BEST FRIENDS FOREVER
Making and Keeping Lifetime Relationships

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Dr. John Townsend

UNEDITED SAMPLE

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Contents

Introduction: Lifelines
Chapter 1: The Accidental Necessity
Chapter 2: If You Aren’t Drawn to Them, It Just Doesn’t Work
Chapter 3: Speed Dial
Chapter 4: What Matters Most
Chapter 5: No Explanation Needed
Chapter 6: BF’s In a Facebook World
Chapter 7: Permission to Speak the Truth
Chapter 8: The Time Factor
Chapter 9: Family, Friends, and Family Friends
Conclusion: The Power of BF's
Discussion Guide
Introduction:
Lifelines

I was having lunch with some friends when the subject turned to friendship itself. I had been researching the subject for awhile, so I threw out an open-ended question: “How important have your best friends been for you?” I was simply doing some informal information gathering. There was a brief silence, then people gave the following ideas:

- They have been safe places where I can be myself
- They are a few people I can be comfortable with
- They are the ones I go to when I need support
- They know and accept all of me
- They have walked with me through my marriage and childrearing years
- I have found God in a deeper way through these relationships
- They have been those who helped me through tough times
- They have made my life more meaningful

It was all thoughtful and positive. It was also fairly predictable. I think it was what any of us would say about our closest friendships. Then one woman, whom I had not known for a long time, and who had not spoken until this point said: “I probably wouldn’t be here without them.” I heard something in her voice, and I asked, “You mean, like, you probably would not be where you are these days in life, that sort of thing?” She looked directly at me and said, “No. I probably wouldn’t be here. Here here. On earth.”

You could feel the level of the conversation change, as no one could have predicted that one. We were in a whole new, and deeper arena with that one thought. The speaker was Rachel, a professional woman I had known for some time. She was not someone you would think of who was in a crisis, or in trouble, or who had experienced a great deal of trauma. She was in her mid forties, married with two children.

Obviously, it was time to hear her story, so I asked her to tell it to us. She told us about years of serious and painful struggle: an abusive childhood, a nightmarish first
marriage, and, by far most difficult of all, the death of one of her children. That last event, she said, almost put her under. When I asked her how she got through all of these massive losses, she said, “God and three friends.” God, she said, sustained and guided her through the very dark years. And three friends, three best friends, were there in so many ways: They listened to Rachel. They supported her. They stayed at the hospital during her child’s illness. They let her feel whatever she needed to feel about her life. They lent her money when her job fell through. They drove her to church, and to her therapist’s office when she could hardly move. “That’s what I meant about saying that without them, I probably wouldn’t be here,” Rachel said to us at the table.

More Vital Than You Can Imagine

I begin this book with this story because it illustrates a problem we have in our best friendships, and that is that the word has somehow been robbed of its meaning and power. It has been diluted. Friends, especially best friends, is often explained in a vanilla way, in the same manner you would say, “We just decided to stay in for the evening and watch some reruns.” There is nothing wrong with that, and it can be a good experience. And so friendships can appear comfortable, safe, and not much more than that. But Rachel would not see it that way, and I agree with her. She would see her best friends as a lifeline to her. Her three relationships were not simply helpful and encouraging. They were critical. They were a matter of survival. And I think that is more of what friendships should be about: people we go to with our deepest dreams, needs and questions, and who are a lifeline to us. People who bring us life.

As I work with people and organizations, I have noticed several reasons that the power and meaning of friendships have been diluted in our present day experience. One is that many people are simply isolated in the first place, and, though they want more close relationships, have learned to live without them. They may have trust issues, or some painful past relationships, but whatever the reason, they are lonely though they are surrounded by people. Others are simply not aware of their deeper need. In their experience, it is enough to have pleasant and positive conversations with others, and there really isn’t much more after that. They feel bad for people who struggle, but really experience no “dark night of the soul” seasons, or seasons of great celebration for that
matter, that they are driven share with others. Some people do not know how to deepen a relationship, and don’t possess the required skills and abilities. And a fourth is that some people put their friendship energy almost exclusively into the opposite sex, either in dating or marriage, and have difficulty experiencing high levels of need for nonromantic friends. They are stuck in a world of being a couple, and it can exclude the idea of best friends. In addition, some people have difficulty opening up to anyone but their close family relationships. Non-family friends just do not make it into the circle. There are others, but however it plays out, friendships, especially best friendships, don’t bring to us what they were intended to bring.

Jesus saw friends as central, in a way we often miss. He told his disciples that he was going to stop calling them his servants, and change things: “Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you” (John 15:15). He was making a distinction between two types of relationships. Servants and friends are very different. You give a directive to a servant. But you bring a friend into your confidence. At lunch, you tell the waiter you’d like a refill on your coffee, and he does it. But you tell a friend that you need that refill because you didn’t get a lot of sleep last night with a sick child at home. You “make known to” your friend what is going on in your life.

