



Finding Deep Friendships
in a Shallow World

KNOWN

Dick and Ruth Foth

Foreword by Mark Batterson

Praise for *Known*

“Most of us don’t get a how-to course in building lasting friendships; often we are left to figure it out as we grow up. Reading *Known* gave me a fresh look on friendship and its important role in my life. This fantastic resource of poems and stories from the Foths’ personal experiences will bring incredible meaning and longevity to your relationships.”

—BETSY MILLER, director, StoryBrand Foundation

“I’ve been learning about extravagant love from Dick and Ruth Foth for over a decade. I asked Dick if he would come with me to a country in the middle of a civil war. He said ‘yes’ without skipping a beat. This is how the Foths are wired. They don’t see opportunities and faith and friends as separate parts of their lives but as inseparable ones. They don’t love people after they’ve ‘arrived’; they love their friends on the way. This is exactly what Jesus did. You’re going to enjoy in these pages learning about friendships from the people who have been teaching me most of what I know about them.”

—BOB GOFF, chief balloon inflator and author of *Love Does*

“I found myself nodding with affirmation reading each page of *Known*. Read this book if you want more meaningful friendships. Read this book if you want deeper conversations. Read this book if you want to be moved. Read this book, and you’ll find yourself leaning into relationships the way Jesus intended them to be.”

—BARRY H. COREY, president of Biola University and
author of *Love Kindness: Discover the Power of a
Forgotten Christian Virtue*

“I was twenty-eight when I got married. Standing beside me was a sixty-eight-year-old groomsman named Dick Foth. My friend. The stories and ideas captured in this book have been transforming lives through Dick and Ruth for decades. I’ve seen these pages in action. They have shaped my life, my family, my friends, and my community. I trust they will shape yours too.”

—JEREMY VALLERAND, president and CEO,
Rescue:Freedom International

“The world is full of STORYTELLERS but starving for SAGES. When Dick and Ruth Foth write a book, we get the rare privilege of both! From Dick’s anecdotes, to Ruth’s poetry (and everything in between), this book is proof of the ancient truth that two are better than one! When I finished this book, I felt a renewed sense of beauty and awe for the God I serve and the people around me.”

—CHAD BRUEGMAN, teaching pastor and directional
leadership, Red Rocks Church, Denver

“I look for three things from an author: credibility, authenticity, and clarity of message. Dick and Ruth Foth have delivered on all three. *Known: Finding Deep Friendships in a Shallow World* is a masterpiece! I will never look at relationships the same way again.”

—HAL DONALDSON, president, Convoy of Hope

“Dick and Ruth’s intensely practical yet otherworldly words will reach through the pages and gently beckon you to follow them into the deep warmth of relationships that nurture, heal, and equip you to live your dreams and fulfill your destiny.”

—DAYNA BOWEN MATTHEW, author of *Just Medicine:
A Cure for Racial Inequality in American Health Care*

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WATERBROOK

KNOWN

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We write this book for twenty-two reasons:
Our four children and their spouses, who know us
best, and their children, who enrich our lives at
every turn with their love and their friendship.

Here's to you!

Erica and Van with *Aly* and Zach, *Claire* and David,
Sam, and *Hope*.

Jenny and Brett with *Drew* and *Lily Grace*.

Susanna and Scott with *Jack*, *Will*, and *Addie*.

Chris and Traci with *Cameron*, *Chloe*, and *Noah*.

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Foreword

If you gave me a word association test and said, “Relationships,” my immediate response would be, “Dick Foth.” I’ve never met anyone who does relationships better! And I’ve been the beneficiary of that fact for two decades now. Of course, it takes two to tango. And one of the beautiful things about this book is that we don’t just get Dick’s viewpoint; we also get Ruth’s reflections! And trust me, when Ruth speaks you want to listen very closely, very carefully! There is a raw honesty and profound dimensionality to this book because it’s two-part harmony.

When I was a rookie pastor trying to find my way in ministry and in marriage, Dick Foth befriended me. Dick and Ruth invited Lora and me over to their home for our first Thanksgiving in Washington, DC. When Ruth served up a warm berry cobbler for dessert, I knew it was a friendship that needed to be cultivated!

Dick Foth has been a spiritual father to me for more than two decades now. He’s been a sounding board for difficult decisions. He’s offered encouraging words during tough times. And he’s not afraid to ask the tough questions! In fact, he rarely asks me how I’m doing. He usually asks me how my wife and children are doing! Dick knows that it’s our relationships with those who are closest to us that is the best barometer of how we’re doing personally!

