

A Weekend In February



***In Celebration of
Friendship Old & New!***

By Timothy A. Johnson

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CELEBRATING FRIENDSHIP!

The old campfire song encourages us to "make new friends, but keep the old; one is silver and the other gold."

There are those who would claim that this advice is unrealistic. I was tutored in my college years that no one can really maintain more than six to seven close relationships at any one time. It is practically and emotionally impossible, I was told. To further underscore that point, since then I have read more than once that Americans have just around that number of friends-- six or seven on average.

There are plenty of dynamics that contribute to a limitation on relationships in our lives. The pressures of pursuing education, careers, family life, and other daily responsibilities tend to narrow the scope of our interpersonal involvements. We all have only twenty-four hours in a day and investing in a wide range of friendships is unlikely.

There is a certain sadness, however, in these realities. When we simply settle for our current social web and make no effort to reach beyond it, we find ourselves increasingly trapped in our own little world. It reminds me of the poignant funeral service I once conducted for a woman who had not reached out in relationship to almost anyone. At the end of her life, only five people showed up for her funeral, none of which had a really close connection to her.

For me, as one who has trained church leaders, I have regularly stressed the need for strong relational skills for those in charge of local churches. Pastors and leaders need the ability to make and build friendships and positively lead teams of people working together. Furthermore, I believe the health of a local church will be the result of individuals moving out to make friends with those beyond the immediate congregation to touch them with genuine interest and love.

An expanded circle of friends is necessary for the mission of every church to be realized. But whether we are connected to a church or are simply members of the broader community, our lives are greatly enriched when we move beyond our current circle of acquaintance and make new friends, while maintaining faithful connections to those we have known for a long time.

What does meaningful friendship really entail? It depends on how "meaningful" is defined. Those who think that real friendship requires you to live in the other person's back pocket all the time, strictly limit the number of people they will ever connect with. I believe, though, that friendship can be genuine and meaningful even with people we see only occasionally, if indeed we enter into encounters with them with genuine interest and intentionality.

It has been my personal mission for many years to proceed through each day with a friendly attitude toward everyone I meet with the possibility that those I meet today could become lifelong friends who will enrich me and I them.

With that attitude, I have met and conversed with hundreds of people over the last years who have seriously deepened my understanding of life. I, in turn, have been a source of encouragement and insight because I have taken the time to engage people who have simply crossed my path.

With new friends and old ones, I have endeavored to meet up for breakfast, lunch, or coffee; chat on the phone, FaceTime, IMO, email, text, Messenger; and I believe by God's grace I am a stronger human being as a result.

I know that anyone who is willing to expand their circle of friends will be enriched and they will discover what a meaningful contribution they will make in the lives of others.

In order for this to be realized, however, all of us need to seize the daily opportunities we have to pursue friendship...both old and new. It requires a mindset that is open to the next person you meet and a belief that you really do have something of value to bring to other human beings you run into.

On a weekend in February 2017, I decided to take a trip to Chicago and Indianapolis to visit a group of nine people - a combination of old and new friends of mine. It was a wonderful excursion for me. Each of these people are specially gifted and valuable to me. They have been a source of encouragement, wisdom, and inspiration at several levels. I believe I have enriched them, as well.

Each of these people represents a category of people we have opportunity to pursue in friendship, but oftentimes do not. I introduce them in an effort to encourage and challenge everyone willing to read these pages. The great motivational speaker, Charlie Tremendous Jones used to say, "Five years from now you will be the person you are today, plus the books you read and people you get to know."

It is enlightened self-interest for us to engage as many people as we can as friends. It broadens our perspective, gives us an opportunity to be loving and helpful, and strengthens the social web that gives us regular encouragement and support.

What should be your goal? Do you need to have a circle of hundreds of friends that you are constantly expanding? No, that is not necessary...but to grow as individuals, it is healthy to be adding new people in our acquaintance over time. Even if we aimed to get to know one new person a year for the rest of our lives...we would lead more enriched lives, having greater inter-personal impact.

Let *A WEEKEND IN FEBRUARY* help you to imagine those new connections that will deepen and broaden your life.

Timothy A. Johnson - February 5, 2017

BOB – The College Friend



I had the opportunity of attending a small Christian liberal arts college in the mid 1970's. The student body was only about 900 strong at the time, but it provided a really interesting environment for developing friendships. Our barracks-like dormitory conditions crammed eleven men into each four-room suite. That meant that

most of those small rooms had three roommates crowded together. In this physical space, some of the typical relationships built in college were spawned. In addition to that, during a couple of years of our experience, there was an identifiable pack of students that would eat together, play

together, hang out together. It was probably a collection of about twenty-five people who were referred to as "The Group."

From that clique, perhaps my longest-lasting college friendships have emerged. The dynamics of a residential college are truly intense. In that environment strong relational cords are woven. In the weddings that took place soon after college, the wedding parties were often composed of those we knew in school.

