

Spiritual Imagination: Friendship and Belonging

By Michael Shimek

Friendship with my guy friends is somewhat difficult to explain, only because it's hard for two men to talk about friendship. I have one friend where I can say, "I love ya, man" and it feels really good to know he sees me the same way. I have many friends whom I like and I hang out with because I enjoy their company, but we don't talk about being friends. All my friends are important to me, and I would hate to see something bad happen to them, and if I ever saw anybody messing with them, I would rough them up badly.



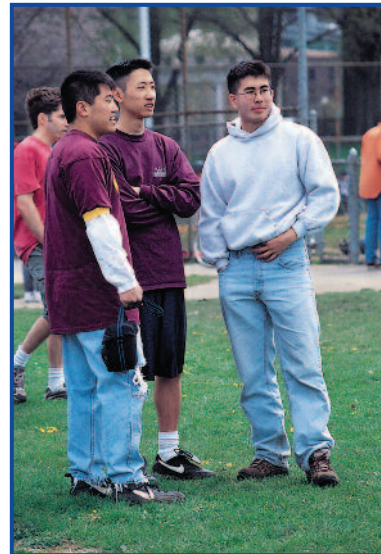
I don't believe that I could have come so far in my life without the friends that I have now and that I have had in the past.



My friends will be there for me in good times and bad, and I will be there for them.

The Wonder of Friendship

FRIENDSHIP for young men and old is a wonderful, powerful, and complex reality. It activates our imaginations and keeps our souls interacting with people and creation. As a teacher and as a parent, I wish that I could give my students and my son a recipe to follow to insure that they have friendships throughout their lives. But recipes are impossible. Friendships are



as unique as the particular people involved. A book can analyze characteristics of friendship, but it cannot capture and contain the experience. Friendship can only be lived.

In the film *Stand By Me*, based on a Stephen King short story, four young boys have an adventure together in a New England small town. One of the boys narrates the story, looking back on their adventure as an adult. At the end of the film he writes, “I never had any friends later on like the ones I had when I was 12. Jesus, does anyone?” The sentence reflects both the beauty of this childhood bond and the sadness that the four have scattered and moved on with their separate lives. To appreciate the beauty of friendship, we have only to watch children play together. They fight and squabble, but they also enjoy being side by side with friends and with their group.



In high school friendship is usually more important than any other outcomes in the curriculum—at least for students.

Every year when I begin a new semester, I look around to see who is in my class. Most of the time I think that I got lucky or sometimes that I am screwed. This year when I looked around my religion class, I thought that I was screwed. It's not that I hated the people in my class; it's just that I didn't know most of them. Towards the middle of the semester I realized how all of these people had their own hopes, dreams, and fears. I found myself in amazement that my peers in the class, the ones that I had never tried to get to know, were just like me.

This young man's thoughts are honest and reflect a natural desire to belong. His writing is a heart statement, a good statement. Friendships have richness and color that, like beautiful landscapes, are better to appreciate than evaluate or ana-

lyze. We don't have to measure or compare a particular friendship against our ideal relationship to acknowledge its beauty. If I see a group of skateboarders or hacky sac players, I miss the comfort, contentment, and belonging they enjoy if I am thinking they must be trouble-makers and drug users. When I see two men together, I miss appreciating their friendship if my first concern is, "I wonder if they are gay?" If I see the rich camaraderie of a sports team that has shared the highs and lows of competition and I dismiss them as a bunch of jocks, I miss the beauty of team friendships. Adults often see friendships and make the judgment, "It won't last." Instant judgments short circuit our appreciation of the beauty of having friends. The instinct to make quick judgments may come from our own longing to belong. An old West African proverb says, "He that sees beauty and does not look at it will soon be poor."



Do men maintain their friendships as they grow older, or does the sadness in Stephen King's question at the end of *Stand By Me* reflect men's common experience? Some writers about men's issues say that the majority of older men in our culture do not have good men friends after they begin their adult lives. It seems to be different for women.

We can honor the beauty of friendship without denying the struggles that contradict its value. Because friendship involves the heart and our need to belong, friendship can wound us. In our lived experience friendships can enhance and deepen our lives and cause pain. Wanting to be friends and not knowing how plagues old and young men. When we try to make friends and our attempts fall flat, our failure can intensify our isolation.

