

# The Power of Friendship

By Kathy Paauw

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Kathy Paauw  
orgcoach@gte.net

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A friend is a gift you give yourself.  
-Robert Lewis Stevenson

Overwhelmed by the demands of our time and energy, it's easy to put friendships aside. And yet it's often our friends who are best able to keep us tethered to the world around us as it spins out of control. Feeling connected to others is essential, especially when times are tough. The holiday season accentuates feelings of isolation and loneliness for some...and it does not have to be this way. Feeling lonely or feeling connected to others is a choice.

So what holds us back?

Even when we make friendships a priority, many of us feel guilty about choosing time with a friend over time with our spouses and kids. Dr. Alice Domar, assistant professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School and the author of *Self-Nurture*, writes specifically about women, although I believe what she says applies to men, as well: What shapes women's behavior is our inner voices, and what those voices say to us is 'A good mother and wife wouldn't want to be with friends. She'd be satisfied to stay home with her family every evening and on weekends, when she hasn't seen them all week long. Only a selfish woman spends time with her friends.'

Those of you who have read other articles I've written probably know what I'm going to say next. Quit shoulding on yourself!!

If you've put friends on the back burner for very long, you may find that there's nobody to turn to when you finally do want to spend time with a friend. Friends from the past may have gone their separate ways or may be as overscheduled as

you are. As for new friends, you may have been too busy to form new connections. In order to weave friendships into the fabric of your life, you need to give yourself permission to enjoy them. In this fast-paced stress-filled world we live in, we need the support of friends.

Because we spend so much time at work, that may seem like a natural place to look for friends. Domar points out that it's sometimes difficult to co-mingle office friendships with our personal lives. She notes that competition in the workplace may also strain a friendship. Those you work with are either your boss, the people who report to you, or the people on your level who just might be going up against you for the next promotion. That can make true friendship kind of hard, explains Domar. Those of us who work solo or from a home office face a different kind of challenge -- that of feeling isolated.

I recently read an interview with a famous actor who admitted that he felt lonely. His interviewer, who was clearly surprised by this revelation, asked how someone with such fame and popularity could feel so alone. He stated that he did not feel alone -- he felt lonely. The actor went on to qualify his statement, explaining that although he was surrounded by people all the time, he did not feel connected to those people, and that disconnectedness left him feeling lonely.

Sometimes friendships drift apart because of busy schedules. Other times it is because of misunderstandings or hurt feelings. Jan Yager, author of *Friendshifts: The Power of Friendship and How It Shapes Our Lives*, recalls something that happened when her father died and a close friend did not attend the funeral. She felt hurt and disappointed, until she later learned that her friend had not come to the service because she was still distraught over the death of her own father. With this additional information, her perspective completely changed from feeling slighted to feeling empathetic.

Yager says that making friends may seem easy. The hard part is in keeping the connections strong during the natural ups and downs that affect all relationships. The more vulnerable we are willing to be with friends, the greater the chances of having deeper and more meaningful friendships...and the greater the chances of feeling hurt by them. Yager's suggestion: consider friendship an honor and a gift, and worth the effort to treasure and nurture.

Scarcity vs. Abundance

Complete possession is proved only by giving.  
All you are unable to give possesses you.

-Andre Gide

Do you feel like you don't -- or never will -- have enough, do enough or be enough? The level of abundance in our lives has a lot to do with how we value ourselves and what we have in our lives right now.

I have a theory about why so many of us feel disconnected. It has to do with the scarcity mentality that we live under. I'll share a story to illustrate.

Many children who lost their parents in war-torn Kosovo were brought to an orphanage where their physical needs were taken care of. A psychologist was brought in to care for the emotional needs of the orphans, and one of the first things he discovered was that many of these children were not sleeping. They would not close their eyes at night because they feared that they would be hungrier when they woke up than they were when they went to sleep, a sad reality from their past -- so they did not sleep. The psychologist had an idea. He asked the staff to give every child a piece of bread to keep with them at night, and he asked that the children not eat the bread until morning. If they were hungry at night, they could go to the kitchen and get something to eat, but they were not to touch the bread until morning. Over time, the children started to trust that there would be enough food. Eventually they were able to close their eyes and fall asleep, with the bread cradled in their arms.

Aren't we like the children in Kosovo? We fear that we will not have enough -- enough time or enough love, for example -- so we cling tightly and become stingy with how much time or love we give to those we care about most. This illusion of scarcity causes us to give only the leftovers -- in a very measured and controlled way -- to what we value most. For many of us, this is why our friendships and other relationships have suffered.