One of those weddings was that of my friend Bob. He was a fellow member of my graduating class. He is perhaps one of the quickest wits that I have ever known. His innate intelligence is remarkable. In our college days we enjoyed playing tennis together and eating Saturday morning breakfasts regularly. We discussed a wide range of issues of life, of faith, of politics, of relationships. His company was always a pleasure and there was a true heart-to-heart connection between us.

I was honored to be included in his wedding party, but also continually blessed since then to maintain at least periodic connection and reconnection through the intervening decades. One of the light-hearted dimensions of most recent years are the very humorous posts he puts on Facebook...my wife has become a big fan as a friend on Facebook. I often will hear a laugh from the next room and she will say that Bob has posted something hilarious.

So, as I moved toward Chicago from Minneapolis on that February weekend, I called ahead to make sure that I could meet up with Bob in southern Wisconsin where he lives. I was glad to see both him and his wife for lunch. Their story is one of tremendous love and courage. They have faced some challenges in the raising of their family, but even when their two daughters were grown and out of the home, they have taken on the parenting of a number of special needs kids, expressing unbelievable love and care as adoptive parents.

Here my friend is, same age as I am, but with six kids under his roof that he will be helping to bring into adulthood for the next decade and a half. I look at that degree of love and commitment and it becomes a challenging example to me. My friend continues to enhance my understanding of the human experience and offers an example of extreme love that I can only hope to emulate.

As I sat there at lunch with Bob, I recognized the great blessing of a long-term friendship. With every topic and reference, there were forty years of relationship that undergirded the conversation. There was an underlying understanding of personality and temperament. There was an awareness of strengths and weaknesses...there was deep brotherly love flowing.

What is so wonderful about those friendships that involve intense connection early in life, when you do encounter one another later, it is possible to emotionally pick things up right where you left off and add another building block in the relationship.

Think through your group of college or even high school friends. Just think about the quality and depth of friendships you enjoy to this day with some of those you spent intense time with back then. Identify someone you were close to back then and have not contacted recently. Reconnect. Discover that meaningful friendship is not easily dissolved. Discover that you can still learn from others and be an encouragement to them by reigniting long-standing relationships. That is the joy I found on the *Weekend in February* with my friend Bob.

LEONID – The Airplane Seatmate



Whenever you board a plane there are choices you make on what you will do with that flight. At times, you may be so exhausted that the only thing you want to try to do is sleep. Sometimes you may have work that needs to be done...and with inflight wifi these days, it is very handy to take that option.

But...of course, another option is to engage the people around you in conversation.

Over the last fifteen years I have logged many thousands of miles in travel to Africa through Europe. I have had dozens of seatmates along the way which I have treated in various ways. I usually try to be

gracious and polite, ask a question or two about their destination, and show interest in their personal life. At times, I retreat into reading, writing, or attempting to doze...and other times I get into a very lively conversation that launches a friendship.

One such time came about a dozen years ago on my way to Amsterdam on the first leg of an African excursion. I met a man named Leonid who was an immigrant from Russia and who was returning to visit family there. He was a musician in the United States who once played for an orchestra in St. Petersburg, Russia before coming to the U.S. in 2000. Just the outline of his story piqued my interest to hear more. I had a full-orbed conversation with Leonid for three to four hours on that flight, asking him about life in the old Soviet Union, his opinions about life in Russia today, his impressions of what life in America is like compared to Russia, what his impressions were of church life in America, and what his personal plans and ambitions were for the future. It was a very stimulating conversation with a very intelligent and articulate man. At that time, I offered one of the booklets of compilations of my newspaper columns for him to read, along with all my contact information. He shared his contacts with me, too. So this is how we launched what is becoming a life-long friendship.

In the meantime, I have been in touch with Leonid once or twice a year...many times calling around Christmastime to catch up again on what is happening in his life. In our most recent phone conversation, we determined that we would aim to meet face to face again sometime soon. On the *Weekend in February*, I drove on beyond Chicago to Indiana to have lunch with him.

There we were...first time in twelve years face to face. It was so great to see how Leonid's career had developed since I first met him, with a wide range of opportunity for teaching and performance in his chosen field of music. He shared about his personal life as well, with some of the joys of connecting with his sons and other family in the recent past. The path ahead seems very promising for him and I can sense that the encouragement I can give him has simply fanned the flames of his success.

For me, he has given me a window into the life of an immigrant to America, into the life of a professional musician, and into the life of a university professor. On a personal level, the brotherhood he has offered

me is a warm-hearted affirmation of my ability to relate to people between cultures and backgrounds.

And...it all began sitting together on a trans-Atlantic flight. I could have pleasantly smiled and turned my head the other direction. He could have done the same. Instead, we engaged each other with genuine interest and a dozen years later we have a friendship that deepens and becomes increasingly meaningful.

