

Letters to a Young Catholic: How to sustain friendships

Dear Friend,

Jesus' most impressive miracle was having 12 close friends in his 30s, and only one betrayed him. That's not an original joke, yet it's still funny because it's true. You usually have far fewer friends when you are an adult. And having close friends and lasting friendships as an adult is harder still.

In an [article for The Atlantic](#), Jennifer Senior says that she's "aged-out of the friendship-collecting business, which tends to peak in the tumbleweed stage of life. Instead," she continues, "I should be in the friendship-enjoying business, luxuriating in the relationships that survived as I put down roots."

There are a couple things worth noting in what she says. First, there is a shift in friendships as we age: It is easier and more natural to find and make new friends when you are younger for myriad reasons. Second, when she speaks of "relationships that survived," it sounds like that is something that just happens: Some friendships live, some die. While there is some truth in that – due to circumstances like location or having kids around the same time – what is left unsaid is that the friendships that endure are often the friendships you prioritize.

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Some friendships end because of a bitter fight, or a change in values, or even outright betrayal. But most friendships end with a whimper. Nothing happens; it is just "that things stop happening between you," as Senior puts it. No sudden break, just silent drifting. This happens all the more during times of transition, like when you move from high school to college,

or college to the working world, or from one city to another, or from being single to married, or to married with children.

There are friendships so dear and enjoyable that you could never imagine them ending. And then you find yourself looking back over the past year – or five years – to see that you have hardly spent any time at all with the friend that was so dear to you. You miss them and you don't. You miss what you shared together and wish it was still there, but you spend your time on so many other things that you don't really feel the absence of that person, except maybe in fleeting moments of nostalgia.

There is, therefore, a radical difference between happening to have friends and sustaining friendships. The first is about chance; the second is about commitment. We should think about friendship more like a virtue: It is something you practice, grow in and develop. You do not become virtuous by accident. In the same way, friendships require habits and actions. We cannot sustain all friendships forever – there is indeed a natural and even necessary winnowing of friendships that usually must occur as we grow older. But in order to sustain the friendships that not only matter most but that we want to matter most, we have to foster intentionality, flexibility and follow through.

I want to share with you some of what I have learned through both study and experience about how to sustain friendships.

Prioritization

One of my best friendships started when I was a young adult, from my late 20s to mid-30s. My friend Pete and I happened to work together for several years. We both loved playing basketball and played together often. There were a lot of reasons for us to spend time together.

Then circumstances changed. Pete started a big, time-consuming job, and he had to move on from the work that we shared

together. My wife and I had more kids, and our older kids were in more activities that took up more of our time. Most of the reasons for us to spend time together expired. This was not as obvious a shift as going away to college or moving across the country, but the effect of these changes would be the same: We were about to drift, not because we didn't value the friendship; it is just that things had changed.

Fortunately, Pete and I realized this was about to happen. Our response was really simple and really important. We decided that we would have lunch together every week. When we came up with this idea, one of us (I don't remember who) actually said, "If we don't make time to hang out, we're not going to." This was a friendship worth investing in, so we made it a priority.

This commitment goes on the calendar before other things. Sometimes we have to miss a week or even two due to travel or other conflicts. But instead of always trying to "find time," we make time in advance, then we cancel when necessary. The default, in other words, is spending time together.

This is so obvious that I feel silly even mentioning it, but this is how priorities work. Priorities are the things that go on the calendar first. Priorities are not necessarily inalterable, but they do require a reason and an explanation for not holding to them. Pete and I have held to our weekly lunch date for several years now. If one of us moved to a different city, we would have to find another way to sustain the relationship. But I believe we would, and we would do so by making time spent in friendship a priority.

Focus

This will sound weird after what I just wrote, but a surefire way to put a friendship on the path toward its dissolution is to focus on the friendship itself. I think what happens is we idealize the friendship – we hold to the idea of being

friends. True friendship, though, isn't about the cozy or reassuring feeling of being together. Rather, it is about desiring the other person's good.

Focusing on the other person's good means wanting what is best for the other person, acting in their best interest and even making sacrifices of time, effort or preference to support them. It is nearly impossible for competitors to really be friends. Envy gets in the way, and envy eats at relationships from the inside. The commitment friends make to each other is to be there for each other and to support each other. To sustain a friendship, you have to make a commitment to be there for your friend.

Favors

At least once I heard someone say, "If you want to make a friend, let someone do you a favor." That sounds counterintuitive. It would seem that we make a friend when we do someone else a favor. But I think there is great wisdom here. We all want to know that we matter, and one of the best ways to know that is to know that we have mattered to someone else. So let someone else know that.

The few people that I count as my closest friends are people who are honest with me and ask me for advice and help. I think they count me as a close friend because I also turn to them when I am in need. We often learn how to love people by doing good things for them. That means that if we want to let people learn to love us, we have to let them do good things for us.

Presence

It is easier to be in touch with lots of people than ever before in history, and at the same time, it is harder to be truly present to people than ever before. So here is something simple I have come up with: Body > Voice > Writing > Text.

This means that being together in person – as in, bodily; in the same place at the same time – is the best kind of encounter. Encountering each other through voice – as in, by phone – is the next most personal and most real. Writing – as in, typically, through the actual strokes of a pen, definitely in longer form as with letters – is next in line as a way of being present to each other. Last of all, short-form digital communication – as in, texting and the like – is not really a form of presence at all but rather a way of keeping up chatter. It isn't bad, but it is no substitute for the more genuine thing. Whenever possible, prioritize the more embodied form of presence. And above all, pray for each other (which means being present to each other in God).

In everything I have shared above, a basic assumption is that in order to sustain friendships, you have to want to sustain friendships. Friendships are not sustained by accident. I think, therefore, that periods of reflection are really important, especially as times of transition approach: Which friendships are important to me? Which friendships do I want to be important to me? And how do I – how do we – make sure those friendships not only survive but live and grow?

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Lenny".

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