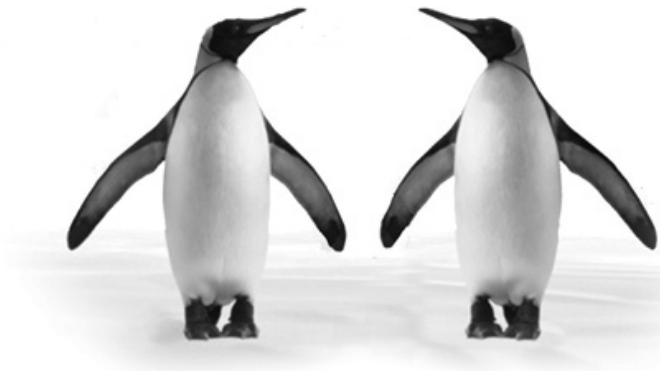


MAKING AND KEEPING
LIFETIME RELATIONSHIPS

HOW TO BE A
BEST FRIEND
FOREVER



DR. JOHN TOWNSEND

Best-selling Author of *Boundaries*—2 Million Copies Sold

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Dedication

To anyone who believes
in the life-sustaining value of best friends.



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Introduction: Lifelines

Recently, I was having lunch with some friends when the topic turned to friendship itself. I had been researching the subject for a while, so I threw out an open-ended question: “How important have your best friends been for you?” I was simply doing some informal information gathering. There was a brief silence before people gave the following ideas about friends:

- They have been safe places where I can be myself.
- They are a few people I can be comfortable with.
- They are the ones I go to when I need support.
- They know and accept all of me.
- They have walked with me through my marriage and childrearing years.

- I have found God in a deeper way through these relationships.
- They have helped me through tough times.
- They have made my life more meaningful.

The answers were all thoughtful and positive—and fairly predictable. They probably represent what any of us would say about our closest friendships. Then one woman, who I had not known for long and who had been silent until this point, said: “I probably wouldn’t be here without them.”

I heard something in her voice, so I asked, “You mean, you probably would not be where you are these days in life—that sort of thing?”

She looked directly at me. “No. I probably wouldn’t be here. *Here* here. On earth.”

I felt the level of the conversation change, as no one could have predicted that answer. We were in a whole new and deeper arena with that one thought. The speaker, Rachel, was not someone you would think of as being in a crisis or having experienced a great deal of trauma. She was a professional in her mid-forties, married, with two children.

I then asked her to share her story with us. She told us about years of serious and painful struggles: an abusive childhood,

a nightmare of a first marriage, and, by far most difficult of all, the death of one of her children. That last event, she said, almost put her under. When I asked how she got through these massive losses, she said, “God and three friends.” God, she said, sustained and guided her through the very dark years. And three friends—three *best friends*—were there in so many ways: They listened to Rachel. They supported her. They stayed at the hospital during her child’s illness. They let her feel whatever she needed to feel about her life. They lent her money when her job fell through. They drove her to church and to her therapist’s office when she could hardly move. “That’s what I meant about saying that without them, I probably wouldn’t be here,” Rachel told us.

MORE VITAL THAN YOU CAN IMAGINE

I begin with this story because it illustrates a problem we have in our best friendships: the word *friends* has somehow been robbed of its meaning and power. It has been diluted. Friends, especially best friends, are often explained in a vanilla way, in the same manner you would say, “We just decided to stay in for the evening and watch some reruns.” There is nothing wrong with that, and it can be a good experience. Likewise, friendships can appear comfortable,

safe—and not much more than that. But Rachel does not see it that way, and I agree with her. She sees her best friends as a lifeline. Her three relationships were not simply helpful and encouraging. They were critical. They were a matter of survival. I think that is more of what friendships should be about: people we go to with our deepest dreams, needs, and questions, and who are lifelines to us. People who bring us life.

As I work with people and organizations, I have noticed several reasons that the power and meaning of friendships have been diluted in our present-day experience. One is that many people are simply isolated in the first place and, though they want more close relationships, they've learned to live without them. They may have trust issues or painful past relationships, but whatever the reason, they are lonely even though they are surrounded by people. Others are simply not aware of their deeper need. In their experience, it is enough to have pleasant and positive conversations with others and not much more. They feel bad for people who struggle, but have not experienced “dark night of the soul” seasons, or seasons of great celebration for that matter, that would drive them to share with others. Some people don't possess the required skills and abilities to deepen a relationship. Still others put their friendship energy almost

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exclusively into the opposite sex, either in dating or marriage, and have difficulty experiencing high levels of need for nonromantic friends. They are stuck in a couple's world, which can exclude the idea of best friends. In addition, some people have difficulty opening up to anyone but their close family members. Nonfamily friends just do not make it into the circle. There are other reasons, but however it plays out, friendships—especially best friendships—don't bring to us what they were intended to bring.