When you board your next flight, the person seated next to you is a unique creation of God who is deserving of your kindness and attention. It is just possible that you could have a long-term connection that will enhance your life. Remember my experience with Leonid. The *Weekend in February* was a memorable stop on our lifelong journey as friends.

BRIAN - The Guy at McDonald's



The local McDonald's has become the equivalent of the old fashioned small town coffee shop. It is interesting to see the variety of people who patronize the local McDonald's. It really is a cross-section of the community and offers opportunities to befriend people each time we walk through the door.

Many times, though, we are intent on getting in to eat our fast food and leave as quickly as possible to pursue the agenda of the day. Once in a while, however, we can benefit by pausing long enough to strike up a conversation, however brief, with a fellow customer.

One morning in a nearby McDonald's I saw a young adult reading an inspirational book at his table when I was having coffee with another friend. As we were leaving, I paused just to compliment him on his choice of reading material. That led to a brief conversation in which I heard the outlines of his immediate situation, his geographic roots in Chicago, where I had lived before, and a few other details. He appeared

to be a very sharp emerging adult and so I shared my contact information, along with my card that indicates the kind of work I do and the fact that I do mentoring and life-coaching as part of my personal mission.

Subsequent to the first meeting, my friend Brian and I met once together to lay down a foundation for friendship. It was a very engaging conversation I enjoyed that day. He shared with me about his immediate family background, his personal faith, the girlfriend that he had in the Chicago area, his most recent educational achievements, and some of his hopes for the future. I was very impressed with him on first meeting and eager to stay in touch. I left with him some of the booklets I have written, to offer something inspirational for him. I soon said good-bye and texted him my appreciation for the meeting.

The next thing I knew, Brian texted me to let me know that he had taken a teaching job with emotionally-challenged kids in the San Francisco Bay area. And so, as it has been with many people I have met on the fly in my life...my assumption was that I may not see him again, even though the connection was a meaningful one.

A few weeks before the *Weekend in February*, I received a text from Brian picturing one of the booklets I had given him months before with the words, "Years later, still having impact on my life." What an encouraging, affirming word! I called him back immediately and renewed our friendship over the phone.

He indicated that he had returned to Chicago, was pursuing new career options, had begun a writing career, and was preparing for marriage. Since I had my trip to Chicago already planned, I suggested that we meet for dinner while I was in town on the *Weekend in February*.

We decided to meet to enjoy deep-dish pizza and an extended conversation. It was wonderful fellowship! We discussed several personal matters, faith and theological issues, and direction for the future. There was a deep heart connection that developed in that get-together that still warms me to this day. My friend's thoughtfulness, sensitivity, kindness, and intelligence all were obvious. His perspective as a young professional in his mid-twenties was both illuminating and encouraging to me. I feel we are experiencing the mutual blessing of a blossoming friendship.

As I hope in all my friendships, I anticipate a life-long connection with Brian, enjoying communication both electronically and face to face for years to come. It began with an unplanned meeting in a McDonald's. In the course of each day, we all are presented such opportunities...people who are right in front of us. They may be in a restaurant or some other public setting. We have the choice of totally disregarding them, or engaging them in some way that affirms them and opens the door of friendship. The *Weekend in February* revealed to me in relation to my friend Brian just how rewarding that engagement can be.

BILL - The Teacher



Teachers play a very important role in our lives. Beyond the crucial work of parents, those who teach us imprint us with knowledge, skills, values, and perspective that promote growth and understanding for all of life. In my early years, elementary school teachers were thought of as almost superhuman. If you ever met them in the community or eating at a restaurant it was

seen as some kind of miraculous appearance. Their presence in school seemed to be the only real and appropriate place for them. The thought of actually having a friendship with a teacher was beyond thinkable. Somehow the teacher/student divide could not reasonably be bridged.

Well, as we become adults we realize that teachers are just human beings like anyone else and are actually approachable as friends. I learned this fairly early in my life. When I was a senior in high school, I wrote a letter to my fourth grade teacher, Mrs. Mullen, from Hale School in Minneapolis. I still think she was probably the best teacher I ever had. I was impressed with a hand-written letter she sent back to me with full appreciation for my affirmation of her teaching and warm-hearted memories of having me as a student.

I continued to pursue Mrs. Mullen as a college student and even young career person, visiting her in her home, continuing to express my appreciation for her impact on my life.

So, from early on, I was willing to approach and engage teachers outside of the classroom in some kind of friendship. When I came to a small residential college, I realized that this was far more natural and likely with the teachers there. At my alma mater, I was grateful for the open-heartedness that many of the professors had to develop personal relationships with students which was very encouraging.

