

**Moved: No Forwarding Address –
Where Do Old Friends Go?**

Beacon UU Congregation

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Years ago, back in the day, as in the early 1990's, I sent holiday cards...through the mail... like, with a stamp, sometimes even before Christmas.

Yet, in 1992, our family had just moved from Boston to Concord, MA and the holidays found us still a bit in-between -- no longer fully invested in our former neighborhood or parish, and yet, not quite completely bonded to their replacements. The boxes still formed a hulking cardboard tower in the corner of our new living room, serving not only as a serious impediment to holiday decorating, but also as a tangible reminder of our on-going transition.

And so, it was in this limbo-like state that I embarked on the holiday card ritual in December. First, I chose my design -- a nice autumn family photo of the 4 of us with the multi-purpose greeting -- "*Happy Holidays.*" Red envelopes, glossy paper, 3-day processing. Forty should be enough I reckoned.

Then, as 1993 dawned, and when I could no longer put it off, I cracked open my address book. And because of my heightened sensitivity to our emotional and physical in-between-ness, what confronted me elicited the oddest mixture of astonishment and sadness. For that well-worn address book resembled not so much a mailing list, as the latest bulletin from a missing person's bureau. Or worse, a chronicle of friends lost in the mist -- causalities of time, change and circumstance. But why so many? -- why so much black ink scratched over addresses, with no new addresses squeezed into the margins?

Where have these people gone? Moved: No Forwarding Address. Why had they drifted away, with only their names standing in my address book as a fragile monument to our former connections?

There was Claudia, under the B's, although for all I knew she had married and was using a different last name. Claudia was my best friend at summer camp on Lake Erie-- someone who knew me before I got my teeth straightened, before life became complicated.

For six remarkable summers, we carved our initials on the bunk and on trees, shared that sentimental wishing boats ceremony, had secret slang, knowing glances, dopey nicknames, and deep affection. How could she have drifted away?

There's Cathy, under the M's -- she went AWOL in Cambridge after we no longer worked together. Rosanna, with whom I traveled in Europe -- she was lost

in Soho. Abbie, who went missing in Vermont, Chris who disappeared in Weston; Felicia, one of my childhood besties, who was somewhere in the Chicago suburbs, Where the heck is Joyce, who drifted in Pittsburgh; Kim, who's faded in L.A. and Beth, who was M.I.A. somewhere near NYC? Where had these old friends gone? And how could I stem the tide of even more friendships joining this causality list?

As I stand before you, looking out (I'm sad to say) on potential MIAs in the making and acknowledging that I, too, am a potential "scratch-out," I'm forced to accept that some friendships do drift away for reasons many of us will both recognize and regret.

I'm not referring to those relationships that end with everyone's awareness – the friend divorces with the baroque endings characterized by broken crockery, speeches and slammed doors; or the cool classical finales marked by dialogue and handshakes. I'm talking about the fade-outs with conclusions that are a bit formless; the cause either unknown, too mystical to grasp or just too distressing to confront.

Many psychologists, sociologists, poets, and others claim that this type of drifting is inevitable because of the society in which we live. They point to earlier, simpler times when friendship was a haven from stress, and conclude that our friendships (or lack of them) can become another *source* of stress, another arena in which to fail.

They enumerate other crucial reasons as well: depersonalization; social and physical mobility, the fragmentation of modern life, wherein transactions have replaced relationships, and competition (and its evil sisters, jealousy and envy). And these findings were shared before social media, before friending and unfriending on Facebook and the ability to locate "lost friends" with a quick click on Google.

However, then as in now, experts lift up the inability of friendships to equal the mythical, idealized view we hold of them, and, of course, the proverbial time crunch. "Where will I find the time," we asked sincerely --what with the job, the house, the family, my committees, my garden? According to one executive who was suffering more than most from what writer Barbara Ehrenreich calls the "tyranny of busyness," a friend is "someone who *doesn't call me!*"

And yet, despite the seeming incompatibility between modern society and deep friendship, millions of us continue to defy the obstacles to seek and develop relationships. We are aching for that "safety net for the heart" which friendship provides.