In addition, at the end of his life, during his time of deep trouble and distress while he was praying at Gethsemane, Jesus asked his own three closest friends, Peter, James and John, to keep watch with him (Mark 14:32-34). Imagine God himself asking three friends to support him! It seems so dependent of Jesus, so “unspiritual.” The stereotype is that he should only be looking to the Father for support. But it is just a stereotype. The reality is that Jesus modeled a need for both the divine and the human connections.

I think most of us are missing out on using our best friendships in these ways. We are more on the safe side, not the Rachel side, of things. And I hope that this book will help you to get the most out of what is available to you. Because when you have a few real best friends, and you know what to do with them, life can be significantly better, fuller and richer.
So this book does deal with friendship in general, its nature and its development. But the central thrust is about the deep bucket of those few very close relationships. You don’t have time nor energy to make many BF’s in life. “I have lots of best friends” either makes no sense, or it is the sign of someone who is not familiar with true and deep relationships.

There are many examples of famous best friendships, both in history and currently: David and Jonathan. Roosevelt and Churchill. Lewis and Tolkien. Sinatra and Martin. Damon and Affleck. Oprah and Gayle. We have a fascination with the dynamics of these relationships, partially because the people are well-known, and partially because we want long-lasting and safe relationships like these.

**Unused potential**

We can state the issue in terms of potential: most of us aren’t experiencing the highest level of good that is available from their friendships. You may find a great deal of warmth, understanding, encouragement and shared life experiences in your best friendships. But I believe that for most of us, there can be much more richness, growth and fulfillment for you as well. Think about all the important areas of your life, and how you are intentional about growth and improvement:

- The gym for your body
- Church for your spiritual life
- Classes and training for your career
- Marriage seminars for you and your spouse
- Parenting workshops for your family
- Financial training for your money
- Classes for your sports and hobbies

However, we don’t tend to pay a great deal of attention to doing something more intentional about our friendships, where we focus on our best friends, and making those relationships even better. I’ll go into the reasons for this later. But think for a moment
about those few special people on your BF (best friend) list and ask yourself these two questions:

1. If this relationship is a good one, would it be worth the exploration to make it a great one?

   If you like the person, and you are drawn to her, why not? You are BF’s for a reason. There is good you are both experiencing today as you walk through life. Why not more and better?

2. Are there some specific areas of life in which my best friends and I could do better for each other?

   Some friendships tend to be “specialty” relationships. That is, the energy stays on parenting, marriage or dating, but doesn’t delve into physical health, family of origin, spiritual values or finances. While each BF does have its specialty arenas, there may be untapped help in your relationship that is available.

   The closest thing to this kind of thinking is in the romantic sphere of life: marriage and dating. And there are lots of good researched and helpful principles for creating intimacy, communication and depth in those relationships. While the romantic world should certainly also be a close friendship for you, that is only one person. The friendship world is several people, which should ideally include your partner. And that arena has its own ideas and principles, found in this book, that can enrich and fulfill your relationship in a unique way.

F’s, BF’s, & BFF’s

Should BFs also be BFFs? Ideally, I think so. That depends on how life and circumstances go. Few things on this earth will last forever. But the second “F” in this title has to do more with the reality that best friendships are open-ended about time, they do not come with an expiration date. If we know that we will be moving to another town in a year, it will be hard to deeply engage in a person living there, though it is possible. So as you explore and engage in your relationship, you are most likely operating as though you will be best friends forever.

As a psychologist and relationship expert, I have observed people relating to each other for many years. And I have discovered some principles that will improve a best
friend relationship. That is the heart of this book. In my own personal life, I have found these same principles operating. I am fortunate to have my own set of BFF’s who have been with me for years and walked through life with me. I can’t imagine experiencing the world without them, and I am grateful to God and to them for that.

I have experienced the “problem of potential” in my own friendships, and have seen great results in these principles. I had one lunch conversation recently with a close friend, in which we told each other that we were important to each other, and in what ways. I told him it was something I think we both were aware of, but had never been clear about. We both left the meeting with a deep sense of “This person is a lifer for me.” I will go into the mechanisms of this conversation later in the book, but the very talk we had helped us use more of the potential in the relationship.

Let’s understand our terms a bit here. A BF is a kind of friend, so it is important to understand the “F” part of the word. “Friend” is an extremely popular and broad term. So here I want to briefly explain what a friendship is, its essential components, and, based on that, what a best friend is.

This is important, because it is so unclear. A friend I told about the book said to me, “People need this book. I know so many people who make a BF out of someone they have known for a week, and there’s something weird about that.” While this is usually a move made from a lack of information, or a crisis, or desperation, it is not how we are to make our friendships. We are to “guard our hearts” (Proverbs 4:23) and spend time and energy making sure anyone we let in our lives and hearts really deserves to have a place there.

