

# Friendship's Role in Coming to Know as We Are Known

BY CAROLINE J. SIMON

The deep connections most central to admirable and enviable friendships are rooted in personal, even intimate, knowledge. From a Christian point of view, a true friend's endorsement of one's own self-conception does not stem just from personal loyalty; it must be based on insight into one's true self—the self rooted in God's intentions for one's life.

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**K**nowledge is a crucial marker of friendship. "I have called you friends," says Jesus, "because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father" (John 15:15b). Although obedience is a necessary condition of intimate knowledge of Jesus' own intimacy with God, those who follow Jesus' commands are more than servants. Friends share knowledge while servants do not know the "what" or "why" behind what is required of them.

What kind of knowledge is crucial to friendship? And why is that knowledge so central to the gifts that friendship confers within our lives?

C. S. Lewis, in his well-known discussion of friendship in *The Four Loves*, indicates that the kind of knowledge necessary to friendship has little to do with self-disclosure concerning personal information. Lewis claims that since friendships are based on some "common interest" — like cooking, or astronomy, or reading theology — friends characteristically take little interest in one another's personal lives. Friendships are formed,

according to Lewis, when we discover others who take delight in the subjects that most delight us. The knowledge of your friend which is necessary to friendship is focused tightly on whatever joint endeavor gives rise to this shared delight—the “What? You too?” experience of finding that you are not the only one who cares about your subject or sees it from a particular, rare point of view. Lewis goes so far as to call friendship a connection of

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“naked personalities” because details of one’s friends’ lives that are irrelevant to the pursuit of the subject at the core of the friendship are matters of indifference to the friends.<sup>1</sup>

These observations from Lewis illustrate how autobiographical views of friendship can be. These claims about the impersonality of friendship are unsurprising views from a

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twentieth-century British don reflecting on the friendships that he cultivated in university common rooms and pubs—friendships that centered around discussing writing and books over sherry and pints of stout.

In contrast, many late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century writers on friendship would demure from Lewis’s claims about friendship being a matter of naked personalities, instead seeing that the deep connections most central to admirable and enviable friendships are rooted in personal, even intimate, knowledge. I concur. In fact, what sets friendship apart from other sorts of human connections is knowing a person well enough to endorse his or her self-conception and aspirations.

### **SEEING A FRIEND’S TRUE SELF**

Elsewhere I have claimed that friendship is a special relationship that involves endorsing a friend’s own conception of who she is or at least aspires to be.<sup>2</sup> A friend believes in you as you would like to believe in yourself and assures you that he has the impression of you that you, at your best, hope to convey.<sup>3</sup> I take this phrase “you, at your best” very seriously. From a Christian point of view, a true friend’s endorsement of one’s own self-conception does not stem just from personal loyalty. True friendship must be based on insight into one’s friend’s true self. The judgment that the friend’s self-concept is substantially accurate and fitting to his unfolding story must be based on knowledge of his character. In order to commit oneself to a friend’s conception of the good life, one needs to know what her conception of the good life is. As a Christian, I believe that our

true selves (the selves that we are destined but not fated to become) are rooted in God's intentions for us. So friendship is based on knowledge in multiple ways and brings together knowledge of present realities and knowledge of ultimate ideals and destinies.

One of the great goods of friendship, then, is that it is rooted in and provides this kind of depth-perception. A true friend knows me well enough to see me as I am, warts and all, but also knows me well enough to see me as someone whose best self aspires to be much more. Friendship affirms that a friend's view of his unfolding life story is substantially correct. Friendship commits itself to helping a person attain his vision of himself. Friendship involves not just endorsing someone's self-concept, but caring deeply enough about her aspirations to go out of one's way to help her achieve them. A friend is someone who is on your side, someone who is willing to see the world from your point of view – but not the point of view of your prodigal self, the point of view of your best and truest self.

To further explore these ideas it will be useful to consider a particular example. Tony Hendra, in his spiritual memoir, *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul*, tells of his decades-long relationship with Dom Joseph Warrilow.<sup>4</sup> For years Hendra periodically visited Father Joe at his monastery, Quarr. To Hendra, Father Joe was not just a sounding board and Hendra saw him as much more than a spiritual director. A good part of Father Joe's redemptive effect on Hendra stemmed from his ability to make Hendra feel not just thoroughly understood, but deeply loved as a unique self (p. 269). Friendship involves acceptance based on intimate knowledge. The awareness of our friend's acceptance and admiration is one of the great gifts of friendship and is part of what makes friendship a source of strength.

