Spiritual Friends

Most of the time what we need is not the advice of an expert. It's a friend's wisdom.

Spiritual counsel, easy prayerful conversation between companions engaged in a common task, is less and less frequent. But when Jesus designated his disciples "friends" (John15:15) in that last extended conversation he had with them, he introduced a term that encouraged the continuing of conversation. "Friend" sets us in a nonhierarchical, open, informal, spontaneous company of friends of Jesus, who verbally develop relationships of responsibility and intimacy by means of conversation. Characteristically, we do not make pronouncements to one another; we simply talk out whatever feelings or thoughts in our hearts as Jesus' friends.

Beyond teaching and preaching, there are other ways of using words which are just as important, if not as conspicuous: questions and conversations, comments and ruminations, counsel and suggestion. It is a quieter use of language and mostly takes place in times and places that are not set apart for religious discourse. It conveys

The usual phrase to designate informal, unplanned exchanges in the Christian community is "spiritual counsel…" Spiritual counsel doesn't speak with the authority of preaching; and it isn't capable of the precision of teaching … it necessarily occupies a far more modest place – reticent, shy, awkward. In fact, I am reluctant to use the word, "spiritual counsel," for the phrase might carry the connotations of "elevated" or "holy." And far more often than not, it consists of apparently non-urgent, non-religious concerns. Just the day by day business of following Jesus, one step after another, wondering how on earth the Holy Spirit is bringing anything worthy of being called fruit out of the gravel and weeds of my life … how about those long stretches of "ordinary time?" The conversations that take place in the church parking lot after Sunday worship are as much a part of the formation of Christian character as the preaching from the sanctuary pulpit. . . . But conversation, as such, though honored by our ancestors, is much neglected today as a form of Christian discourse.

Eugene Peterson in The Wisdom of Each Other: A Conversation Between Spiritual Friends

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Another type of peer relationship is a special gift from God. We call it the "close buddy." To have a close buddy in your relational network brings tremendous blessing and strength not found in any other relationship. This relationship is characterized by unrestricted openness, trust, commitment, and a high sense of mutual accountability or sense of responsibility for one another. The close buddy relationship is epitomized by Jonathan and David, whom we discussed at the beginning of this chapter. You may want to review that or read about it in 1 Samuel 16-23.

Obviously, in any relationship beyond acquaintance each person has a need for chemistry or compatibility, but that is not often obvious until the people get to know one another and pursue a friendship. In the close buddy relationship, a mutual appreciation and respect emerges. Close buddies don't see differences as problems, but rather as complementing strengths in the relationship. As friends discover and affirm common goals and values, and openness and trust grow, the opportunity to move the relationship to a close buddy emerges. What moves people from friends to close buddies is a mutual commitment to the pursuit of a deeply meaningful goal. Out of this will grow a sense of responsibility for one another that will not be reached alone. It also provides accountability for integrity and inner-life growth, which is vital for those who desire to finish well.

Stanley and Clinton in Connecting