Jesus saw friends as central in a way that we often miss. He told his disciples that he was going to stop calling them his servants and change things: “Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). He was making a distinction between two types of relationships: servants and friends are very different. You give a directive to a servant. But you bring a friend into your confidence. At lunch, you tell the waiter you'd like a refill on your coffee, and he does it. But you tell a friend that you need that refill because you didn't get a lot of sleep last night with a sick child at home. You make known to your friend what is going on in your life.

In addition, at the end of Jesus' life, during his time of deep trouble and distress while he was praying at Gethsemane, Jesus asked his three closest friends—Peter, James,

and John—to keep watch with him (Mark 14:32–34). Imagine God himself asking three friends to support him! It seems so dependent of Jesus, so “unspiritual.” The stereotype is that he should have only looked to his heavenly Father for support. But the reality is that Jesus modeled a need for both divine and human connections.

I think most of us are missing out in our best friendships in these ways. We are more on the safe side, not the Rachel side, of things. And I hope that this book will help you to get the most out of what is available to you. Because when you have a few real best friends, and you know what to do with them, life can be significantly better, fuller, and richer.

We often don't have time or energy to make many BFs in life, so it's good to know how to make them count. (And when people say, “I have lots of best friends,” it is the sign of someone who is not familiar with true and deep relationships.)

There are many examples of famous best friendships, both in history and currently: David and Jonathan. Roosevelt and Churchill. Lewis and Tolkien. Sinatra and Martin. Damon and Affleck. Oprah and Gayle. We have a fascination with the dynamics of these relationships, partially because the people are well known, and partially because we want long-lasting and safe relationships like these.

UNUSED POTENTIAL

Most of us aren't experiencing the highest level of good that is available from our friendships. You may find a great deal of warmth, understanding, encouragement, and shared life experiences in your best friendships. But I believe that for most of us, there can be much more richness, growth, and fulfillment as well. Think about all the important areas of your life, and how you are intentional about growth and improvement:

- The gym for your body
- Church for your spiritual life
- Training for your career
- Marriage seminars for you and your spouse
- Parenting workshops for your family
- Financial training for your money
- Classes for your sports and hobbies

However, we don't tend to pay a great deal of attention to being more intentional about our friendships. We aren't prone to focus on our best friends and on making those relationships even better. Think for a moment about those few special people on your BF list and ask yourself these two questions:

1. *If this relationship is a good one, would it be worth the exploration to make it a great one?* If you like the person and are drawn to her, why not? You are BFs for a reason. There is good you are both experiencing today as you walk through life. Why not more and better?

2. *Are there specific areas of life in which my best friends and I could do better for each other?* Some friendships tend to be “specialty” relationships. That is, the energy stays on parenting, marriage, or dating, and doesn’t delve into physical health, family of origin, spiritual values, or finances. While each BF does have its area of specialty, there may be untapped help available in your relationship.

I have experienced the “problem of potential” in my own friendships and have seen great results in applying the principles I’ve learned. I had lunch recently with a close friend, where we told each other that we were important to each other in specific ways. It was something I think we both were aware of, but had never been clear about. We each left the conversation with a deep sense of “This person is a lifer for me.” The very talk we had helped us use more of the potential in the relationship.

The closest thing to this kind of thinking is in the romantic sphere of life—marriage and dating—where there is a lot of good research and helpful principles for creat-

ing intimacy, communication, and depth within those relationships. While the romantic world should certainly also offer you a close friendship, that is only one person. The friendship world should consist of several people and ideally include your partner. That arena has its own ideas and principles, found in this book, that can enrich and fulfill your relationships in a unique way.

A NECESSITY

You may have a healthy marriage or dating relationship. But whatever is going on in your life, the research keeps pointing to the conclusion that *all aspects of our lives are deeply affected by the presence or absence of friendships*. Friendships are more than a luxury or icing on the cake. They are a necessity.

Researchers have been studying the effects of social isolation since the 1970s, and the evidence is overwhelming. They have found that when people are disconnected from relationships, their medical and psychological conditions suffer.¹ Friendships even affect our finances. A recent long-term study found that during high school, if you were named as a close friend by someone else, you were likely to make 2 percent more income later in life. This study discovered a multiplier effect as well: being named by five people equaled a 10 percent increase in wages.²

The flow of scientific data supports what the Bible says about friendships:

Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up.

Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken. (Ecclesiastes 4:9–12)

Can you relate to “falling down” in life and not having someone you can trust deeply to talk to about it? When we fall down alone, it takes much more effort to get back up in life again.

FRIENDSHIP’S ORIGIN AND PURPOSE

Friendships are actually an essential part of our childhood development. Infants don’t start life looking for buddies. They come into the world looking for a life-support system called Mother. That is their first and most primary relationship, where they begin to experience how to connect, trust, and reach out. This prepares them for all other relationships. They find that relationship is the best place to be, and

life goes better when they are in a connection. At that point, they are able to then make contact with Dad, and, after that, brothers and sisters.

After that, between ages four and eleven, kids gradually become more and more interested and involved with friendships. Their early experiences with the family have given them the readiness to leave those first relationships and venture out into the social world, part of the “leaving and cleaving” process designed by God (see Genesis 2:24 KJV). This is when school, playdates, sports, the arts, and church relationships flourish.

The child’s social relationships often begin to compete with the family, and parents have to establish age-appropriate balances to keep it all in place. It is common for parents to feel as though their kids don’t see home as special anymore. But if home base is a good, warm, and structured place, it is often a sign that the family has done its job well.

The “friendship explosion,” then, must make room for puberty and romantic interests, starting at around twelve years of age. At this point, there is a confusing time of integrating romantic relationships with same-sex and opposite-sex friendships, which continues into the twenties. All this helps prepare the young person ultimately for grown-up activities such as establishing a mature support system,

dating, marriage, and parenting. The end result is a healthy blend of romantic and nonromantic relationships, which provide the connectedness and growth we need.

This entire process is a shift in the center of our lives, from what is called our “family of origin” to our own friends and new families. As part of that leaving and cleaving, friends are more and more the sources of love, care, direction, and interest for us. The family of origin, if it’s a loving and healthy one, is part of this, but can no longer be the center of it. That is the grand design: to let young people take what they have learned from their families and spread their wings and apply it to their new lives. In that sense, friends are our “second family.” They continue our growth and development as we mature: emotionally, relationally, spiritually, and professionally. They also provide what ingredients of growth might have been lacking in our family of origin, or help us heal from what might have been injured there as well.

Jesus referred to the second family in his own life experience:

Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers

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are outside looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.” (Mark 3:31–35)

In other words, those who have deeply shared like values toward God are the family we need as adults. Friends become family.

I was facilitating a small group of people who wanted to go deeper into their relationships with themselves, with God, and with each other. It was a vulnerable and intimate set of experiences, in which the members took big risks with each other and found a depth of friendship they had not had before. After several months of meetings, I asked for feedback on how the group was going. One of the members said, “This is how the body of Christ should be functioning.”

As we talked, I realized that she was referring to all the “one anothers” the New Testament teaches, and how those should be norms for our best and highest relationships: be devoted, honor, live in harmony, don’t pass judgment, accept, be patient, forgive, teach and admonish, spur to love and good deeds, and love deeply from the heart. This is how friendships should be. This is how family should be.

At the time of this writing, our sons have now entered college. My wife, Barbi, and I have had to continually adjust to the fact that our sons are much more outward-bound and friend-oriented than they are nest-oriented. We stay connected to the boys a great deal, but the energy is clearly “out there,” where it needs to be.

In the same way, as a conference relationship speaker, I am privileged to talk to parents who have embraced their new role with their adult children. Though they will always be Mom and Dad, and share all the history, love, and honor that entails, they have accepted that they aren't the center of their kids' lives and have moved to the side, so to speak. It is not easy, and every parent must fight the urge to keep their teenagers and young adults totally based on the family. We have to let them go so that they can have great friendships like we should have in our own lives. They are learning how to be a good friend from the principles they pick up at home.

BEING A GOOD FRIEND

As a psychologist and relationship expert, I have observed people relating to each other for many years and have discovered some principles that will improve any best friend relationship. In my own life, I have found these same principles operating. I am fortunate to have my own set of BFFs

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who have been with me for years and walked through life with me. I can't imagine experiencing the world without them, and I am grateful to God and to them for that.

Not too long ago, I asked some of my closest friends if we could have a "friendship audit" and talk about us. It was a little awkward at first, especially with people I've known for several decades. How do you switch from "How's life?" to "How are we?" There's no smooth way to do this, so we just jumped in.