Tony Hendra is a British-born and Cambridge-educated satirist and comedian who went on to edit the *National Lampoon*, do improvisational comedy, television writing and production, and contribute essays to *Harper's*, *Esquire*, *GQ*, *Vanity Fair*, and other magazines. His life zigzags from a felt-call to monasticism, to loss of faith, through drug and alcohol dependence and failed relationships, and back to faith. Through all this, the still center of his turning and tilting world is Father Joe.

## **FRIENDSHIP IN A CHRISTIAN LIFE**

Some within the history of Father Joe's own religious tradition would see him as taking a risk here. If his befriending of others is too deep and enduring, and especially if it is preferential, it may compete with other commitments that he has as a monk passionately pursuing the love of God. Some Christian thinkers who have wanted to emphasize the contrast between Christian love and other sorts of love have been suspicious of friendship, at best grudgingly giving it a cautious endorsement. Over against the universality of agape or neighbor love, friendship can seem self-indulgent and exclusivist.

Though some within the Christian tradition have been suspicious of friendship, it has had its defenders as well. Aelred of Rievaulx, a twelfth-century monk and abbot, had a great deal to say about this topic in his book *Spiritual Friendship*.<sup>5</sup> In many ways *Spiritual Friendship* is a courageous work. Living in a time when monastics were suspicious of particular human affections, Aelred insisted on seeing true friendship as having both its source and fruition in the love of God. Living in a time when some were suspicious of pagan thinkers, Aelred baptized the wisdom of Cicero and wove it into a deeply Christian theology of human affection.

Cicero's eloquence enlivens the classical Greek conception of friendship that the Romans inherited from Aristotle. Aristotle had maintained there were two lesser forms of friendship – friendship based on mutual usefulness and friendships based on mutual pleasure. He saw these lesser forms as incomplete and immature. Complete friendships were those based on loving one's friend for his own sake because of his virtues. Complete friendship involves a shared commitment to grow in virtue and pursue the good.

Though indebted to Cicero (and through Cicero, to Aristotle), Aelred transforms Cicero's wisdom by giving it a distinctively Christian stamp. Classical thinkers on friendship like Aristotle and Cicero knew nothing of neighbor love or charity, the peculiar love that Christians are enjoined to have even toward their enemies. Nor were they in a position to see that true friendship has its goal and completion in something more than human excellence. For a Christian thinker like Aelred, both charity and spiritual friendship are rooted and perfected in Christ. These loves for our fellow human beings are, according to Aelred, stages toward the love and knowledge of God.<sup>6</sup>

The Bible also records striking examples of deep friendship that dovetail with characterizations of friendship in the classical Greek and Roman traditions. Aristotle characterized a complete friend as "another self" and the most significant friendships as "one soul in two bodies." The Bible describes the love that Jonathan had for David in similar terms, telling us, "the soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1b). Thomas Aquinas enriches Aristotle's notion of a friend as "another self" by explaining, "in the love of friendship, the lover is in the beloved, inasmuch as he reckons what is good or evil to his friend as being so to himself; and his friend's will as his own, so that it seems as though he felt the good or suffered the evil in the person of his friend."<sup>7</sup> In loving my friend, my self expands and is enriched by his accomplishments and delights. This expansion of self is not selfish; the expansion of self involved in friendship is also costly. Sorrows double, not just joys, for my friend's suffering becomes my own. The compassionate suffering that is part and parcel of friendship, costly and painful as it can be, deepens our humanity. Places in our hearts that did not previously exist are created by compassion for our friends and loved ones.

Models of close friendships in the biblical materials lend support to Aquinas' and Aelred's contention that friendship can be part of a well-lived Christian life. Many of these ruminations on friendship are incarnated to a large extent in Father Joe's befriending of Tony Hendra. Part of the redemptive efficacy of the friendship is Father Joe's ability to see past Tony's fleeting enthusiasms, excesses, doubts, cynicism, and foibles to the warmhearted idealist who wants ultimately to make a difference for good in the world. The endorsement of a friend's self-conception need not be a wholesale endorsement. Friends can help each other see themselves more clearly. Friends can correct each other's view of things, including each friend's self-conception; this is part of friendship's great good. That Father Joe does this so brilliantly for Tony is exactly why Tony thinks of Joe as his best friend.

