

## BEFRIENDING FRIENDS

What is love? two souls and one flesh;  
friendship? two bodies and one soul.  
— Joseph Roux, *Meditations...Love and Friendship*,  
circa 1870

THERE'S A SUSPICION ABROAD that of all the endangered species, friendship might be the closest to extinction, especially among men. There are plenty of people we might call "friends," but on closer inspection we should more truthfully call them acquaintances, buddies, or even chums. Now if we had ever been a partner to a genuine friendship with its endearing give-and-take, we'd quickly know the difference. At best our "friends" are but embryonic friends.

The saying goes: Family you don't choose—only friends. But do we even do that much? Isn't it truer that for the most part friendships just happen? We rub elbows; with some we get along better than with others; we rub elbows still more with those found to our liking; common interests are discovered and pursued; we do things together; we confide in them and they in us. Throughout,

enough bonding is taking place to dub the relationship friendship. And so perhaps it is (though barely): a usually tacit but reinforcing web of intimacy and reciprocity that waxes or wanes with time, changing circumstances, and inevitable stress.

Who are the would-be friends we've collected along the way, if indeed we have generated any? Usually they're people with whom we've shared good times, interests, escapades, or even trials. We find them non-threatening; we're comfortable together; we're similar to one another. In practice friendship often boils down to a mutual admiration and protection society. Rarely, however, is it a deeply personal, one-on-one thing, especially for men. We males tend to coalesce and travel in packs, gangs, groups, wherein dirty jokes, sexual exploits, and booze-lubricated adventures serve as the binding agent. The Boy Scouts, National Guard, the armed forces (especially the Marines), unofficial athletic teams, the neighborhood watering hole (that is, the local bar) are all instances of this male herd spirit. We anonymous ciphers seem to find validation, reinforcement, security, and strength in these clusters of like-minded peers.

### FINISHING THE JOB

So, you might be wondering, what's wrong with having junior friends? Hardly anything at all. Let's just finish the job, instead of leaving it a quarter or a half or even more incomplete. That's the only point. Friendship is good, even great, as far as it goes. In all too many cases, however, it doesn't go far enough, and is nowhere near what it can be. We arrest friendship's development when we let it remain in the realm of herd instinct, instead of more deliberately "growing" it.

Always present is the unwitting but real danger of not coaxing friendship beyond self-love. We naturally like ourselves, and so, by extension, we tend to like those who resemble us, at least

superficially. Being and moving in the company of the familiar, these pals represent, as it were, an eagerly sought vote of confidence in our personality and character. As for who and what we are, we all duly feel somewhat uneasy. We thus seek and need affirmation in our incompleteness. To a greater or less extent we're all other-directed. At work here too is the primal instinct of self-preservation.

With arrested friendship, we also witness the possible "tie that binds," the homogenizing pressure that drags us down, that exacts conformity to group fiat. We can so easily find ourselves limited to, and deprived by, the company of look-alike mini-persons. We find ourselves then branding those who fall outside our inner circle as not only different, but threatening and inimical. The inclusions and exclusions of so-called friendship thus become a source of joint, defensive impoverishment, instead of enrichment.

Our description of immature friendship discloses the usual motivation behind this mutual admiration society. It's not so much that we "desire" friends so much as we "need" them. Nor is it less true that our friends "need" us. We band together, because we find it mutually convenient. The intent behind most friendship is therefore a fundamental urge, however unwitting, to receive and to exploit. We often use others for our unenlightened aims, however much we must apparently "give" to prime the pump, to bribe personal benefits out of others, and so forth. So long as this contractual relationship among moral diminutives proves mutually helpful, it lasts, though in a barely commendable fashion. But when, as invariably happens, friends start going in different directions, both geographically and morally, it takes very little to undo the prior pattern. Were there, however, more self-knowledge and self-definition, our doings and choosings, both personal and social, would (or could) be much more thoughtful, enterprising, and beneficial to both parties.

