

From the Heart...

...Lifeskills for Today's Family
By Sharon L. Benedict MS



New Beginnings - Dreams to Still Hold Near

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, Jan 3, 2014)

“When we are motivated by goals that have deep meaning, by dreams that need completion, by pure love that needs expressing, then we truly live life.” Greg Anderson, author of *Cancer: 50 Essential Things to Do: 2013 Edition*, was diagnosed with terminal cancer in 1984 and given 30 days to live. Yet, he decided to really start living.

Anderson clearly affirmed the supreme connection between the pursuit of our passions and dreams with the realities and relationships we have in life. Dreams are wonderful thoughts to keep us young at heart but need life relationships that help our dreams and core values come true. This is true even more so when a life-threatening diagnosis hits you.

The core values and the relationships we have are key motivators for setting a goal and staying faithful to it. Without them, we falter every time, and our dreams fade. My close friend, Nancy, was always there when I needed a morale boost or a kind correction—keeping my dreams alive. Her courageous fight with melanoma and passing gave me a lifetime of gratitude for her being part of my life. My husband, John, has also been one of my strongest supporters for helping my dreams come true. These are just two of the many people in my life that made all the difference—when I was disappointed, even despairing, and when I was celebrating.

As this New Year begins, what are your dreams you want to nurture and keep alive? Are you facing a major challenge in your life, whether it be your health, finances, relationships? During this month's articles, think about those deeper life passions you have kept quiet about. Isn't it time to take a closer look at what your life could be like with those dreams realized? Where is your courage resident inside you? Isn't it time to energize that courage ready to help you on your journey to "really living life?"

Who do you want to share the journey with? Who can help you make them come true? Believe me, it's not a selfish thing to reach out to help others fulfill their dreams while you do the same. Take the journey together. I leave you with these gems to encourage your courage to rise up with your new beginnings that will help you hold on to your dreams, close to your heart and relationships.

- "When you are DOWN to nothing ... God is UP to something" Bishop T. D. Jakes
- "If you want to see the brave, look at those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look at those who can love in return for hatred." *Bhagavad-Gita*
- "There are two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle." *Albert Einstein*
- "The worst of circumstances can produce the best of choices." *Gerald Mann Ministries, Austin, Texas*
- "Gratitude unlocks the fullness of life. It turns what we have into enough, and more. It turns denial into acceptance, chaos to order, confusion to clarity. It can turn a meal into a feast, a house into a home, a stranger into

a friend. Gratitude makes sense of our past, brings peace for today, and creates a vision for tomorrow." *Melodie Beattie*

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From the Heart . . .

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When it comes to Friends . . .

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, Jan 10, 2014)

“Be courteous to all, but intimate with few, and let those few be well tried before you give them your confidence. True friendship is a plant of slow growth, and must undergo and withstand the shocks of adversity before it is entitled to the appellation.” In a letter to his young nephew, Bushrod Washington, on January 15, 1783, George Washington (1732 - 1799) set in motion this worthy advice for us all.

For many young children and teens, if someone has many friends, somehow they tend to believe that person is more special than themselves. This is even more the case when popularity and importance is gauged today by the number of “friends” you have on Facebook or some other online social network. And monitoring the degree of intimacy put out there with these so-called “friends” can be tricky at best, if not dangerous.

So, how does the young and young-at-heart choose wisely and can be satisfied with a few close friends? Friends come in all shapes, sizes, and styles. Mark Vernon, author of *The Philosophy of Friendship* (2005), suggests “try listing some of the friends you have – your partner, oldest friend, mates or girlfriends, one or two family members, work colleagues, neighbours, friends from online chat rooms, family friends, a boss perhaps, therapist, teacher, personal trainer – whoever you might at some time think of

as a friend. A look at such a list puts your friends in front of you, as it were, and highlights the vast differences.”

The experts in psychology, philosophy, and theology tend to group friendships into three or four groups. With four groups, the first is *acquaintances* which includes occasional contact where you ask questions of each other of a more “public” nature such as “Where do you work?” You are just beginning to connect or quickly disconnect depending on the encounter.