The majority of professors, of course, that I encountered in college did not become close personal friends...there was still a certain distance between us as students and teachers. But, I have found that when I have made the effort to recontact past teachers, it is very much appreciated.

One professor whom I remember fondly is Bill, the professor of my biblical interpretation class in my senior year in college. I have often thought in the last years of teaching in Africa, that I have leaned regularly on the principles of Bible study that I received in that class. I decided in the last year to email Bill to let him know that his teaching was having regular impact on my work in Africa. That revived a connection with him that resulted in enjoying breakfast with him on the *Weekend in February*.

As I sat down to breakfast with Bill, I realized the poignant fact that he was the only professor still teaching at my alma mater who was there when I left forty years ago. He has had a tremendous career. Thousands of students have come and gone through that time but he has maintained an unusual commitment to relational ministry with them. He has gone beyond the classroom to really get to know students personally. He has, for instance, become very close to the basketball team, even traveling with them on the road. He has been a positive, encouraging presence in the lives of hundreds of people.

At breakfast he also shared about several young adults for whom he has really become a father figure in recent days, offering important mentoring to them.

I was able to share with Bill all the aspects of my work in both the United States and Africa which involves a good deal of mentoring and

interpersonal investment, as well...and making it clear that his part in my own early training is now having practical application in what I am doing around the world.

He shared as we talked that although there are regular words of encouragement that have come through the years as a teacher, many times the impact of his service is hard to measure. You never know for sure how much you are accomplishing in any one term. When you do hear from a student, it gives you confidence that you really have made a contribution. In reaching out in friendship to him, I was giving him affirmation for his entire forty-two year career at the school.

As adults, we should have the confidence to reach out and personally engage those who have taught us in the past. Approaching them with the initial purpose of affirming them as those who have contributed to our personal success will first of all encourage them immensely, but it will also open the door to a regular communication that will be mutually helpful into the future. I plan to stay in touch with my friend Bill as long as we have opportunity into the future.

Think through all of the teachers that have had impact on you in the past. If they are still alive, make an effort to communicate and engage them with genuine personal interest. This expansion of your web of relationships will be a blessing to you as it was on the *Weekend in February* with me and my teacher friend Bill.

HARRY - The Friend of Your Parents



For more than twenty-five years I have helped to organize a senior citizen fellowship which was originally a part of the Central Free Church where I worshipped and served in various capacities over a period of seventeen years. I was a younger man helping organize activities for people in my parent's age group. My mother, for several

years before her death, was a part of this group, as well. I still am leading this group and find perhaps my closest friends on earth there. It is a link to an older generation from which I benefit greatly.

I have always enjoyed the company of older people. I remember how my brother Tom and I regularly visited our father's elderly aunts, Hannah and Jennie, on Saturday afternoons with our parents. We enjoyed time on the farm with my mother's aunt and uncle, Minnie & Bennie. We had a built-in appreciation for the older generations.

When I entered into the ministerial ranks of my denomination, I was relating oftentimes to the friends of my father who was a veteran pastor. There were several important friends that I have developed as a result of my willingness to look to older generations.

One friend of my father's was also the president of my alma mater, Harry by name. I was aware of him because of his national reputation within our denomination and as the key leader in our college and seminary. When I attended college there, we had some contact, although somewhat limited till after graduation.

After college, I found myself in a deepening friendship with Harry that continues to this day, becoming more meaningful all the time. Harry went through a number of ups and downs in his personal and professional life since I graduated. He left his position as president of the college, his second marriage came to an end, he relocated to California, married a third time, and pursued a number of options to support himself and his new wife. Through all these events in his life, I maintained contact with him sometimes in writing but mostly over the phone. I always sought opportunities to meet up with him face to face to enjoy the ongoing conversation.

In recent years, Harry and his wife have had opportunity to return to the Chicago area and they have been gracious in offering a free place to stay when I have been in town. He also has been very eager to meet to keep the fire of our friendship stoked.

So, as I considered my *Weekend in February*, Harry was an important person for me to see. We decided to meet at a local IHOP in the western suburbs of Chicago. My friend and mentor just recently had celebrated his 87th birthday. Only the use of a cane and hearing aids would have tipped you off that he had reached that milestone. In conversation, he was still as sharp as a tack!

Harry is a wonderful story-teller. He has such a wealth of stories from his past--all the way from his childhood to his early ministry as a pastor

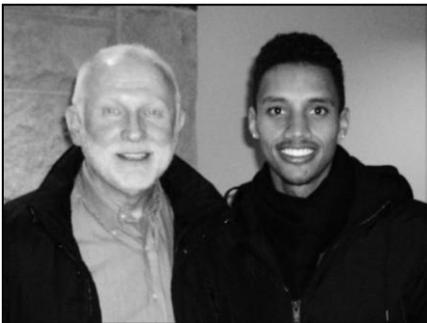
to his career as a college president and throughout all the other seasons of life. He is one of the most interesting conversationalists I know. On that Saturday afternoon, it was a delight to catch up again on all aspects of life we could touch on in our 2+ hour conversation.

