

Submission for weekly column "Space for Reflection" in The Current
"What are friends for?"

Look into the window of a restaurant on Las Olas Boulevard late on a Saturday night, and you may see four women sitting at a corner table, bent double in laughter, wiping tears from their eyes. That would be me and three of my closest friends, relating another of life's most embarrassing moments. Another time you might notice that the tears are flowing, but nobody's laughing. No doubt one of us is sharing some deep hurt or fear, knowing that the listening ears, supportive words, and comforting hugs we need will be provided by the other women at the table.

A recent study by a Duke sociologist called *Social Isolation in America* includes the sad information that one-fourth of Americans say they have nobody to talk to about "important matters." An equal number of Americans have just one friend to turn to. The study's author, Lynn Smith-Lovin, reports that over the past two decades, the number of people with nobody to talk to has doubled. Is this due to the use of technology replacing face-to-face interaction? Or are we so consumed with work and activities that little time is left for simply being with the people we love? All I know is, I need my friends.

Bestselling author Tom Rath takes up this subject in his new book, *Vital Friends: The People You Can't Afford to Live Without*. He writes, "Friendships are among the most fundamental of human needs." In spite of this, he points out, many people fail to cultivate friends. Well, the college years provide a great opportunity for friend-cultivation! This is also a time to learn how to be a true friend. Rath describes eight roles that friends can play: builder (motivator), champion (sing your praises), collaborator (has similar interests, passions), companion (always there for you), connector (introduces you to others, widens your circle), energizer (always gives you a boost, makes you laugh), mind opener (expand your horizons, embrace new ideas), and navigator (helps you make decisions). It's worth reflecting: Who helps us in these ways, and have we thanked them lately? Do we provide these forms of support to our friends?

As much support and joy as friends give, sometimes our friendships are the source of drama and grief. I think the key to having enriching rather than draining friendships involves making the move from what I call the "junior high" mentality to spiritual maturity. The junior high mentality believes it's okay to pass along secrets, as long as we mention that the information is a secret. The spiritually-mature approach is to be loyal and actually keep information confidential. The junior high mentality avoids the friend we're upset with or bad-mouths him to others. The spiritually-mature approach is to privately talk through what happened and how we both feel and what can be done to make the relationship stronger. A junior high mentality puts a guilt-trip on friends who can't meet all our emotional needs. A spiritually-mature approach bestows the gift of acceptance upon our friends and shows gratitude for whatever they can give.

Some people make the best friends of their lives at college. What do you think it takes to be a true friend? Let me know!

Robin Cooper
G.A. for Multicultural and Spiritual Affairs
robicoop@nsu.nova.edu
954-262-7253