As you've probably noticed, females seem more inclined to have friends (and enemies)—or something approximating the

authentic article. That's not to say they can't be catty and gossipy and, arguably, more inclined to bear grudges. But till "friendship" turns bad, affection, intimacy, and mutual favors seem to come more naturally to women. Aren't they always whispering secrets and compliments to one another? In general, females display fewer signs of a psychological or spiritual identity crisis. Not for them self-doubts; biology—the ability to make babies and nurture them—does seem to be destiny for them. Women engage in far less anti-social behavior than do men.

### MALE IDENTITY CRISIS

On the other hand, men don't seem to know where they're headed or how to get there, except to prove themselves with at least the appearance of derring-do and sexual conquest. They are mortally afraid of being called or thought a "sissy." Yet their fathers in some cases may be uncertain role models, perhaps only sporadically showing how real men act. Further, most schooling takes place under a succession of females. In fact, education can be seen as an attempt at emasculation, but certainly feminization. So men overcompensate with exaggerated machismo and homophobia, while insisting on smoking Marlboros and drinking excessively.

Men are very competitive and seem to think that the more fellow males they put down, the higher will be the resulting pedestal, from which they can lord it over others. Schoolboys are notoriously cruel and unjust and very given to practicing ostracism. We men shun showing affection or intimacy, especially with members of the same sex. We tend to affiliate upward to natural male leaders, whom both sexes tend to admire. With the tight-knit and reduced nuclear family, we've found no substitute for the absent uncles and other masculine role models to initiate boys into manly lore and ways with various traditional rites of passage (hunting, fishing, camping, drinking). Formerly it was clear that men were hunters,

fighters, pioneers, cowboys, providers. But, in today's highly urbanized and unisexed world, what are men supposed to be or do?

Now this collective male identity crisis, highly exacerbated in our day, works against our striking up true friendships. Such relationships, especially with other men, come across as too personal, soft, threatening, long-term, unexciting. And with women? Then sexual attraction almost always gets in the way, often making us devious manipulators. A current dearth of platonic friendships, finally, deprives us of the lessons and rewards of the meeting of minds (as opposed to bodies) that defines true friendship. As a result, men are largely bereft of experiencing relationships that are not somehow sexual, be they hetero- or homo-. Then, no wonder love boils down to "making love." How impoverished and stunted we men end up!

### TURNING UNENLIGHTENED FRIENDSHIP AROUND

When it comes to friendship, chance seems to rule. Everything remains somewhat fuzzy, unexamined, rudimentary, unsatisfying, impermanent. We tend to fall into and out of a succession of short-lived relationships with equally superficial companions, if not mere bedmates. We all tend to "use" our "friends," whether female or male, for our own questionable ends. Rather than "befriending" others, today's young people tend to do little more than "network." But surely we can and are called to do better than just "getting ahead." And the sooner we admit we have few, if any, friends (and certainly don't deserve much better), the readier we'll be to start at ground zero. Otherwise we run the very real risk of letting both sexual lust and grubby greed call all our social shots. Here, too, we must begin with self-knowledge.

Only by acknowledging that our friendships are stunted, however painful the admission of self-love's limits may be, are we

thereby freed to start cultivating the real, deep, genuine thing. And none too soon. We will continue to distort and vitiate friendship until we've acquired virtuous self-dominion, since we cannot give of ourselves unless we first take possession of ourselves. Yet the painful admission that we're semiconsciously using others, often as accomplices to our base doings, should point us in the right, virtuous direction.

As we more and more become self-knowing and self-owning individuals (therefore with character and personality), we emerge into personhood, capable of knowing and loving aright. We then become capable of bestowing and receiving the mutual esteem and support, the kindness and confidentiality that define friendship.

Once we've discovered who we are and what we're about, we're much more likely to discover and attract like-minded and like-hearted peers, with whom we can share ideas and ideals, joys and sorrows. Friendship is nothing if not grounded on common interests and tastes, ideally on common virtues. We appreciate the favors our friend does for us, while we're strongly tempted to reciprocate, to generate favors in turn. I better both myself and my friend by improving our friendship, and vice versa. We relax in the other's presence; we let our hair down, remove the mask and open ourselves to the other's approving gaze. Neither is using the other, but each basks in the understanding and consideration the other disinterestedly offers.