Simply put, there isn't anyone I've learned more from than Dick Foth. And you're about to discover why I love and honor Dick and Ruth so much. This book is pure gold—gold that has been refined by seventy-five trips around the sun and fifty years of marriage. You'll find a few theories in this book, but those theories are backed up by hard-earned, down-to-earth lessons about life, love, and catching tadpoles!

Dick and Ruth now live near Fort Collins, Colorado, but Dick graciously returns to Washington, DC, to speak at National Community Church several times a year. Every time I announce that he's coming, our church gives him an ovation. For the record, they don't clap for anyone else, including me! Our congregation is very young—about half are twentysomethings—and my theory is that Dick is the grandfather they always wish they had. You'll feel the same way about Dick and Ruth just a few pages into this book.

Dick is one of my favorite communicators, one of the best communicators on the planet. He can tell a story like nobody's business. But after listening to his preaching for more than twenty years now, I think I know his secret sauce. No matter what text he's speaking on, no matter what context he's speaking in, he has a reassuring message that comes through calm and clear: *it's going to be okay!*

Dick and Ruth have weathered some storms, including the divorce of Dick's parents. They've walked through their fair share of tough times as husband and wife, father and mother. And they've been good old-fashioned friends to so many people during Dick's tenure as pastor, college president, and friend to some of the most powerful people in politics during their years in Washington, DC. But through

thick and thin, despite all the ups and downs, they're still standing. And not just standing, smiling!

The sad reality is that we live in a very shallow world, but if anyone can help you build deep friendships, it's Dick and Ruth Foth. Whether it's overcoming the aches and pains of loneliness or taking your friendships to a deeper place, you've come to the right place.

A book is a two-way street. The authors invite you into their lives, and you get to discover a whole new world. I think you'll love Dick and Ruth's world. But the reader also invites the authors into their world. I believe your life will be better because of it. I know mine has been forever imprinted, forever impacted.

—*Mark Batterson*

Introduction

What Really Matters

Words are easy, like the wind;
Faithful friends are hard to find.

—William Shakespeare, *The Passionate Pilgrim*

The question I asked the university student was casual.
“What’s a word that you’d use to describe your generation?”

He said, “Overwhelmed!”

I said, “What do you mean? What are you overwhelmed by?”

When I heard *overwhelmed*, I saw my parents—born in 1910 and 1913 respectively—who lived through World War I, the influenza epidemic of 1917–18, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and World War II.

“Information,” he said. “My generation is overwhelmed by information.”

When he said *information*, two facts I had recently seen popped into my head: Children born in the 1990s belong to the first generation in the history of the world that

- do not have to go to an authority figure for information,¹
and,

- will be able to access more new information that will be generated this year than in the previous five thousand years combined!²

“But you’re so connected to each other,” I continued.

He said, “Oh, yes! I’m connected to several dozen people through Facebook and Twitter. I just don’t know how to start a conversation.”

His words jarred me. For me, face-to-face conversation is the stuff of life. My thoughts zipped to Penn Station in New York City ten years earlier. Ruth and I were sitting in a hole-in-the-wall Pizza Hut waiting for our train to Washington, DC. An older woman approached our table and asked if she could join us because seating was scarce. “Absolutely,” we said.

As we talked, she told us of graduating from a major midwestern university as a young woman and going to work for Hallmark in their creative department. She rose to the executive ranks in marketing, where she spent the rest of her career and from which she retired. When we asked, “What brought you to New York?” she said that she had been talked into coming out of retirement two years earlier to join the marketing department of a large New York company.

When I asked, “What’s the biggest difference in the workplace now for you?” she replied, “It bothers me when a young person sends me an e-mail on a subject, while sitting five feet away in the next cubicle.” “Why does that matter?” I asked. “It’s efficient.” She got quiet for a moment, then looked straight at us and said, “I miss the face-to-face, the eye contact. Eye contact makes us human.” I doubt that she had read the work of Atsushi Senju, a cognitive neuroscientist, who says, “A richer mode of communication is possible right after making

eye contact. It amplifies your ability to compute all the signals so you are able to read the other person's brain."³

The older woman wasn't making a scientific statement. She was making a visceral statement. Just like my young university friend.

