

Friendship

"The more you discover what a person is, and experience what a human relationship requires in order to remain profound, fruitful, and a source of growth and development, the more you discover that you are alone--and that the measure of your solitude is the measure of your capacity for communion."

--May Sarton

Casual or intense, our friendships hold the power to enrich and sustain us. In them we discover, express, and measure ourselves; through them we grow. Yet these seemingly familiar relationships remain complex and various, opening to us a range of discoveries that carry us between solitude and communion--between aloneness and a sharing of self with others.

For some people, perhaps more for men than for women, friendship is a matter of shared activity--a golf game, a theater outing. For some, it resides in fascination with what is different from oneself, while for others it thrives on shared interests and potentialities.

The activity of friendship may be physical, emotional, or intellectual. Some friendships focus around one or another; some integrate all three. Some are relatively static, while others are dynamic. The tenure may be brief or lengthy: the impulse to begin a friendship may be circumstantial or rationally deliberate.

Discovering a friendship that delights and strengthens us is not always easy, for friendship often leaves us vulnerable. But from the shared risk of opening the self to others, we create a "fabric of friendship," woven from mutual acceptance of each other's person, condition, and behavior. Friends offer verbal and emotional confidences freely and spontaneously, trusting that each has the other's best interest at heart.

But attempts to describe friendship rationally are often inadequate. One of the delightful mysteries of friendship is that a particular relationship may flourish in the absence of any set of rational characteristics.

The various portrayals of friendship found in the reading of this series--fictional and autobiographical--assert its dynamic, energetic nature. Friendships grow, change, even pass away. From the innocent companionships of childhood, we grow into the more self-conscious relationships of adolescence and finally to the mature friendships of adulthood.

Childhood and Adolescence

Early in life as we learn to share toys and experiences, we begin to make friendships with other children in the neighborhood. Within the structure of community we gain an awareness of our individuality. We are pulled between the need for acceptance and the fear of rejection. We desire the soothing comfort of aloneness, but fear confronting the self we may find there. We desire the acceptance of friends, yet fear confronting the self we find reflected in their eyes. As we grow, we eventually overcome both fears, and the fabric of our world becomes whole through a balance of our solitary selves and our friendships.

Jacob Have I Loved

by Katherine Patterson

Adolescence is a time of physical and emotional turmoil. Young people often find growth-producing relationships, so beneficial to developing a sense of self, difficult to formulate. Struggling with emerging physical and psychological needs, adolescents are awkward and self-conscious. Often they lack the self-confidence they need to share the essence of themselves with another in friendship. Nonetheless, intense, meaningful, and long-lasting friendships often emerge.

Jacob Have I Loved, winner of the Newbery Medal in 1981, is the story of a twin sister's struggle to mature. Against the background of the biblical story of Jacob and Esau, Katherine Patterson works out the personal emergence of Louise Bradshaw.

Louise is unable to establish satisfying relationships because, in her helplessly adolescent way, she is unable to sustain a consistent faith in her own value. She possesses a strong, concrete sense of right and wrong and cries out for justice. Yet, repeatedly overshadowed by her talented and attractive twin, Caroline, Louise often believes herself to be dispossessed of goodness.

Tiny, isolated Rass Island, the setting for the novel, introduces numerous motifs of enclosure, both physical and mental. Through the use of this setting, Patterson provides an appropriate context for her belief that personal emergence is a precondition for self-acceptance and friendship. Louise's experience is a common one. As she grows beyond a conviction of her own limitations, she recognizes the human potential for mutual support and becomes a woman capable of acting out of love. In so doing, she comes to peace with her home, her family, and her companions who have tried all along to be her friends.

Louise flounders in an isolation which is unproductive, fearing (or perhaps hoping, since it would remove her own sense of responsibility) that, like Esau, God has cursed her to a life of barrenness and isolation. Only when she recognizes and admits her own value and

begins to treat herself respectfully does she become open to productive friendships. Ironically, she then is freed to deal constructively with the insularity and solitude that have intimidated her. By accepting her own value and potential, she learns to be a friend, and the lesson revolutionizes her life.