Although Harry was a colleague of my father's, he still was about ten years younger than my dad. He maintains a youthful, progressive outlook on life. He is very well-informed on current events--in fact he arrived a bit late to our luncheon because he was leading a class on current events at the complex where they live. He takes genuine interest in me as a friend, a husband and father, a non-profit director. He is the kind of friend I wish was in the same town as I so we could enjoy more face to face contact.

There is so much wisdom and heartwarming goodwill that I experience when I sit down with Harry. His knowledge of the back-story of my church heritage informs my perspective. Most encouraging, however, is his kindness and brotherly love that he offers in personal affirmation.

Each of us who are young enough...have friends of our parents who could be similarly enriching to us. As long as they are still living, we can benefit from connecting with them. They help us get perspective on life and wisdom that can help us on our own forward path. Those of us who were warned earlier on not to trust anyone over thirty need to realize how valuable the older generation is to us today. That all became freshly apparent to me with my friend Harry on the *Weekend in February*.

FRANCESCO - The Person on the Phone



The rise of modern telemarketing has generally been an annoying development in American life. With the ring of the phone we are ushered into an uninvited conversation about products or services about which we are generally not interested.

Long ago I determined that I was not going to let the telemarketer get the best of me. I decided to engage them one way or another. Sometimes it has been in a light-hearted way

to make it clear to them that I was in no position to part with what little money I had left. Other times I have given them the compliment that they have a very good telephone manner and they probably are not being paid what they are really worth. At times, I have been asked personal questions in return and I let them know what my work entails and my situation in daily life. One guy even asked me if I had a job in my organization for which he could apply. I have had a number of interesting conversations over the last forty years by seeing the person on the phone not as an adversary but as a potential friend.

So, when someone called me from my alma mater to seek a financial contribution a while ago, I was not immediately annoyed. In fact, I am very open to giving at least a token gift to my alma mater. On top of that, I enjoy chatting up the person on the other end of the phone. Well, in my conversation on my last such call, I met Francesco, a student at the college who was originally from Rwanda.

I found this student an especially engaging young adult. He was very articulate, polite, good-humored, and he sported an ever-so exotic African accent. I could imagine that he was charming a good number of senior citizens into contributing generously to the school!

My interest in Francesco was heightened, of course, in that he had African roots. With my travels in the last years, I can honestly say that I have more African friends than American friends today. I have a special respect for the younger generation African immigrant who is getting their start on American soil. They generally are very intelligent, culturally aware, respectful of the older generation, and motivated to excellence. I found all those characteristics in Francesco even in the first phone conversation.

After having made a modest financial commitment in response to the call, I got contact information for my new friend and made the intention of staying in touch in the future. I pursued that through calls, texts, and even some FaceTime conversations. When I came to planning my *Weekend in February*, I definitely wanted to include Francesco.

I met him on campus on a Saturday afternoon. That was the first time we had met face to face and yet it seemed like I had known him for a long time. We already had established a foundation for friendship by the electronic means available to us. He gave me the five-star tour of his

dorm room and suite, meeting one of his suitemates. It was interesting to examine the 21st century experience of students compared to my own in that institution in the 1970's.

We proceeded to drive down to the city to enjoy dinner at an Italian restaurant that we students had patronized forty years earlier. The conversation over that more than six-hour excursion ranged widely. Francesco reminded me of the outlines of his family experience, with his mother back in Rwanda, his sister in the Czech Republic, and the sad story of the tragic loss of his father in a motorcycle accident in his early teenage years. In all of his family story, I saw in him what I have seen in hundreds of other Africans--an intense family loyalty, love and respect, and practical commitment to the care of siblings and parents.

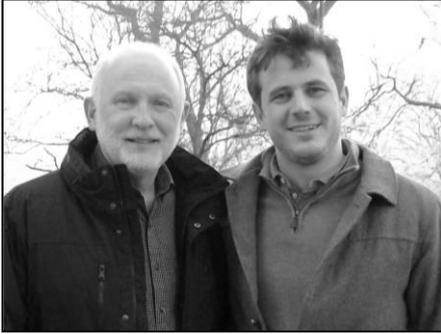
As he described the demanding schedule he had been maintaining with academics, work, and his leadership as a key member of the soccer team, I realized just how honored I was to be able to secure an entire evening with him in dining and conversation.

What I realized as we sat and talked that night is that the genuineness I detected over the phone in my initial conversation with him was proven to be totally true. He is a gracious, charming, intelligent, articulate young man. His genuine interest and care for other people is obvious. He meets people well and it was clear that he enjoyed the love and respect of all the fellow students we ran into when we were on campus together. He is a remarkable man.