**Pinning It Down**

What is a friendship? When you read the checkout stand magazines, or google the word, it is a hard term to pin down. Most of the descriptions are either very general or very anecdotal:

- Someone who shares life with you
- A person who accepts you as you are
- An individual who you can say anything with and be anyone with
Someone who you look forward to sitting down with and talking about what you’ve been up to, your joys and your struggles

These are descriptive, but don’t help you pin down the essence of friendship, in a way that you can have clear lines of what is, and isn’t that sort of relationship.

In my view, at heart, at the DNA level, a friendship must have three elements: **knowing, liking and presence.** These are simple, but they are the foundations. They are the three key components that are universal in friendships, from neighbors to church relationships to work connections. Knowing, liking and spending time with.

**Knowing.** You have objective information and personal experience with the person. You know where they live, their marital and parent status, what they do for work, their hobbies, their faith. On a personal level, you may know their history, likes and dislikes, their dreams, and their hurts. Knowing provides the foundation of whether or not this relationship will be a friendship, and how deep it can go. And if what you know is scary or toxic, you need that information as well.

**Liking.** You want to spend time with each other. You are drawn to each other’s presence. When life happens, for good or bad, you want them to know about it, and you want to know about their life. You don’t have to make yourself call or visit because you should, or because they are good for you. It’s about a want to, not a have to. The liking aspect helps also when you have conflicts or problems in the relationship. It serves as an anesthetic to get over rough patches. And if you don’t like them, it is hard to call it a friendship. A duty, or a professional relationship, or some sort of an obligation, maybe. But not a friendship. More on this later.

**Presence.** Friends spend time together. That is how knowing and liking happen. It may be a phone call, a lunch, an evening, a bike ride, a vacation. But time together is essential. The more time together between two good people, the better the relationship. There is a mutual commitment to be with each other, and you gladly pay the price for its benefits. Sometimes people move away and don’t see each other much. That doesn’t mean they aren’t friends, just that it is harder. But if the time was put in prior to the move, like making many deposits in an investment account, it is much easier to stay connected.
Think of your BFs now. You probably can reflect on the presence of these three components, in different amounts. But you have to have all three. These are simply the essentials. They are the basics, what define a friendship, and also a best friendship.

**The Specialty Category**

Now to your best friendships, a special category. What defines, and is unique about a BF?

I think it is a friendship in which you *hand over the key to the vault*. That is, you let the person know you, at the deepest and most vulnerable level. You invite them in to what is most important to you, your:

- Dreams
- Vision for Life
- Feelings
- Core Values
- Strengths
- Hurts
- Secrets
- Sins
- Mistakes
- Past
- Heartaches

These are not easy to let others in on. But they are the essential to having close friends. Handing the key to the vault means you are saying, in essence, *I entrust you with myself. Be safe for me, and also help me be a better person.* Just as a vault contains precious investments, your vault is something that is to be both preserved safely, without condemnation, and also developed and grown over time, into someone much better and more mature.

A friend of mine attended a coaching team I was leading for professional people. He signed up for business growth with a personal twist. He didn’t know anyone on the team. Yet, a great deal of the time the team members spent with each other consisted of connection, honesty, challenging to excellence and the like. Over the months, he began
making social relationships with these people, and he and his wife would go to dinner with other members and their spouses. They became part of his normal network of friendships, but on a deep level as well.

He didn’t expect this to happen, nor did he plan for this. But the presence of those qualities drew him in to the members and created an atmosphere of knowing, liking, and presence. The same thing happens every day in casual friendships that grow, in small groups, and in specialty groups, such as common hobbies and interests.

A best friend, then, is not someone who has some mysterious and unfathomable special quality no one else has. Rather, she is someone who ideally has become a high priority-relationship for you, and one you will invest in personally. You will find yourself wanting to know her at even deeper levels, find a great well of love inside you for her that is growing, and become fiercely loyal to, and protective of, your time together, for it is vital to you both. That is the way it should work, and the way it works best.

**One or Several?**

Is there room for only one BF, or more than one? Some people believe this is a one-person arrangement, that a best friend means a #1 friend. While we can have a closest friend, this is not always the way it is. “Best” simply is an indicator that a few people are the deepest in your life and commitment. It is similar to best movies, restaurants and sports teams.

The reality is also that we need more than one person to provide the qualities in our relationships. Different friends have different strengths in the qualities. Variety helps. It is a good thing to be able to call several people “my best friends”, and it is a good goal to move toward.