And I'm so glad we did. Each friend I talked with reported that they came away feeling closer to me and better about the relationship, and I did as well. In one friendship, what came up was the reality that we have always been there for each other, in good times and bad. In another, we acknowledged that we believe in the good we see in each other. In another, mutual respect for each other's lives was a major element of the relationship.

The good between us far outweighed the bad, which would make sense for a very close relationship. But that doesn't mean it was all affirmations and roses either. One friend said, "I have had to adjust my expectations downward with us." It was his nice way of saying that he thought I was doing a substandard job of calling and taking initiative to stay in touch. He was right: I was letting him do more of

the work, and I felt remorse when he mentioned it. I hated that someone I value that much would feel that way. When a close friend gives a reality check like that, it has a deep impact. I told him I wanted to change and would like to be a better friend in that area.

Another friend said, “I hesitate to call you out of the blue sometimes because you seem really busy.” There is a common thread between these two conversations, which is that I often get too tied up in what I do and don’t make those important spontaneous calls as I should. We talked about that one: whether I put out a “Not Available” signal or whether he had difficulty taking risks, for what is the harm when a person says, “I can’t talk right now”? We ultimately agreed that even though I am busy, I need this friend in my life, and if he calls, I would really welcome the call. If I couldn’t talk or meet then, I would make sure we did some-time soon.

The pattern of me being less accessible to my friends than I would like to be was important to notice as well. If a couple of people you trust tell you something similar, pay attention. This is a gold mine of valuable information. Since I have received this feedback, I have taken time to reflect deeply on these behaviors and am making significant

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changes to make things better. It's good to know I have best friends I can trust to tell me if I'm changing or not!

I really value my friends and need them in my life. A Russian proverb says, "Tell me who's your friend and I'll tell you who you are." I hope that this book, and the ideas here, will help you to find out more about who you are by deepening your connections with your own best friends.

1



Fs, BFs, and BFFs

A friendship should add great things to your life: trust, companionship, and shared experiences, for example. But it will also cost you something: time, energy, and commitment. Even the most easygoing friendship requires some effort and investment. Given the energy involved, it leads to the question: should all BFs (best friends) also be BFFs (best friends forever)? Ideally, I think so. That depends on how life and circumstances go. Few things on this earth will last forever. But the second “F” in this title has to do more with the reality that the best friendships are open-ended about time and do not come with an expiration date. If we know that we will be moving to another town in a year, it will be hard to deeply engage with someone who lives there, though

it is possible. So as you explore and engage in your relationship, you are most likely operating as though you will be BFFs.

FRIENDS

Let's understand our terms a bit here. A friend once told me, "I know so many people who make a BF out of someone they have known for a week, and there's something weird about that." While such a move is usually made due to a lack of information, or a crisis, or desperation, it is not how we are to develop friendships. We are to guard our hearts (Proverbs 4:23) and spend time and energy making sure anyone we let in our lives and hearts really deserves to have a place there. A BF is a kind of friend, so it is important to understand the "F" part of the word.

"Friend" is an extremely popular and broad term. When you read the checkout stand magazines, or google the word, it is a hard concept to pin down. Most of the descriptions are either very general or very anecdotal:

- Someone who shares life with you
- A person who accepts you as you are
- An individual you can say anything to and be anyone with

- Someone you look forward to sitting down with and talking about what you've been up to, as well as your joys and your struggles

These are descriptive, but they don't identify the essence of friendship in a way that presents clear lines about what it is and isn't.

After spending time researching this topic, I've come to the conclusion that at the DNA level, a friendship must have three elements: *knowing*, *liking*, and *presence*. These seem simple, but they are the three key components that are universal in friendships, from neighbors to church relationships to work connections.

1. *Knowing*. You have objective information and personal experience with the person. You know where they live, their marital and parental status, what they do for work, their hobbies, their faith. On a personal level, you may know their history, their likes and dislikes, and their dreams and hurts. *Knowing* provides the foundation of whether or not this relationship will be a friendship, and how deep it can go. And if what you know is scary or toxic, you need that information as well.

2. *Liking*. You want to spend time with each other. You are drawn to each other's presence. When life happens, for

good or bad, you want them to know about it, and you want to know about their life. You don't have to make yourself call or visit because you should, or because they are good for you. It's about a *want to*, not a *have to*. The *liking* aspect also helps when you have conflicts or problems in the relationship. It serves as an anesthetic to get over rough patches. And if you don't like someone, it is hard to call your relationship a friendship. A duty or a professional acquaintance or some sort of an obligation, maybe. But not a friendship.