The Chosen

By Chaim Potok

The adolescent male friendship depicted in Chaim Potok's *The Chosen* is both easier and more difficult: easier because the book's central characters are not caught in the intense struggle for self awareness that plagues Patterson's characters; more difficult since the boys must maintain their friendship in the face of social barriers.

Danny Saunders and Reuven Malter have important reasons to avoid or even to despise each other. The boys come from backgrounds opposed to each other for religious and social reasons. Their relationship begins in fierce competition when Danny deliberately bats a ball at Reuven's head and hits him in the eye. Guilt-ridden, Danny visits Reuven in the hospital, and they are drawn to each other almost against their wishes.

The story of this friendship shows each boy struggling to understand and meet the needs of the other. Danny's father, a stern hasidic rabbi obsessed with the proper practice of traditional faith, uses silence to force Danny to make his own decisions about life. For a time Reuven's father, a more personable yeshiva teacher, is also silenced by poor health, so the boys come to rely more and more on each other for intellectual companionship and emotional support.

When news of the Jewish holocaust reaches the communities of Danny and Reuven, it heightens the political contention between the two sects. In an effort to maintain the integrity of his community, Danny's father imposes a strict silence between the two boys. Even in this silence, Danny and Reuven preserve their loyalty and concern for each other. Indeed the intensity of their bond seems enhanced by this separation as they learn to appreciate forms of non-verbal communication.

Danny and Reuven provide a model for friendship that works as it should. Neither gives up his individuality to the other, yet neither remains the same person he was before they met. Each learns to accept the other's rich heritage; more important, each learns to respect himself. Together they forge a sense of personal order and purpose in the face of the hate and turmoil which mark their world.

Adult Friendships

Undoubtedly, friendships enrich adult life in countless ways. Adult friendships, like the nourishing ones of adolescence, have the power to transform self-diminishing isolations into enriching solitudes. As adults, we do not reject the solitary self in search of friendship: rather we enlarge our understanding of ourselves through community with others. Joining together in shared activities and accomplishments, we find ourselves richer for the experience.

The Color Purple

by Alice Walker

The sometimes controversial epistolary novel tells the story of a young black woman's growth from desperate isolation and victimization to self-acceptance and celebration of universal community. Friendship is the catalyst for the change. Celie, the central character, expresses this change through friendships with her beloved sister Nettie, protective Shug Avery, defiant young Sofia, and even, finally, the hated Mister _____.

Celie's letters to God and to Nettie, as well as Nettie's letters to Celie, trace the lives of individuals whose ostensibly racial and familial ties are superseded by the universal human needs for respect and freedom.

Through the acceptance and protection of Shug Avery, Celie grows from violent repression and despair to affirmation of herself and all of life. Shug is a bluesy siren who dazzles Celie and is adored by her as one might adore a movie queen. But Shug humanizes the relationship, adopts Celie as a friend, and leads her to a level of self-awareness Celie has never before imagined.

From Nettie's letters, Celie learns history--partly racial history and partly an archetypal story of mankind's complex missions of love. This sister, from whom Celie has been unfairly separated for years, remains Celie's touchstone of innocence and happiness. The story comes full circle when the two are reunited. Their expression of love and respect measure the painful growth that has marked the years of their separation.

From Sofia, Celie learns self-respect and courage. Sofia's defiance of a spineless, abusive husband and endurance of a repressive white community are painful lessons for Celie. She is intimidated by Sofia's assertive nature, but she recognizes Sofia's strength and senses her integrity. Celie eventually learns enough self-respect to be Sofia's friend and comforter.

These various friendships guide Celie from adolescence to adulthood. Through the support of friends around her, Celie grows emotionally from despair to an experience of love that is neither exploitive nor manipulative.

Celie's letters measure the growth of self-respect which prepares the way for her friendships. Like Louise in *Jacob Have I Loved*, Celie values solitude in the midst of her friendships. Indeed, her friendships transform her isolation into constructive self-reflection, and the letters become mediations revealing her deepened vision of life.

The letter form provides a rich medium for the staged growth of Celie from writing only to God to addressing persons. It also allows the integration of peripheral matter as diverse as racial history and Christian theology. The form is a key to the personal voice and experience of friendship.