A woman I was counseling with began to pay close attention to her best friendships, seeing how much of a difference they made in her quality of life. She made the discovery that one BF had the ability to draw her out, be vulnerable and go deep about the emotional areas of life. She loved how her friend was able to “be there” with her, and it meant a great deal to her. At the same time, however, she had another friend who showed her love and care by practical helps: advice, good ideas, financial helps and
suggestions. Their conversations had a different tone, but the value was there, just the same. “BF” is a plural term.

Male or Female?
What about opposite-sex best friends? I hear this question come up a great deal. Many people are concerned that a close opposite-sex relationship is too dangerous because of the possibility that emotional intimacy will end up being sexual acting out. So, by that reasoning, we should limit our deeper friendships to the same sex.

There is good reason to certainly exercise caution. Billy Graham was famous for never walking into a hotel room until one of his staff entered it first, in case someone who didn’t like him had set up a woman in a compromising stance with a photographer on hand. And many pastors and Christian leaders will not meet with a woman alone with the office door closed, or ride in a car alone with a person of the opposite sex. There are situations that do require a certain amount of care and restriction, because of the dangers. Joseph, in the Bible, physically ran from temptation with Potiphar’s wife (2).

Having said that, however, women and men can be good friends with each other. They bring a perspective and a way of being to each other that can’t really be replaced. The feminine and masculine viewpoints help balance us, grow us, and makes us better people. Jesus Himself had a deep and abiding friendship with sisters Mary and Martha, which in addition showed his value for women in an age when women were seen as inferior (Luke 10:38-42).

Think about your family of origin. It was designed ideally so that you would be raised by a mom and a dad. Both contribute to your development and preparation for life. Does it make sense, once you have grown up and left home, to forever relate to the opposite sex in a meaningful way only if you are dating or married to the person? That limits a great deal of growth and friendship potential.

So evaluate your situation carefully. I have seen many solid marriages enhanced by opposite sex friendships. The husband’s female friend tells him he is entirely too left-brained and is not listening to his wife. She is an advocate and a guide for his wife, and the marriage. The wife’s male friend tells her that she doesn’t let him have his “cave
time” when he needs to be alone for a few minutes after work to recover from the day and transition into the family. He is an advocate for the husband, and the marriage as well.

I recommend that both spouses spend time with the friend, so that the other spouse will feel more secure and know that he is safe, loved and that everything is on the up and up. But the spouse who is feeling insecure needs to be heard and understood, because he or she comes first in the marriage.

If there is an ongoing character problem with opposite sex relationships, things have to be different. For example, if a man tends to be flirty or sexually inappropriate with women as his norm, or he even has been unfaithful, he needs to get counseling and help for those issues, before taking a risk with a close female friendship. For the time being, he may need to be “sober” and stick with his male friends. An alcoholic should not get a job as a bartender, so to speak.

The tricky question here has to do with the problem of a spouse who doesn’t want her partner to have opposite sex friends, but the issue is her fear and insecurity, not his character or love. In that situation, the risk is that he may curtail healthy, godly and marriage-supporting connections so that she will not feel anxious. However, then she never has to face and deal with her own fears and difficulties trusting his love.

In that sort of issue, then the one with the problem never deals with it, and the one without the problem pays for his spouse’s injury. One option in this case is that she gets help for the problem, and he remains sensitive to her feelings, supporting her growth and being totally trustworthy. I worked with a couple in which the wife found herself intensely jealous of any attractive woman her husband talked to, from a neighbor to work colleagues. Yet he was insanely in love with his wife. The root of the issue was that she had grown up with a distant father who had an affair on her mom, and that nightmare bruised her ability to trust a man’s character. Once she realized the issue, she revisited her past, grieved the losses with her dad, and was able to feel secure in her husband’s love, resolving the dilemma.

**Banish Superiority**

Finally, remember that “best” is not a morally superior category. Your best friend is your best friend because you and she are great fits for each other; not because one of you is a
better person than the rest. When you ask the waiter at the restaurant what he recommends, he will usually say “My favorite is the steak, or the pasta”, or whatever. Favorite is just favorite, it isn’t superior. You and your BF’s would not fit every other friendship scenario. So there is no better or worse here.

Remember the pain of junior high, when the cliques were in full bloom. You were out or in, or in the middle. But there was a stinging moral tone to not being in, like the *Mean Girls* movie. Stay away from that tone, and just be glad you’re finding some great fits for yourself.

**A Great Life Requires Great Friends**

I have a friend who is a professional woman; she was struggling with a fragile marriage. Though she and her husband had been married many years, there was deep alienation between them. She was lonely and unhappy in the relationship, and was considering ending it.

She had invested most of her life in her family and her job. The friendships she did have were more social relationships and neighbors; good people, but no one she really confided in about what was going on. This made the loneliness worse. She had never really known how isolated she was until the marriage began to go sideways, and that was the tipping point which helped push her into finding some safe people to open up to.