When the young man said, "*Overwhelmed*" and "*I don't know how to start a conversation,*" it was a Penn Station echo. Intrigued, I listened. And he schooled me. He had good reason to feel overwhelmed. Come to think of it, I feel that way myself half the time. The Niagara of information we have access to can drown us. How we keep up, sort through, choose, and prioritize can paralyze us. Instant access has changed everything: education, sports, business, politics, and of course, shopping!

Still, nothing has changed more than the way we talk to each other.

Communication is the name of the game. Our brains are Exhibit One. A communication marvel, the brain automatically sends and receives millions of messages a day throughout our bodies. Person-to-person communication, on the other hand, takes intent. Every arena of life—business, sports, medicine, education, the military, and families, to name a few—work only as well as we communicate. Why? Because great communication creates relationship, and relationship drives our whole lives.

At stake in this new reality, where we have keyboard control over what we wish others to know about us, is the depth of the relationships we want to build. We have all kinds of relationships, but apart from family, none is more meaningful than a friendship. Friendship, by definition, is unique. It's about investment and vulnerability. So trying

to make a friend at light speed is brutal. On the Internet, I can give you *information*, but it's hard to give you *me*. That process does not happen at the tap of a key.

How then do relationships get started? What nurtures them? When God says, "It is not good that man should be alone," we know he's not kidding. Because we know alone. How do we get beyond that reality? What do we need to understand to create any kind of connection, let alone a friendship?

Glance with us for a moment in the rearview mirror. How do kids make friends? When we are young, we develop friendships on the fly. Mostly, they come from play. When I was young, I lived to play. Looking back, play set the stage for my first friendship.

My parents moved from Oakland, California, to south India when I was three years old. The next five years framed how I see the world to this day. But the year we returned to the States framed how I see *friendship*. We came to Springfield, Missouri, in the summer of 1950. The Blue Mountains of southwest India were as different from the Ozark Mountains of southwest Missouri as curried chicken was from biscuits and gravy.

It was there that I got my first bike, a bright red Schwinn. That bike became my ticket to a world of Royal Crown Colas and Eskimo Pies saturated in Ozark accents and open-door hospitality. Those were good times. And John David made them better.

John David lived three doors up from us on Williams Street on the north edge of Springfield. Born within two months of each other in the spring of 1942, he and I had *chemistry*. Whatever that means, we had it. We were Marco Polos on bikes, racing through the nearby

local zoo and county fairgrounds, ranging out, when time and parents allowed, to Doling Park and the James River.

We only lived in Springfield one year, but that year was filled with fishing and hiking and spelunking through caves. The days were riddled with BB gun wars, wrestling matches, and games of every kind. The greater the challenge meant the greater the fun.

When we explored Doling Park Lake that spring, we found the tepid water at the lake's edge to be a perfect hatching site for tadpoles. Hundreds of tadpoles. Huge tadpoles. Tadpoles with oversized heads and sweeping tails. We became hunters. They became the hunted. Armed with Folgers coffee cans nailed to scrap-furring strips, we captured a bunch of those denizens of the shallows.

We took them back to the unfinished concrete basement of the Foth house and put them in a galvanized washtub. I don't remember what we fed them or how many survived the trauma. All I remember is being amazed when tails fell off and legs grew. In a few weeks, on a humid June night, the full-throated baritone songs of their cousins back at the lake filled the darkness. And we knew that something wondrous had happened.

Looking back on that year, another wondrous thing had happened: I had made a friend. My very first real friend. A friend to talk to and play with. A friend to fight and dream with. A friend with whom I could morph and grow. A friend for the adventure called life.

We left Springfield for Oakland, California, in August of 1951. John David and I would connect every so often over the next decades, but it would be more than forty years before we lived near each other again. Then it would be in Washington, DC. By that time, John

David Ashcroft had served twice as attorney general of Missouri, twice as governor, one term as senator, and—during our years in DC—would become the seventy-ninth attorney general of the United States.

Relationships come and go. Some are for a season; others just for a moment. But some are for a lifetime. At this writing, John David and I have been friends for over sixty-five years!

