

Developing Healthy Relationships – Dan Hitz

Dan Hitz has been the director of Reconciliation Ministries of Michigan since 2003. This article was written with the help and insights of many of his friends, especially Ken Patriquin and Aaron Pierce.

“The Lord would speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend.”

Exodus 33:11a NIV

Exodus 33:11 has been a precious verse to me since the very first time I read it. When I consider a relationship with the Lord as real and as precious as talking to a best friend, it brings with it a deeper desire to share my heart with Him and understand His heart at a more intimate level. When we think of close friends, we automatically assume certain qualities will be present in those relationships.



For many of us, the process of making friends can be difficult. Our experiences have shown us that friendships are risky and don't always turn out the way we had hoped. Some of us have been hurt by those we've trusted and have learned to relate to people from the other side of an emotional wall. Some of us are so lonely that in our desperation we've latched onto someone around us and poured our hearts out, without taking the time to consider if the other person is actually safe. It's hard to take the time to allow the friendship to develop properly. Some of us have given up on healthy relationships altogether and hide behind work or ministry.

It is important to have healthy friendships for continued growth as men and women in the Body of Christ. No one is meant to walk this journey alone. Those of us who have journeyed through Living Waters, or another in-depth discipleship group, have found a deep level of relating beyond what is found in most church groups and social circles. Such in-depth relating is a cold drink of water for those who have spent a lot of time in the lonely wilderness. However, our discipleship groups only last for a brief period of time. We can be tempted to rush right into other relationships trying to force them to have the depth of our small groups. It just doesn't work. Some of us have cultivated deep friendships for a season and then life happens. We begin to withdraw and we find ourselves in a place of social isolation.

Friends are important to Jesus. He told his disciples that he no longer calls them servants, but friends, because He has shared the heart of the Father with them (John 15:15). He had many close friendships in Scripture including John, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. He had many other friendly acquaintances that he interacted with on a wide variety of occasions. He also commanded us to love one another and said that others would know that we are His disciples by our love for each another (John 13:34-35). **Since Jesus knows relationships, He can help us as we learn to develop healthy relationships in our own lives.** No matter our reactions to the thought of risking vulnerability and stepping out to develop friendships, it is important to remember that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us (Philippians 4:13). Jesus will help us through this process.

True friendships take a long time to develop and not all relationships will be at the same level of intimacy. Some people will come into our lives for a brief time and for a brief purpose. Some will easily become close friends while others remain simple acquaintances. Some people are safe to befriend and others are not. As we navigate through this process, we can learn a lot from the life of Christ. Jesus demonstrated the various levels of relationships during his ministry on earth. He interacted with the **multitude** in general as He ministered from village to village. He taught a **group**

of 70 followers through “on the job training” as he sent them out in pairs for ministry (Luke 10). He focused on the **twelve** disciples as they grew closer to Him and received more specialized teaching. He revealed more intimate details to **Peter, James, and John** as they joined Him on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matthew 17) and when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33). Finally, there was **the disciple whom Jesus loved** (John 19:26). John, Jesus’ most intimate friend, leaned his head on His chest during the Last Supper and received Mary as his own mother as Jesus was on the cross. We will follow Jesus’ example as we look at developing healthy friendships and the various stages of relationships.

Stage One: Very Casual Acquaintances – the Multitude. These are people that you may see frequently, but you have no significant relationship with them. There is no reason to feel commitment or vulnerability to that person. Examples would include store clerks at the 7-11 where you get your coffee every morning, or most of the people you run into at a large church each Sunday morning. You may like them, but you would probably feel uncomfortable if they showed up at your house unannounced. I have a habit of frequent evening runs to my neighborhood grocery store for ice cream. They used to have a very grandfatherly security guard who would smile and say hello. He was replaced by a more business-like security guard who doesn’t have a welcoming smile. As much as I miss the smiles from the older security guard, I would feel awkward if he showed up at my house and said hello. We really had no relationship; he was merely a very casual acquaintance.

