

“The Friends We Keep”  
Rev. Nancy O. Arnold

May 6, 2018  
UU Congregation of Danbury

Reading: “The Mirror of Friendship” by Elizabeth Mauske

On her frequent trips on foot to Temuco, an old Araucanian Indian woman used always to bring my mother a few partridge eggs or a handful of berries. My mother spoke no Araucanian beyond the greeting ‘Mai-mai,’ and the old woman knew no Spanish, but she drank tea and ate cake with many an appreciative giggle. We girls stared fascinated at her layers of colorful hand-woven clothing, her copper bracelets and coin necklaces, and we vied with each other in trying to memorize the singsong phrase she always spoke on rising to leave.

At last we learned the words by heart and repeated them to the missionary, who translated them for us. They have stayed in my mind as the nicest compliment ever uttered:

‘I shall come again, for I like myself when I’m near you.’

Sermon “The Friends We Keep”:

It is not unusual for ministers to get together to compare notes on how busy we are. We often talk about what we have to do when we arrive home. Naturally, I mentioned this sermon on friendship. My colleague smiled at me and said, “oh, it’s already written.” Everyone laughed, knowing my very last minute sermon-writing habits. (That’s what happens when you stay friends with colleagues who attended seminary with you.) It was almost too tender a remark for me to take in. But, she and I both knew that she was not referring to my actual sermon.

A sermon on friendship has already been written by me. Many times. You see, friendship and friends have always been of great importance in my life. I am fortunate that usually I have had at least one friend in my life with whom I could be myself. No pretense. No games. No need to be someone I am not. A friend with whom I could dare to be myself – and be loved anyway.

Friendship touches at the very heart of what it means to be religious. I think of being religious in the way Unitarian Universalist religious educator Sophia Lyon Fahs described it. Being religious means to dip “into the heart of things, into personal feelings, yearnings... (and to) see what physical eyes alone fail to see...” (Sophia Lyon Fahs)

Friendship is a quality of life. It signifies an ideal goodness that can exist between people. To the ancient Greeks, friendship was a virtue. Friendship with another was almost synonymous with the ideal “good.” Aristotle suggested that we love friends as we wish to be loved. The quality of friendship is the good that can come from loving others as we wish to be loved. “Friendship is essentially a partnership... (Aristotle said) a friend is a second self...”

My colleague, Bruce Southworth, writes:

The companions we choose consecrate our lives.  
The companions of your heart, of your mind, and  
of your soul and spirit define you, and so our  
choices either destroy us or liberate us.

“A friend is a second self...” Friendship is a gift of and a gift to the spirit. When you are with a friend, you are with yourself, wholly as you are. The friends we choose help us to define ourselves. Like the old woman in today’s reading, we return to a dear friend because, as she said:

“...I like myself when I’m near you.”

The test of true friendship is how we feel about ourselves when we are in the presence of our friends. There have been many people in my life with whom I have been close. Some of them are still friends. Others have disappeared (at least for a time) because of geographical distance. But there are others with whom I have severed ties quite intentionally. Some friendships have been less than healthy for me. I didn’t like the person I became when I was with them. It was too risky. They were not to be trusted. And, one thing about a friend is that you need to feel safe enough to be yourself. You have to be able to trust your friend.

I believe that the people who enter our lives do so for a reason. There is usually something we are supposed to learn. (Sometimes we need to learn it again and again.) It may be a sense of mutual need that draws us together. It may be a shared interest. Or, it may be more obligatory than that. Collegial relationships often are interpreted as friendships, by one party or the other. Some of us refer to our “work friends,” or our “church friends,” or even our “family friends.” Some of us even have a “friend at Allstate!”

But I want to tell you about my friend, Mary. Mary, and I have the distinction of being each other’s “oldest friend.” We have been friends since we were sixteen – more than fifty years ago. At times, we’ve seen each other only a few times a year. Now that I’m back in New York, we have managed more than that. Our friendship has survived marriages and children, professional obligations, the deaths of parents and most recently of Mary’s husband, and many, many geographical moves (mostly mine). It has also survived our own growing needs. This has not been an easy thing. From the inception of our friendship, I was supposed to be the “stable one,” the one with two feet planted firmly on the ground. My role was to keep us from getting into more trouble than we did. (And we managed to get into a fair amount of trouble anyway.) I could be counted on to handle the practical things, like figuring out the tip on the bar tab, and making sure we arrived home safely. Mary was in charge of fun. I was in charge of Mary.