We all somehow desperately need someone in our corner, who delights in us, whose allegiance is not revocable. Friendship, indeed, is rare, mutual, asexual love; many ancient sages liken it to "one soul in two bodies." It motivates us to grow spiritually and morally, lest we prove unworthy of the other.

Friendship is a most precious treasure, well worth waiting and working for. One of the biggest threats to marriage is the absence of, and even incapacity for, friendship between the couple. In its absence, in George Santayana's melancholy expression, "They walk

alone together." Ideally, before getting married each future partner should have experienced the joy and reward of genuine friendship with someone other than his or her spouse-to-be. Having been enriched by that experience, each is therefore better able to aim for something similar, if not better, within marriage. Surely the best marriage would be one where two souls become one body *and* the two bodies become one soul. The best and most lasting friendships are those that develop between fellow aristocrats of love.

### AT LEAST ONE DEEP FRIENDSHIP

The program is simply this: let's *really* befriend our current "friends," however many or few. For now, don't worry too much about making more friends. Let's first rescue and vivify the friendships we already lay claim to. Once we learn what all true friendship entails, then we'll know when, why, and how to expand our circle of friends. We must realistically start with those at our side. It's not that easy for us to mend our stunted and stunting ways, however exalted and globe-girdling any newfound resolve. For one, let's avoid the self-deceiving trap that befell Lucy in "Peanuts," when she declared, "I love humanity; it's people I can't stand."

We must also get over the shortsighted belief that what's good for others is bad for me and vice versa. In fact, what others need and expect from me is paradoxically what's best for me. I'm designed and built to give of myself with no strings attached. Now that truth is far from self-evident; it actually flies in the face of conventional wisdom. Therefore at first sight this selfless generosity would seem to spell misery rather than happiness. There's probably no way short of actual experience to grasp this deepest of truths: selfishness backfires and generosity fulfills. Or another formulation: You're never happier than when making others genuinely happy.

Interestingly enough, when we build our character and strive to become full-fledged, virtuous persons, we needn't seek or strike up friendship. Then indeed, but only then, does friendship arise spontaneously, for like attracts like.

Here's a ten-point program for having almost too many friends:

1. Understand your friends by trying to stand in their shoes. Review each now and then during your times of reflection.
2. Make excuses for them as readily as you do for yourself, especially when they're not around to explain or defend themselves.
3. Listen, ask, and remember well. Know their pet peeves, favorite drink, birthday, anniversary, assorted hot buttons, favorite pro teams, preferred colors, and so on.
4. Help them with their burdens, especially when your aid can go unrecognized. Ideally, make it seem as if they're doing you a service.
5. Ply them with favors (but don't keep count). Cater now and then to their likes and dislikes.
6. Be truthful, even when it hurts. We especially owe others, above all our friends, the deepest, most transcendental truths that are hardest to come by.
7. Exchange letters. Let there be non-directed phone calls, but not too lengthy.
8. Overlook and forgive their shortcomings.
9. Be genuinely grateful.
10. Sing and drink together.

## FOR FOLLOWERS TO FOLLOW

The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil  
is for good men to do nothing.  
— Edmund Burke, 1794

Very soon, only too soon, your country will stand  
in need of not just exceptional men, but of *great* men.  
Find them in your souls. Find them in your hearts.

Find them in the depths of your country.  
— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, addressing the U.S. Congress, 1976

**I**N HIS *Republic's* famous cave allegory, Plato asserts that almost all of us find ourselves enchained in a huge cave, with our backs turned to its opening and our eyes fixed on its back wall. Outside the cave's entrance is perpetually maintained a large bonfire; between it and the actual entrance people do various things and walk back and forth, projecting their shadows onto the back wall. All the cave dwellers, never having been outside the cavern, are persuaded that the shadows they see projected represent the sum total of reality. They don't even suspect that what they're witnessing is a mere shadow world. Now and then a few cave

furniture, appliances, tools; do a bit more than you're obliged to. Don't leave car messy or "on empty." Avoid loud noises.

