

Friends for Life

A reflection by the Rev. David M. Horst
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Story

The Rainbow Fish by Marcus Pfister. *The Rainbow Fish, with his iridescent scales, is the most beautiful fish in the whole ocean; but because he is also vain and proud, he becomes more and more lonely over time. Then he realizes that he couldn't win friends through beauty, so he overcomes his pride and gives away his glitter scales to the other fish and discovers true friendship.*

Reading

Henri Nouwen was a 20th-century Dutch Catholic priest, professor, writer, spiritual guide, and theologian. This is an excerpt from "Out of Solitude: Three Meditations on the Christian Life" published in 2004.

"When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares."

Reflection

Where does a good friendship begin? Many ways: Finding a common bond with someone with whom we share experiences and interests. Discovering that rare person who has the same temperament and sense of humor as us. Meeting someone who thinks about things and life as we do. Loving someone who is our opposite, the yin to our yang, and complements us in surprising and delightful ways. Connecting on a deep level with another who, as Henri Nouwen observes, "share[s] our pain and touch[es] our wounds with a warm and tender hand" may be the truest friendship of all.

We all might think back to the first meeting with someone who became a lifelong friend or perhaps a one-time friend to whom we become close during a time we needed them or the on-again, off-again friend we talk to every year or so when we see them in a dream or in a flash of memory that crosses our mind.

Friendships are marvelous, complex, heart-opening, challenging, egalitarian, respectful, life affirming, sometimes fraught, and so much more, find your own descriptions of friendship — yet the heart of any true friendship, I believe, is the empathy of you and me, friend to friend, shared with one another. Empathy is the capacity for me to feel what you are feeling: Your joy is my joy. Your loss is my loss. Your success is my success. Your struggle is my struggle.

I recently learned in a *Scientific American* article (December 2017) by science journalist Lydia Denworth that most neuro-scientists understand

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empathy as an umbrella term with three main components: Emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, and empathic concern.

Emotional empathy is the ability to share another person's feelings and watch that person's behavioral states. Emotional empathy is innate and evolved in the context of parental care, kinship groups, and community living.

Cognitive *empathy*, scientists say, is the capacity to think about and understand another's feelings, what is called "perspective-taking."

Empathetic concern adds to these two the motivation to do something about another's suffering — otherwise known and expressed as compassion.

Empathy in the broadest sense, then, is what we feel, think and say and do in our relationships with our friends — an interconnectedness that is *not* of self and other, not me as subject and you as object, but of self and self, recognizing each person in the relationship as a subject with their own full humanity, full agency, and full equality.

The proud and haughty Rainbow Fish in our story today had to learn about empathy, it seems, once the octopus imparted her wisdom about sharing beauty to receive happiness. With his act of giving away his rainbow scales, the Rainbow Fish discovered the humanity, agency, and equality inherent in all the fish in his watery community — and a beauty and a love beyond pride in his colorful scales. The Rainbow Fish experienced, perhaps for the first time, his ability to feel what someone else is feeling. "Come and play with us!" his new fish friends called. "Here I come," said the Rainbow Fish, happy as a splash.

What the Rainbow Fish had to learn empathy through cognitive understanding and reasoning, we are learning too. Even if humans are born predisposed to care for and related to others, our empathetic nature must also be nurtured and practiced — ideally beginning in childhood but continuing throughout our lives. So we're all more like the Rainbow Fish than we'd like to admit, and a wise word is often needed. We all need guidance and practice being the friends we want to be even though friend-making and friend-keeping are instinctual.

If we agree that empathy is the basis of friendship, acknowledge that our empathetic nature is made of both heart and mind, nature and nurture, and admit that friendship is a lifelong practice of attention and nurturing, then let's turn our attention to empathetic concern or compassion, how we respond to a friend's need for friendship and how a friend responds to ours.

Friendship is fundamentally about showing up and making time, building a foundation of trust and reliability, telling the truth in love, providing an honest perspective when requested.