Do you live under the illusion of scarcity or the reality of abundance?

The reality of abundance means that there's always enough. I've discovered this through running my own business. This year I have done more volunteer and pro bono work than any other year in business, and I've exceeded my income goal for the year with one month still left to go. I get back much more than I give away. Thinking back to earlier years in business, I realize that the more I tried to control time by being stingy with it, the more time I needed. By spending time on what I value most, my experience of time expands. I'm experiencing the reality of abundance.

Perhaps you've been jarred into thinking more about what

matters most in the aftermath of the September 11 tragedy. I know I have. I'm making more time for friends and family, which means that I'm spending less time on things that are not as important and more time on what I value most. And the more I let go of my fear of not having enough, the more I experience an abundance of that which I want or need more of.

So don't hold back when you give to others in your life. You can give the leftovers, or you can give from the abundance of everything that you have to give.

## Getting Connected

Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow.  
Don't walk behind me; I may not lead.  
Just walk beside me and be my friend.  
-Albert Camus

If you're feeling disconnected, it may be time to reconnect with old friends or make some new ones. Here are some ideas to get you started:

Pick up the phone and call an old friend you have not spoken with for a while. Chances are that your friend has been as busy as you've been and will be glad that you made the effort.

Have lunch with someone at work. If you don't feel comfortable socializing with someone in your company or department, seek out someone who works nearby. If you work solo or in a home office, schedule time for coffee or lunch with someone you'd enjoy getting to know better.

Get involved in professional associations in your field, where you can meet people with common interests.

Join a service club. Make a point of getting to know others who attend the monthly meetings.

If you have school-aged children, get to know other parents.

Sign up for volunteer activities through their school or after-school extra curricular activities. Talk with other parents when you attend your child's sporting events or music/theatre performances. Get to know the parents of your children's friends.

Plan an evening out or a weekend away with a friend, and ask your spouse to handle things at home. (Offer to do the same in return for him/her.)

Get involved in something you enjoy. Join a choir, community orchestra, or sports team. Take a ceramics class. Then make a point of getting to know others who share these common interests.

Get connected on the Internet. If you don't find an existing chat room that interests you, start one yourself by tapping into an existing community such as your kids' school or your alma mater.

Several years ago my husband planned a weekend away with two college buddies who live in other parts of the country. They decided to make this an annual event, and it's something they plan well in advance and look forward to. I fully support my husband's participation in this annual weekend reunion, as it provides him with an important social connection with valued friends.

Spending time with friends is not self-indulgent behavior. Extensive research has found that people who do not enjoy a strong social network are two to three times more likely to die at a younger age than those who have this kind of support. Although this social network used to be provided by extended family who lived nearby -- a cousin to seek advice from, a sibling to share problems and concerns with, a grandparent or aunt/uncle to learn from -- today it's often friends who meet these needs.

Yes, all of these ideas require time...a valuable commodity these days. And if you put yourself last on the list, you may find yourself stressed out, depleted of energy, and unable to give your family members or your job the full attention they need. Just remember that doing something that is good for you is ultimately good for your whole family and your career.

## On Friendship

--by Kahlil Gibran, The Prophet

And a youth said, "Speak to us of Friendship."

Your friend is your needs answered.

He is your field which you sow with love and reap with thanksgiving.

And he is your board and your fireside.

For you come to him with your hunger, and you seek him for peace.

When your friend speaks his mind you fear not the "nay" in your own mind, nor do you withhold the "ay."

And when he is silent your heart ceases not to listen to his heart;

For without words, in friendship, all thoughts, all desires, all expectations are born and shared, with joy that is unacclaimed.

When you part from your friend, you grieve not;

For that which you love most in him may be clearer in his absence, as the mountain to the climber is clearer from the plain.

And let there be no purpose in friendship save the deepening of the spirit.

For love that seeks aught but the disclosure of its own mystery is not love but a net cast forth: and only the unprofitable is caught.

And let your best be for your friend.

If he must know the ebb of your tide, let him know its flood also.

For what is your friend that you should seek him with hours to kill?

Seek him always with hours to live.

For it is his to fill your need, but not your emptiness.

And in the sweetness of friendship let there be laughter, and sharing of pleasures.

For in the dew of little things the heart finds its morning and is refreshed.

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