

Chapter 1

Companionship: A Friend for the Journey

A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter;
he who finds one finds a treasure.
A faithful friend is beyond price,
no sum can balance his worth.
A faithful friend is a life-saving remedy,
such as he who fears God finds;
For he who fears God behaves accordingly,
and his friend will be like himself.

—Sirach 6:14–17

We live in a world of contradictions, at least where friendship and social interaction are concerned. On the one hand, this is the age of the “global village,” where we are connected to our employers, our families, our friends, and even our passing acquaintances by cell phones, faxes, e-mail, and wireless gadgets that allow us to communicate in the blink of an eye. On the other hand, we live in increasing isolation. The very technology that is supposed to make our lives so much easier and so much more integrated is, in actuality, cutting us off from face-to-face contact, leaving us with mostly virtual relationships that may supply superficial satisfaction but never feed our deeper need for something that touches the heart and soul.

In some ways, it would seem impossible to be isolated in this modern-day world. Even on vacation, we are usually plugged into a mind-numbing array of people, places, and social networking websites that allow us to occupy every free second in our harried lives. The problem is that despite all our “favorites” and “buddies” out there in the land of plenty, we are hungry for a real connection.

This need, this hunger, is nothing new. The desire for companionship and friendship dates back to the beginning of humanity. The Lord himself said: “It is not good for man to be alone” (Gn 2:18). Human beings are meant to have partners to journey with them through different phases of life. Whether we are married or single, we need solid friendships in our lives, relationships that go deeper than meeting for coffee once a week or catching a movie after work. While those kinds of friends are important, to be sure, most of us need someone—or several “someones”—who are not just friends, but spiritual friends.

Spiritual friends are those soul mates who share our spiritual longings and help us to become our own best selves. These special friendships are like life preservers that keep our heads above the murky waters of isolation and superficiality. Sure, it may be fun, even necessary, to have friends we can call to go out for cocktails or shopping, but it is even more important to have friends we connect with in a significant and lasting way.

But spiritual friendships are not always easy to recognize immediately. They may develop slowly over months or even years. They may burn brightly for several years and then fade a bit as we move into a different stage of our lives.

We may look back at an earlier time in our own lives and realize that what got us through a rough spot was an extraordinary friendship that seemed ordinary at the time.

Recognizing Those “Aha!” Moments

I remember when I landed my first job after college in the communications office of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Metuchen, New Jersey. I was commuting to a new town more than an hour’s drive from my home in suburban New York. I was young and somewhat intimidated by my new responsibilities, which included everything from reporting for the weekly newspaper to writing scripts for a cable show to editing a monthly newsletter. And then I met Dorothy, the diocesan director of evangelization, whose office was just one floor above mine.

Upon first meeting, Dorothy’s unbridled joy seemed almost too good to be true. Could someone really be this happy, I wondered. Her obvious love of God—and trust in his plan—was like something I had never witnessed before and, to be honest, haven’t seen since. Whether it was something “minor,” like an office argument, or something major, like the loss of her apartment, Dorothy’s trust that God was in control never wavered.

I would often retreat to Dorothy’s office for a dose of her calm and steady words of encouragement. Her generosity and kindness spilled over into personal time as well. She invited me to stay at her apartment any time I was working late or out on a date. I could come and go—whether Dorothy was there or not—as if her home was my home. I have

many fond memories of sitting at Dorothy's little dining table with her, sharing a simple meal and talking for hours.

I'll never forget the first time I stayed at her house and was awakened around 5 a.m. to the sound of Dorothy singing "Morning Has Broken" before taking her dog Raphael out for a walk. I thought I had fallen through the rabbit hole and into an animated Disney feature. Surely the dog would be sweeping up the kitchen while birds cleaned the dishes. But Dorothy was—and still is—100 percent genuine, as is our friendship. It didn't matter that I was in my early twenties and Dorothy was nearing fifty when we first met. Our unlikely friendship was held together by something deeper than the typical ties of age or hobbies. We were bound by our shared faith and our desire to further that faith not only through prayer and service but also through friendship.

Dorothy soon became a spiritual mentor whose sunny disposition and solid faith began to influence my own actions and attitudes in dramatic ways. Through her peaceful acceptance of even difficult situations in her life, I began to see a new way of dealing with things.

