



Chapter Nine

ONE IS A LONELY NUMBER

I WAS SPEAKING TO A GATHERING OF PASTORS FROM AROUND the world at a conference designed to help churches develop small-group ministries. I addressed the importance of churches having a place where people could develop deep friendships. As I delivered the talk, my own heart began to ache. Even as I spoke, my soul yearned for significant, intimate relationships. I had to fight to keep my emotions from boiling to the surface.

My insane travel schedule was definitely an obstacle to establishing solid friendships, but I couldn't use it as an excuse any more than I could use it for an excuse not to exercise. For years I'd been unwilling to do the work required to make close friends, and I was unwilling to pay the price. As a result, I was surrounded by fans but woefully short of friends. That day I confessed to my audience a fear I had shared with my wife, Diane.

I had a recurring dream that I had died. In my dream Diane managed to handle her grief fairly well, but she couldn't find six friends close enough to take a day off and carry the box I was

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to be buried in. In my out-of-body dream, I watched helplessly as she pulled the casket down the cold cement steps alone . . . *thump, thump, thump* . . . then dragged it to where the big black SUV waited.

My situation is not unique. I have met hundreds of people who felt they had no friends at all. The surprising discovery was that many of them did not know how to make friends or, like me, were afraid to try.

YOU NEED A FRIEND

You might be able to survive without friends, but you cannot live fully alive. In our culture it's possible to be surrounded by work colleagues, neighbors, teammates, classmates, and even fans, without having someone who makes that deeply satisfying, heart-to-heart connection that defines real friendship. As I finished my talk that day, I knew I needed to be more intentional about finding friends who would do life with me. I realized I couldn't live fully alive alone.

So how did I find friends in a desert of acquaintances? I did it the same way I raced the thunderstorm to the top of a mountain ridge: one step at a time. My first step was to assess what was required to develop close friendships and purposefully change my lifestyle to make it happen.

Bill Gothard, founder of the Institute in Basic Life Principles, categorizes friendships on four levels:

1. An *acquaintance* is a person you contact rarely or only once, such as someone you meet while traveling or who comes to your house to fix the plumbing or washing machine. I had tens of thousands of these.

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2. A *casual friendship* is based on common interests or activities. A casual friend may be a person at work or someone you know at a club, at church, or on a sports team. I had dozens of these kinds of friends.
3. A *close friendship* is based on mutual life goals and long-term interests. The two of you see potential achievement in each other's lives. You discuss specific goals and assume a personal responsibility for developing them. These friends can make suggestions about important aspects of your life. I had very few of these. Not enough to carry a box.
4. An *intimate friendship* is based on open honesty, discretion, and a commitment to the development of each other's character and spiritual potential. You help each other through trials and sorrows. You assume personal responsibility for each other's reputation. You are sensitive to traits and attitudes that you both need to improve. Intimate friends are committed to faithfulness, loyalty, and availability.¹ Other than Diane, I couldn't think of a single intimate friendship I had developed or maintained in the past five years of my life.

Life is at its best when we are developing friends in all of these categories. People seeking intimate friendship don't knock at your door and volunteer for the job. If someone does, you should probably run. The scariest people in the world are those who appear to be desperate in their search for friends. There's a sense of panic and a loud sucking sound that emanates from these souls. You don't want to sound like a vacuum cleaner. Take a deep breath. Relax.

I found it effective to mine my existing acquaintances for people who might become casual friends. I spent some time

with casual friends and was delighted to watch some of those relationships grow into close friendships. Eventually the effort paid off, and over time I found relationships that touched my soul. It didn't happen overnight. I had to work at it, make the investment, take the risk, and extend lots of grace. It's possible for an intimate friendship to develop from any of the other categories of friendship, and it's worth the work. Today I have enough friends to carry the box, and if Diane hires a couple more, they will be able to carry it down the steps without dropping it.

One of the culprits keeping me from close friendships was that old nemesis, fear. I'd had a few friendships end painfully, usually because I was unwilling to allow anyone to confront me. I was also fearful of confronting my friends. When the going got tough, I bolted. What a conundrum! True friendship *is* painful. It requires the courage to walk through fire as well as dance in the rain. I wanted to dance, but I was afraid of the heat.

When I look back at crashing in that shallow bathtub at the edge of the road, digging snow out of my underwear with a stabbing pain in my wrist, I vividly remember begging God that I might have some of this joy and adventure in all of my life. Yet when it came to the commitment necessary to develop deep friendships, I was afraid to point the sled downhill and let go. What if I broke my wrist? What if a UPS truck pulled out in front of the relationship? What if it hurt? A spirit of boldness, screaming down an icy road in a plastic saucer, was missing when it came to matters of the heart. I was a coward, unwilling to face the possibility of rejection and unwilling to carve out the time to build significant relationships.