### **EQUALITY AND MUTUALITY IN FRIENDSHIP**

While the relationship between Tony Hendra and Father Joe illustrates some of the central aspects of friendship, it also contrasts in important ways from standard paradigms of friendship. Looking at these divergences can also help us in understanding friendship's nature and characteristic virtues.

Friendship is often, and for good reason, seen as characterized by reciprocity and (at least approximate) symmetry. But there are all sorts of asymmetries in the relationship between Hendra and Father Joe. Hendra is fourteen when the two first meet and Father Joe is at that time already in Hendra's young eyes an agelessly ancient adult. Of course, as Hendra matures, the age difference between the two becomes less significant, but the maturity gap is never

really outgrown. Moreover,

Father Joe is a father in Hendra's eyes in multiple ways. When Hendra's biological father dies his grief is in large part regret, mixed with guilt, because in many ways Father Joe has functioned more as a father to him than his own father did. Father Joe is, for Tony, the patient, waiting father who weathers Tony's prodi-

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gality and embraces him as he loops back from his eccentric orbits into worldliness. And although the connection between Hendra and Father Joe is, in fact, durable and deep, it involves far more giving on Father Joe's part than on Hendra's. The asymmetries of giving and receiving and of maturity within their connection make it seem less than a full-fledged friendship.

Significant friendships ideally involve a *sense of equality* and *mutual affir-*

mation, *mutual* self-disclosure, caring and the sharing of activities and sorrows, along with *mutual* admonition and advice giving. Mutuality is not completely absent from the Hendra/Father Joe connection, but their shared activities are mainly conversational, with Hendra doing the self-disclosing and Father Joe functioning as the creatively receptive listener. Father Joe offers sage observations, along with gentle, sparing admonition and judicious advice. He balances the need to speak the truth in love with a concern to avoid intrusion into spheres best left to Tony's discretion.

That Father Joe performs these corrective functions for Tony is certainly compatible with friendship. We all engage in some degree of self-deception about ourselves. In some cases, one may think a friend has lost sight, for the present, of his better self. Cases in which we think our insight into our friends' unfolding life stories outstrips their own vision of themselves call for patience, humility, and prayer, lest the equality and mutuality essential to friendship dwindle. Knowing when to speak and how to speak as a friend demands wisdom and skill. How can we correct without unduly wounding or being paternalistic? One wants to give one's friend the benefit of the kind of insight only a friend can furnish, yet one wants the story that one's friend lives out to be his own. What gives one pause about calling the Hendra/Father Joe relationship a mature friendship is not that there is advice-giving and correcting going on, but that it is all in one direction, flowing from Father Joe to Hendra but not vice versa. This is not inappropriate paternalism in a relationship between a spiritual director and someone coming for direction, but as a longstanding feature of a friendship it marks it as a less than fully developed relationship of equality.

When Father Joe does talk in a self-disclosive way, what he intimates is his rich and vivid awareness of God, his robust enjoyment of nature and the gifts of creation, and his boundless understanding of the vagaries of the human heart. Hendra is never in a position to give Father Joe advice, not only because this monk seems not to need any advice that Hendra could give, but because Hendra seems to have only a dim conception of what Father Joe's life consists of beyond their conversations.

In the epilogue to *Father Joe*, Tony Hendra says that the last, posthumous, surprise that Dom Joseph Warrilow gave him was finding that "there were hundreds of other Tonys" in Father Joe's life. Hendra revisits Quarr after Joe's death and expresses surprise to one of the monks on having found himself among a vast circle of Joe's "old friends." The monk responds, "Ah yes — everyone thought they were Joe's best friend" (p. 269). It is precisely because Hendra knows little of what Father Joe's life is like outside their conversations that Hendra can be so shocked in finding that there are "hundreds of other Tony's" in Warrilow's life. Evidently Father Joe had such a gift for inviting intimacy from those whom he counseled that they felt that the intimacy was mutual even though central features of Father Joe's life remained beyond their ken.

## TOWARD INTIMACY IN FRIENDSHIP

In a mature friendship, the mutual knowledge that friends have of one another is a form of intimacy. It is based both on the willingness of friends to disclose thoughts and feelings to one another that they would be unwilling to reveal to mere acquaintances as well as on nonverbal *intimacy*. As Warren Wilner says, "Intimacy as a mode of communication refers...to a quality of being in which something is being conveyed, without explicitly describing what it is or how it is being transmitted. As that which is inmost ...the whole of something or of oneself is conveyed as a whole without being broken down into its component parts, or being made part of a larger communication."<sup>8</sup> Friendships can be cemented by what is not said and (perhaps especially) by what need not be said. Because it is possible to experience another's wholeness, it is possible for friends to communicate truths which could not and need not be uttered between them.