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When another person keeps seeking our friendship and we don't choose to be friends with them, we can feel smothered. Some men will shut down when it comes to being real friends. But without desire to belong and connect, our imaginations shut down as well.

To feel left out is painful, a wound many men, young and old, feel. Despite our bravado and claims of not needing others, total independence doesn't play well in real life. I have thought many times about a candid moment I experienced when I was canoeing in the Minnesota Boundary Waters Wilderness Area with two other men. At a portage, we stopped to breathe. One of the other men asked, "Why is it that when there are three men together, I always feel that I am the one that is left out?" The other man and I both responded immediately, "I feel the same way!" A counselor for men tells me that most of his work is simply helping men recognize what they need and then learning how to ask for what they need. The three of us at the portage valued time together; we needed our connection with each other. What surprises me still is that one of us expressed our longing to belong out loud.

Seeing people use, manipulate, and treat others more as things than as persons can make real friendship seem impossible. Their wounds lead some men to stay away from friendship because they think most people just use others. The beauty of friendship arises from the parts of ourselves we share with others as gift. Like beauty in general, when we try to possess friendship, we lose it.

- **Recall the names of friends that you have had in your journey. Don't dismiss short-term friends; for example, people that you may have been close to only briefly but with whom you shared and grew. What made these people your friends?**
- **Who were or are some of your most unconventional friends—those that wouldn't fit the general image of friend?**
- **In your journey what team, group, or job gave you a sense of belonging?**

- **Read the following proverbs about friendship. Select two or more that express your own experience of friendship and talk about what they mean to you.**

Make a friend when you don't need one. –JAMAICAN

One leg cannot dance alone. –EAST AFRICAN

To have a friend, be a friend. –GREEK

You never know your friends from your enemies until the ice breaks. –ESKIMO

Tell me your friends and I'll tell you who you are. –ASSYRIAN

Who is mighty? One who makes an enemy into a friend. –HEBREW

Friends multiply joy and divide grief. –CZECHOSLOVAKIAN

A friend's eye is a good mirror. –GAELIC

Better one true friend than 100 relatives. –ITALIAN

Friendship and Spirituality

The relationship between friendship and spiritual imagination is reciprocal. Reciprocal means to give and take mutually. Friendship feeds and nurtures spiritual imagination; spiritual imagination feeds and nurtures friendship. The beauty and gift of friendship is like the wonder of the night sky; it can open us to the Sacred. Both the longing for and the experience of friendship echo the Divine. Theology suggests that the Sacred strategically reveals Itself to us in those closest to us. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001, several magazines carried the story of a primary-school student's letter to President Bush. Apparently the teacher assigned the students to write about why people hate us. The student suggested, "Why don't we send them our names?" The child imagines friendship—knowing one another by name—can be an antidote to terror and hatred.



Our experience of friendship can vastly enrich our imagination of God and prayer. In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, friendship images or mirrors

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the Sacred. In the gospel of John Jesus calls his disciples friends. Chapter 11 tells the story of Jesus and his friends Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus, who has died.

The two women send for Jesus when Lazarus gets sick.

When Jesus comes, they go out to meet him and take him to their brother's tomb. Jesus grieves for his friend.

At the sight of Mary's tears, and those of the Jews who followed her, Jesus said in great distress, with a sigh that came straight from the heart, "Where have you put him?" They said, "Lord, come and see." Jesus wept, and the Jews said, "See how much he loved him."

In chapter 15 of John's gospel Jesus is speaking to his followers after their last supper together. He is saying farewell to them, anticipating his death and return to God.

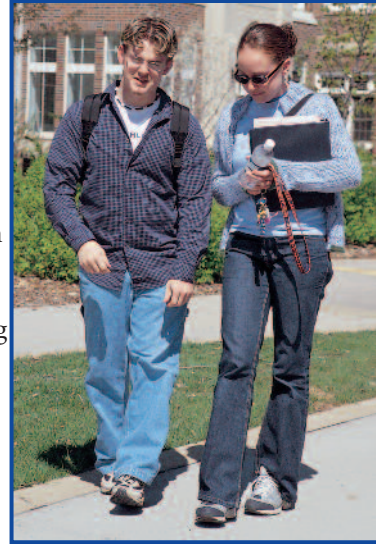
This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends, if you do what I command. I shall not call you servants any longer because a servant does not know his master's business; I call you friends because I have made known to you everything I have heard from my father (15.12-15).