It took a minor car accident to make me see just how much Dorothy's influence had changed me. I was driving my little Chevy Chevette up the Garden State Parkway during rush hour on my way home from my Metuchen job one night when I rear-ended the very large car in front of me. Something distracted me, maybe a song on the radio, maybe another car on the bumper-to-bumper drive, and I simply didn't stop in time. The driver of the car I hit flew into a panic, saying he was worried about his heart. Since his car didn't have so much as a scratch, he took off. He left

me standing there alone in my high-heeled boots and black winter cape, wondering how I was going to move my unmovable car across three lanes of traffic. With the help of some good Samaritans, my car was pushed onto the shoulder, where I waited for the police and a tow truck. An hour or so later, I called my parents in incredibly good humor and told them with a bit of a chuckle that I was standing in a repair shop in Newark holding the grille of my car in my hands. I'm sure my composure must have unsettled them. In some ways, it unsettled me. No tears, no cursing, no shouts of "Why me?"

Dorothy's trust and peace were starting to rub off on me. Her friendship and real-life witness to the Gospel was beginning to influence my choices and my actions in profound and positive ways. With Dorothy's lessons of faith echoing in my head, I knew that I could choose to respond to my crisis of the moment with trust rather than fear or frustration. My car may have been in pieces, but because of what I was learning from this person who was put in my path at just the right time, my spirit was intact.

It was only much later that I realized that Dorothy is one of those rare spiritual friends who come into our lives when we least expect them but most need them. They walk with us—like the two disciples traveling together on the road to Emmaus—talking with us, teaching us, praying with us, bringing us closer each day to God and, in doing so, helping us reach our fullest and truest potential.

I am now close to the age Dorothy was when I first met her, and she is almost seventy-five. Although we rarely see each other anymore, Dorothy remains a spiritual role

model for me. She is someone who can give my prayer life a jolt with just one short conversation. We are in the midst of planning a weekend visit, something that will be akin to a retreat from my perspective because to be in Dorothy's company is to be in the presence of true holiness.

When I called her recently, she had just finished praying the Rosary on her porch. I took the opportunity to tell her again about that car accident from long ago and how she influenced me without even knowing it. In true Dorothy fashion, she began talking about the power of Scripture and the prophets in her own life and how all God ever wanted of his people was for them to trust in Him.

"I don't need to know the future. God will meet me wherever I go," Dorothy said, sounding very much like the woman I first met twenty-five years ago. When I spoke about the importance of our friendship in my life, she summed up spiritual friendship perfectly: "We can draw on each other's strength because we can't be up all the time, because we care about one another. We are united in Christ, united through the Spirit. That's what you don't have in other friendships that are not spiritual friendships. There's a very strong bond there that you might not have with someone you just meet for cocktails."

Spiritual Friendship: A Definition

Our fiercely independent society tells us we can make it on our own. We don't need anything but a desire to succeed and a willingness to work hard. Well, that may be true in the business of the world, but it is certainly not true in the business of the spirit. We all need companions. Even happily

married people need friend companions because no one person can fill every need, every spiritual longing, at every moment of our lives.

As we change and grow—and all of us do—we are often met on our path by people like us who can take our figurative hand and accompany us to the next stage in our journey, the way Dorothy did for me all those years ago. Such companionship, when it is good and true, can strengthen not only our relationship with God but with important people in our lives—spouse, children, parents, friends. Spiritual friendships feed our souls, and when our souls are nourished and calm and strong, we tend to handle the rest of our lives with less friction and chaos.

A spiritual friend can offer insights and prayers, comfort and encouragement when we are struggling with our children or a problem at work. We can pray with one another—or for one another. We can talk about spiritual questions that not everyone else wants to discuss. Whether we live across the street or across the country, we can join our hearts and minds and provide each other with a spiritual refuge. Such companionship can bring us a deep sense of peace that comes from knowing we are loved in a particular way, that we are not alone, and that what we are longing for and striving for is not so impossible or crazy after all. And all of that, in turn, allows us to approach the rest of our relationships and responsibilities with a spirit of hope and a sense of solidarity. It is powerful stuff.