That said, 1950 is gone forever. How people relate to each other today has been transformed. We live in a high-tech, digital world that promotes connections which often mimic relationship, but are far from what we actually yearn for when we look for meaningful community. Through our network and connections, we can have a feeling of being close without real touching. Dr. Sherry Turkle of MIT, in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*, puts it this way:

Technology proposes itself as the architect of our intimacies. . . . Digital connections and the sociable robot may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other even as we are tethered to each other.⁴

Please understand. I love technology and social media. The ease that it offers in discovering the world is a playground for guys like me. To hear from our friends on Facebook or see our twelve grandkids' grins on Skype is wonderful. But sometimes what we *think* is happening *isn't* happening. Like an old North Carolinian friend of mine said so often, "What's happenin' ain't what's goin' on!"

The world of technology and social media can present itself in an

alluring way, but it often gives me more than I want and less than I need. It changes daily. Platforms and devices shift like the weather. It offers me a lot of things and takes me lots of places. Specifically, it takes me *wide*. Where it cannot easily take me is *deep*. So, where do I go to find deep?

There is built into each of us the need not just to connect but the need to engage. As we will see, we discover ourselves as we discover each other. We adapt to change, but we yearn for stability. We love to have wings, but we also need roots. *Friendship can deliver both wings and roots.*

You already know I'm an older guy. I like to think I won't be officially old until I'm ninety. But, at this writing, I *am* on my seventy-fifth trip around the sun. So life has worked me over a bit. In the process, I've discovered that certain things make us human and certain things make life work. Old Archimedes, the greatest scientist of his day, spoke to that idea. Born in 287 BC, he described how levers work and gave us one of the most quotable lines in history: "Give me a place to stand, and I'll move the earth." It's a physics principle and a great metaphor.

Where *can* you stand to get a solid footing in life? Where *can* you really be grounded?

Ruth and I have a bias: *get relationships right and everything else follows*. Our first seven years of life were spent in very different spaces geographically, but they had a common theme: relationship was king.

We were both born in California. I was an Oakland guy, and she was a San Joaquin Valley girl. I was city. She was farm. Then things changed. At the age of three, I left all extended family and sailed to India with my parents and sister. Ruth stayed in ranch and farming

country north of Modesto surrounded by grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins. They were her best friends.

She could run two hundred yards through a peach orchard and up the back stairs straight into her grandmother's kitchen. It was there with her grandma that she would discover canning and baking with all its delights. It was in that farmhouse that the smell of fresh-baked peach cobbler was tied to the love of her grandma—one of the deepest bonds Ruth has ever had. And it's with her still!

I, on the other hand, was running the decks of the MS *Gripsholm* (Swedish liner converted to troop ship) all across the North Atlantic from Jersey City to Alexandria, Egypt. Then, on to Bombay, India, on the RMS *Samaria* (British liner converted to troop ship) with more of the same. Churning through the chop and swells of the seas, we befriended fascinating people from around the world every day on the fantail or promenade deck or over lunch in the dining room. To this day, when I breathe in salt air, I am there again, a three-year-old finding new friends at every turn. That joy has never left!

With those scenes as a backdrop, we write this book with one thought in mind: *let's make sure of relationships*. The siren song of the immediate is all around us. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO) is so real that *distracted* and *overwhelmed* can easily define our lives. And that intimate cyber world—alive in your pocket, on your wrist, or embedded in your glasses—delivers big time. We get that. But to paraphrase Shakespeare, "*Wide* is easy, like the wind; *deep* is hard to find." Deep doesn't just happen. It happens when you get sugar on a kitchen floor and flour on your blouse front and Grandma chuckles. It happens when you explore a ship from funnel to anchor chain and your dad

makes sure you don't get lost. It happens when you become the greatest tadpole hunters of all time!

The ancient prose of Ecclesiastes 4:9–12 says it best:

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.

These words speak to the effectiveness of our lives. When two or three walk together, it's the best.

In that spirit, as you hike trails or take road trips, gather in twos and threes for serious talk or a screaming football afternoon, have a hot beverage while munching on a Cinnabon or gluten-free something, maybe, just maybe, a few of those relationships will get tagged with that wonderful word, *friend*.

To make a friend and be called a friend is a worthy goal.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle said it so well, "Friendship is a kind of excellence and furthermore is very necessary for living."⁵

Above all, friendship does not depend on sameness. It is way more

than hanging out with folks of common origin or religion or personality. After all, if sameness of personality were a litmus test, Ruth and I shouldn't work. Friendship—true, deep friendship—is found in a desire to know and the willingness to be known. It is choosing to walk with another person through whatever comes. A lasting friend knows you and still likes you. And a lasting friend, at the end of the day, is quite simply *there*.