I am the richer for coming close to him as a friend. I have a broadened appreciation for the challenges of the immigrant coming to America, and a deeper understanding of the relational depth of African friends, a fresh example of one who is willing to work hard to accomplish goals in school and life, and the joy of relating to someone who really respects me personally and seeks out my counsel and company. It is a great blessing!

It is very easy to blow off the uninvited phone call. It is not in our best interests, however, to do that. Even if that call does not result in a lifelong friendship, we can develop our skills in relating to others we meet along the way, if we learn to graciously and warmly engage the person on the other end of the phone. I learned the blessed benefit that comes with that approach with my friend Francesco on the *Weekend in February*.

ZACH - The Emerging Young Adult



Ever since the 1960's in America there has been a much-touted generation gap. Back then the apparent divide between the establishment generation and the younger adults coming up, especially those being called into service in Vietnam, seemed enormous. There seemed to be a larger than usual separation in

values and style that was disturbing to grassroots social arrangements.

A gap of generations has perhaps been a reality all throughout history, but there is a growing tendency in American culture to idolize the younger generation. It is believed that they are the future; they deserve affirmation and attention; us older ones will soon enough become irrelevant, so we must make way for the younger.

There is some common sense in all of that, but what has happened as a result of that underlying philosophy is that most social interaction, education, and community life has become stratified along age lines. Young and old do not naturally hang out with each other. Some of the more natural conversations of previous generations have ceased to take place. We often run in the track of our own age group and basically stay in our own lane.

There is a great loss in this approach to social life. Both younger and older people suffer from a lack of connection with one another. I have found, as I have reached out to young adults in the last several years, there is a great interest, even hunger in them to connect with older adults to offer them perspective and wisdom.

Therefore, I have in a very forthright manner, agressed the young adult population wherever I go, with the hopes that I can encourage them and perhaps spark a friendship that can be helpful going both ways. I am on the look-out constantly for sharp young adults on the rise.

One such individual that I met at O'Hare airport on the way back from one of my Africa trips, was Zach, who was returning from the Czech Republic, spending the previous semester studying overseas. From the

first minute I could tell he was an exceptional young man. He met me very easily, entered into conversation with confidence, and showed a genuine interest in me and my life and work.

Following that first encounter, Zach and I had coffee together one time back in the Minneapolis area, furthering the conversation and getting to know each other a bit. Since then, nearly four years before the *Weekend in February*, we have had opportunity to chat briefly on the phone and text occasionally just to keep in touch. At one point he had interest in checking out some non-denominational churches in his area of Chicago and I offered a suggestion or two.

But one of my hopes was that on one of my next trips to Chicago, we could meet again face to face. So, Zach was one of the nine people I arranged to see when I made my trip. We made a plan for me to pick him up at his place, attend the historic Moody Church in Chicago, and have lunch together afterward.

It was great to see precisely where he lives in Chicago. Being able to visualize where a friend lives helps to flesh out your understanding of their life. He was ready on time and intent on following through on our plan...something not always seen in friends young or old. He was willing to come into my religious world a bit; Moody is a church somewhat different from that of his own background, but with apparent appreciation for the experience.

Over lunch that day, at one of those classic places I knew as a college student by Lincoln Park, we had a great conversation. Zach is a genuinely interesting career person. He is very intelligent and articulate. He is very much self-aware, knowing his strengths and weaknesses and the kind of work he wants to move into professionally. He also possesses enough common sense to know that he must jump through a few hoops before he achieves his ultimate goals.

On the personal level, Zach provides for me a great window into young adult life in this season in America. His description of his own relationships with his girlfriend, his roommates, and his colleagues sharpens my perceptions of present day social realities and how I can more effectively relate to younger people.

His understanding of political affairs exceeds that of most younger men I know. He has really thought through some important issues and has

cogent opinions on both the personalities and policies that are currently being put forward at the national level.

Over and above all of these matters is a heart-felt compassion he expresses for others. He described to me some dynamics in his own family that he has been helpful in remedying and he expressed how he is interested in mentoring fatherless kids in the inner city. That rang true because one of the most poignant memories I have of Zach is seeing him reunited with his mom and dad after his study tour in Czech. The way he embraced his parents that day, coupled with his own commentary later that "my parents are the greatest people in the world" proves to me the strength of his own family upbringing. He has benefited so well by good parenting that he will be able to offer support to others who have not.

The whole encounter with Zach was such a great experience. To reconnect with this rising young adult star is really an honor to me. He is a smart, articulate, thoughtful, compassionate human being and if I can encourage those qualities with an ongoing friendship, that makes my life all the more worthwhile.

It all started by entering into an initial conversation at a gate at the airport. In any one year, there are probably hundreds of emerging adults with whom we could make some kind of impact. It only takes the few extra minutes necessary to show them general interest and concern. I saw some of the fruit of that effort with Zach on my *Weekend in February*.