Stage Two: People for Activities – the 70. These are people that you fellowship with during organized activities such as church projects, community groups, and school committees. You may share similar interests over a specific project even though you have very different personalities and social backgrounds. During these activities you may share some general personal information such as the type of job you do and how many kids you have, but you don’t have an expectation to share deep heart issues. You simply get a basic idea of their personality and general view on life through the shared activity. I’ve had many of these relationships through church activities such as missions trips and church work days. We really appreciate each other’s fellowship during those activities, but haven’t ever gone over to each other’s houses unless it was to discuss some specifics for our upcoming project. We simply shared an organized activity.

Stage Three: Friends – the 12. Our friendships begin to transition to the next level as we draw from the people we have met through various activities and begin to initiate our own activities. These are people that you find generally compatible and begin to visit the coffee shop or take in a movie together. You would feel comfortable inviting them over to your house for a relaxed evening of conversation and games. Your conversations now begin to move beyond the shared activities to some of the more personal issues of your lives, but you still do not share deeply personal information. During this stage of relationship, both parties are learning more about the other person and have a better understanding of the other’s worldview, desires, and personalities. I have some friends whose company I enjoy. They may come over to my house to visit or help me work on a car. They know some less common information about me, but I wouldn’t share deeply personal information. We may not have built up a deeper level of trust for such information, their worldview may be different from mine, or they may not be open to a deeper level of vulnerability or trust. We are able to enjoy each other’s company as friends.

Stage Four: Close Friends – Peter, James, and John. There are some friends that we are able to share more of our hearts with knowing there is a mutual respect and trust. Although both people in the relationship are able to share sensitive information about hopes, dreams, victories, and defeats; there are still some deeper heart issues that are held back. Close friends will support each other in times of challenges and celebrate with each other during the victories. Although they will still go to the coffee shop together, other activities may involve a deeper level of vulnerability including traveling together for an extended period of time or the sharing of highly personal information. I have close friends who came from out of state to support my family when our son passed away. We get together

when they come back into town and can sit in a restaurant and talk for hours about the joys of life and significant personal challenges. There are certain areas of my heart that I hold back. I trust them deeply, but certain information is for a very few. Still, we are very close friends.

Stage Five: Most Intimate Relationships – John the Beloved. Very few people fall into this relationship category. It is reserved for the very few people that have journeyed with us through some significant ups and downs in life and shown themselves faithful. We will still do some fun activities together, but we can also share the very depths of our soul with them. There is a mutual trust, love, and respect for each other. We are able to share our worst fears, our deepest desires, and our most guarded secrets. We can overlook each other's faults and challenge each other to overcome. My wife is my best friend. She knows the depths of my heart. We have walked through some awesome victories and some terrible defeats. Through the years we have learned to turn towards each and walk to Jesus during the trials. We also learned to have fun and meet each other at the park for a spontaneous lunch break while I'm writing this newsletter. I have another friend who is a prayer partner. He also knows my victories, defeats, challenges, and vision. We pray with each other regularly and know each other's vulnerabilities. We hold each other accountable and challenge each other to grow in the Lord. This is the deepest level of friendship.

What are some practical ways we can develop friendships and increase our relationships to the next level? The process begins as we develop basic friendships. Church activities can help those who have difficulty making the initial connection. They help us get together with others who share a common interest and provide an initial activity to focus our conversation and relationship around. During these interactions, we can consider what is important to us as a person and see if there are others in the group with similar interests. Some of those interests will be deep issues of faith. Some will be a shared recreational interests. Others will blend both. There will be some people that we simply don't click with. That is ok.

As we find others with similar interests we can then take the step of inviting them to the coffee shop or over to our house for dinner. As we take that step in vulnerability, we learn how these people carry themselves outside of the organized activity. Some people may be good people, but simply not seem like the type of person we feel comfortable sharing our personal life with. Not everyone will progress to the friends level. Sometimes we may sense something is not quite right in a person's character. We can be polite to them the next time we see them at the organized activity, but recognize that they may not be a good person to befriend. When we connect with someone that does share similar interests and seems compatible, we can continue to reach out to them and develop a friendship. We can share a little of our personal information with them and see how they respond. Do they feel uncomfortable? Do they share a little of their personal information? Do they protect your information? As we see how the other person responds in the relationship we can then maintain, increase, or decrease the level of friendship. Remember, not all friendships will progress to the next level of relationship. That is ok. It is also ok to put up boundaries if you sense that the relationship is not a healthy one for you, even if the other person thinks it is. As you reach out to others, you will find those that are compatible and can focus on developing a healthy friendship.