The relationship between friends is one of equals. Friends stand side by side and experience shared truth. Understanding friendship as a kind of love stretches our imaginations.

The statement, "We were more than friends," suggests a false tutor that limits our imagination with regard to love and friendship. Usually we understand this phrase in a sexual context that measures romantic love as the highest form of love. The young man whose thoughts appear at the beginning of this chapter has one friend with whom he is comfortable saying, "I love ya." His friendships with other

men are difficult for him to explain. Clearly he loves his friends but he is also trying to protect himself from the cultural false tutor that values romantic love and misunderstands friendship as the same kind of relationship.

A senior named Jim once shared this painful story with me. He grew up with a wonderful group of guy friends—not unlike the group in *Stand By Me*. He fell in love during his junior year with a girl named Mary. They had a good relationship, but he had no resource to counter the false tutor that said romantic love replaces friendship love. His men friends continued to call and include him in their activities, but he was always busy with Mary or planning activities with her and her family.



Eventually his friends stopped calling. The relationship with his girlfriend lasted about a year and a half. Then he started calling his old friends to find out what was going on, and they told him, “Nothing.” His old friends felt sold out, and in a way they were. No one told Jim not to listen to the false tutor that says dating is more important than friendship. I wished that his father, friend, or mentor had told him that he gets to have both. Jim needed to give attention and energy to his guy friends as well as his girlfriend.

Ironically, maintaining good friendships with the same sex can work like an insurance policy when we fall in love. Our sense of being a man or manliness comes in large part from fathers, mentors, and men friends. If I exclude these resources and only ask women to tell me that I am a man, they can only affirm that I am a nonwoman. Having good men friends allows me to relate to women out of my fullness and not out of my dependency, particularly regarding my gender identity. This works as well for women. Women’s same-sex friendships can safeguard their romantic relationships with men.

By honoring friendship as an important love, we enrich how we imagine and experience the Sacred. When I hear the words, “God is love, and those who abide in love, abide in God,” I hear the image differently if I have both friendship love and romantic love in my lived experience. What do the following reflections from my high school students say about friendship as a kind of love?


I hope that when I die and people go to my funeral, there is a phrase that is muttered silently among the guests or even in the eulogy, that is along the lines—“He was a loving man.”



I was in North Carolina the summer before I had my surgery. I went for a walk on the beach with my friend who is a very spiritual person. At the time I had questions about God and death because I really didn’t know for sure whether or not I was going to survive such a major surgery. While we were walking, the sun set and there was one moment just at the end of the conversation when I felt that everything was going to be okay. I think my friend was the only person who could have made me feel that way at the time. Even though not all my questions were answered, I just wasn’t as scared anymore.



I think my soul is great and very special. My best friend and I went snowmobiling. When we did, we both had a special moment looking at the stars.

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- **When teachers and parents say, “I don’t want to be friends with my students or children,” what do you think they mean?**
 - **How can family members be friends?**
 - **What are some challenges and opportunities in having good friends of the opposite sex?**
 - **How do you experience the Sacred through those closest to you?**

Men's Friendships With Men: The Contradiction

This chapter intends to appreciate the wonder of men's friendships and to reflect on the connection with our spiritual imaginations. However, it is naïve for us not to acknowledge the challenges. Many men treat other men poorly in our world. In my years of listening to men's stories, most have experienced some form of meanness from other men. In one class with men only, I invite the students to share a time when they avoided a fight or confrontation. An amazing thing happens once I give permission to tell a story like this and expect everyone to talk. No one has to justify backing down by citing weapons involved or superior numbers. Something happens that is difficult to explain. The class gives each other respect and calmness as each tells their stories. For a brief moment at least, we seem to share a bond of realization that it is not easy being a man in our world. The only other time I feel this honor and respect is when men talk about their fathers.