When all is said and done, Ruth may be peach cobbler and I may be salt air, but we know what it's like to be known.

And we've been friends for more than fifty years.

That's what really matters.

RUTH'S THOUGHTS

Half a century! That's a long time to be friends. Especially when you're as different as peaches and salt air! Let me explain:

Dick is a man of many words. Most of them spoken. He believes that people want to know what he is thinking, so he talks. If no one was present to listen, he could probably talk to a wall. I am a woman of few words. Before I speak, I must mull things over and decide if anything I'm thinking is worth saying. Often I decide that it isn't.

Dick is very curious about others and life in general, and he uses most of his words to engage people. People on trains or in airplanes. People at the bank or in grocery stores. Many times he engages with people he has never met before. He sees them as friends-in-the-making. He thinks he can never have too many

friends. So he has a gazillion friends. That's why he's writing a book about friendship.

Why am I helping him? I'm trying to figure that out. It's certainly not because it's easy for me to make friends. I'm more of an introvert, and to be honest, it's never been my goal to have a lot of friends. Just a few good ones—and most of them family. Until the age of seven, I grew up surrounded by family—my mother's parents and their eight children and many grandchildren. Until that age, I didn't need any other friends; these were the most important people in my life. When a move to another state necessitated making new friends, I chose three others: Ruby, Ruth, and Regina. We were the 4 Rs. In high school Mary Anne and Liz were my best friends.

Then I met Dick. At times I have been quite jealous of his uncanny ability to make a stranger a friend. He comes alive and gains energy by being with people—a lot of people! He would be very lonely going through life with just a couple of good friends. Being with lots of people drains me, and I need a good dose of solitude afterward. Put me in a room with strangers and it can turn into the loneliest place on earth. Small talk doesn't come easy for me. I am much more comfortable having tea and a chat with a couple of friends or being introduced to folks I don't know by sharing personal stories around the dinner table.

I certainly can't say, like Dick, that I've never met a stranger, but I am grateful for the wonderful friends we share—and often those friendships began as a result of Dick's engaging personality. It's taken us many years to come to a place where we feel

comfortable and happy doing what we do best. I take care of the everyday details of our household and bake apple pies, while he travels the world and adds some spice and adventure. We value our friendship. It has become a safe place where we can be ourselves and welcome the differences that push us to grow.

Whether you are someone like Dick, who loves to be surrounded by friends, or like me, who is content with a trusted few, your uniqueness will help you build some great friendships if you are willing to accept others as they are. People you meet who are quite different in personality can lend balance to your perspectives and open up a whole new world to you.

Making a friend takes time and effort and perseverance. As an introvert, sometimes I've felt that it might be easier to go it alone, rather than invest in another friendship. These are my true feelings, especially when a location change has necessitated leaving behind some good friends, and making new ones seems daunting. But that's when I must stop and remind myself how lonely life would be without good friends—people who are there for me in all kinds of circumstances.

So why is this introvert helping her very outgoing, extroverted husband write this book? I'll answer that question now. I'm writing because I think there may be quite a few of you who are like me. And I think we introverts have something to say about building a few strong, lasting relationships. We may not have dozens of friends, but we're happy with the friendships we do have. I am writing to say that there is a place for us too—even if we don't use a lot of words.

FIRST THINGS

Recognize What's
True About Life

The Great Alone

The most terrible poverty is loneliness, and the feeling of being unloved.

—Mother Teresa of Calcutta

On January 26, 2014, at New York City’s Presbyterian Hospital, Pete Seeger lay dying.

The ninety-four-year-old iconic singer and composer of “If I Had a Hammer” and “Where Have All the Flowers Gone?” had been the face of folk music and social commentary since the day he dropped out of Harvard in 1938 to ride his bicycle across the country.

When the phone rang, it was Arlo Guthrie, son of his old friend Woody. Pete and Arlo had played many concerts together all over the country. After the call, he posted this to Facebook: “I simply wanted him to know that I loved him dearly, like a father in some ways, a mentor in others and just as a dear friend a lot of the time.”¹

At 3 a.m. on January 27, Pete breathed his last. He died a man known and loved. Who wouldn’t want that? No rational person would choose to die alone or unloved. Nothing could be emptier than that.