Decades of research have shown that it is nearly impossible to be truly content with friendships, even amongst the introverted. Two surveys offer some

interesting findings on this subject-- in *Self Magazine*, more than 60% of the respondents claimed that success in personal life was more important than professional success. A Yankelovich survey adds shades of gray to this rosy picture, however, in reporting that 70% of Americans have many acquaintances but few close friends, and that they experience this as a serious void in their lives. In 2018, an Ipsos poll found that 54 percent of Americans surveyed said they “always” or “sometimes” felt like no one knew them well. Loneliness is a bona fide public health crisis in our country.

One societal shift that may bode well, especially with the 50% divorce rate, is the trend towards prioritizing friendship building and sustenance over romance. I see the wisdom in that...roses wilt. More people are prioritizing friendship over kinship, too – what is that old chestnut? You can’t choose your family. And Facetime and Zoom have given us methods of connectivity that can close the loneliness gap for some folks.

Recently, in the *Atlantic Magazine*, Arthur Brooks asks: “If your social life is leaving you unfulfilled, you might have too many deal friends and not enough real friends.” I ask you all who are on social media: How many Facebook “friends” do you have? My latest tally is 788. 788 friends...kinda makes a mockery of the word, “friend,” doesn’t it?

That said, the pandemic reoriented our economy of attention and may have prodded us into a new awareness of friendship, with a renewed emphasis on home and hearth, altruism, ‘cocooning’ and living our values, and pursuing personal growth. We may be more inclined to listen to a Brené Brown podcast on the power of vulnerability now than to Robert Ringer’s “Winning Through Intimidation.” And although there may still be a market for “The One Minute Manager,” more of us are beginning to realize that there is no such thing as the “One Minute Friend.”

Now that we’re getting back to a life out into the go-go whirl again, we’ll undoubtedly begin asking anew: “where will I find the time, “There are only so many hours in the day, only so much I can do. I’m only human.” And that’s exactly it -- we are only human, and maintaining deep, meaningful relationships in the context of our lives, our society, and our personal insecurities is immensely difficult.

Perhaps we can take a lesson from Antoine St. Exupéry’s *The Little Prince*, who is so unabashedly devoted to his vain, yet vulnerable rose. “My rose is more important because it is she that I have watered,” declares the Little Prince, “it is she that I have put under the glass globe behind the screen; because it is she that I have listened to when she grumbled, or boasted, or even sometimes when she said nothing. Because she is my rose. It is the time that I have *wasted on* my rose that makes my rose so important.”

"It is the time that I have "wasted" on my rose that makes my rose so important..."How interesting that St. Exupery chose the word "waste," instead of more noble verbs like "devote" or "spend" to describe the Little Prince's care-taking of his rose.

We've been conditioned to absolutely abhor the concept of wasting time -- to most of us it conjures up an image of non-productive slacking. So, what does it mean to "waste time" on a friend? I believe it implies time freely given and unmeasured, with the awareness that without this "wasted time" we are not truly important to one another; that we are, in fact, M.I. A.s in the making. Deal friends, transactional friends, not real friends.

Deal friends exist on the lowest rung of the friendship ladder, based on expediency and transactions and these connections do not engage the whole self. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote, "Our friendships hurry to short and poor conclusions because we have made them a texture of wine and dreams, instead of the tough fibre of the human heart." This is especially astute when we consider how societal realities push us towards deal friends over more intimate, enduring ones.

St. Exupery, in another of his books, Wind Sand and Stars, reflects that "old friends cannot be created out of hand. Nothing can match the treasure of common memories, of trials endured together, of quarrels and reconciliations and generous emotions. It is idle, having planted an acorn in the morning to expect that afternoon to sit in the shade of an oak."

We must, like that innocent towheaded Prince, waste time on our roses and our acorns, being ever mindful of the weeds, the tyranny of busyness, that entwine us in our private calendars of "things to be done" and keeps us from one another.

The Rev. Gary Smith, who was the Senior Minister of my home church, the First Parish in Concord, related a story to me that demonstrates how "wasting time" holds its rewards. He and his family moved from Connecticut to Bangor, Maine many years ago when Gary took at position at a church there.

Left behind in Connecticut was a family that had become very dear, very important to them, and they vowed to do what it took to maintain that connection. So, on holidays and special occasions, into the car they would pile, and drive nine hours in each direction to share these events and experiences. No one actually enjoyed the nine hours of travel, but they relished the rewards at the end of the road -- the security, the deep caring, and the laughter. They watered these roses and acorns of friendship with "wasted time," and in the process, stayed off of each other's missing person's list. To this day, they still travel the distances necessary to maintain their special bond.