When she formed these relationships, more from desperation than from anything else, she was surprised at their impact on her marriage. She wanted help for herself, but found that the marriage was helped as well. These people listened. They were empathic. They heard her experience at a deep level. But at the same time they didn’t go the easy route and bash her husband, who was not present to defend himself. Instead, they encouraged her to grow, develop, change herself, while at the same time drawing clear boundaries with his behavior as well. And, over time, she and her husband began moving toward one another again. This woman attributes a large amount of the marital growth to the impact of these “real” friends. Their support, unconditional acceptance, wisdom and feedback were indispensable for her.
The Facts. You may have a healthy marriage or dating relationship yourself. But whatever is going on in your life, the research keeps coming in, and it is overwhelming: *all aspects of our lives are deeply affected by the presence or absence of your friendships.* Friendships are more than a luxury, or icing on the cake. They are a necessity.

Researchers have been studying the effects of social isolation in people since the 1970s. The evidence is overwhelming. They have found that when people are disconnected from relationships, their medical and psychological conditions suffer. Friendship's even affect our finances. A recent long-term study found that during high school, if you were nominated as a close friend by someone else, you were likely to make 2 percent more income later in life. This study discovered a multiplier effect as well: nominations by five people equaled a 10 percent increase in wages.

The flow of scientific data supports what the Bible says about friendships:

*Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up! Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone? Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.* (Ecclesiastes 4:9-12)

Can you relate to “falling down” in life and not having someone you can trust deeply to talk to about it? When we fall down alone, it takes much more to get back up in life again.

Friendship’s Origin and Purpose

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Where it begins. Friendships are actually an essential part of our childhood development. Infants don’t start life looking for buddies. They come into the world looking for a life support system called Mother. That is their first and most primary relationship, where they begin to experience how to connect, trust and reach out. This prepares them for all other relationships. They find that relationship is the best place to be, and life goes better when they are in a connection. At that point, they are able to then make contact with Dad, and, after that, brothers and sisters.

After that, between around ages 4-11, kids become gradually more and more interested and involved with friendships. Their early experiences with the family have given them the readiness to leave those first relationships and venture out into the social world, part of the “leaving and cleaving” process designed by God (6). This is when school, play dates, sports, the arts and church relationships flourish. The child’s social relationships often begin to compete with the family, and parents have to establish age-appropriate balances to keep it all in place. It is common for parents to feel as though their kids don’t see home as special anymore. But if home base is a good, warm and structured place, it is often a sign that the family has done its job well.

The “friendship explosion” then must make room for puberty and romantic interest, starting at around 12 years of age. At this point, there is a confusing time of integrating romantic relationships with same-sex and opposite-sex friendships. This process continues into the 20s. All this helps prepare the young person ultimately for grownup activities such as a mature support system, dating, marriage and parenting. The end result is a healthy blend of romantic and nonromantic relationships which provide the connectedness and growth we need.

The Second Family. This entire process is a shift in the center of our lives, from what is called our “family of origin” to our own friends and new families. As part of that leaving and cleaving, friends are more and more the sources of love, care, direction and interest for us. The family of origin, if it a loving and healthy one, is part of this, but can no longer be the center of it. That is the grand design to let young people take what they have learned from their families and spread their wings and apply it to their new lives. In that sense, friendships are our “second family.” They continue our growth and development as we mature: emotionally, relationally, spiritually and professionally. They
also provide what ingredients of growth might have been lacking in our family of origin, or help us heal from what might have been injured there as well.

Jesus referred to the second family in his own life experience:

*Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.” “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”* (Mark 3:31-35)

In other words, those who have deeply shared like values toward God are the family we need as adults. Friends become family.

I was facilitating a small group of people who wanted to “go deep” into their relationships with themselves, with God and with each other. It was a very vulnerable and intimate set of experiences, in which the members took big risks with each other, and found a depth of friendship they had not had before. After several months of meetings, I asked for feedback on how the group was going. One of the members said, “This is how the body of Christ should be functioning.”

As we talked, I realized that she was referring to all the “one anothers” the New Testament teaches, and how those should be norms for our best and highest relationships: be devoted to and honor (8), live in harmony (9), don’t pass judgment on (10), accept (11), be patient with (12), forgive (13), teach and admonish (14), spur to love and good deeds (15) and love deeply from the heart (16). These are how friendships should be. These are how family should be.

One of the most fulfilling things I ever see as a conference relationship speaker, is when I talk to parents who have embraced their new role with their adult children. Though they will always be Mom and Dad, and all the history, love and honor that that entails, they have accepted that they aren’t the center of their kids’ lives, and have moved to the side, so to speak, along with their other friends. It is not easy, and every parent must fight the urge to keep their teen and young adult totally based on the family. We have to let them go so that they can have great friendships.
At the time of this writing, our sons have now entered college. My wife, Barbi, and I have had to continually adjust to the fact that our sons are much more outward-bound and friend-oriented than they are nest-oriented. We stay connected to the boys a great deal, but the energy is clearly “out there”, where it needs to be.

