

Friendship . . .

"that's what friends are for..."*

There would be few adults alive today who are not familiar with the Burt Bacharach and Carole Bayer Sager song, "That's what friends are for." It won singer Dionne Warwick a Grammy award in 1985. It's worth reminding ourselves of the chorus: "Keep smiling, keep shining, knowing you can always count on me, for sure, That's what friends are for, For good times and bad times, I'll be on your side forever more, That's what friends are for."

Good friendships are the essence of life. They are remarkable assets of well-being. They promote the flourishing of mental health. Sociologist Thomas Putnam (*Bowling Alone*) said as much as he dissected the components of what he referred to as "social capital," those networks of reciprocity that hold societies together.

Those of us who are blessed with good friendships know that, in order to maintain them, one has to value and nurture them. I offer three principles that can assist in that task.

The first is loyalty. Look again at the words of the song: in good times and bad times, a friend will remain by your side, where they can be counted on for unfailing support. A challenge to all of us is to ask how many people we could call in a crisis at any time of the day, knowing that they would respond immediately to what (reasonably) would be asked of them. I remember being chosen in such a situation when a friend of mine called me to join her in her house at the precise time that she was going to announce to her husband that their marriage was over.

The second is a welcoming nature. My friend Geoff Boyce has written extensively on the value of what he refers to as "radical hospitality." He says we might need to go out of our comfort zone to connect with people who may be quite unlike ourselves, but with amazing results for our communities. These attachments

bring neighbourhoods together. My suburban street's annual "progressive dinner" attracts large numbers; our regular morning coffee gatherings supplement these festivities.

The third is trust. A favourite biblical story is of the warrior Naaman who commands a Syrian army. He has leprosy. The prophet Elisha tells him that he can be healed if he bathes in the Jordan River in Israel, the land of his sworn enemy. After a lot of grumbling, he finally does what he is advised to do, and is healed. The story has a valuable lesson regarding the value of humility, but the favourable outcome was principally dependent upon trust.

I have tears in my eyes recalling the time I heard of the suicide of a young woman whom I had encouraged to participate in our church youth group. Ahead of her taking her life she had posted a letter to me in which she apologised for the grief that she would cause. She added that I had been an important friend in her battle against depression.

That's what friends are for.



Kindness*

There are two sorts of people in the world: those who are kind and those who are not so kind. Fortunately, in my experience, the former vastly outnumber the latter. I could write an entire book of stories about people who are naturally kind. Their attitudes, I tend to find, stimulate those around them to adopt the same practices.

I am grateful to my friend Charlie Conway who once told me that the best way to respond to beggars is to organise what they ask for. So if they want \$3 for a bus fare, buy them the bus fare. If it's \$5 for sandwich, buy them a sandwich, and so forth. I cannot bring myself to ignore the needy. If there are charlatans among them, they are well outnumbered by those genuinely in need.

It doesn't take a lot of effort to be kind. There is a common practice I see in a lot of coffee shops where one can pay to cover the cost of the next person's order. It's called 'paying it forward.' It can be infectious! I read once about a man in a drive through planning to pay it forward only to hear that the person in front of him had paid forward for his order!

Another form of kindness is writing notes or letters, or offering simple gestures. I still recall the day after my mother died when a colleague stopped me in the corridor, touched me on the arm and offered eight words, "I am sorry to hear about your mother." It was just what I needed, in fact, it was all that I needed. In this case, less was more.

In recent years I had an experience that brought the importance of small gestures home to me. I was visiting Vancouver. I had not been there for many years. I was an invited speaker at one of the universities. My host, Margaret, was delighted to make the arrangements. We had known each other at graduate school in Toronto three decades earlier. I had not seen her since, although from time to time we had corresponded. She invited me to dinner upon my arrival. Since she was hosting me and covering all the transport and accommodation, I indicated that I was going to pay for the meal. "No," she insisted, "you are my guest tonight." I protested but she was adamant.

She reached into her bag and retrieved a letter. It was addressed to her Vancouver address in my handwriting. It was dated 1983 and post-marked Toronto. She took the letter out of the envelope and started reading. I was congratulating her on her first academic appointment and telling her how clever she was and how wonderful she would be. "This letter got me through my first year here," she said. "Your words were my comfort." As it happens, I do not remember writing that letter, but I am pleased I did.

Never underestimate the power of a kind and supportive word.

**RICK
SARRE
ADELAIDE, SA**

★EXCERPTS from Rick's forthcoming book -
'Life Stories in Five Hundred Words'