The dislike and mistrust of other men comes from a complex of reasons. One pandemic reason is the false tutor that says if I want recognition and respect as a man, it has to come at the expense of other men and for sure women. The false tutor is like some comic ranking system for masculinity. In a recent World Cup game, a French man who felt disappointed in his team's play said, "*Ils jouent comme des femmes,*" or "They play like women." In a pickup game of basketball on Chicago's West side, the first trash talk was, "You're my bitch." The intellectual or physical bullies that all men grow up with are working on masculinity and being big. Some men's relationships survive on sharing their contempt for those lower

on the perceived masculinity food chain. The bully's friends are friends only in the hope that they will be eaten last.

The realization that all men do not wish me well is a lesson learned early in a man's life. From the everyday messages that tell men that we are not enough to the deeper wounds that sometimes come from friends and family, men's journeys can appear as a gauntlet and a lonely one at that. Such lessons are not all bad. It is

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important for men to discern or read others for their own protection. We all control our faces and expressions, especially in unfamiliar territory. To wear a mask is not a bad thing in itself. Writers about men's issues sometimes refer to "the naïve male." The naïve male believes the wrong people and trusts

the wrong messages. He is ripe for manipulation by both men and women. He doesn't use a protective mask.

The danger with wearing masks is that we can forget we are wearing the mask or forget the person behind the mask. We become our protection. I am as you see me to be. This posture makes friendship almost impossible in that we are not bringing our true selves to the relationship.

The landscape of men's friendships with other men is not easy to navigate. I have heard in listening to men that sharing pain and disillusionment rather than measurements of success often opens up the greatest possibilities for spirituality and friendship. One of the most memorable comments that I have heard on a father-son retreat came from a man who said that the more he advanced in his spirituality the more common he became. The more he navigated the landscape of woundedness, masks, and measuring of who is the biggest the more his spiritual life put him side by side with every man. He no longer saw other men as adversaries or stepping stones in his journey but rather fellow travelers. His spiritual imagination helped his friendships with other men and his friendships nurtured his spirituality.

A person begins his spiritual accomplishments by learning how to be a friend. —*Hazrat Kahn*



I love the idea that a friend is someone with whom you have a shared truth. As different as my friends are from one another, at the core we are extraordinarily similar. On the surface we could be from different planets. The truth of who we are isn't something that's visible at the surface.

I associate the experience of equality in friendship love with the early Christians' celebration of Eucharist. The communities celebrated their love for one another and the mystery of God's love at a table where all were welcome. Their community life wasn't always idyllic. First-century Christians formed cliques and brought prejudices to the table just as we do now. In fact, the apostle Paul addresses the problems of factions and some going hungry when they shared a meal after the Lord's supper.



I hear there are divisions among you; and to some extent I believe it. Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine. When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry and another becomes drunk. ... What should I say to you? (1 Corinthians 11.19-22).

Paul suggests that the followers of Christ remember the true meaning of the Lord's supper: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11.26). The breaking of the bread in the early communities united in Christ rich and poor, gentiles and Jews, slave and free, men and women, educated and uneducated.

The re-imagination of friendship, especially men's friendship with other men, in our culture encourages me. When I grew up, the films that I watched usually showed vulnerability and friendship between men only when they were facing

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death. Or the big man had a sidekick friend whose job was to highlight the alpha status of the hero; the Lone Ranger had Tonto, Batman had Robin. In contrast I think of the film *Good Will Hunting* and the friendship Matt Damon and Ben Affleck portray. In an incredible scene towards the end of the film Ben Affleck tells his genius friend that every day when he stops at his house he hopes Matt Damon will be gone, will have left his situation to access his potential. This wish exemplifies the selfless love of friendship.

A senior told me that the biggest lesson that she learned about herself during high school was "that my love matters." A wonderful lesson about friendship.

- **What qualities and gifts do you bring to friendships?**
- Reflect on your own lived experience and thoughts about friendship and complete the following sentences:
 1. **Some good advice about friendship that I have received was...**
 2. **Some bad advice about friendship that I have received was...**
 3. **Sometimes I feel that I am the only man who...**
 4. **The behaviors in men that distance me from them are...**
 5. **The behaviors in men that I admire are ...**

- Choose a close friend and write his name. Make a list of 10 ways that you are similar or alike, and then list 10 differences or ways that you are different.

Name _____

Similarities

Differences

1

1

2

2

3

3

4

4

5

5

6

6

7

7

8

8

9

9

10

10

- **Illustrate your image of friendship and share it.**