Without risk, friendship will never be anything but a distant dream.

For a while I leaned heavily on the rush that comes from applause and laughter to sustain me. How crazy is that? Fans

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see you as networking potential; friends see your potential. Fans love you for your performance; friends love you for you. Fans are fickle; friends stick with you through the toughest times. Fans want to see only your good side; friends protect your backside. Fans demand that you entertain them; friends are satisfied just to be with you. I cherish and appreciate my fans, but friends interact with me and nurture me on a deeper level than fans are able to do.

Making friends is like exercise; it requires discipline and vigilance. I stopped trying to pretend I was perfect and stopped requiring perfection from the people around me. I found some of my best friends by looking for ways to befriend people. I made investments in the lives of people who were already in my life.

IT'S ABOUT TIME

In the end it all boiled down to time—time sharing meals, time helping move furniture, time sitting by a hospital bed. Not very dramatic and mysterious, is it? Making friends is laughing until the early hours of morning or talking on a back porch until you fall asleep. It's celebrating a birthday. Sometimes it's just being there in a time of crisis and saying nothing.

I had to learn to trust someone with the real me. On stage I feel safe because I'm in control. Face-to-face, I'm vulnerable. It's hard to reveal my heart, my weaknesses, my dreams, and just as hard to listen to the heartaches and dreams of others. I took a risk by making myself accountable to someone else. I was a terrible accountability partner to myself. It was too easy to lie to myself, then believe the lie. I started learning to risk by holding my friends accountable. We would push each other to stay on

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track in every area of life. We refused to let each other give up on dreams. We challenged each other's views. We argued, intervened, cheered, and encouraged.

The greatest risk in the search for true friendship is rejection. Along the way I was dumped by a valued friend of many years. I still love my friend, but I miss that intimate interaction that once characterized our relationship. I miss the laughter, the soul searching, the energizing arguments, and the friendly games of poker.

Losing a friend is an excruciating experience. The temptation is strong never to take that kind of risk again, never to let anyone that close to my heart. Then I remember the sled ride again. Pain was part of the price I had to pay for the joy of the ride, proof that I was alive. Waterskiing and friendship have something in common. If you choose to risk your heart with friends, you will fall; it will hurt, but it will be worth it.

Part of the wonderful new life I have discovered is a circle of great friends and a handful of remarkable, intimate, personal friends. I can exist without intimate personal friends. I did it for years. But I can't live fully alive without intimate friends, and neither can you.

FAITHFUL FRIENDS

Friends were critical to the physical challenges in my life. Since my shocking encounter with The "Noooooo!" Photo, the process of getting fit has been painful and discouraging at times, and at times exhilarating. Part of the way, I've had friends to share my journey toward better fitness. Other times, I've tried it alone. Take it from me: you can't do it alone. Living fully alive is not a solo act. Trying to make it alone is a recipe for failure.

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Human beings are social creatures. We were created to interact with others, love each other, and depend on each other.

If I expect to maintain this new lifestyle and continue to enjoy its benefits, I must find friends and like-minded people who will join me in the quest; people who will help hold my feet to the fire; friends who will spur me on when I feel discouraged and who will celebrate my achievements with me.

As much as I enjoy a solitary ride through the countryside on my bicycle, I need the company and encouragement of faithful friends to keep me honest. It's almost impossible to stay in bed if someone is knocking at your door to run with you. Some of my friends and I actually ended up forming our own club, which we christened GAG for Guts and Glory. We wanted to get rid of our guts, and we wanted to glorify God by taking good care of our bodies. We also studied the Bible and wanted to have the strength, mental toughness, and endurance to experience everything God wanted for us.

Several of us who signed up to run the triathlon trained together, riding bicycles and running up and down the Tennessee hills. One morning we tackled the steep and infamous Yardstick Hill near my house. As I pedaled, puffed, and grunted toward the top, I looked back to see Jacob, a fellow GAG member, struggling to make headway. This was his first attempt at Yardstick Hill, but he kept plugging along, going slower and slower yet refusing to get off the bike. Halfway up he began traversing back and forth across the road. I could hear him gasping for air as sweat poured from his body. When he finally got to the top he jumped from his bike and raised his arms in victory. We hollered like a couple of high school cheerleaders.

Later in that ride we started up another hill, two miles long. Halfway up, I had my friends stop so I could take some pictures of them. We paused on the steep, hot ribbon of asphalt. Behind us

the beautiful Natchez Trace Parkway Bridge majestically spanned the road we were riding. Only a few moments earlier we had crossed underneath that bridge. Ahead, the road snaked relentlessly up and through the trees before disappearing over the crest.

As I snapped the last picture and we prepared to continue the climb, my friend Theron stayed put, his feet firmly planted on the pavement on either side of his bike. “I’ve used all I’ve got,” he said. “I don’t have any strength left. I can’t make it to the top.”