But there have been times in our friendship when I needed more than she could give, and Mary needed more than I could give. Each time I thought, “well, I guess it had to happen. We’ve finally outgrown each other.” What I would forget in these low times is that our friendship is based in love and trust. We can each be wholly who we are with each other – even when the other doesn’t like who we are. Visiting with Mary is coming home. We pick up where we left off.

A few years ago, I mentioned a conversation that Mary and I had had when my son Christopher was a baby. (He is now 48.) I had recently written him a letter telling him of this conversation. Mary remembered the conversation as well as I did. Our shared history is rooted in mutual love and affection. And we have continued to build on that all these years, even as we respect the women we've become. We dare each other to be ourselves.

When people come to this congregation, it is most often in search of a community that shares similar values. We offer community to those who desire it and are willing to participate in it. But we also offer a religious context for that community. We lift up the spirit of friendship in all of its virtues. This is a "house of friendships, a haven in trouble, an open room for the encouragement of our struggle," as Kenneth Patton reminds us. But it is also "a house of truth-seeking... a house of prophecy... and a house of freedom." We come together here as we are. We become who we are as part of this spiritual community.

"What does it mean to be part of a religious community – a liberal religious community?"

Bruce Southworth responds to this question:

We seek wholeness... Freedom to be who we are, to discover our best selves, to grow our souls, to think for ourselves about religious living – such freedom encourages us in the search for (truth and meaning) the search for wholeness. Celebration of life arises. ... Religious traditions from around the world inform our lives, and we weave them with the lessons of history, science, art, (and) literature – all realms of human endeavor. The searching, critical, appreciative mind leads to self-understanding and leads us to those principles of caring, compassion, and just action that contribute to our spiritual health, wholeness, and a better world. We seek companionship and community. Interdependence is the reality of all life, and the spark of the divine within each of us responds to the spark of the divine within one another. We need not be all alone if we learn to risk vulnerability, dare to be open, and welcome the new. It becomes safe to be different and to become who we can be in (all) our fullness and vibrancy. We know we can transcend the moments of brokenness and reclaim the health within us. Here kindred spirits work at trusting Life's goodness and beauty to overcome our fear of its pain and heart-ache. Here we help transform the world.

We begin with who we are, in the here and now. A. Powell Davies reminds us that: We meet each other as friends and neighbors anywhere and everywhere, but we seldom do so in the consciousness of our souls' deepest yearnings. But in church we do – in a way that is intrusive, yet leaves us knowing that we all have the same yearning, the same spiritual need of assurance and faith and hope. We are brought together at the highest level possible. We are not merely an audience. We are a congregation.

Some congregations have Bring-a-Friend Sundays. The idea is to introduce someone you know to a Unitarian Universalist community. But it always seems odd to me to designate a particular day for this because in my experience, each time we gather is a "Friendship Sunday." You have only to talk with the members to hear story after story of what it means to belong to this congregation.

In a conversation I had with one long-time member, she told me how lucky she had been to meet so many people who were so kind and caring. When I suggested to her that “like attracts like,” she seemed humbled by the thought. But I believe it is true: “like attracts like.” When we reach out to others with compassion and an open mind, we attract people who share those values and who care about us, as people of worth and dignity. That’s what this congregation is about – at its best.

In *Gift From the Sea*, Anne Morrow Lindbergh writes:

When we start at the center of ourselves, we discover something worthwhile extending toward the periphery of the circle. We find again some of the joy in the now, some of the peace in the here, some of the love in me and thee which go to make up the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh draws on the examples she finds in the sea to discern life’s meaning and purpose. Just as the tide moves in and out, so our relationships with ourselves and with one another are marked by the ebb and flow of intermittency. The only constant on which we can count is the here and now. People come in and out of our lives, and we cherish what time we have together. And if we’re lucky, along the way we’ll meet the friends we keep no matter what.

The spirit that is friendship can be found in this place made sacred by your design. You can dare to be yourself here. And if you don’t, we might dare you to be yourself. For those of you who are visiting today, I hope you take something of the spirit of this place with you and return again to be a part of the life we share together. Perhaps you will feel as I did when I first arrived here almost two years ago. I found myself thinking:

“I shall come again, for I like myself when I’m near you.”