Between us, Ruth and I have lived in California, Oregon, India, Missouri, Illinois, Washington, DC, and now Colorado. We have met

thousands of people and invested thousands of dollars in homes, cars, causes, travel, children, grandchildren, food, and a myriad of other things. We have discovered something in our nearly one hundred fifty combined trips around the sun: *apart from the great ideas that move us, life revolves around two things—relationships and money.* And only one of those makes us rich.

When we say, “Boy, she had a rich life!” we are not talking properties or portfolios. Those things can evaporate overnight. What creates real wealth is *friendship*. A rich life shows up in a phone call to a dying man letting him know one more time how much he is cared for.

The question is, How do we begin to build that kind of friendship? You’d think it would begin with knowing what we want. But sometimes we move forward by knowing what we *don’t* want.

When my parents divorced in the early 1960s, I had a choice to make. I could submit to my fear, which entertained the idea that the patterns leading to the collapse of their marriage were genetic. Which meant that I must expect what happened to them to happen to me. Or, I could do something else. I could say to myself, “Whatever I need to do *not* to end up there, that’s what I want!” I think we respond to many traumas that way. Disoriented, our emotions shattered, we say, “Whatever we need to do *never* to let *that* happen again, let’s do *that*.” We frame a positive action from a negative experience. We say “No!” to the thing that steals life and “Yes!” to the thing that gives it.

FROM NEGATIVE TO POSITIVE

Is God doing that very thing when he uses *not* in the first pages of the Torah? The grand sweep of design, covenant, and truth are all there

and worthy studies in themselves. The Genesis creation account is punctuated six times with the phrase “it was good.” The last verse of chapter 1 even says, “God saw all that he had made, and it was *very* good.”

But eighteen verses later in chapter 2, the subject of relationship is brought into focus with this sentence: “It is *not good* for the man to be alone.” Adam has been created from the dust of the earth and the breath of life (see 2:7). He looks good and whole. But Yahweh says, in effect, “We’re not done yet.” So Eve is created. Together, they reflect who God is.

Here’s the deal: it is clear that relationship existed before Adam and Eve. God was always about relationship. When he says, “Let *us* make man in *our* image,” he is talking about relationship, which is in the very DNA of the Creator. So, when we hear “It is *not* good for the man to be alone,” our gut says, “Aha! That’s true!”

But, why tell us what we are *not* created for? Because it’s simply impossible to misunderstand those ten words—“It is *not* good for the man to be alone.” From childhood to old age, we all know what alone feels like.

In February of 2015, I interviewed three friends at a breakfast for business leaders in Charlottesville, Virginia. In that room of two hundred bright minds and lots of success, we explored roots and vision and faith. About two-thirds of the way into the interview, I asked the three—John Ashcroft (former Attorney General of the United States), Vern Clark (former Chief of Naval Operations), and Curt Richardson (cofounder of Otter Products)—this question: “At what moment in your life and career did you feel the most alone?” The room went absolutely still. Dead silent. Slowly their responses came. One had twice

endured undeclared bankruptcy. One had to fire a subordinate, effectively ending the young man's career. One had suffered through a family tragedy. As each man answered, you could hear murmured assent. Everyone knew alone.

To be clear, alone is not the same as solitude. Alone just happens. Solitude is a choice. Theologian Paul Tillich articulated this distinction beautifully when he said, "Language . . . has created the word 'loneliness' to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word 'solitude' to express the glory of being alone."² One is toxic, while the other is life giving.

The alone we speak of here is the toxic kind. That alone is unpredictable. Almost anything can trigger it. Aloneness unchecked turns us in on ourselves and destroys perspective. The gathered pain is an inch-by-inch accelerating slide off an emotional cliff. It is isolating. Left unresolved, it is a cancer.

That's why isolation is used for punishment. Emotional pain is the teacher. Alone is a time-out, when I disobey as a little guy. Alone is what happens when I behave badly as a teen and get suspended from school. When I break the law as an adult, I am separated from society and go to prison. If I am disruptive in prison, they put me where? *Solitary confinement*.

Who chooses to be alone and disoriented in the dark? No one. Who really wants to experience moments of unbridled joy or great hardship by themselves? No one. *Human contact is life itself*.

Flying home to California from the East Coast in the spring of 1992, I watched the young man sitting next to me grade English papers. Turns out he taught literature at a high school near our home. He was returning from an event where his retired navy officer father had

been honored. He told me that his dad, a navy flier in the Vietnam War, had been shot down and spent several years in the infamous Hanoi Hilton prison camp. Held in isolation for weeks and months on end, prisoners used a tapping code for talking through the walls. Messaging through stone saved them. Life was found in another person, in another universe only twelve inches away.