Throughout the process of developing relationships it is important to be real. Avoid hiding behind a mask or hiding your feelings in an attempt to get the other person to like you. We share our heart, but it is important to practice the idea of *containment*. **Through containment we recognize that healthy relationships take a long time to develop, and we resist the urge to jump head first into a deep relationship without walking through each stage of development.** Rather than spilling our guts and sharing all of our information, we *contain* our personal information and share a level of disclosure which matches the stage of relationship that we are in with a specific person. We can still be real even if we don't have a deep level of friendship, but we will practice more *containment* (proper place and time) with friendships that are more basic compared to friendships that are more developed.

As you seek to develop close friendships, consider those who are in your current circle of friends who have shown themselves faithful to protect your information and relationship. Who are those who are the most compatible in terms of spiritual vision, interests and personality? You can begin to share more of your personal information with those friends, and see if they continue to respond well to what you have shared. Do they open their hearts up at a deeper level? Some people will. Others may not feel comfortable opening up their hearts at a deeper level or may not be ready to. They may not want to transition to a deeper level of friendship at all. That is ok. We can begin to develop a deeper relationship with those who do respond to a deeper level of intimacy. We can nurture the qualities of a close friendship which include a faithfulness to commitments, a willingness to bear with the minor faults of the other, and a mutual support in times of need.

Although close friendships are rewarding, healthy friends recognize that no human can fulfill another human. There are needs in our lives that we can only get from the Lord. **Releasing our friends from an unrealistic demand to fulfill us frees us to enjoy the blessing that friendships can bring. It keeps us from getting upset about the human limitations of others.** The mutual respect that each friend has toward the other becomes more precious as the friendship is formed within godly boundaries and expectations.

The most intimate friendships provide the deepest level of vulnerability and support. These friends know your most intimate thoughts, hopes, dreams, and secrets. They also provide the deepest level of reward. As you consider your closest friends, consider who among them feels the safest and has been with you through the challenges of life. Is there a mutual level of deep trust and vulnerability? Have they remained faithful throughout the significant challenges of life? If so, then you can gradually begin to share the deeper areas of your heart. The same considerations of mutual respect, support, and sharing that have been used for the other levels of friendship can be used as you explore the possibility of transitioning the relationship to this deepest level. Very few friends will be found in your circle of the most intimate friends. Those few intimate friendships that you do have can be deeply rewarding.

Some thoughts for the journey... As you set out to develop more meaningful relationships, it is important to take some time to pray. Ask the Lord for guidance and some small, practical steps you can take to develop the relationships. Consider who in your life is currently at the various levels of relationship. Who can you start consciously working with to increase the current level of friendship? It is ok if you feel like you are starting from the very beginning. It is more important to have a few healthy relationships than many unhealthy ones.

You will encounter some speed bumps along the way. Don't give up if things don't go smoothly at first. When you hit a speed bump and have difficulty in a relationship, reevaluate and see if you simply need to talk about the problem and resolve it, or if it is a deeper relationship issue that serves as a warning flag. Not all relationships will continue or grow to the next level. The important thing is that you keep an open heart towards the Lord and continue prayerfully reaching out to the healthy people in your life. Properly resolving conflicts with healthy people greatly improves the quality of the relationship.

As your walk through this process, remember that your most important friend is Jesus. In Him you have a friend that sticks closer than a brother. You have a Father in Heaven that supports you in this journey and can lead you through each step. You have the Holy Spirit that can guide you and give you discernment as you consider your relationships. Trust the Lord to lead you in this process and trust Him to do a deep work in your heart.

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