

The Practice of Friendship
by Margaret L. MacLeod and Atlanta McIlwraith
Presented to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Belfast
February 26, 2006

MARGARET:

Atlanta and I very grateful to be with you today and to share a bit of our exploration of the subject and the practice of friendship. She and I have been friends for nearly two years and our friendship, Atlanta's presence in my life, has been so valuable and **enriching** that I very confidently will claim today that she is one of the closest friends I've ever had. In preparation for today, we spent many hours drinking tea and looking at the subject and action of friendship with as many lenses as we could think of.

In this work, one interesting revelation we had is that we have quite different expectations of friendship:

[Earth and Water]

MARGARET:

My family put down roots in a small town in southern Maine, where we lived throughout my childhood. In fact, my parents still live there. The seedling friendships of kindergarten grew into a healthy garden, and I am lucky to be able to say I've had friendships that have lasted more than thirty years. I met Bethany, who stood as maid of honor at my wedding, walking down my street when we were five years old. To me, developing friendships is akin to cultivating a garden, coaxing the seedlings to grow, **enriching** the soil year after year, watching our roots mingle and our branches reach toward each other. As a result of this, it has been my expectation that since many of mine have, friendships should last forever. It was enlightening for me to flesh out this idea with Atlanta and discover her contrasting attitude and background.

ATLANTA:

I deeply value Margaret's friendship because, while we are similar, we are not the same. I so appreciate how we support each other, how we laugh together, and how much I learn from her.

We had different experiences growing up. When I was eight years old, my family moved from England to California. Four years later we moved from the West Coast to the East Coast. As a child, I used to wonder if there was something that I had done (or not done) that had the friendships I'd left behind fade. After some time, however, I understood that people (including myself) and friendships change. It's nobody's fault. It's just the way that it is.

I recognize that there would be something very special in having a close friend, outside of my family, who had known me since childhood. I think Margaret is fortunate to have had that experience. I treasure my own friendships that have stood the tests of time and different locations. In my life, however, those enduring friendships are the precious exceptions and not the rule. In the meantime, I am grateful for the diversity of people I have encountered and with whom I have shared my time.

If I take a quiet moment to reflect, I feel very present to motion in my life. I feel part of a flow that is bigger than me: a river that is always changing, always moving. The currents bring new people into my life. Sometimes we move together for a long time. Sometimes the water subtly shifts and we find ourselves in different streams that expose each of us to new people, new places, new experiences. It's all part of being alive.

Let's take a moment to sit and contemplate what some of our own expectations of friendship may be.

PIANO MUSIC

[The Close Friend]

MARGARET:

How many people in our lives know our deepest dreams, our ugliest flaws, our biggest secrets (*and still like us!*)? How many people are there in our lives in front of whom we can totally fail and yet they still love us? With whom do we share our deepest selves, and with whom do we want to share our deepest selves?

Some of us are lucky enough to share a roof with our closest friend: a spouse, a sibling, a parent. If not, hopefully, we have one or two close, deep friendships in our community (*proximity is always nice but not always necessary.*)

In his book, *Illusions*, Richard Bach writes:

“The bond the links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other's life. Rarely do members of one family grow up under the same roof.”

So, a close friend is a gift, a gem, someone to be cherished. For this person has earned our trust and love. : An anonymous writer once penned:

“A friend is someone who knows the song in your heart and can sing it back to you when you have forgotten the words.” (unknown)

If friendship is a garden, then a close friend is a perennial that blooms again and again. It's roots are strong and reach deep into the rich soil of which we, ourselves, are the tenders. If our paths diverge along the way, these friendships can become evergreens, strong and tall, giving us shade in the heat of the day, holding the soil intact when a heavy rain pours down. These are the friends we can pick right up with where we left off, though many seasons may have passed.

[Ships that Pass in the Night]

ATLANTA:

When I am in the presence of a close friend I feel like I am home. I can be exactly who I am in the moment. I trust that my friend will accept me for all that I am and for all that I am not. Without effort, I accept my friend for who she is. As humans we look for places to give and receive. Our close friends provide us with both.

Even those friendships that flicker only for a brief spell can leave us with a generous gift. As some of you know, almost three years ago, my friend Jeff and I walked from the outskirts of Philadelphia to the coast of Maine. Along the way we met a woman, I'll call her Anne. The night we met, Anne and I stayed up talking for hours, sharing parts of our deepest selves with each other.