11. Serve others at home, surprise them with joys; let them rest in dependable you; help with younger children or siblings. Courtesy, good manners; good grooming, dressing up for meals. "Please" and "Thank you." Tag along when others have errands to run, especially dad or mom. Jump to answer the phone, fill coffee cups or wine glasses, including your own.
12. Compliment, compliment, compliment your wife or mom; make every day "Mother's Day."
13. Have a schedule that covers everything. Don't let free time just happen. Be punctual; lots of so-called "heroic minutes" throughout the day, especially the initial one: getting out of bed.
14. Make yours a habitual state of healthy tension; end each day exhausted, having exercised pretty much to the full all your moral and mental muscles.

So, strive to be ever truer to yourself in your vocation to being a full, complete person. And how to do that? By continuing to take the various, interlocking steps covered in this book. You could do a lot worse than to fire your imagination with a composite of Pied Piper, Johnny Appleseed, and King Midas, with a happy, hilarious, ever expansive ending that may never end. Well, that synthesis is the goal for which we, however weak and inconstant, should resolve to reach, come what may.

## ARISTOCRATS OF LOVE

Love begets love. This torment is my joy.  
— Theodore Roethke, *The Motion*, 1964

AT TIMES THE WORLD seems to be going down in a turbulent, endless sea of conditional love. We all know what conditional love is: I like you so long as I find something likable in you and so long as you, in turn, like me for similar reasons. When, however, we tire of one another, the mutual admiration and affection compact just dissolves.

So long as we like each other, how we treat one another has most of the appearances of love, or at least of niceness and kindness. But what is really going on in this relationship is much more contractual. As the lawyers say, *Do ut des*, which means, "I give, so that you give in return." When what you have to offer no longer pleases or benefits me, my need for you evaporates and with it the veneer of friendship. We both move on in the hopes of finding or putting together a new constellation of "friends" useful and convenient to us in our current needs. Eventually, however, we run out of semi-feigned niceness or of prospects from whom to

bribe their nicenesses. Not surprisingly, the rift develops also on the other side: our "associates" begin to resist being used with little payoff for them. Then one's ego can collapse in a cloud of confusion, loneliness, and self-disgust.

All too afraid that allegiance to them is proportional to their good behavior, children tend to rebel and cave in; so do spouses. It's almost as if the object of conditional allegiance perversely misbehaves in order to prove to the other how shallow is his or her commitment. When that happens, pathologies of all kinds—mental, moral, familial, social, even physical—sprout like dandelions in the spring. The reason is simple and obvious: we know only too well that we generate precious few good deeds and thus deserve only scant allegiance from others. We know ourselves to be, for the most part, both unloving and unlovable. If we further peer into others' lives, we soon conclude that we're all in the same boat: all in need of unconditional love, yet both the subjects and objects of all too conditional commitments. A precarious house of cards, if ever there was one.

### WHAT WOULD MAKE US CONTENT

What would we most like to find, but rarely if ever do, in the persons pledged to us? If the golden rule bids us to do for others what we would like them to do for us, we do well to ask first how we'd like to be treated. The sought-after qualities that make up unconditional love are almost too good to be true, but not for that reason less needed. Here are some facets of the unconditional love we need and have yet to encounter:

1. Someone who is always, irrevocably there, in our corner, smiling and encouraging us, righting us when we stumble or give way to real or imagined fatigue; someone who kindly puts a positive spin on our every deed, misdeed, and non-deed, no

matter what, no matter how we misbehave, no matter how badly we mistreat our unconditional friend.

2. Someone who doesn't need to be asked to understand, condone, forgive us unreservedly; who finds excuses even we had overlooked; who's never scandalized or censorious at our missteps, however frequent, childish, or cheap; whose faithful, perpetual smile is never affected by our scowls; who's eager to adduce reasons why our mountains can justifiably be shrunk to molehills; yet who never compromises with the truth of my self-defeating ways.
3. Someone who more than merits our fullest trust and confidence, before whom we can discard the mask of our false persona; to whom we can unburden ourselves by confiding all our most embarrassing, self-deflating and even deviant thoughts, addictions, deeds, and urges, the sources of our disappointments, headaches, and heartbreaks, shrunken goals and expectations; on whose capacious and stalwart shoulder we can lean, and even cling, however few or many tears our ducts can still eke out.
4. Someone, further, who delights in our company; whose pulse is quickened by our mere voice or physical approach; who eagerly awaits our phone calls; whose eyes twinkle even more when we're around; who's quick to listen, observe, ask about, and take a genuine interest in our affairs, however trivial and fleeting; whose laugh, sense of humor, and optimism are rampant and catching; who exquisitely respects and defends our freedom, without trying to remake us into his or her image.
5. Finally, someone who is not put off by our cynicism, put-downs, recidivism, and downright wretchedness, but who, on the contrary, entertains in our regard the highest hopes, the greatest expectations, the most unlimited dreams; who's keenly