JOE - The Professional Colleague



For those of us who have graduated from formal education and pursued our professional careers, we often become restricted in a narrow circle of acquaintance within our own limited geographic or professional ranks. We tend to hang out with a small number of carefully selected colleagues and do not expand beyond that.

In the process, those from our past about whom we may even be aware by broader reputation, we tend not to pursue. Facebook has become a

partial remedy for this situation. Nowadays, it is possible to look people up on Facebook and get reunited with people from your past and become a helpful presence in their lives, personally and professionally.

It was precisely through this path of social media that I was reunited with my friend Joe. When I reconnected on Facebook originally, he had just accepted a staff position at one of the large churches in my own town and so I reached out to see if we could get together for breakfast, lunch, or coffee. I did not get an immediate response on that attempt to reach him. It was not until several months later that I received word that he had not seen my most recent Messenger communication and I found he had moved on to another ministry.

My friendship with Joe went way back to my college days. He was a year or so younger than I, but he was involved in the concert choir, band, and other musical activities at the time. I have a vivid memory of a specific conversation I had sitting with him on the bus on our choir tour of Europe. On our way to Legoland in Denmark, we had a particularly meaningful conversation about faith and life. Ever since that half-hour encounter nearly forty years ago, I have had a warm place in my heart for him personally.

So, through the years, I have noted with interest his professional path--to a major mega-church where he was involved in worship ministry, to a church in Michigan, to a church in my own town, and now to his latest place of service in Milwaukee. When I was setting plans for my *Weekend in February*, I checked with him to see if he would be available on the Monday after the weekend so I could visit on my way back to Minneapolis. He was more than happy to meet up with me.

My trusty GPS got me right to Joe's church and field of ministry in the 3rd Ward of Milwaukee...an upscale remodeled warehouse district in the city. I had the chance to see where the newly emerging church, a satellite of a nationally-recognized ministry, has been established.

I was delighted to renew my relationship with my friend of more than forty years as fellow professionals in Christian ministry. Both of us appeared significantly more mature than we did in our callow youth! But the conversation was a very stimulating encounter in which I benefited greatly from the perspective of one who has offered his gifts in ministry

in the past in a place drawing over 20,000 in attendance to a place now where just around 100 are gathering regularly. His current experience, more closely relating to that of the average pastor in America, has dimensions that are deeper and richer for him than some of his past situations.

Joe also took genuine interest in some of my writings that I have generated over the last years, as well, and I believe he will actually read them! I have not had personal experience working in ministries of the magnitude he has seen in his past, yet he was still open to hearing my perspective as one who has worked with hundreds of people both in the U.S. and overseas who are managing smaller ministries.

Throughout the entire conversation, I was blessed with the general good humor and grace that Joe has always possessed and the intervening years of maturity have simply refined. The whole experience was a shot-in-the-arm for both my life and his.

As we move forward in our professional lives, we can be led to believe that those who have been involved in operations either larger or different in focus than our own have nothing to gain from our friendship or counsel. But in the context of the Church...or even the human family...we must realize that we ALL need each other and can benefit from relationship. I was heartened in my renewed connection with my friend Joe that some of the foundational philosophies I have maintained throughout my career as a resource provider and consultant to churches were affirmed and supported by his multi-faceted experience in church work. We found common ground and appreciation for common commitments.

It pays to reach out to fellow professionals to be enriched by their insights and offer your own helpful perspective to them. It is a lesson I learned as I met with Joe on the *Weekend in February*.

BEN - The Person Making New Beginnings



Life is a never-ending series of ups and downs. There are financial down-turns, marriage failures, thwarted business plans, personal rejection, and multiple obstacles to success. In each of these kinds of situations, there are people who are starting over regularly. They are in need of someone who can offer a listening

ear, a word of encouragement and affirmation, a bit of counsel and advice.

Oftentimes, we are so absorbed in our own business that we find it hard to offer the time and energy it takes to give someone who is at a new beginning in life the assistance we are able to provide.

My friend Ben, was at just such a place several years ago when I met him at the federal prison in Sandstone, MN. I met him when he was toward the end of an over three-year sentence and nearing his release. I was in the prison at the invitation of the chaplain, who was a close friend, offering some training and inspiration that day. Ben showed an interest in communicating with me and so he wrote me a letter later, showing appreciation for my visit.

A little later upon Ben's release, the chaplain bent the rules a little bit to give me contact information where I could track him down at the half-way house where he was located on his initial path toward re-entry into normal life.

What has transpired in the last years has been a mutually beneficial friendship that has deepened my understanding of a broad range of human experience. Ben has taught me some of the dynamics of incarceration that face thousands of young adults in this season of America life. He shared how his relationship with his twin daughters has been impacted by his imprisonment and re-entry.