The longing for spiritual friends is not some invention of contemporary pop psychology. Throughout history, people have been drawn together by their love of God and

their desire to become more spiritually centered. This desire and need is something that crosses the boundaries of religious beliefs. Whether you are Jewish or Christian or Muslim, Buddhist or Hindu or Native American, you are likely to have a hunger for companionships and friendships that incorporate your deepest beliefs in a life-changing way. The Buddhists call it *kalyana mittata*. The ancient Celts call it *anam cara*. Spiritual friendship may have different names in different religions and cultures, but it comes down to the same principle: two people bound together by a love of God. It is even possible for two deeply spiritual people of different faiths to come together in a spiritual friendship that does not negate either's religion, but instead feeds and fosters the friends' individual beliefs.

Thomas Merton, the famed Trappist monk whose extensive writings on prayer, peace, and his own journey to Christianity have influenced countless people of all faiths, was good friends with the late Daisetz T. Suzuki, a famous Zen master. The two met and corresponded. In fact, in his book *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, Merton wrote extensively about Suzuki, saying that meeting him was "like arriving at one's own home." His conversations with Suzuki were "unforgettable" and "extraordinary," he wrote.¹

Of Thich Nhat Hanh, another Buddhist monk, Merton once wrote: "Thich Nhat Hanh is more my brother than many who are nearer to me in race and nationality, because he and I see things in exactly the same way."² Rather than present a stumbling block, their different beliefs became building blocks. The friends took elements of each other's

spiritual traditions and used them to strengthen their own faith practices.

Spiritual friendship can spring up in unlikely places and between unlikely people. God works in mysterious but wonderful ways. The key element in any spiritual friendship, however, is the longing for a deeper relationship with our Creator, something that is evident from earliest recorded history.

Look back at the quote from the Book of Sirach that opened this chapter. In reading the passage again, it becomes obvious that deep friendship has long been valued as something beneficial, powerful, and even life giving. In the full verse (6:5–17), Sirach says that we may have a multitude of acquaintances but will find that our true friends number only “one in a thousand.”

Sounding surprisingly in touch with our modern sensibilities, the verse reminds us that many people will choose to be our friends for the wrong reasons and will turn their backs on us when we are in need or are no longer useful. I believe our mothers referred to those sorts of people as “fair-weather friends.” A true friend, on the other hand, is like another self, someone who will stand beside you no matter how many slings and arrows are buzzing past your head; someone who is, as stated in the Book of Proverbs, eternally yours: “*He who is a friend is always a friend*” (Prv 17:17).

Aelred of Rievaulx, a twelfth-century Cistercian monk, wrote the book of *Spiritual Friendship*—literally. In his best-selling treatise on the depth and significance of God-centered friendship, Aelred brings a spiritual dimension to the ideas originally expressed in *De Amicitia* (*On Friendship*)

more than one thousand years earlier by Cicero, the Roman orator, philosopher, and statesman.

Rievaulx called the true friend a “guardian of love” and a “guardian of the spirit,” and said that true friendship is a “virtue by which spirits are bound by ties of love and sweetness.” He refers back to Cicero’s *De Amicitia*, saying, “Even the philosophers of this world have ranked friendship not with things casual or transitory but with virtues which are eternal.”³ In other words, true friendship lasts forever and is inescapably bound by a deep love, not a romantic love but a soul-level love that allows the friendship to withstand things that might destroy a lesser friendship—disagreements, separation by time or distance, pressures from the outside world.

Aelred breaks friendship down into three basic types: carnal, which is based on vice and is indiscriminate; worldly, which is based on gain and a desire for possessions; and spiritual, which is based on morals and “pursuits among the just.”⁴ Spiritual or “true” friendship, he explains, constantly perfects itself, grounds itself in a similarity of lives and morals, and incorporates benevolence and charity.⁵

What Does That Mean for Us Today?

At this point it should be clear that spiritual friendship, with its focus on benevolence and justice and charity, is a far cry from a simple night out with the girls. Spiritual friendship is connected to our God-given mission, our calling to live out our faith in the everyday world. That’s because spiritual friendships run deep. They bend with pressure but don’t