The next day, Anne invited us to visit her in her new home in Belfast. One month later, Jeff and I walked into town on the date she had requested – which is no small feat when you're walking. Anne had left us a message saying that she had been called away for a number of weeks. In her message she wished us luck.

As it turned out, Anne's absence was an amazing gift. Because we had nowhere to go, we wandered into town and found ourselves talking with reporter who wrote a story about our walk for the local paper.

This UU community opened its doors and its hearts to us. A woman invited us to live in a vacant house in town. A whole chain of events, which I never could have predicted, occurred as a direct result of Anne's unfulfilled invitation.

While my interaction with Anne never evolved into a friendship, it led me here, to Belfast, where I have made some of the richest friendships in my life.

Sometimes we don't know why people come into our lives. It only becomes clear in hindsight. So here does that leave us in the present?

For me it leaves me in a place of trust. Trust that there is a purpose for each interaction. I don't believe in coincidences. Even seemingly negative interactions have taught me valuable lessons. Because of them, I've become stronger, more aware of boundaries, better equipped to stand up for myself. These can be painful lessons to learn but they are gifts nonetheless in their own right.

Way back when, in sixth grade, a shy classmate I barely knew wrote the following message in every autograph book she signed. She wrote: "In memory's golden basket, drop one pearl for me."

That message speaks to how I have come to view some of those connections with could-be friends that are bonding in the moment and were never meant to be anything else.

PIANO MUSIC

[The Lost Friend]

MARGARET:

Years ago I was knew a man named Andrew. We had the potential to be deep, caring friends. But, at that time, I didn't know or trust myself well enough to simply be who I was. I so wanted our friendship to grow but I was afraid that if I exposed my inner thoughts and feelings, he might

not like me. Instead I tried to be someone I thought he would like. The relationship wilted, understandably, because I wasn't authentic.

Years later, after no contact, I often thought of trying to re-connect with him. We were both married and our lives had moved on but I wanted to talk with him to know who he had become and to finally take the risk of sharing with him who I am. For many months, I thought of calling or e-mailing him but, I didn't.

Last spring, Andrew was killed in an accident.

I was stunned.

I regret that I didn't pick up the phone and just said hello, how are you. Now it's too late.

What would Andrew have said to me? Would our conversation have resolved the past? What might it have reflected in me?

Sometimes it's scary, isn't it...letting someone in, exposing our authentic selves with another. Sharing deeply can seem like a big risk. In it, we open ourselves to potential judgment, or worse, rejection. But sharing deeply can be our own litmus test for a relationship. If the person with whom we share can see our inner self and be with us in that, then we know that person is special indeed. If they back off, we need to remember that it is not because of who we are, but of their inability to connect in that moment.

Don't wait to share yourself with someone you love. Be authentic in your sharing. Sometimes to reach the ripest fruits, we must go out on a limb.

PIANO MUSIC

[A Friend's Reflection]

ATLANTA:

Now that I'm getting older, I've become more aware of the mirror in my bathroom. Sometimes I see a reflection of my best self. At other times, I only see everything that's not right. It's funny how the same mirror can do both.

I've come to believe that friends do this for us as well. They reflect us as we are. Sometimes they remind us that we're stronger than we know. At other times they help us see our frailties and our faults. Both offerings are equally valuable.

If friends are our mirror, perhaps we seek out friendships as a way to know our true selves.

The Sufi poet Rumi (born in 1207) had a great friend named Shams. Some of you, I am sure, already know this story. After sharing an intense friendship that was almost all consuming, a friendship based on learning, love, philosophy, and mystical conversations, Shams suddenly disappeared. As Coleman Barks writes, "the mystery of the Friend's absence covered Rumi's world." As Rumi searched everywhere for his friend, he had a revelation and wrote:

Why should I seek? I am the same as
he. His essence speaks through me.
I have been looking for myself!

I think it can be similar for many of us. Through the joys and the challenges of our friendships and relationships, we come to know ourselves.

This Rumi story resonates with me. I feel fortunate to have shared a powerful and deep friendship for a number of years that had me to come to know myself in ways I'd never known. In this friendship, my friend and I loved each other, and we fought each other. We trusted each other and we allowed ourselves to be raw and human in each other's presence. Although we met as adults, we felt that we grew up together in the years we shared. For it was through our relationship that we each came to know our own core. And it was that knowing which ultimately led us down different paths.

Of course when the friendship moved and changed, I completely forgot the Rumi story and suffered deeply as I mourned the loss of this friend. On the other side of that process, however, I now recognize the gift of that separation which forced me to come home to myself. While my friend was gone, the insights and new strength from our friendship remained with me. I notice now that parts of my friend reside in me and I know carries parts of me with him. That's how it is between friends.