interested in, while fanning, our growth and betterment in every dimension; who ever invites us to soar like eagles in our healthy ambitions and aspirations in lieu of floundering around like barnyard hens; who's ever sketching new, unexpected vistas for our ideals, lest we settle for making mud-pies in squalid gutters; who, like a coach, patiently teaches us the steps to achieving full personhood for both ourselves and others; who resells us time and again on how desperately others need to perceive the fruits of fully ratifying human existence as aristocrats of love.

### GENERATING UNCONDITIONAL LOVE

A tall order, you say? Indeed. But would anything less do justice to the agonies and ecstasies that make up the human condition? Moreover, if that's the genuine love each of us would like to be the object of, isn't that what our very own being calls us to do for others? The unconditional commitment and love that others need of us is what will actually make both the subject and objects of this boundless, unreserved self-giving as fulfilled and blissful as both parties can possibly be in this life. Whether or not we're the object of others' unconditional allegiance (something that would doubtless make it easier for us to maintain this heroic tenor), we owe it both to ourselves and to others to love them so, for that is the best way for us authentically to love ourselves (super-enlightened self-interest). If volunteers are needed to get the ball rolling and thereby trigger a chain-reaction of reciprocating but unconditional commitments, how about you and I? However much others may benefit, we can't help but be the chief beneficiaries. Surely some of the others at least will begin to respond in kind and will shore us up and spur us on, when our efforts flag, as doubtless they will.

What will assuredly keep us plodding along is to see, first in hope and dream, and then in actuality, the heights of creativity, development, truth, and virtue to which human beings will scale, when they know themselves to be loved unconditionally and begin so to love others. If this total, reciprocal commitment were to catch on and spread contagiously, what a new world and society would soon arise, phoenix-like, from the ashes of our barren, blind, self-defeating selfishness! It would make the combined utopias the world has dared to dream seem like mere ineffectual wills-o'-the-wisp in comparison.

### TO GUARD AGAINST RENEGING

Now for this good infection to spread far and wide and thus wreak such transformations of persons, families, and societies, more than enthusiasm and good intentions are requisite. Otherwise, the pessimists will deservedly have the last cynical laugh. What, more realistically and practically, can weak, volatile, vindictive and cunning persons do to redeem their pledge to love others unconditionally? Besides trying our best to live the program in felicity and wisdom outlined in the preceding chapters, what further steps could we take to defy the all too usual atrophy that, termite-like, infects all things human? Here are some suggestions, based on the first impulse of real love to eternalize itself and to hedge itself round with all kinds of self-imposed but public protestations, restraints, vows, witnesses, and the like:

1. To see ourselves through the sloughs of despond, dark nights, inevitable doubts, confusions, and temptations to weasel out of this exacting pledge, it would be wise at least to commit ourselves in writing, a mission statement, if you will. This "testament" will naturally highlight the end pursued, the steps and means thereto, the obstacles and the benefits. Having it



in writing will permit us to revisit this declaration periodically to inspire serial re-commitments.