I asked the young man, “How was your father different when he came home after those years?” He looked at me and simply said, “I loved him. When he left, he was a hard-driving high-tech fighter jock.” Then, pausing with a half smile, he said, “But when he came home, he was a human being.”

There you have it. Human contact is the name of the game, a mirror reflecting who we are and what we might become. It gives our lives texture and depth. It gives hope to the future and perspective to the past. Face it. The need to connect with another human being is the place we all begin.

Our earliest connection is mother and child. Studies show that as early as four months into a pregnancy a baby in utero hears its mother’s heartbeat and is so comfortable in that watery womb world. Then comes the moment of delivery and the scary, intense journey out the birth canal to that bright-lighted new world populated by giants! A wise OB-GYN nurse places the newborn on the mother’s stomach or at her breast. In that moment, a traumatized infant with ear pressed against the mom’s chest hears the familiar beat once again. And all is well.

Scientists use the phrase *attachment theory* to describe the needed bond between a parent and child, while the phrase *attachment disorder* describes what happens when that connection is disrupted. John

Bowlby, a British psychoanalyst, first came up with attachment theory. He was trying to understand the intense distress observed in infants who had been separated from their parents. Bowlby observed that separated infants would go to extraordinary lengths (for example, crying, clinging, frantically searching) to prevent separation from their parents or to reconnect to a missing parent.³

Might it be that all of us, because we are fallen, experience some kind of attachment disorder? Wasn't that the consequence of being sent away from Eden? I find myself in one place when I belong in another?

We all remember places when aloneness has grabbed us. October 17, 1989, at 5:04 p.m. is time-stamped in my psyche. Driving over Highway 17 in the Santa Cruz Mountains toward Oakland, California, where I was to speak at a fund-raiser, the world exploded. Eleven miles down in the earth's crust, tectonic plates under gigantic pressure shifted three feet.

That 6.9 Richter-scale moment, later named the Loma Prieta earthquake, destroyed much of downtown Santa Cruz, flattened freeways in Oakland, set parts of San Francisco ablaze, and collapsed a section of the San Francisco–Oakland Bay Bridge. With the road cracking, huge trees whipsawing, and landslides covering roads, I somehow made it off the mountain to the town of Los Gatos. Hundreds of people milled in the streets. Bricks and glass littered sidewalks like confetti.

One thought and one thought only overwhelmed me: *I must get back to those I love*. Finding a pay phone, I dialed home. The after-shocks made the pavement shake under my feet, as sirens wailed and people shouted. And, the Great Alone had me by the throat. When Ruth said "Hello," tears came.

You've been there haven't you? When a phone call didn't just change your day—it changed your world. When what you had feared for months really did come upon you. When some failure of yours caused people to stop talking or turn away when you entered the room? And the ground shakes.

No one is impervious to feeling alone. Any trauma at any age can disorient us. When it does, the Great Alone waits in the wings. And this is not a religious or moral phenomenon; the dilemma is not a function of ethics or art or politics or age. It happens because we are human. American author John Steinbeck reflected: “We are lonesome animals. We spend all our life trying to be less lonesome.”

Leanne Payne put that reflection in context when she wrote,

We are lonely, then, because we are separate. . . . Born lonely, we try hard to fit in, to *be* the kind of person that will cause others to like us. Craving and needing very much the affirmation of others, we compromise, put on any face, or many faces; we do even those things we do not like to do in order to fit in. We are bent . . . toward the creature, attempting to find our identity in him. . . . fallen man is trapped in the continual attempt to find his identity in the created rather than the Uncreated.⁴

When fractured relationships are the expected and alone becomes the order of the day, the distance and separation we feel is like leaving Eden all over again. As Adam and Eve walked out of the garden, the Great Alone was waiting.

Okay, that happened. We get it.

But that's *not* how it needs to stay. And that's *not* where we are meant to stay.

RUTH'S THOUGHTS

You sit as one apart—
 so self-possessed, so sure, so unafraid.
I quickly judge you by mind's eye
 and say, "So unlike me."
Hugging my fears, I sigh
 "No chance we could be friends."
But when you turn and look at me,
 it's in your lonely gaze I see
 that we are family.

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