

Qualities of a Friend



What are the most important qualities of a friend? The question was asked of me and it's turning out more difficult than one might suppose. A list of attributes seemed the way to address the question, but that was so sterile and analytical, not to mention boring.

Storytelling is usually a good strategy. Who doesn't like a story? That approach didn't produce much fruit either. Listing sixty years of friends showed me that friends are people, and people come and go. People are filled with inner conflicts, inconsistencies, and ambiguities. To make a person into a principle, to hold any living human up as the model of a given quality is to lie. When we think of an individual as an ideal we create a standard no one can meet.

Let me give you an example. Dan was a friend of mine and still is. We were friends from first grade through high school. He was the best man at my wedding. In the first and second grades, our

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recess time was restricted to the playground where we could play on the monkey bars, swings, and the merry-go-round. That's the thing you sit on while your friends push you around until you lose your lunch. The school board must have thought the playground was safe, it wasn't all covered with asphalt half of it was gravel. Those who survived to the third grade were allowed to play on the athletic field across the street. The field had no play equipment, but it did have a lot of room to run around. We could also bring balls and bats to the field, but we had to bring them back into the classroom when we were done.

I have no recollection of injuries in our baseball games, but there was a close call while returning the bat one day. That day in 1964 something happened – I don't remember what I did or said, but something lit a very short fuse in Dan's head and he exploded in rage. He was carrying the bat which he started swinging like a broadsword while I started jumping out of the way. He took several swings and really put his back into it, but luckily he wasn't a great swordsman. With the help of another kid, Dan was disarmed and I lived to play another day. People are complicated, and friends can be a mixed bag. I would say an even temper should make the list of qualities to look for in friends. A friend should be able to think through a situation without anger, but we also need to appreciate the whole person. Dan definitely had issues with anger, but that was not what defined him. Over the

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years he proved to be a faithful friend, and a guy needs to be accepted as a whole person rather than individual traits.

Friends should also be people who enjoy one another's company. Through high school, Louis was another of my closest friend. Exactly how we became friends is beyond my recollection, but we spent a lot of time together. After we were old enough to drive we would go to his family's cabin in the woods. If you look online for a cabin you'll see beautiful a-frames, or maybe a two-story for half a million. Lou's cabin wasn't exactly in that camp. When we arrived at this cabin the first thing was to climb onto the roof and remove the tin can that was on the chimney because of the snow. Inside there was an old wood cook stove, army surplus bunks that would sleep three, and a small table. A window gave light during the daytime and we lit a Coleman gas lantern when the sun went down. It was awesome, We drove around the countryside in my old '49 Dodge pickup, played music, shot guns, cooked our meals on the wood stove, and did the stupid things teenage boys do. We laughed and enjoyed being together. Both Dan and Louis still live in the area where we all grew up, a thousand miles from me. We don't see each other much, but I'm still thankful for their friendship and the things we learned and experienced together.

Sometimes you need a friend who knows the old stories, someone who has lived life with you. Rod and I are cousins of

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about the same age and his school teacher parents would often bring their kids to the family farm where I lived. There was a small college in the area where they could further their education while Rod and I enjoyed the summer on the farm. He was the brother I never had. In his early twenties, he and a partner started a small construction business. I had just finished college and he called me to come and work for them. For some years we still enjoyed the relationship that can only exist between those who have walked many miles together. Then we had a bit of a falling out. To this day, we have little contact and I miss the camaraderie, but I still treasure the memories.

Intelligence is a great quality, as is curiosity. A friend able to discuss a variety of topics, and with the intelligence and curiosity to learn about new things can make a wonderful companion. Again, this is one trait among many.

Chuck has been a friend for over twenty years, and we love to share thoughts and we discuss things for hours. We have a great deal in common. That is until we get into politics. There we really need to cut each other some slack. A few years ago, he was living on his sailboat in San Diego and he invited me for the weekend. I took a train down the coast and met him at the station. We sailed a bit and did some sightseeing, but mostly we talked. At the end of my stay, he said, "I am so glad you came. There is no one else with whom I can have these meaningful

conversations.” Then he added, “Of course, when it comes to politics, you’re whacked!”

Sharing goals can be an important brick in building a friendship. That brings me to Don, another friend of my adult years. We first met when I was starting a Boy Scout troop. His nephew Chris was living with him and he thought it would be good for the boy. He told Chris that he would do the scouting thing with him and committed to being one of the leaders for six months. Don and I led Troop 626 for over ten years during which we put packs on our backs and hiked a few hundred miles. We showed boys the mountains and valleys of southern California and even did a fifty miler in the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of New Mexico. We didn’t dislike camping and hiking. We didn’t even hate spending a week at summer camp in the hottest part of the year. We didn’t mind, but we would not have sought those things out for fun. We did it for the boys. Laboring together whether on dusty trails with a backpack or at any other worthwhile endeavor, can cement a friendship. Sharing a common purpose can create a strong bond.

Our family moved in 1988 when I got a biotech job in Central North Carolina. It took me a while to get used to the flat land and at one time I considered working at another company up in the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was a family business, and while I ended up staying where I was, I made a couple of trips while

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considering the job. The president of the company took me out to lunch on one of the trips and in our discussion, he asked, “Do you know the motto of the State of North Carolina?” I had no idea. He said, “Esse quam videri, to be rather than to seem. I think that’s a pretty good motto.” I’ve always remembered that lunch, and the lesson he gave me. Esse quam videri is one of the important things to look for in a friend, and it is not always easy to find.

During my first year in college, I met Ken, a man that embodied that phrase. He was a few years older than me having served in the Navy before college. We were in similar programs, I was planning to go to medical school and he was to become a veterinarian. The main difference was that he was brilliant. He could discuss almost any topic from chemistry and physics to literature or current events. I’ve known other brilliant people, but none with his casual demeanor. While others wanted to talk about the things that made them look good Ken was simply who he was. We studied, fished, hunted, and laughed together. We were both married the same year and I remember when a mutual friend asked if we were nervous about making this lifelong commitment. Ken said, “Not at all, you just make a decision and act on it.” Ken didn’t feel the need to impress people. He was who he was, and that made it easier for me to do the same.

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There are still other important qualities such as integrity. A real friend is someone you know you can trust and only a fool relies on a person without integrity. Integrity is more than simple honesty; it is a consistency of character that allows others to know how the person will act. A friend should be a person who lifts you up, not just cheering you up but raising you up and helping you become a better person.

A friend isn't your coach or your advisor, but someone who walks the road with you. The Old Testament book of Proverbs says, "Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another." That is the kind of friend who celebrates your triumphs but also cares enough to tell you the truth you don't want to hear. This is a friend you are willing to listen to because while their words may bite you know they would never hurt you. You can confide in them knowing what you entrusted to them is safe.

It is good for a man to have close male friends, and I've had a few. Writing this brief essay has helped me remember some of them and how they blessed me. But it has also reminded me that we all change. Our beliefs, our priorities, and even our memories change. If my oldest friends were to read what I've written they would probably say I got it wrong. That is because we all run our memories and perceptions through the filter of our unique mix of experiences and our current situation. That isn't a bad thing. It is one of the things that makes people so fascinated. However,

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it makes it hard to maintain close friendships with people when you aren't in regular contact. To have close friends we have to cultivate new friendships and that is a lot of work.

My final realization is that I have set the bar very high. I've presented a list of qualities that would be hard for anyone to live up to. I would be tempted to say impossible if I didn't know one person who has cleared that bar with room to spare. Next month we will celebrate our forty-seventh wedding anniversary.