This intimacy is normally a product of accumulated shared experiences. I can know my friends' unspoken thoughts because I have seen them react to diverse situations; I understand their character and know their values. One can reach such understanding through long and diverse stretches of shared activity or through verbal self-disclosure.

Whether knowledge of the other is gained verbally or through shared experience, knowledge is necessary for friendship. As philosopher Marilyn Friedman observes, "One's behavior toward the friend takes its appropriateness, at least in part, from *her* goals and aspirations, *her* needs, *her* character — all of which one feels...invited to acknowledge as worthwhile just because they are hers."<sup>9</sup> Some of my friend's plans and projects become my own, as my care for my friend leads me to love what she loves.

In a sense, Tony does take on Father Joe's central project. Tony comes to long for deeper intimacy with God by being drawn to that

love through Father Joe's steadfast love for Tony, a love that continues to hold on to him throughout the vicissitudes of his life. In fact, Tony says that Father Joe *meant* God to him (p. 266). "So long as Joe was alive in the world, there was a gossamer-thin thread of connection to the possibility of God, but now..." (p. 265). Tony's grief at Joe's death is like a dark night of the soul.

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However, Tony never knows enough of Father Joe's own spiritual journey, or of other more ancillary plans and projects that Joe may have, to come along side him to help. Part of the reason that knowledge of one another is necessary within friendship is that it forms the basis of the care that only friends can give. Mature friendship both requires and produces growth in goodness, not as friendship's goal, but in order to equip us for befriending. Being a friend requires strength of character. As we strive to do what friendship calls for, we will grow. Sharing our friend's sorrows will exercise our compassion; sharing our friend's hardships and dangers will exercise our endurance and courage.

Tony does reach the point where he asks himself what he can do for Joe rather than running to Joe for help in his last visit with Joe before his death. He goes to Quarr bringing his seven-year-old son, Sebastian, with him. This in itself is huge. He is not just showing up to talk about his life; he is bringing an important part of his life into his relationship with Father Joe. He finds that Joe is in dire health, suffering the late stages of cancer. He hears Joe, perhaps for the first time, talk of his fear – not a fear of punishment after death but a fear in the face of “the immensity of what lies beyond the door. A God of love – infinite and eternal” (p. 260). Joe tells Tony that he thinks that death makes nothing of us all, not because death is the end, but because death ushers us into God's perfection, which makes “failures of us all” – even as God loves us infinitely anyway. Tony now gets to be the compassionate listener. Sebastian contributes his own gift of childish banter. Mutuality has begun to transform spiritual direction into friendship and Tony knows deeper truths about this mentor who has spent so much of his time coming to know Tony and helping Tony come to know his true self.

Labeling and classification in the area of human relationships can seem a cold and theoretical exercise. At the practical and spiritual levels what matters is that Tony Hendra and Dom Joseph Warrilow had a rich and wonderful relationship that spanned decades and changed Hendra's life for the better. Surely, in the end, that is what mattered to both of them and is something for which we can all thank God.

## NOTES

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), 96.

2 Caroline J. Simon, *The Disciplined Heart: Love, Destiny and Imagination* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1997).

3 This echoes language used by F. Scott Fitzgerald's character Nick Carraway to describe his first impression of Gatsby in *The Great Gatsby* (New York: Scribner's, 1925; Scribner paperback/Simon & Schuster, 1995). See my discussion of the relationship between Nick and Gatsby in chapter four of *The Disciplined Heart*.

4 Tony Hendra, *Father Joe: The Man Who Saved My Soul* (New York: Random House, 2004). Page citations will be in the text.

5 Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship*, translated by Mary Eugenia Laker, S.S.N.D. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1974).



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6 For two very good contemporary Christian treatments of friendship see Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1989) and Gilbert Meilaender, *Friendship: A Study in Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 1981).

7 Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica, First Complete American Edition*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: McGraw Hill, 1947), I-II, Question 28, article 2.

8 Warren Wilner, "Philosophical Approaches to Interpersonal Intimacy," in *Intimacy*, edited by Martin Fisher and George Stricker (New York: Plenum Press, 1982), 24.

9 Marilyn Friedman, "Friendship and Moral Growth," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 23 (1989): 4.

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