**Walking the Talk**

When I developed this concept, I realized that I often have people do these steps, but I hadn’t really acted on them thoroughly myself. I thought, *Walk the talk.* So I went to some of my closest friends and told them I wanted to have a “friendship audit” and talk about us.

It was a little awkward at first, especially with knowing people for several decades. How do you switch from “How’s life” to “How are we?” There’s no smooth way to do this, so we just jumped in.

The results were striking. Each friend I talked with reported that they came away feeling better and closer about the relationship, and I did as well. In one friendship, what came up was the reality that we have always been there for each other, in good times and bad. In another, that we believe in the good we see in each other. In another, mutual respect for each other’s lives was a major part.

The good between us far outweighed the bad, which would make sense for a very close relationship. But that doesn’t mean it was all affirmations and roses either. One friend said, “I have had to adjust my expectations downward with us.” What he was saying in a nice way, was that he thought I was doing a sub-standard job of calling and taking initiative to stay in touch. He was right, I was letting him do more of the work and I felt remorse when he told me. I hated that someone I value that much would feel that way. When one of your closest friends gives you a reality like that, it has a deeper impact, because that person goes deeper in you as well. I told him I wanted to change that, and would like to be a better friend in that area.

Another friend said, “I hesitate to call you out of the blue sometimes because you seem really busy.” There is a common thread between these two conversations, which is that I often get too tied up in what I do, and don’t make those important spontaneous “how are you” calls as I should. We talked about that one, whether it was that I put out a
signal saying “Not available”, or whether he himself had difficulty taking risks, for what is the harm when a person says “I can’t talk right now?” Where we finally ended up was that we agreed that even though I am busy, I need that person in my life, and if he calls, I would really welcome the call. If I couldn’t talk or meet then, I would make sure we did at some time.

The pattern of me not being as accessible to my friends as I would like to be was important to notice as well. If a couple of people you trust tell you something similar, pay attention. It is a gold mine of valuable information for you. Since I have received this feedback, I have taken time to reflect deeply on these behaviors, and I hope I am making significant changes to make things better in this area. It’s good to know I have best friends I can trust to tell me if I’m changing or not!
Chapter 1: The Accidental Necessity

Best friendships can go on a long time without yielding their potential and value, unless we put focus and energy into them. The less focus and energy, the less good you will receive. You can be proactive, that is, you can take initiative to be intentional on improving your friendships. Or you can be passive, that is, go with the flow and let things happen. If you’re a nice person, you’ll probably have friends either way. But passivity will not get you the great connections that proactivity will.

Here’s an illustration: We’ve always been a pet family, and now have two old Labrador Retrievers. Heidi and Casey are in their teens. They’ve had a good long run, and we are very connected to them. In these later years of their lives, they have less energy and demands to play. So it’s easy to be a little passive with them. Say hi when you get home, pat them on the head now and then, and make sure they are fed. And we have done that, especially when we’ve been busy with work or family activities.

What has happened is that they slow down even more. They will sleep all the time, become lazy and I will even see an increase in health problems. We’re not being negligent or unkind to them. We are just being lazy ourselves.

But when we make sure we’re playing with them every day, walking them, and taking them on excursions, that is, when we are proactive, I can see a shift. They have more energy and are more alert. They act younger than they are.

That is how friendships are. You probably are kind and warm with your friends. But you can neglect the care and maintenance of the relationship, and you can do it in quantity (not enough time) or quality (what you do with the time). You may not notice it immediately. But friendships will either improve or become less enriched, depending on how proactive you are. Take initiative, and you will reap the rewards.

A Russian proverb says “Tell me who’s your friend and I’ll tell you who you are.” I hope that this book, and the ideas here, will help you to find out more about who you are, by deepening your connections with your own best friends.

A Chance Encounter
A BF relationship can begin in any number of ways, most of them accidentally and as you are going through life. Your closest friendships probably didn’t begin with an interview and a questionnaire. Actually, the online age is changing all this, with the existence of friendship sites. You can even post “friend wanted” on Craigslist, and people can request to be your “friend” on Facebook. Still, most BF’s begin as we simply pass through life and meet someone we like.

In researching this book, I asked people about how they met their closest friendships. Most of the sources were the following:

- Your kids are friends with their kids
- Childhood and school days
- College
- Workplace
- Neighborhood
- Church
- Introduction from a mutual friend
- Chance encounter

One friend of mine said, “Ten years ago, I was talking to a neighbor and we got into how we need to walk in the mornings. We just started doing that. It was about the walking, and having someone to do it with was just a way to make the time more pleasant. But, and I didn’t expect this, now the friendship is the main thing, and the walking is secondary. She and I have become very close.”