The next group is *casual friendship* that can develop quickly, even from the first contact. You begin to discover shared interests, activities, concerns. Questions become a little more personal about feelings, goals, opinions. Whatever is shared at this stage, may need to be kept in confidence as with other levels of friendship. You will be learning about your new friend’s strengths and positive characteristics you see in them. Both of you should be honest about yourselves, becoming a friend you can trust.

The third group is a *close friendship*. This friendship reflects a bond of trust, love, and care developed with time. You also share similar life goals and values. This level of friendship embodies a responsibility to help each other reach those goals and a willingness to see any potential hindrances to achieving those goals.

The fourth level of *intimate friendship* is based on a deep commitment to unselfishly invest in one another’s lives—helping each other mature in character, honesty, humility, and discretion. It also means you are there through any loss or grief and celebrate with them any good fortune and accomplishments. Each have the freedom to correct one another and point out blind spots, and try to work out solutions

together. An intimate friendship is where some of the greatest, enduring love and marriages shine.

For the theologian, praying for each other is a tenet of faith, asking humbly and sincerely for God's greatest good to be experienced on behalf of your friend, whether just an acquaintance, casual, close or intimate relationship.

The next article will discuss how a friendship goes awry and is lost. In the meantime, here are a few other sage words of wit and wisdom from Solomon, Aristotle, to Dale Carnegie to instill discernment in choosing and keeping friends at any level, and being grateful for them all.

"Without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods."

Aristotle (384 BC - 322 BC), Nichomachean Ethics

"Friendship make prosperity more shining and lessens adversity by dividing and sharing it." Cicero (106 BC - 43 BC), On Friendship, 44 B.C.

"Iron sharpens iron; so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend" (Proverbs 27:17).

"A friend loves at all times, and is born, as is a brother, for adversity." (Proverbs 17:17)

"Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so does the sweetness of a man's friend by hearty counsel" (Proverbs 27:9)

"You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you." Dale Carnegie

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When it comes to Losing Friends

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, Jan 17, 2014)

Friendships are one of life's greatest gifts. Yet, friendships can challenge the most hardy of us humans. *"The shifts of Fortune test the reliability of friends."* Sometime between 106 BC and 43BC Cicero penned these words in his *De Amicitia*. Whether you are ten years young or almost hitting the 100 mark, the depth of one's friends are definitely tested when something goes wrong. Yet, the shifts of fortune don't need to be a loss. Even shifts to good fortune test whether your friend celebrates with you or jealousy rears its ugly head to sabotage whatever fortune has come your way.

Broken friendships have been around for eons, such as quoted here by King David 1000 BC, in Psalm 41:9, "Even my own familiar friend, in whom I trusted (relied on and was confident), who ate of my bread, has lifted up his heel against me." What is one of the first thoughts you have when losing that friend who hurt you deeply?

Does finding a way to make that friend jealous rear its head in you as well? Or some other ugly way to get back at your friend or talk behind her/his back? If we dig a little deeper, a core emotion is actually grief or agonizing sadness. Other emotions may accompany this, including defensiveness, anger, and discouragement. You may find yourself wanting to try to restore the friendship but don't know how to go about it. Of all the potential emotions or feelings, which ones seem to surface for you?

While losing a friend who is still around is never compared to the death of a child, family member, or a very close friend, a broken friendship can be almost as devastating to the person doing the grieving. In trying to restore the relationship, Irene S. Levine, PhD, offers in *The Friendship Doctor* (Oct 5, 2009) *5 Tips for Mending a Tattered Friendship*.

“1) Assess what's going on between you - Try to think objectively and make sure that you really want to mend the friendship. Your latest tiff may just be a sign that the relationship has been doomed for a while. Have you simply outgrown each other? That's no one's fault. People change over time and not always in the same direction. Have the same problems recurred time after time? Maybe the bad chemistry or sense of imbalance between you has become so overwhelming that it is impossible to transcend. Or--- is it something that you think you might really be able to fix? If so, proceed to Tip 2.