2. We won't go very far or last very long, unless we find an ethical coach-confidant-friend. To such a mentor we must submit our perverse tendency to deceive ourselves and revert to unenlightened ways. We all need someone, who, with objectivity and disinterestedness, can guide, counsel, encourage, challenge, and (why not say it?) love us. Such an adviser must know us inside out; we can hold back no secrets, especially the most embarrassing and shameful infidelities to our life's project and to others. These huddles give us an opportunity to look bad, to "gossip" about ourselves. We should elicit from our confidant the commitment to tell us the truth, especially when we're backing away from it, lest in our worse moments we forget that, while hurting, the truth also heals. Ideally, our guide will have both the strength and vision to fan our desire for the goal—bliss, ecstasy—while showing us that we keep seeking it in the wrong places or ways. Topics? Hits and misses; desires, hopes, disappointments; deeds, misdeeds, and omissions; review of the jointly tailored plan to make the project a reality; particular targets of struggle. Frequency? Initially, at least once a month.

Does this second step seem excessive? Such an assessment is but the natural voice of the defensive, inexperienced outsider. A person who has no or very reduced standards, which are effortlessly kept (at least some of the time), can probably dispense with a guide. But persons who recognize that, in so many ways, they are their own worst enemies will understand that they need help to raise their level of performance towards their lofty goals. For precedents, one need go no further than the toils and travails of the athlete determined to go for the gold, who would never think of going it alone without the best of coaches.

3. As mentioned earlier, Peanuts' Lucy got it only too right: "I love humanity, it's people [smelly, pushy, disagreeable, flesh-and blood individuals encroaching on me] I can't stand." While one may want to love and serve everybody, at least in theory, true love is a matter, not of sweet words, but of gratuitous deeds and favors to very concrete and usually unappreciative people. However universal my aspirations, these must be proved and forged in my daily interchanges with those closest to me. In other words, each of us needs to have a handful of persons, be it one's natural family or a chosen group of friends, whom we commit ourselves, in our heart of hearts, to love and serve. For their sake, to be sure, but no less for ours.

Across the human spectrum, there's no doubt that the deepest, most lasting joys we observe are those associated with maternity and even paternity; such is human nature. How mothers and fathers of infants beam and bloom, unthinkingly glad to sacrifice themselves, quite uncharacteristically, for their utterly dependent loved ones! Well, if biological generation almost invariably brings out the best in us, what deeper joys might not spiritual paternity—discipleship, apprenticeship in life—bring in its wake? To coax forth, amid however much more blood, sweat, and tears, children of the spirit is surely the adventure we're all called to, but so few hit upon.

### HANDLING UNREQUITED LOVE

True love is born and further matures in the face of unrequitedness. It's so easy to love those who respond in kind. But is that really other-love or, rather, camouflaged and relatively unenlightened self-love? Most of us, to be sure, can fairly easily go out of our way to generate three or four unbidden favors, but when these go

unrecognized and we find ourselves being taken for granted, and even despised, well, that's another matter. Yet only then does it become possible for us to bestow an absolutely *free* gift of self.

Whatever our age, it may very well be that we have so far generated few, if any, tokens of truly unselfish other-love. Parents should be forewarned that they really don't and can't start loving their spouses or children with utter disinterest, until they've stopped liking them (this dislike need not be precipitated intentionally, it will soon enough arise on its own). It's ironic but only too true: most marriages today break up just when they were about to get under way, just when the partners need to slough off the confining skin of positive feelings and inclinations that make up "liking." This painful step necessarily presages the advent of genuine other-love. Only then are we psychologically and morally free to surprise others stealthily by joy.

The following two chapters suggest in considerable detail how newfound "aristocrats of love" might embody their disinterested self-giving as spouses and parents, in what are undoubtedly the most common relationships calling for selfless commitment.

## REINVENTING MARRIAGE

If love is blind, marriage is a good eye-opener.

—Anonymous, 1940s

**M**ARRIAGE TODAY looks almost as if it were down for the count. In fact, the only unions likely to survive the ever-growing moral undertow in the third millennium may be those pairing two virtue-strengthened aristocrats of love. The chickens born of inadequate and improvised "love" are coming home to roost.

This we soon learn in spades if we happen upon any country-Western radio station. How can there be anything other than broken hearts and vows when morally unprepared people unthinkingly commit themselves to a potentially lifelong venture light-years beyond any acquired capacity for self-giving? The wonder isn't that one out of every two unions comes unstuck, but rather that half the marriages somehow stick it out, amid however much despair. Exaggerated? According to Ann Landers' readership, some six mothers out of ten regret having brought their very own