

Friends:

There is no substitute is there? There is nothing in the world that can take the place of friends who have been through it with you. There's a comfort level, a trust, the certain knowledge that, whatever happens today, they will be steadfast tomorrow. It's marvelous. Whether it's sweating out a political campaign, getting through another baseball season or being there when a friend gets sick, there is nothing like the rock of a real friendship.

We know artists. We know farmers. We know business people. We know the folks we grew up with. We know mess-ups. We know achievers. We know fascinating humans from every psychological bent and personal bias. We all do. And from this diverse amalgam we choose to rely on relatively few souls (compared to the size of the pool) who make it to the short list of...true friends. What a treasure to have. What a treasure to be included. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about how it happens; that's someone else's field. I spend time appreciating the fact that it happens.

We recently spent the evening with a small group that included a shepherd and a painter and accountants and a writer and a farmer and a social worker and grandparents and teachers. My goodness, the experience, the collective wisdom in the room was awesome. The humor in the room was contagious. The room itself was happy to be itself, to be home to such a wealth of generous camaraderie.

Have you sat on the outside of a raging conversation, let's say in the next room, when a group of animated people is talking and arguing and laughing? There is a rhythm to it. It's almost like a piece of music. The volume changes, the pitch changes and the cadence changes. If you listen long enough and closely enough you can start to predict how it will go. You can pretend to conduct. Delicious. There are timid silences and bold crescendos and opinions offered in the complete confidence that they will be victorious. There are statements to the contrary, the counterpoint. There is the constant harmony throughout, the harmony of "Can I fill your glass?" and "Did you get enough to eat?" There are listeners and actors and mediators and foils. People talking at the same time. People talking about seven different things at the same time. My goodness, it's an opera! But it's an opera that you can understand.

You know what, it's a great joy to realize that the place you provide and the comfort you extend to friends is integral to the flow of the evening. It's no accident that people will open up and shout in one place but be quiet as church mice in another. It's no accident that a listener will become a talker and that a blowhard will listen. It's not by chance that opinions are valued and that dogma is not. It's because you provide the place, the zone, the incubator for glorious conversation. For us it's a dinner, for others a barbecue, for someone else it's the tavern or the book group and for my mom, it's the church breakfast. The setting is crucial. Welcome your friends and provide the place. The chemistry that results is priceless.

But we don't do it enough, do we? We know the benefits, we know how good it feels but we don't arrange these gatherings nearly as often as we should. We all have lives and we all have schedules. There are the kids' games and the meetings and the chores and the job and the phone calls and the bills. There's all the stuff that we know we need to do. We have lives where myriad other factors trump our time with friends. We resolve to make more time. "We have to do this more often." We promise ourselves and our friends that it won't be so long next time. We mean it too. But the very - long - time - in between happens nonetheless. It's the world we live in.

I know folks who seem to rise above all that. They almost always find the time to get together. They are the same ones who write a card, bring a little something and send a thank you afterward. They're amazing. They must be fabulously wealthy or have a social secretary or never sleep. It must be something like that; otherwise we'd all be like them, always in touch and ready to cha-cha. They're like those circus folks who keep all the plates spinning while playing the accordion. It's a quality I don't seem to possess. But I wish that I did.

Maybe I can change. Maybe I too could be that socially on top of it guy who is only too happy to host. Maybe I could learn to send the note and give the gift and plan the soiree. It will take some practice. And first I have to find some plates that I can afford to break and then buy an accordion.