His path to recovering his business, returning to his local church, and resuming his relationships in the community has been a story of faith and

fortitude on his part. With all that he has dealt with, he continues to put one foot in front of the other and marches on.

So, whenever I come close to his home town in Wisconsin, I try to see if it's possible for us to meet somewhere to fan the flames of our friendship. On my way from Milwaukee back to Minneapolis, Ben met me in Madison...about a 90-minute drive from his home. Just the willingness to drive that far is a heart-warming affirmation of our friendship.

On this day, once again we had a great time across the table from each other. As a good friend he always takes an active interest in what I am doing and where I am travelling in the world. As an astute student of the Bible, he has insights about life and church work that are directly based on scripture but also very down-to-earth and brutally honest. In terms of his spiritual life and understanding of theology he stated again that day that he would not have traded his years behind bars for anything because of the opportunity he had for study and reflection.

Ben's mind and spirit are all intact, even though there are some practical challenges he faces just like we all do in making ends meet and keeping faith with responsibilities. But it is great to see his pride and love for his twin girls who are now nearly fifteen years of age. He really wants to be a good dad, even though his visitation is restricted.

There is a degree of resiliency in Ben's mind and heart that is instructive to all of us. Even though life has served up challenges to him, he takes each day patiently and persistently, following through on his own responsibilities. He is open to the possibilities of the future, even though each day may present difficulties to face.

In all that he has to deal with, his faith in God has not been shaken. He continues to pursue a life of faith and nourishes his spiritual side. The silver lining in the cloud of his incarceration was the deepening of his biblical and theological understanding.

Every time I have the chance for a conversation with Ben I come away in some way deepened in my understanding of life and faith. He has become a minister to my own spirit as a result. Although he may have obstacles and detours on his path ahead, he has pursued his opportunity of new beginnings after his release from prison with character and conscientiousness.

Having an open heart to the person at a crossroads is a test of our own character. Are we willing to sacrifice a little of our own time and energy to propel someone else forward in their success? There are great benefits of walking with people for the long haul into their future as they get a fresh start. I was reminded of that blessing with Ben on my *Weekend in February*.

THE CONCLUSION OF THE MATTER

Each of us has a web of relationships in life. It includes family, friends, and professional colleagues. My call is to be faithful in nurturing all of these established connections, recognizing that every human being craves the attention and affection of others. Your willingness to reach out to those you already know in kindness and love will always be well-received and will benefit you in return.

In addition to those already in your personal web are hundreds of others who would be blessed by your touch if only you took the extra two or three minutes at times to engage them as new friends. That can begin with an engaging smile, a simple compliment on how they are doing their job, or on the sharp clothing they are wearing, or the impressive hair style or facial hair they are sporting. Seemingly superficial matters like these open the doors of conversation and friendship. It will become apparent soon enough how deep or wide those relationships will become...but we must be willing to open the door to the possibilities.

"Make new friends...but keep the old!" That is a lifelong formula for happiness and satisfaction in relationships. In the cosmic plan, God gives us opportunities each day to show kindness and love to others. May he give us the grace to respond to those occasions and reap the benefits that come as a result. I know how it can work...it all came clear to me on *A Weekend in February!*

A WEEKEND IN FEBRUARY ***In Celebration of Friendship Old & New!***

In this age in which people may have thousands of Facebook friends, we need help on our flesh and blood friendships. Author Timothy Johnson, in *A Weekend in February*, explores the value of developing friendship...with new acquaintances as well as those who have been in our lives for a long time. Enjoy the stories told here of his connections on a weekend road trip that helped him renew friendship with nine people. *A Weekend in February* will encourage and inspire you to build better relationships with all your friends...old and new!

Timothy A. Johnson holds the B.A. in History/Secondary Ed. from Trinity Int'l University, the ThB and ThM from American Bible College, the D.D. from St. Thomas a Becket University, and ordination in the Ev. Free Church. He has served as Minister of Congregational Development at Central Free Church in Minneapolis (1980-84) and since 1984 as Exec. Director of the Minnesota Church Ministries Association, based in Eden Prairie, MN. He is author of *Celebrate What Is: Discovering God's Three Dimensions of Ministry Happening in Your Church*; *Christian Perspectives in the Public Square*; *Power Motivation: Encouraging Words to Inspire Church Leaders*; *The Gospel Nudge: How a Mentoring Mindset Accomplishes the Mission of the Church*; *50 Topics to Engage Men in Conversation*. He contributes to the *Spiritually Speaking* column in the Eden Prairie News. He is known as Bishop Timothy in Africa where he ministers in a growing network of pastors and churches. He lives in Eden Prairie with his wife Mary. They enjoy their son Jeffrey and daughter Andrea who live nearby with their spouses and growing families.



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