“Yes, you can,” I barked. “You have more strength than you think you have.” My challenge drew a confused stare. “Imagine that your daughter was at the top of this hill and only you could save her life, and the only way you could do it was to get on that bicycle and ride up there as quickly as you could. If she were there and needed you, would you have anything left?”

He nodded vigorously, still trying to catch his breath.

“Well, she’s up there,” I said. “Go get her.”

He was gone before I finished the sentence and rode at a substantial pace the rest of the way up the hill.

What we really mean when we say we don’t have anything left is, “I’m extremely uncomfortable. I’m breathing hard. My legs hurt.” In reality there’s plenty left if you have the right motivation—or the purposeful encouragement of a friend.

On several occasions I’ve been the one who couldn’t go on. I remember during a battle with debilitating depression, a true friend sat by my side and encouraged me. “God has abandoned me,” I said.

“No, He hasn’t,” she insisted.

My sister had flown hundreds of miles to be with me during this difficult time. “You’ve been blinded to signs of His presence all around you,” she told me. “Look!” She pointed to the sun streaming through a skylight, bathing my body in its warmth. “Open your eyes!”

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I recalled a scripture I had learned as a child. As I remembered it, Psalm 121 begins: “I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help” (KJV). That was a significant moment in restoring my sight and my sanity. My sister did for me what I had done for Theron. It’s what friends do for each other.

You might be the one stuck and out of juice on the side of the road. You might be the one down in the dumps and ready to shift your life into neutral, or you could be the one who inspires the weary to keep on going.

God says where two or more are gathered together, He comes to the meeting (Matt. 18:20). And if He’s there, the resources for creativity, spiritual growth, and physical endurance are also there in infinite abundance. We need each other. Start your physical program for health alone if you must, but quickly find like-minded friends to do it with you. Keelan Hastings is a trainer who pushes me way beyond where I would go alone. He is also my friend, so I know he cares. If you need spiritual growth, find some friends who want to take that ride with you. Find a friend who will help you track your progress and urge you on when you fall behind. Find a trusted mentor, teacher, or pastor who will be a friend and spur you on toward the top of the mountain.

MIKE

A few years ago I met Mike Lahouti, a man who would become one of my best friends. He taught me another truth about living fully alive: we should not limit our friends to people of like mind. He and I were opposite poles of a magnet. He was a successful, organized sales rep for an international corporation,

and I was a scatterbrained entertainer. I was training to run triathlons, and he had little interest in physical activity. He was raised as a Muslim, and I was raised in a devout Christian home. Mike was not fond of what he knew of Christianity, but he was intensely curious about the faith he saw demonstrated in the home of Brian and Traci, my son-in-law and daughter, and was head-over-heels in love with my grandchildren. His love for my family was the one thing we had in common.

Mike lived next door to Traci and Brian and would often drop in unannounced for dinner. He expected us to reciprocate. His home was always filled with friends and laughter and food. At the sound of his back door opening, we would hear the excited shout, “Welcome! Come in. Sit down. Eat.” It didn’t take long for Mike to become an adored and trusted friend.

Once I got to know Mike, I discovered that we shared other common ground. He was stubborn and opinionated, and so am I. He was open to hearing the views of others, and so am I. He also had a marvelous sense of humor and a laugh that could melt Arctic ice. Almost every night Mike and my son-in-law would sit on the back porch, talking about the things that only true friends can discuss and still remain friends—faith, politics, personal strengths and weaknesses, family struggles.

At Christmas I gave Mike a Bible inscribed with his name, and he began to read it. Eventually we started an unconventional Bible study that will remain one of my most cherished memories: stale sandwiches and wine followed by an informal clutch of people sprawled across furniture or on the floor with open Bibles. Mike and my family and a few neighbors studied the book of Romans, then the book of Acts. Mike’s questions were intelligent, probing, and firm. For some of them, we had no answers. We made no secret of our desire to see Mike come to know Christ and the power of His resurrection.

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In the summer of 2010, Mike began to lose his long and courageous battle with cancer. We often dropped in to check on his health and nurture this valued friendship. My little grandchildren drew encouraging pictures and wrote notes declaring their unabashed love. Once they brought Mike a crayon drawing of him standing in heaven on clouds with Jesus. We never did figure out which one was Jesus. Evidently Jesus and Mike resemble one another. My initial fears about the pictures causing Mike anxiety were unfounded. He took great comfort in the love expressed by these children and was deeply moved by their desire to see him experience faith in Christ.