2) Pinpoint what happened - If it is something you said or did, or something you didn't say or do---or if the problem was with her, talk about it. No friendship is perfect and each one has tiny kinks that need to be worked out. Communicating avoids little problems from escalating into big ones that can undermine a relationship.

3) Be the first to offer the olive branch - If you know you were in the wrong, take responsibility for your mistake. Tell your friend how important the relationship is to you and show her in some small but concrete way. Invite her to dinner or send her a card that says, "I'm sorry." If she was in the wrong, practice forgiveness. Harboring resentment towards someone has a way of bouncing back like a boomerang to hurt you (including raising your blood pressure). Let go of the disappointment. Having a shared

history should provide a strong foundation that allows a friendship to weather small hurts.

4) **Step back after you've tried** - Be sensitive to her response. Okay, you've been thinking about how you were going to handle this fiasco, for hours or maybe even weeks and months. But you just sprung your thinking on her and she may need time to mull it over. If her answer is "No way," accept it for the moment, give it some time, and try again. If she repeatedly blows you off, you may have to accept her decision and move on.

5) **Don't necessarily view endings as a failure** - Friendships have beginning and endings. Ones that last forever are more likely to be the topic of novels and television scripts (think *Sex & The City*). The women I surveyed for my book, *Best Friends Forever: Surviving a Breakup with Your Best Friend*, talked about even very close friendships having "expiration dates" and "shelf lives." And sometimes women breathe a sigh of relief after an ambivalent or toxic friendship is over. Friendships are wonderful and life affirming. If we're lucky, each one provides us with new wisdom so they get better and better!"

My hope for each of us is that we will cherish all our relationships, but particularly those friends who have made all the difference in our lives. How about each of us thanking our friends this week for simply being who they are and the rare gift of their friendship?

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When it comes to Offending Friends, Family, & Strangers Alike

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, Jan 24, 2014)

Have you ever been exhausted at the end of the day and someone knocks on your door trying to sell you something? And while trying to be polite and say you were not interested, somehow one word you said is interpreted as offensive?

You were somewhat befuddled and being so tired you didn't know what to say. So, you just let it all pass, said no thank you, and closed the door. For sure, you would never want anyone to feel uncomfortable or embarrassed or anything with what you would say or do. A little later, though, you start to feel bad about the unintentional but perceived offense. You ask yourself, "How could I have that slip out of my mouth?" But there is nothing you can do since the salesman went on his way without getting his name or even the company information.

Am I making too much of a big deal out of this scenario? For some, you may be thinking, "No big deal. Can't stand people coming door to door selling stuff anyway. Just forget it." For others, that sense of nagging guilt lingers.

What about when a family member calls for advice and asks you "What would you do in this situation?" You offer it and they proceed to do just that. Yet, it backfires on them. Guess what? Your family member calls you back to tell you what happened

professing that it wasn't your fault. It was their decision to do whatever it was in the first place. But the truth of the matter is you still feel bad about it and feel responsible. Your heart was in the right place all along but it still didn't help much.

What is really going on with these two scenarios? First, for those of you experiencing lingering sadness about it, consider this. The fact that you are even questioning your motives signals to me you try to say and do the right thing. Your heart is in the right place, not meaning to hurt anyone.

But we all get tired and slip up unintentionally. Why? Because we are human, and it is best to embrace none of us are perfect. Slipping up but recognizing it, actually gives us opportunities to learn a good lesson. It also offer us a chance to make up for it later down the road with those offended; but if not, possibly with other people you wholeheartedly and purposefully want to show extra kindness that makes their day easier all around.

Opportunities will show themselves, believe me. And you will be ready and willing for them. Another possible tip for us all when being asked to give advice with the "What would you do" question. Possibly, next time, we will be more cautious and reflective as to whether we say anything or not.

