

Fear of Friendship



By Gail Catlin

I learned about true friendship late in life, at the age of more than thirty-eight years, to be exact. Up to that time I drew a boundary, a line of demarcation, that kept me safe from intimacy, trust, and surrender—all the spiritual realms, in fact, that make friendship sacred territory and a window into God's love and promises. Now that I've been given the gift of friendship—and I've given myself back to it—I am convinced that it is in the action of faith within our one-to-one relationships that we discover God's covenant of love for us—not a contractual fulfillment of redemption by works, but a promise of love for faith.

I learned about friendship from my women friends, the ones who saw me through my humanization at midlife, when my illusions were cracking, my dreams drifting away, my persona growing tight like a straitjacket. That was

the time I realized that I had given up my life for a professional career and persona that represented only a part of me, not all of me.

Eventually, the suits and bows at the collar and need to compete in the board room showed in my brow and my friends said, "speak to us." Not being able to hold myself back, I did, fearing what might happen when I became real instead of "perfect." The miracle was that my friends stayed when the corporate titles were gone and the desk accessories packed away. My friends have remained as a statement of their commitment that my life should be lived and fulfilled, not erected and bronzed. In surrendering to their love, I have discovered the most spiritual realm—what I call "the covenant of connectedness"—and it lives in my belief in God the Father and Jesus.

When I started to speak with others about my interest in friendship and its relation to the concept of covenant, it surprised me to hear them immediately link the covenant of the Bible to God's law. This, of course, reveals my sketchy knowledge of theology. But I did not arrive at my understanding of covenant through the Old Testament, where God's covenants were laws of faith first handed down to Moses as rules for the people.

The Old Testament often records circumstances and consequences for violating the rules. God eventually realized that the people had missed the mark and the law was incomplete. He made a new covenant, that of the New Testament, Jesus Christ, and people's relationships with God.

It seems to me that Jesus' story is primarily that of one-to-one relationships, a ministry of love between individual people. He was even persecuted for not promoting salvation for masses instead, or the ascent of a single large group. He moved as one man, surrounded by close friends bound in love and conviction, and administered to individuals in need of love and healing in body and soul. He brought a message of one person's love for another as the kernel of faith and promised that each of us could be in a personal relationship with God. He asked us to turn from the incomplete things of this world—the hollow laws—and invited us into the

wholeness of relationships with each other and with God.

I'm writing a short story. A woman flees to Paris, seeking fulfillment after struggling with her marriage. She wants to actualize herself, to express herself. First she joins a commune, thinking it will liberate her. Then she falls in love with its leader, only to be jilted. She retreats to a hospital as a volunteer on the cancer ward.

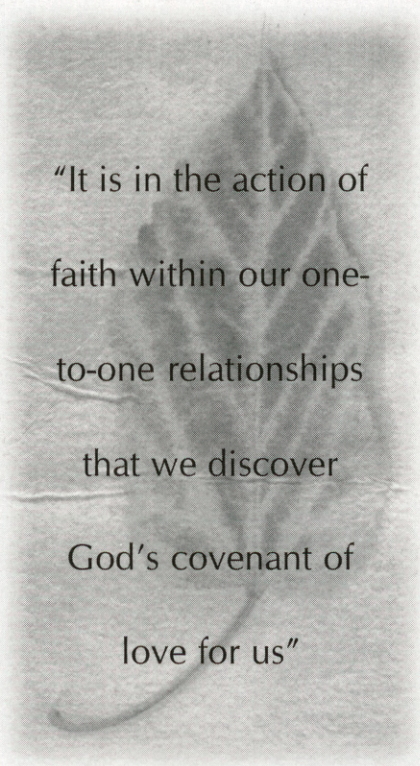
There she meets an elderly woman, a miraculous person with an incredible life story and a remarkable mind, but the woman is dying of cancer. This elderly woman wants the young woman to care for her until she dies, to take her back to the old women's apartment, to sit with her, to be there, to pack up things and give them to appropriate charities or family members after she dies. Without the young woman's care, the old woman will end life in the hospital.

The young woman is petrified. She did not come to Paris for this! It is far too scary and intense and she shrinks from the request. But the elderly woman's desire to die in her own home haunts the young woman, and, in an act of faith, she consents, not having the slightest idea how to get through the experience, particularly after avoiding emotional and spiritual cliffs all her life.