Turtle Diary

by Russell Hoban

In contrast to the rich and lasting friendships formulated in *The Color Purple*, the friendships in *Turtle Diary* might at first seem almost trite. Yet, even these casual relationships carry the potential to reforge meaningless lives by a shared vision of hope.

William G. and Naera H. lead quite separate lives in a London that seems devoid of the potential for human community. William is a timid and overly self-conscious book shop attendant. Naera writes children's books peopled with imaginary creatures so unrealistic and "sweet" that she sickens of their stories, even though they sell well.

What brings the lives of these two characters together is not their shared need for community, but rather a shared vision born of a very different sort of friendship. If friendship, on some level, means understanding another creature's potential and helping him fulfill it, each of them "makes friends" with the sea turtles in the London Zoo. Both William and Naera secretly want to see the turtles free to live in their natural habitat and to complete nature's ordained journey and cycle. They discover a zoo keeper who shares this conviction, and their three separate visions become a single reality.

Russell Hoban uses juxtaposed diary entries to emphasize the separateness of the book's two central figures. Gradually, though, the entries are linked by recognition of a perhaps accidental, perhaps providential shared purpose. As the ordinariness of both their lives is transformed by their fantastic plan, William and Naera become friends. The friendship is not romantic; it is not all-consuming. Its foundation is the common act of testimony to man's concern for life and freedom.

Rather than learning regard for others via self-respect, it seems that these two characters have it the other way around. Their shared respect for the turtles and assumed responsibility for them begs a renewal of regard for themselves.

The Loss of Friendship

As we age, our friendships become vulnerable to losses which occur not from moving apart or from misunderstanding, but rather from acts of nature--death, senility-- which irrevocably separate us from one another. At these fragile times of loss, we need friends more than ever. Unfortunately, these are also times when we are more rigidly bound by our own sense of self than we were in adolescence. Preferring the safety and ease of aloneness, we may find ourselves responding to loss by drawing away from friends in order to protect ourselves from uncontrollable future desertions. But another, more valid response is to cherish and nurture our existing friendships and to appreciate their beauty and fragility in the wake of our loss.

Recovering: A Journal

by May Sarton

May Sarton's journal begins in December 1978 and concludes in late November 1979. During this year, Sarton is recovering from the loss of a dear friend and companion to senility, from the loss of a breast to cancer, and from the loss of the creative exhilaration she needs to begin another novel.

Much of her healing occurs in what might appear to be isolation. Writing from the study of her Maine house, isolated from everyone except her dog and cat, Sarton relies on the sometimes ironic shifts of season to provide a context for her flow of thoughts and emotions.

However, an array of friendships surrounds this isolation, creating a counter context for her focus of emotions. Her journal tells much of the richness of both casual and long-standing relationships. Sarton recounts the joy of long, full conversations with literary and artistic friends, the sharing of self through the exchange of ideas and experiences. She tells of those who provide physical sustenance--bringing food, helping in the garden and in other ways making themselves useful during her recovery from surgery. And she tells of those to whom she goes when depression, anger, or frustration take her to a point of outburst.

In addition, Sarton struggles with her feelings of obligation to others. The many people who seem to know her because they have read and loved her books prove to be both a blessing and a burden. In the midst of the solitude into which she retreats to heal, their letters are continually calling her to give yet more of herself.

The joys and frustrations of Sarton's friendships serve as goads to move her through the process of healing. Her focus is not on a single relationship that provides a new definition

of self or a different direction for life, but rather on the many sustaining relationships that confirm what she is and enable her to continue to be.

Plotless by nature, the journal suggests something important about friendship that novels cannot easily show: friendship is a process more than a possession. It operates by a mutual dependence of solitude and communion. Sarton's journal describes a fabric woven from a variety of close and casual friendships, not always connected to each other, and from her own self-identification with solitude. The self is the weaver, the warp is self-understanding born in moments of solitude, and the woof is the mutual reaffirmation which comes from the shared interests, values, and visions of friends.

Conclusion

In the process of friendship, there is much to discover, and no single model alone is sufficient. Still there is in the literature of friendship a recurring connection between our self-recognition and self-regard--an aspect of solitary vision--and our openness to communion with others and participation in life that stretches beyond ourselves.

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