing?" Melanie asked, pointing to a smiling forest-green dinosaur with cornrows holding hands with a gap-toothed, grinning chartreuse dinosaur with a pageboy.

"They're having fun playing together," I said.

"And what about that girl over there? What is she doing?" she asked about a scowling dinosaur.

"She's saying an unkind thing to that boy and making him feel sad," I responded, pointing to an olive-green dinosaur in tears.

"And is that okay?" she asked, anticipating my response.

"No," I said in my best wise and all-knowing parental voice. "It's not okay." We looked at each other and nodded.

Melanie was learning about friendship at an early age, how to make friends, how to keep them, what you can and cannot do with them. She will need these lessons to help her negotiate potential minefields in human relations. Her mom was quite willing to review the same lesson over and over, to help reinforce Melanie's sense of proper playground etiquette.

Not all friendships work out the way you imagined. One of my early childhood friends was Virginia Hill. We did everything together, from playing with dolls to jumping around the block on our pogo sticks or following a storm drain to see how far we could go. I thought we would always be friends, but one day at the end of sixth grade, she told me that maybe we were getting tired of each other. No way!

¹ *Secrets and Confidences: the complicated truth about women's friendships*, Karen Eng, Ed. (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2004), pp.29-30.

It wasn't so for me! But apparently she was getting too grown up for me and by seventh grade she had a different circle of friends. Junior High can be rough.

Moving on in my own life, there was the summer my nose got broken. I was a teenager volunteering at Summer Street School, in Shreveport, LA. The school had a summer program for children and youth with mental retardation. My cousin David, who has Down's Syndrome, attended that school. The summer program was for kids with a range of abilities to learn cooperative and competitive skills.

We played T-ball, and sometimes ran with the batter to help him reach first base. We took the kids swimming once a week to teach them to swim or float or dog paddle to the safety of the side. We helped them across an overhead ladder and one of the boys slipped off and his elbow caught my nose and snapped the cartilage. I remember how much it hurt, but at least I didn't have to wear a cast!

That summer probably meant more to me than to any of the girls and boys. Oh, sure, they had a good time, and something to do while their parents were at work, but I had a chance to walk with them and cheer them on. We didn't need deep intellectual conversations. With a little bit of encouragement from Linda, the director, I could make a difference by playing well with others.

And it was more than that. No one was more important than the youngest or least able student, but I was making a contribution based on who I was. For a shy and awkward teenage girl that was a magical summer.

The friendships those kids made were for life. Cousin David moved on—to a gymnastics team of four friends who won competitions all over the state of Louisiana. To this day he still goes to the movies with them once a week. They are friends for life.

About twenty years ago I was a member of Northwoods Unitarian Universalist Church in The Woodlands, Texas. The minister started a lay ministry team that would provide pastoral care to members and thus extend the ministry of the church. After all, he couldn't be everywhere at once. Toward the end of our training we engaged in role-play, when we would think up a tale of woe to share with a listening friend. When it was my turn to listen, my partner began telling the story of her friend who was depressed over a number of life events. She wanted to know how to help her friend.

I was listening intently when the realization suddenly came flooding into me that she was really talking about her own life. At that moment the interchange became real rather than role-play. Having suddenly been entrusted with a pastoral situation, I was grateful for the lessons we had learned about active listening, the importance of not giving advice until it was asked for, and above all, the value of attentive presence to others around us. Her talking and my listening generated a kind of magic that continues to amaze me. The way to forge a friendship is to talk and especially to listen for hours at a time, "hearing one another into speech," as Nelle Morton put it.

Having experienced many kinds of friendship, I find that relationships may have become more complicated, but the basic lessons of loyalty, kindness, listening, and on the downside, betrayal, can occur at any age. And if you don't learn the lessons the first time around, you'll probably get another chance.

All of the lessons learned about friendship apply just as strongly to the church community.

Each person who walks through those doors has life experience to contribute. That's not why you came the first time. You came because you were hoping to receive something of value for you or your family. Curiosity, boredom, a life crisis, a hunger for spirituality, or religious education may have drawn you here. You may have come just to humor a friend.

Each person who walks through those doors is a potential friend. Consider this an invitation to offer a smile and a hand of greeting whenever you are here. By virtue of being alive each person you meet has had experiences you might never have encountered.

Conventional wisdom in church development is that newcomers must make six friends in the first six months. Why? So they'll feel like one of the gang instead of like onlookers. This sense of belonging helps give a person confidence to reach out to one more.

One way to encourage the development of friendships is to listen deeply whenever possible. In his book *Men and Friendship*, Stuart Miller interviewed a man who said, "True friendship, I suppose, is a matter of breaking down the barriers of

ordinary social distance - of secrecy, of touch, of possessions. There is a freedom in the presence of the other."