After arriving, she is amazed at the beauty of the elderly woman's apartment, the richness of her books, the sweet and loving conver-

sations that they have day-to-day as the old woman dies. Discovery of her own gratitude for this experience, this relationship, and the manifestation of love between them, stuns the young woman. When she finally cleans out the apartment, alone, the young woman realizes that the relationship, its love, and commitment took her to a place of understanding, mystery, and abiding faith. She had witnessed a mysterious realm of friendship and love, one that carved her inside like a vessel, capable now of holding more of life, love, and spiritual things.

This is not simply a short story, it also explains my understanding of covenant, evidenced by friendships in my life, my sacred friendships. When we truly commit in love to a friend, partner, or family member it is an act of faith. We don't know where it will take us. We might



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want to set up rules, accounting for our friend's behavior, ready to sever ties if violated, but true friendship is much more alive.

By definition, living things grow and change. They act, react, and grow in reflection to one another. Rule-based relationships are brittle and dead, they shatter when we violate legal requirements. Yet we are often afraid to surrender in ways required by covenants between people, and we lack faith in the promise of Jesus, the promise of one-to-one love as a spiritual gift.

Fear kept me from this kind of friendship—fear of where it might lead me, how much commitment it would take, how messy it would be. I wanted to be in control and kept a rein on myself.

I have a friend like this today. She counts my phone calls, visits, and cards as if we had a contract. When I violate her rules, she gets angry and challenges me and my commitment. This reaction gets in the way, and demonstrates that we are not operating at a deep level of trust or faith. Fear of relationships is a reflection of our ego-centered need to control and restricts gifts of faith that are available to each of us.

There is a story about St. Francis of Assisi. It is well known that he was affluent and privileged as a boy and that he shed these privileges to walk in total surrender and faith, ministering to individuals and animals. His is a story of complete faith. Yet Francis supposedly had an intractable fear of and aversion to lepers. In this, he knew he held back his faith and commitment to others.

One night he had a dream. God told St. Francis that he would meet a leper on the road the next day and that he should run up to that man and embrace him in God's love. St. Francis was terror stricken. Oh no! Not this!

He dressed in the morning, hoping that his dream would not happen; maybe the day would pass by and the leper would take another road; maybe he would not need to confront his own limited faith. But, as promised, he soon spotted the leper. He struggled with his faith, with his commitment to all people, with his ability to love.

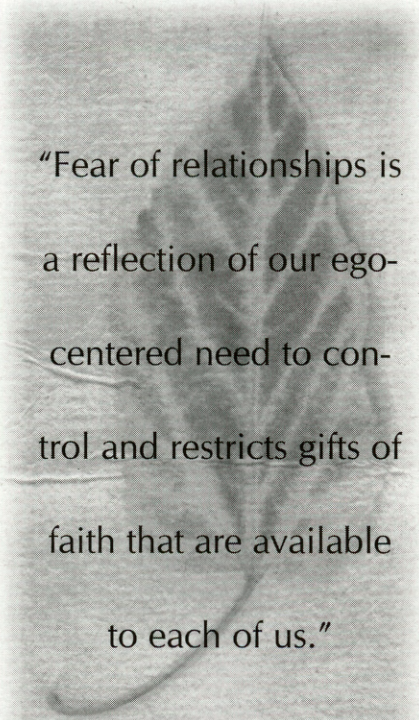
Then, in an act of faith, he ran to the man and embraced him. At that moment, the leper turned into an angel of God. In hugging the man, St. Francis hugged God and learned that by risking his faith to love someone else he had received evidence of God's promise to him.

We see God most clearly when we enter places we can't go alone as mere humans. God is not revealed in human constructions that are known and safe. We must step into the unknown and unpredictable to see his working, just as missionaries enter the unknown, expand their faith, and witness the divine gifts of safety and security each day. So it is with our friendships.

What distinguishes a promise from a contract? How do we understand God's love? These questions get at the root of the matter. A promise is a commitment buttressed by hope, resilience, and perseverance, with faith in details and trust in the outcome. In comparison, a contract is characterized by hypervigilance and pessimism. Contracts require us to relate to God through adherence to rules rather than loving relationships, which are based on the scary and intense task of day-to-day, step-by-step care for each other. As illustrated in the story of the two women, the important things are fulfillment of the promise to be there, the spiritual struggle together, and faith in God's rewards. The Jesus that I know offers us a promise, not a contract.