In my own life, there is an experience which also illustrates quite poignantly this idea. It was October of 1986, and I stood under a slate grey sky in a Pittsburgh

cemetery, preparing to witness the unveiling of my mother's gravestone 10 months after her death.

I was seven months pregnant with my son, Sam at the time, I was feeling more emotional than usual, and I was trying to keep myself "together." When up the path comes my friend, Ellen -- not just any friend, but my oldest, dearest friend; my sister from a different mother.

This might not seem strange given the circumstances, but Ellen was getting married the next day. She had dozens of out-of-town guests to welcome, last-minute details, manicures, and final fittings to attend to, even a luncheon starting within the hour. I hadn't expected her to come, and yet, up the path she hurried in order to stand beside me when I needed it. Needless to say, I didn't hold myself "together." I sobbed both from the sorrow of having lost my mother as well as from the joy of having found such a friend -- a friend who would "waste time" on me like that. Over the years since, we've nurtured that bond between us and recognize it as precious. I would move mountains in order to sustain this friendship. Ask yourself: which of your friendships would you protect and nurture this faithfully?

Ironically, the first time I ever stepped foot in a Unitarian church back in April of 1989, the Rev. Gerry Krick of the First Unitarian Society of West Newton, MA delivered a very moving sermon on the subject of friendship. And during this sermon, Gerry preached (and I'm paraphrasing here) that "when you look into the face of a friend, you gaze into the face of God."

If this is true, and I believe it is, do we not "waste time" on our spiritual growth when we "waste time" on a friend? And, conversely, do we forsake a holy connection when we *fail to* water our roses and our acorns? After all, it is in a deep, soulful place where our truest friendships reside. As recorded in the Bible: "The soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul. "Aristotle called friendship "a single soul dwelling in two bodies." Cicero declared, "Whoever is in possession of a true friend sees the exact counterpart of his own soul."

Voltaire mused, "Friendship is the marriage of the soul. " Gandhi described true friendship as "an identity of souls rarely to be found in this world." And even Leo Buscaglia, that high priest of the hug, has referred to friendship as "a home for one's soul."

All of these philosophers agree that genuine friendship abides in that safe place where we are free to explore our deepest thoughts, our inner yearnings, our fears and our joys. A sanctuary where we bear witness to one another's humanity. I'm quite confident that they would also concur that there is no shortcut to this haven; that we must "waste time" getting there, just like the Smiths did on those 9-hour drives. But that once there, we are truly in the presence of something divine,

empowered and energized by our own spirituality in action. I have been there -- in that rose-filled garden and under that stately oak -- and frankly, I'd like to visit more often. I'm done with disposable relationships. Life is too short and too unpredictable. COVID has shown us that, hasn't it? A gift amidst the grief, I would say.

Returning now to my original story - inevitably, by mid-January 1993, at least one holiday card *had* returned to me stamped "Moved: No Forwarding Address," and so, with regret, I revised my address book and got on with my life. A week later, I received a holiday card from Maggie, one of the people I had intended to include in my rollcall of M.I.A.s. The card had been forwarded from our previous address, and when I opened and read this belated missive from Seattle, I was moved to tears. I hadn't drifted out of her life after all. I might not be noted properly in her address book, but I was still very much at home in her heart.

Maggie reported in her note that her husband, Rick, had developed a passion for gardening, roses mostly; and it made me smile and think of the Little Prince and *his* rose. I was also heartened by the notion that all of the scratch-outs in my address book are a lot like seeds laying fallow in a friendship garden; dormant yet always ready to be revived with the sunny warmth and refreshing waters of faith and patience, and of course, with the wasting of my time to coax a flower out of its slumber.

I wish I could tell you that Maggie is one of my Facebook friends. That we remained connected. But we haven't. Maybe I can locate her on People-finder. And maybe she is a rose-scented memory. That said, social media has closed some gaps – over the years, I've reconnected with Abbie, Claudia, Joyce, Felicia, Kim, Beth, and many others. The scratched our entries have yielded new branches.

I do have one favor to ask, though: if any of you is ever in Seattle, and runs into Maggie, could you please get her address for me.

Blessed be. Blessed we, And Amen.

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