3. *Presence*. Friends spend time together. That is how *knowing* and *liking* happen. It may be a phone call, a lunch, an evening, a bike ride, a vacation. But time together is essential. The more time together between two good people, the better the relationship. There is a mutual commitment to be with each other, and you gladly pay the price for its benefits. Sometimes people move away and don't see each other much. That doesn't mean they aren't friends, just that it is harder. But if the time was put in prior to the move, like making many deposits in an investment account, it is much easier to stay connected.

Think of your BFs now. You probably can recognize the presence of these three components in different amounts. But you have to have all three. They are the basics that define a friendship and also a best friendship.

BEST FRIENDS

Now to your best friendships, a special category. If a friendship is when someone has access to the information that is you, then best friendship is when you *hand over the key to the vault*. That is, you let the person know you at the deepest and most vulnerable level. You invite them in to what is most important to you, your

- Dreams
- Vision for Life
- Feelings
- Core values
- Strengths
- Hurts
- Secrets
- Sins
- Mistakes
- Past
- Heartaches

These are not easy things to let others in on. But they are essential for having close friends. Handing over the key to

the vault means you are saying, in essence, *I entrust you with myself. Be safe for me and also help me be a better person.* Just as a bank vault contains precious investments, your personal vault is something to be both preserved safely, without condemnation, and also developed and grown over time into something much richer.

A friend of mine attended a coaching team I was leading for professional people. He signed up for business growth with a personal twist. He didn't know anyone on the team, yet a great deal of the time the team members spent with each other consisted of connection, honesty, and challenging each other to excellence. Over the months, he began developing relationships with these people, and he and his wife would go to dinner with other members and their spouses. The group became part of his normal network of friendships, as well as friends on a deeper level.

He didn't expect this to happen, nor did he plan for it. But their shared commitment drew him in and an atmosphere of knowing, liking, and presence was created. The same thing happens every day in casual friendships that grow, in small groups, and in specialty groups sharing common hobbies and interests.

A best friend, then, is not someone who has some mysterious and unfathomable special quality no one else has. Rather, she is someone who ideally has become a high-

priority relationship for you that you will invest in personally. You will find yourself wanting to know her at even deeper levels. You'll find a growing and great well of love for her inside you, and become fiercely loyal to and protective of your time together, for it is vital to you both. That is the way it should work, and the way it works best.

BEST FRIENDS FOREVER

How do we know if a BF is really a BFF? When we use the word *forever*, we mean, "I don't see an end to this relationship." This is someone who is so important and special to me that they are in my Hall of Fame. This is a person who I want to be a permanent part of my life. I want their imprint on me, their stamp on me, their effect on me, with no end in sight. They are that significant to me.

ONE OR SEVERAL?

Is there room for only one BF, or can there be more than one? Some people believe this is a one-person arrangement, that a best friend means a number one friend. While we can have a closest friend, this is not always the way it is. "Best" simply indicates that a few relationships run deepest in your life and commitment. It is similar to best movies, restaurants, and sports teams.

The reality is also that we need more than one person to

enhance the quality of our life and relationships. Different friends have different strengths that bring out different qualities. Variety helps. It is a good thing to be able to call several people “my best friends,” and it is a good goal to move toward.

A woman I was counseling began to pay close attention to her best friendships, seeing how much of a difference they made in her quality of life. She made the discovery that one BF had the ability to draw her out, be vulnerable, and go deep about the emotional areas of life. She loved how her friend was able to be there for her, and it meant a great deal to her. At the same time, however, she had another friend who showed her love and care by practical means: advice, good ideas, financial help, and suggestions. Their conversations had a different tone, but the value was there, just the same. “BF” is a plural term.

MALE OR FEMALE?

What about opposite-sex best friends? I hear this question a great deal. Many people are concerned that a close opposite-sex relationship is too dangerous because of the possibility that emotional intimacy will end up being acted out sexually. So, by that reasoning, we should limit our deeper friendships to the same sex.

There is certainly good reason to exercise caution. Billy

Graham was famous for never walking into a hotel room until one of his staff entered it first, in case someone who didn't like him had set up a woman in a compromising stance with a photographer on hand. And many pastors and Christian leaders will not meet behind closed doors, or ride in a car alone, with a person of the opposite sex. There are situations that do require a certain amount of care and restriction, because of the dangers. Joseph, in the Bible, physically ran from temptation with Potiphar's wife (Genesis 39:12).