My father was six feet tall, gentle and dignified. He moved like a saint and healed people as a busy Denver surgeon. He left early in the morning and came home late at night. He was quiet but extremely attentive, and his words revealed a sharp mind, deep knowledge, and studied discipline. He seemed bigger than life to me and I felt safe and protected by his love and strength.

One evening we sat in the living room talking about spiritual things as I prepared for college. Perhaps I asked if he believed in God. He was quiet for a moment, then with a long, slow sigh, he said, "You know, I have four years of medical school, an internship, and a residency. I know every part of the human body; I can take it apart and put it back together. But I cannot make it live. I cannot breathe life into it. That is God's gift and I am aware of it every time I do surgery."



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Time stopped for me at that moment. I think of this conversation frequently, even today. This impressive man with huge and precise hands, powerful and skilled, yet dwarfed and reverent of the Holy Spirit and sensitive to the difference between physical assembly and the living soul. To me, this illustrates the difference between law and the spiritual covenant. The whole is not the sum of the parts. God breathes in the sanctity of friendships. They are not simply results of law.

I once met another doctor. He said he was an atheist. This bothered me for days; at first I wasn't sure why. Then I realized that his disbelief was the ultimate act of arrogance. To think that he heals by himself! To think that life and death are in his hands—or in no one's! (I'm afraid to ask which.) Do we believe such things about God's promises and covenant? Do we believe that we can build them out of laws of nature or intellectualized rules? Or do we receive them when we surrender, not knowing what we will experience?

As the atheist doctor, are *we* arrogant about spiritual things? Do we really think we can operationalize our relationship with God through exact compliance with rules? A person can follow all ten commandments and still not have a relationship with God. Like friendship, God's covenant calls us to make a promise, walk in faith, and follow where it leads. We put this into practice daily through friendships, family commitments, and daily interactions. Through Jesus, God gives us one-to-one relationships to learn about him and his love.

My mother died in May. Our relationship had not always been easy, but we were promised to each other in my birth and we kept that promise until she died. We made it through good times and bad, not saying goodbye even when the going seemed too hard to endure. I watched disease take more and more of her and was grateful that I hadn't abandoned her, that I participated in her last trial. I know that she felt the same way.

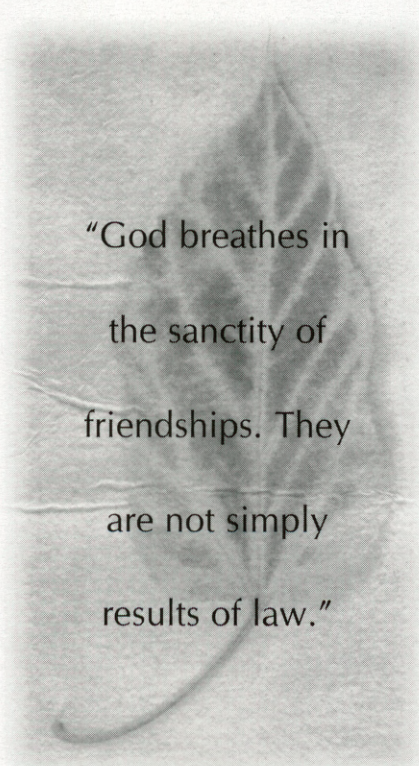
My siblings came for the memorial service. They did not have the same close relationship with my mother and, at times, had none at all. Today they grieve for

something they wish they had, often thinking of the relationship between the two of us as a gift that was uniquely mine. I know that it actually came from a long-term commitment between us and the way we faithfully lived it each day. This is not mysterious; it's a promise from God.

The day that my mother died dear friends called wanting to come to my house. No, they said, it wasn't a bother, and, no, they would not ask any questions. They would make a list, shop, and buy flowers, and, yes, they would let themselves into the house if I had gone to the mortuary with my father.

In years past, I would have felt indebted and concerned about paying them back. In my days of legalistic friendship, I measured phone calls, visits, and gifts like a science. But these friends have taught me about promises, friendship, and love in a way that lets me know love is big enough to encompass this trauma and that they are committed to me even if my mother dies and I'm standing like a deer caught in the headlights. They have taught me this lesson every day for more than a decade and I now have the capacity to give friendship to others. So moves the Holy Spirit.

We learn about God and his love through the permeable, living, and mysterious space between people—not the mechanistic rules of dogmatic spirituality. As my father suggested, I can tell you the parts of friendship and about love between two people, but I can't blow life into it and make it breathe. That is the domain of God's covenant and promise, and I surrender more to it daily.



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