At a going away party for Barbara Coeyman and her daughter Amanda, a friend of Amanda's recalled her first year at a new school. They remembered each other from living in Pittsburgh. The friend's family followed Amanda's to Texas, but the friend was having trouble making friends. She asked Amanda for advice. "Well," answered the athletic Amanda, "I finally knew I had some friends when I made my first touchdown in football." After a pause the friend told us that wasn't very helpful, since she's not athletic. But at least they had each other!

Another example of friendship comes from the memorial service of a founding member of the UU Church in College Station. As UUs often do at memorial services, I gave family members and friends an opportunity to say a few words themselves about the man who died. Jesse Coon, almost 95 years old, was a physicist, a sailor, a Master swimmer who kept winning medals in butterfly until age 92, and a loving family man. But the most striking message about him time and again is that he was a friend to so many, including me, when I was his minister.

Jesse would attend a 50th birthday party and say, "So, you're fifty years old now. What have you done with your life?" and then he would listen carefully to the answer. One of the last things this world-class physicist said was, "My religion is people ... to love people ... and also to love trees."

This kind of friend may be rare, but observing people who make friends easily can be an inspiration to the rest of us as we get to know visitors to our worship services.

Another way to encourage friendships is to invite people into the inner core of the church through openness, transparency, and full participation in the decision making process. More participation means more "ownership" of your mission.

I am a recent convert to the consensus model of governance. I was skeptical at first, but in my work with a dozen different congregations, I've notice an odd phenomenon. The best functioning churches are "we" churches, where everyone seems to own a piece of the mission. "They" churches let only a few people make decisions that are then announced to the congregation. But Live Oak is committed to its consensus model of governance. Having worked with the congregation for a

year, I've watched many proposals come before the Steering Committee.

Some of them are easily adopted, with thumbs up all around the table. Other proposals require a couple of information meetings for congregational input. Still others need an ad hoc committee made of people with a strong interest both for and against the proposal to come up with an alternative all parties can live with. The second iteration often receives a "thumbs up" when it comes back to Steering Committee. Once proposals are adopted, there is considerable satisfaction with the result. When Live Oak hosts the Fall Conference (November 11-13), we plan to have a workshop about using consensus even as a church grows larger.

In Unitarian Universalist churches, the congregation holds the key to carrying out the vision and mission of the church. From what I know of Wildflower, you have a tremendous amount of ministry here—maybe not always in the form of a clergy professional—but from Day One in the life of Wildflower each one of you has made a difference in your service to the community as a whole.

Can you name some of your ministries?

[e.g. welcoming, worship, music, religious education, caring, outreach]

A Minister is one person who will have his or her fingers dipped in each of these areas, hopefully a person who will be a friend to you, but definitely someone who would be totally inept without the rest of you. Ministry lies in the heart of the congregation, not just in the heart of an individual.

You have welcomed fifteen or twenty or more members since January. You will want to befriend them in such a way that they don't disappear through the back door. I've heard the word of warning that some churches are like vacuum cleaners. They attract a lot of people but they forget to install a bag—and they lose them just as fast as they come in!

No single individual and not even an inner circle of dedicated volunteers can carry out your mission alone. Rather, you apply the best aspects of lessons in friendship and learn to trust the group process to choose the next right step. As one example, I'm really happy to hear that several of you are working with Sara Barker and Bill Walker to achieve official recognition as a Welcoming Congregation to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals and families. Live Oak has scheduled a movie and four additional workshops on the topic, starting next month. Our goal

is to achieve recognition by the time of the Fall Conference. I gave some descriptive flyers to Bill this morning and he is passing them around.

Edward Frost, a Unitarian Universalist minister in Atlanta, wrote:

Somehow in us is a story in which we are the hero, fearless before gods and giants, girded up as the scriptures say "in the whole armor of God," knowing for a certainty that right makes might. Each of you has a story, waiting to be remembered, about the power you had and have still to make a difference. Begin to tell your story to someone --even though you may not know yet that you know it. Just begin by saying, "The first time I realized I could make a difference was..." The story will rush forward to be told.

Think back over your own life. When was the first time you realized you could make a difference? Why did you bother?

What has made a difference for you here? . . .

This is a room full of spiritual potential—brothers and sisters on a splendid journey upon this planet. Sometimes we are just along for the ride with no particular destination in mind. But there is a potential that we will meet someone and become more than we are at this moment.

There's no way to know what kind of Wildflower magic will happen here on out. You'll stub your toes now and then, come upon piles of obstacles in the path, and maybe even land in deep water. Wolves may wish to devour you.

But look around for the right tool, maybe a magic life-saving stick, and maybe a friend. You have already made a difference. That's why you bother.

Amen and Namaste