Having said that, however, women and men can be good friends with each other. They bring a perspective and a way of being to each other that can't really be replaced. The feminine and masculine viewpoints help balance us, grow us, and make us better people. Jesus himself had a deep and abiding friendship with two sisters, Mary and Martha, which also showed how he valued women in an age when women were seen as inferior (Luke 10:38–42).

Think about your family of origin. It was designed ideally so that you would be raised by a mom and a dad. Both contributed to your development and preparation for life. Does it make sense, once you have grown up and left home, to forever relate to the opposite sex in a meaningful way only if you are dating or married to the person? That limits a great deal of growth and friendship potential.

So evaluate your situation carefully. I have seen many solid marriages enhanced by opposite-sex friendships. The husband's female friend tells him he is entirely too left-brained and is not listening to his wife. She is an advocate and a guide for his wife and the marriage. The wife's male friend tells her that she doesn't let him have his "cave time" when he needs to be alone for a few minutes after work to recover from the day and transition into the family. He is an advocate for the husband and the marriage as well.

I recommend that both spouses spend time with the friend, so that the other spouse will feel more secure and know that he is safe, loved, and that everything is on the up and up. But the spouse who is feeling insecure needs to be heard and understood, because he or she comes first.

If, however, there is an ongoing character problem with opposite-sex relationships, things have to be different. For example, if a man tends to be flirty or sexually inappropriate with women as his norm, or he has been unfaithful, he needs to get counseling and help for those issues before taking a risk with a close female friendship. For the time being, he may need to be sober and stick with his male friends, not unlike how an alcoholic should avoid getting a job as a bartender.

The tricky question here has to do with the problem of a spouse who doesn't want her partner to have opposite-sex

friends, but the issue is her fear and insecurity, not his character or love. In that situation, the risk is that he may curtail healthy, godly, and marriage-supporting connections so that she will not feel anxious, and then she never has to face and deal with her own fears and difficulties.

In that sort of situation, the one with the problem never deals with it, and the one without the problem pays for his spouse's injury. One option in this case is that the wife gets help for the problem, and the husband remains sensitive to her feelings, supporting her growth, and being totally trustworthy. I worked with a couple in which the wife found herself intensely jealous of any attractive woman her husband talked to, from a neighbor to work colleagues. Yet he was insanely in love with his wife. The root of the issue was that she had grown up with a distant father who had cheated on her mom, and that nightmare bruised her ability to trust a man's character. Once she realized the issue, she revisited her past, grieved the losses she experienced because of her dad, and was able to feel secure in her husband's love, resolving the dilemma.

BANISH SUPERIORITY

Finally, remember that "best" is not a morally superior category. Your best friend is your best friend because you and

she are a great fit for each other, not because she is better than the rest of your friends. When you ask the waiter at the restaurant what he recommends, he may say, “My favorite is the steak or the pasta.” Favorite is just favorite; it isn’t superior. You and your BFs would not fit every other friendship scenario, so there is no better or worse here.

Remember the pain of junior high, when the cliques were in full bloom? There was a stinging moral tone to not being included. Stay away from that tone and be glad you’re finding some great fits for yourself.

A GREAT LIFE REQUIRES GREAT FRIENDS

I have a friend who was struggling with a fragile marriage. Though she and her husband had been married many years, there was deep alienation between them. She was lonely and unhappy in the relationship and was considering ending it.

She had invested most of her life in her family and her job. The friendships she did have were more social relationships and neighbors; good people, but no one she really confided in about what was going on. This made the loneliness worse. She had never really known how isolated she was until her marriage began to go sideways, which became the tipping point that helped push her into finding some safe people to open up to.

When she formed these relationships, more from desperation than from anything else, she was surprised at their impact on her marriage. She wanted help for herself, but found that the marriage was helped as well. These people listened. They were empathic. They heard her experience at a deep level. But at the same time they didn't go the easy route and bash her husband, who was not present to defend himself. Instead, they encouraged her to grow, develop, change herself, while at the same time drawing clear boundaries with his behavior as well. Over time, she and her husband began moving toward one another again. This woman attributes a large amount of the marital growth to the impact of these "real" friends. Their support, unconditional acceptance, wisdom, and feedback were indispensable for her.

This is one of the many positive aspects of having best friends. They can make you a better person, enrich your life, and help heal other relationships in your life. We just have to recognize their potential value and importance.