There is one life coaching tip learned in training and just plain messy experiences that may prove helpful for us. When your family member, friend, or stranger asks that "What would you do" question, how about offering a question back instead that gives them an opportunity to discover their own answer. Whatever surfaces, they will then own it, not you. Whatever they say or do they will have looked deeply into the circumstances and the people involved that would hopefully bring about the best

outcomes for all concerned. Although, none of us can predict the outcome or the reactions of family members, friends, or strangers, no matter the encounter. Yet, helping others to own their own words and actions will go a long way to keeping peace in the family, hold on to friends, and possibly bless a stranger.

There is one last tip here to help us humans get along better. Forgive others and by all means forgive yourself. When we are willing to learn life's lessons we become a better person and can truly know what it is to be a friend.

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Your Best Friend

(published in Boerne Star, Friday, Jan 31, 2014)

"A true friend is the greatest of all blessings, and that which we take the least care of all to acquire." Francois de La Rochefoucauld (1613-1680)

Since the focus this month on Relationships/Core Values keys in on friendships in all its forms, let's spend a little more time on your best friend. There is never a moment that is more valued than honoring and nurturing the relationship with your best friend.

Who is your best friend? Did you have a best friend in the second grade, your teen years, young adult years, today? Did you choose your best friend just because you "hit it off"? Or was there something more you saw in the relationship? What are those special qualities of a best friend? Here are top three qualities to consider when choosing your best friend:

Honesty, Truthfulness, Trustworthy - Nothing impacts a relationship more than being able to trust another person's words. A best friend will *walk the talk*.

Acceptance - A best friend offers a relationship where you feel comfortable being yourself around him or her. A best friend may not always agree with you, but will be honest with you and accept you as you are.

Shared Life Values - At the core of every relationship are shared life values. Know what yours are before you commit to and step into any friendship, particularly when choosing your best friend. Core values that are not shared will distract and get you off track from your life goals. Only after many years will you look back at what you missed. A best friend should have the effect of making you both a better person through your association; and be supportive in your strategic life journey. So, consider this ancient biblical proverb when deciding with whom you want to share your life journey (no matter all long the season of friendship):

“He who walks [as a companion] with wise men is wise, but he who associates with [self-confident] fools is [a fool himself and] shall smart for it.” (Proverbs 13:20 AMP)

Naturally, we like to be with people who make us feel good. Yet, sometimes we have a blind side that eventually wounds us. Our best friends, whether they are young or old, are those who help us stay headed in the right direction, who care about us, and correct us when we are about to make an unwise decision. Yet, at the same time respects that you are the one making the decision, not your friend.

When making friends you may want to ask yourself, “Who are their friends? Those they hang around tell you a great deal about the person. What do mature and respected people you know say about them? How do these potential friends treat others? Unless they consistently demonstrate honesty, integrity, patience, and consideration for others, you have no guarantee you will always be treated well. So give the relationship some time to prove out the character of your new friend in real life.

You are encouraged to also talk to potential friends about more serious topics, in order to reveal their personality, true motivations, and values. Are they kind or cold? Are

they basically positive and cheerful—or negative and cynical? Are they generous or self-serving? If they frequently talk critically of others to you, what makes you think they may not do the same to you behind your back?

Deep down, you know when something isn't quite right with this potential friend, let alone best friend. Listen to your own inner voice—the conscience we all have and occasionally ignore. Why? Mostly because we don't want to hurt the other person's feelings; and we don't like conflict. We may also have some personal need we think will be met by this person being our friend or best friend. Check out your own motives. You will save yourself any number of problems later down the road.

So, when choosing friends, know that your relationship at times may be like *iron sharpening iron*. . .so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend (Proverbs 27:17). As two people “*rub*” on it each other with the qualities of a best friend—Honesty/Truthfulness/Trustworthy, Acceptance, Shared Life Values—you will both help each other grow in integrity together; and the bonds of friendship between you will only get stronger.

This week, say *thank you* to your best friend for being there for you. Look forward to next month's lifeskill, *Time Management*. Let's see how we can avoid just “muddling through” so we can experience life to the fullest—at home, in our neighborhood, community, work, and the world.

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