As Mike's health went into steep decline, Brian took him to a clinic to see if they could prescribe some relief for his pain. There in the waiting room of the clinic, curiosity, love, and friendship arrived simultaneously at the intersection of faith. Mike surrendered to the love of Christ and sparked a moving celebration in our circle of friends. Cancer is a cruel disease, and the end of Mike's life was not exempt from pain or sorrow. But the comfort of God's love and the assurance of eternal life gave Mike, his family, and those who loved him a memory of hope that we will treasure forever. Mike stepped from life as we know it to life as it was meant to be: cancer-free, pain-free, sorrow-free, fully alive in the presence of the One who made him and loved him most. Where did it start? With a disarming, dangerous, risky, wonderful, painful thing called friendship.

THE CONSUMMATION OF FRIENDSHIP

As I was writing these words, my phone buzzed. I glanced down at a text that froze my heart. Another friend, David Pierce, was

in the hospital. His kidneys had suddenly failed, and he was seriously ill. I quickly sent out a message on Twitter and Facebook, requesting prayers for my friend. Then I called Mike Smith, one of my GAG buddies, and told him of the situation. Immediately Mike said, “I need to go down to the hospital and see David. Do you want to go along?”

My immediate response was to delay any trip to the hospital until I finished the work I was doing on this book. When my computer screen flashed to life, my face flushed with shame. How can I write a chapter on the cost of friendship and not put everything aside to visit my friend whose life might be in danger? In David’s book *To Kill a Zombie*, he had written a hilarious and touching chapter on the value of our friendship. I had come close to exchanging that value for a few hours of work. I called Mike and told him, of course, I would go with him to see David. We had a wonderful visit. An hour of laughter and love and prayer restored color to David’s face and lifted all of our spirits. No text or tweet could replace what happened in that room. The doctors found the source of David’s problem, and today he’s home and living fully alive.

And speaking of Twitter, what about those cyberfriendships? Are social-network “friends” really friends? The Internet today allows us to delve into deeply personal subjects with people we’ve never met and scarcely know. How do these relationships fit into the categories of friendship, if at all? I’m not sure myself. But I wonder, how close can friends be when they’re physically isolated? Loneliness ages us faster and more drastically than anything else in life. By that I don’t mean a feeling of loneliness; I mean being alone to the point where we stop physically interacting with old friends and no longer make new ones.

One of the ironies of modern life is that the more technically interconnected we get, the more isolated and disconnected we

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seem to be. A friend recently told me about going to dinner at a restaurant and seeing a party of young adults come in to celebrate a birthday. They were all dressed in festive clothes and the birthday girl had a bunch of balloons tied to her chair. But after everyone was seated, one by one they fished out their iPhones. Within minutes, all eight of them sat silently around the table, oblivious to each other and the occasion, staring into their tiny screens, lost in their individual cyberworlds. There was a birthday party going on, but no one was there to enjoy it.

I won't dispute that there is great value to the social networks and cyberfriends we enjoy. Even God used His own unique brand of social media. When He wanted to reveal the Ten Commandments, He introduced the first "iRock." I imagine that Moses' friends were quite offended when he kept glancing at it at the dinner table. Like most devices, it broke.

When God wanted to warn King Belshazzar of impending disaster, He released the first stunning version of the iPad: a mysterious finger wrote the ominous message of imminent destruction on a screen the size of a wall.

When God wanted to give the Israelites directions to the promised land, He released the first GPS, with a guidance system that worked day and night, and even had a recalculating feature.

But when God wanted to demonstrate His love for us, it required nothing less than flesh meeting flesh. Though in times past He had communicated using all kinds of wonderful gadgets, in order to communicate His love, He sent Jesus to meet people face-to-face. The tablets and burning bushes were replaced with dinners, embraces, personal touch, and holy blood spilled on barren ground.

I'm so glad God didn't text, e-mail, or tweet His message of love to us. Only the appearance of God in the flesh could

consummate the relationship He desired with us. It was this act of love that gave us the ability to lighten up and live fully alive.

Honestly, I don't want to downplay the value of social media. It's often a wonderful entrée to live friendships that last for years. But if we confuse communication with communion, we miss friendship.

What rescues us from this trend toward isolation? True friends who pull us away from the computer, iPod, television, or whatever is connected to those things stuck in our ears, and bring us back to the rich, real world of conversation with flesh-and-blood human beings.

Keep refreshing your supply of friends in all categories. We live in a society that is terrified of strangers. What's the worst that can happen if you offer to sit with someone who is eating alone? He might say he wants to be left alone. So be it. He might think you're weird. Big deal! He'd be right! It's a risk worth taking. That new acquaintance might just become the friend you need. Reaching out to people is supposed to be one of the marks of a Christian. It's certainly the mark of someone who is living fully alive.

Even if I could succeed by myself, I have no desire to stand on the pinnacle of a mountain celebrating my achievements alone. Besides, I don't think I'd ever get there solo. One is a lonely number.

Jesus had twelve guys on His team. I'm not Jesus, so I'll settle for two or three! Seek out people to do life with you. In the end, you're going to need at least six.