What about conflicts in friendships or misunderstandings, which inevitably happen even with long-time, close friends? We offer a sincere apology and a promise to do better, of course, and seek to repair the breach and find a mutual solution. In making amends we might just strengthen the relationship.

There's a spiritual side of friendship, I think, and that's why I shared a few words from the late Henri Nouwen, who reminds us it's not only what we do with and for our friends, but what we *don't* do: A friend is someone who can be with

us *not* knowing, *not* curing, *not* healing, *not* giving advice, *not* offering easy solutions. A friend brings, instead, their presence, their silence, their prayers, their empathy. Isn't this what our friends need sometimes? Isn't this we need often?

I pause now and invite you to bring to mind a friend, someone from long ago or someone who is present in your life now, a friend with whom you made a brief but deep connection or a lifelong, devoted friend. How were or are you friends with each other? What do you do for and with each other? How do you resolve conflict or hurts? What were or are the moments you shared, during times of pain and loss, that were beyond words?...

How we respond to a friend's need for friendship and how a friend responds to ours brings immediate and lasting benefits to us, benefits of the body, mind, and spirit. Research has long shown that people with close connections are physically healthier, recover from certain illnesses more quickly, and live longer. Lower blood pressure and a longer lifespan are other benefits of friendships. On the flip side, lack of friends and the resulting loneliness have physical consequences, including poor cardiovascular and immune health.

Friendship provides emotional support through which we can develop social skills, share joys and sorrows, find romantic relationships, rekindle hope, enjoy compassion and support, and simply have fun.¹

The spiritual side of friendship helps us grounded in reality, gives us a broader perspective on life *and* death, keeps our ego in check, and encourages selflessness rather than selfishness. We may, in the moments of deep sharing, discover something about ourselves we hadn't been aware of and find connection to our deeper selves and deeper consciousness not apparent in our affect and personality we present to our friends — and the world.

Friends in religious community, joined in covenant and gathered together in worship, take friendship to a deeper, spiritual, to a more vulnerable place that might not be possible with friends in other places and times.

Friendship, I'm sure we've all experienced, reduces our anxiety, loneliness, and fear and brings to us, instead, safety, health, and happiness. Truly, in friendship, what we give we receive. Friends *are* life *for* life.

What if we expand the values and benefits of friendship beyond our immediate lives: I'm speaking about our local communities, and I'm speaking globally. I'm speaking about our neighbors, and I'm speaking about the larger humanity of this earth.

Isn't it possible, with our innate *emotional* empathy, to share another person's feelings, whether they live down the street or on the other side of the world? Can we not relate to their needs, their struggles, their sorrows, their happiness, their joys?

And isn't it just as possible, with our ability of *cognitive* empathy, to think about and understand another's feelings, to take their perspective, even if they are strangers to us?

¹ Source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/basics/friends#the-benefits-of-friendship>
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And isn't it possible to feel compassion and find ways to alleviate another human's suffering in whatever town, city, or nation they live?

Isn't there some way we can show up and make time, build a foundation of trust and reliability, and tell the truth in love even from a distance?

I hope so. I pray so. The world dearly needs friendship, neighborliness, a sense of hospitality, and a welcoming attitude toward all.

And as with close and intimate friends, we can stay grounded in reality, keep a broader perspective, keep a healthy ego, and be selfless in our regard for neighbors near and far. We may, with open hearts and minds, discover something about ourselves we hadn't been known before, connect to our deeper selves, deeper consciousness, and deeper love.

Perhaps, too, by the mystic bonds of our evolutionary roots and our collective will to survive, be present, silent, prayerful, and empathetic toward one another — each of us feeling what the other person is feeling.

To begin, to make new friends, let us follow the Rainbow Fish and his new friends, sharing our beautiful colors, swimming together, seeking wisdom where it can be found, and playing together, whenever and wherever friends, old and new, young and old, gather as one humanity in one love and one beauty.

Amen. Keep the faith.