This is the norm. However, whether you met your BF informally or online, you were what is called “relationship-seeking.” That doesn’t mean you were on the hunt, or desperate. It means that within you, there is an openness to new and good relationships. We are scouting even when we don’t think we are scouting.

When I walk our dogs in the neighborhood, I know that they will go crazy on the leash when there is another dog and want to play with him. If they see another person on a walk, they don’t respond. They just go their way with me. As I understand it, their
strong reactions to other dogs are responding to memories of one another, and of their litter days. They are affected by those like them.

In the same way, we are watching, listening and aware of those around us. We may have a full and good life, and still respond to the other “dogs on a walk” if they seem warm and interesting.

The point is that most of us are always looking for more good relationships, but we really haven’t figured out the specific qualities we are looking for, nor do we really know the path to do that. The beginning of a BF relationship may be quite random. But its care and maintenance should not be, if you want to get the most out of it.

However, often we don’t even get to address or experience those qualities because other factors come into play, which is what this chapter is about. I believe that for most people, your BFs, while being a great source of support, are being significantly underutilized, that is, they aren’t providing either of you close to what they could provide. The potential is not being released, and the relationship isn’t getting the bang for the buck that is possible.

The good news is that, if you both are up for it, with a little exploration and effort, you can reverse the underutilization and actually maximize what can be there for both of you.

**Issues to See and Resolve**

**Lack of Awareness**

One source of the problem of underutilization is that many individuals simply aren’t aware of the potential and the place of BFs in life. They have them, care about them, and appreciate them, but not for the value they could bring to life.

In these situations, these best friends are more of what I would call “companions.” That is, they are people you are close to, but the purpose of the relationship is more about going through life with someone, floating down the river in a connected state. And it isn’t disconnected, there is a true closeness here. A lot of good exists in that attachment. But what is missing is that companions don’t really impact their own lives, they are on the
periphery of it. They may be a sounding board and someone to talk with about what’s
going on at home and at work, but there is no real “ask” or “give” involved. They are not
central to the decisions and choices you make in life. They are great for back yard
barbecues and soccer games with the kids, and are encouraging, but it tends to end there.

Often, when we don’t know the real value of a BF, we will outsource issues to
other people that the BF could handle. Some people will seek out a pastor or a therapist
when there is a life struggle, and tell their BF about it much later. “I didn’t want to
burden you”, or “I was embarrassed”, or “I don’t want to be a high-maintenance person”
are common excuses.

As a psychologist, I have seen that a good BF is the front line of bringing
struggles to light. Before a problem becomes a clinical issue, that is, requiring
professional attention, good friends can do a world of good in prevention and nipping
little things in the bud before they become big things.

You will also notice that when BFs don’t have their proper place, they are treated
as expendable. Marriage, kids, dating and work concerns are primary, and friendships
seem to have to fit around all that. Think about how often you reschedule a coffee or
lunch with a friend when other matters take over. We rarely move mountains to keep our
BF times sacred.

Certainly family matters come first. But if you notice a pattern of shifting your
friendships so that they are always at the back of the bus, see this as a problem in
recognizing value.

One thing that encourages me about the current crop of young adults is that they
do seem to value friendships. They are affiliation-driven, and into community at a deep
level. An indicator of this is the emergence of terms such as *bromance* and *womance*,
referring to deep and personal connections between same-sex friends. This generation is
very “relationship-seeking”, and not simply on a romantic level.

*The tip.* However, here is a recommendation if you are aware that you are not
giving proper value to your BF relationships: *for the next 90 days, put an asterisk next to
your next calendared meeting with your BF, right next to his/her name.* That will be a
little signal to you that there needs to be a very good reason for bumping that meeting off.
Unless it’s a crisis, you and your BF will meet. It is a way to reorient yourself to the value that close friendships bring.

**Spouse/Love Interest as the Only BF**

“My wife is my best friend, I don’t need anyone else but God.” In this scenario, the person’s spouse or romantic love interest is the only source and center of the “real stuff” in life. The romantic connection, whether it be a dating relationship or a 50 year marriage, is the only place the energy goes. Friendships are appreciated and seen as good things, but you don’t “go there” with anyone but the person you love.

On one hand, you have to affirm the depth and commitment of someone with a great marriage. There are few things more wonderful than that sacred and lifelong attachment. A marriage must be protected and nurtured; that takes time, vulnerability, investment, good boundaries, and energy.

However, one of the best things you can do to make your marriage greater, is for each of you to have best friends. This is not just a positive suggestion, it is a necessity. There are several reasons for this.