I came across this saying: "no friend, no love, can cross the path of our destiny without leaving a mark on it forever". This is my experience. The people in our lives leave their mark on us – some big, some small—and, if we allow them, the marks inevitably lead us back to ourselves.

PIANO MUSIC

[The Practice of Friendship]

MARGARET:

So, then, what does it mean to be a good friend? As Gibran's Prophet says, "Let your best be for your friend." How do we cultivate that?

Surely, there many answers -- as varied and bountiful as wildflowers in a June landscape. Each of our friends has different needs at different times, and each meeting can encourage those buds to bloom.

But I think there are a few elements that are universal to the practice of friendship.

The first practice is **Listening.**

Sometimes I'll be in a conversation, and my friend might say something like, "Wow, my child threw up all night long last night." And I hear that and I think to yourself, "Oh yeah, I remember one time when my daughter threw up in the grocery store all over the display of strawberries," and I start remembering that and waiting until my friend stops talking so that I can get my story into the conversation. Does this seem familiar to any of you?

Well, in the midst of all that, I completely MISSED my TURN TO LISTEN!

If I had really listened, I might have heard my friend's fear at how sick her daughter was. I might have noticed the fatigue in her body language or her deep disappointment at missing her evening solitude. I might have said, "Oh Eva, are you okay? You seem so tired. How can I help?"

Perhaps I want to share my story because I think it will make me related to my friend. But really, the best way to be related sometimes is just to listen – to hear my friend's story and suspend the urge to tell my own. Our friends need us to share the space of their lives, to offer them the cool, smooth, silver bowl of our hearts and let them pour the steaming, lumpy soup of their souls in and be contained there, for a time.

Another part of the practice of friendship is **acceptance** – suspending our own judgment.

I have a friend, NOT Atlanta, who longs for a husband and to start a family. She has tried every on-line dating service, has gone on blind dates, has met everyone's brother and cousin and great uncle in the state of Maine, but still can't find anyone she likes. It's always something like, he's too bald or his hair is too long or "I don't like the beard" or something like that.

I have this judgment of her that she's too picky.

But when I let this judgment overtake me, I don't notice the depth of her struggle, the passion of her disappointment, I forget that being stuck is part of the path to learning. And she needs me to be her witness there, not her jury.

One more key element in our friendship practice, we need to **acknowledge** our friends for how they show up for us. We need to remember to say, "Hey, I really appreciated being able to call you the other day. Those fifteen minutes really helped get me through that crisis. Thank you."

Atlanta is really good at this kind of acknowledgment. And when I hear her say, "You're a good friend, Margaret," it warms my heart like champagne. I find that inner "YES!" bubbling up inside of me and spouting out as I respond, "Cheers, girlfriend, anytime!" It's delicious to remind our friends how much they mean to us, how we rely on them and how they help us.

1. **Listening**
2. **Acceptance**
3. **Acknowledgment:**

It's like learning a new dance step or how to play the piano -- friendship is a practice and it can benefit from our disciplined awareness.

[Opportunities for Friendship]

ATLANTA:

This is the first time I've stood in this spot and have seen this community from here. As I look at you, I see the faces of close friends (many of whom I met right here in this building). I also see faces of people I hardly know, and of people I've never seen before. I feel fortunate to have found this church community, which I know is full of opportunities to connect.

Opportunities for friendship surround us all the time. Even in places and among groups of people we think we already know.

To forward our growth as a beloved and welcoming community, I encourage you right now to take a minute and look around at our congregation. Let's acknowledge the friends we have here but let's also seek out and allow ourselves to make eye contact with the people we don't know so well.

[Moment of silence]

Making eye contact can create an opening. And sometimes, creating an opening feels a little uncomfortable at first.

Building friendships involves making the choice (conscious or unconscious) to be open to something new. In the next few weeks, I urge you to consider taking a risk to reach out to someone you don't know now, but whom you would like to know. The risk can seem significant but, in my experience, it's worth it. The rich rewards of friendship could be just one risk away -- or several risks away -- but they are out there.

This sanctuary offers us a safe place to take that risk. We all value the inherent worth and dignity of all human beings and everyone here today can choose to be on equal footing by sharing in this opportunity to build new friendships.

As you reach out, be mindful of the risks others are taking and be compassionate to someone reaching out to you.

As Anais Nin once said: "Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born."

PIANO MUSIC