**Marriage requires other sources.** Your spouse can’t meet every relational need you have, nor can you meet his. We have lots of needs, and in varying amounts. Think about the list of friendship qualities from Chapter 1. Can your spouse meet every one of those at every moment? would it work for him to attempt to? Try this: show that list to your spouse and say, “Are you able to do all this, on a more-or-less weekly basis for me for the rest of our lives?” If your spouse is healthy, he will freak out a little, and then say, “We need a small group.”

We were not designed to have one person meet our deepest needs. We were designed for community. There is a great healthy balance in a couple’s life, in which their one-on-one times come first, but they are also going out and doing things on a frequent basis with others as well. Included in that are also “my friends” and “your friends” as well. These other relationships need to be deep and real connections. If relationship is the fuel of life, these BFs fuel not only the person, but the marriage as well.

I was talking to a friend of mine about the impact his friends have on his marriage, as he has several very good BFs. He not only does “couple stuff” with her and
other couples, but he also makes sure he has deeper and more connected conversations with a few men he is close to and trusts, on a regular basis. He said, “I come back to my wife with more appreciation for her and more interest in her world.” His wife agrees that she has experienced the benefit of his having close friends as well.

That is a good diagnostic for your BF’s as well if you are married. If you come back after a night out with your friends and you can’t get past his faults, and are noticing a few more, due to what they are saying and observing about him, you may want to curtail those friendships. Good BF’s tell the truth, but they also do everything they can to help your marriage grow and develop.

Also, think about all the conflicts that young married couples have about this. One of them has a group of close friends that he has spent years with, doing life. The other doesn’t really gravitate toward close friends, and tends to spend more time in dating relationships. When the marriage begins to move into its post-honeymoon phase, often the one without the friendship background will resist those relationships: “you want to be with them more than me.” On the other hand, the “friended” spouse will begin to feel smothered and controlled: “you don’t want us to get a life.”

If the friended spouse is neglecting the marriage, that needs to stop and be redirected. But if not, the other spouse needs to look at what she is afraid of and resisting. She may be scared their connection cannot hold on in competition with his friends. But if there is a problem in the connection, cutting off his friends will not help that problem. It will create even more alienation and distance between the two. This spouse often needs to deal with her own insecurities about how lovable she is in the first place, and about her trust in the love and strength of the marital bond. When she works on that, she often sees that good friends will increase the connection she desires with her spouse.

This is a common problem with husbands, probably more than wives. Since most women have the relational edge on men, sometimes a husband will unknowingly put his wife in the position of being the only deep relationship in his wife, the only social conduit. She is the one he confides in, unpacks about his joys and fears. She is the one who is safe for him to be vulnerable with.

This is a mixed blessing. Many women would give their right arm for a man who would connect at that level with his wife. It is always much better than disconnection and
empty space. But the problem comes in that the wife has to take too much on: his emotions, his reflections of life, his opinions and his dreams. Over time, this can morph from a marriage connection to a child-parent connection, for that is what parents do with their kids. And, if they are honest, the “parent” spouse will admit that it is a lot to bear, and that they would like it if there were other sources he had, who could also listen and support him. You don’t dump the entire truckload of hay on one horse!

A Lack of Vulnerability

Life is too short to go through it with no vulnerability, which is the practice of being transparent about our inner selves, needs, mistakes and emotions. We all need to unpack with someone. Best friends are the best place for that need.

 Actually, you really don’t have to be vulnerable. You can pretty much survive, and have a decent life of sorts with no one knowing you at a deeper level. You will suffocate without air and starve without food. But if you are not vulnerable, you can still grow up, find a career, get married, raise a family, have barbeques and go to church but never let anyone in to what you really feel or need. The effects of a lack of vulnerability are more subtle and long term: quality of life problems, intimacy conflicts and emotional issues, for example. So it is common for some people to simply live lives absent of vulnerability.

This problem can be for a number of reasons: past trust violations, relational hurts, or simply a lack of exposure to authentic connections. Whatever the cause, it reduces our experienced need and hunger for best friends. It takes some amount of effort to have friends; but it takes risk and trust to establish the vulnerability you need to have best friends. So some people simply have never “gone there” and are a little relieved they have not. It’s messy. And others have good reasons, generally rooted in bad experiences, not to be vulnerable.

Face it and open up. If you struggle with a lack of vulnerability, you want to break out of that jail. If you admit an insecurity, a need or a past hurt, to a good person, you will be amazed at how much good, and how much value, you will experience from a best friend.
I often tell people, “If you have a hard time opening up to your friend talk to him about that. Tell him ‘I am really uncomfortable talking about what’s really going on.’ That will often break the ice for both of you. But if that it also too scary, talk to a therapist about it and work it out. Directly or indirectly, you must face your fears of being open and begin to unpack with those who matter most.”

Become intentional in your present and future friendships. It will not require overhauling your life, but it will pay off in great rewards.