

Developing a Personal Support System

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Scripture: A friend loveth at all times. A brother in born
for adversity. Proverbs 17:17

I grew up in Waco, Texas . . . at 1825 Fort, to be exact. At 1822 Fort lived the Ed Symes family. The Symes had three sons. Their son Billy was my age. The most enjoyable day in my life was a day I spent with Billy at his dad's dairy farm near Waco. We fished for crawdads with string and pieces of bacon, picked wild plums and put them in an old rusty Brer Rabbit Syrup can we had found, and had a wonderful, wonderful day together.

I cannot remember Billy and me fussing much, but one day we did while he was at my house, and I asked him to go home. Pretty soon after that the Symes family moved to Gallatin, Tennessee. Billy and I were 11 and 12 at the time. Through all these years we had no contact with each other, but each year as a carload of us from the Baptist Building would go from Little Rock to Louisville to visit with Arkansas students enrolled at Southern, I would see the sign pointing to Gallatin on the highway between Nashville and Louisville.

Each year I would determine to try to locate Billy. Finally I wrote the mayor of Gallatin, and he responded and told me where each of the three sons lived. I located Billy in St. Louis. One of the first things Billy said was, "Tom, do you remember the time you sent me home?" "Billy," I said, "I've remembered that for fifty years. I'd hoped you had forgotten."

Today Billy is part of my support system, even though he arrived late. We write, talk by phone, visit. When he realized that I was having some difficulty in my

early days of retirement, Billy hopped on an airplane and came down to give me the Meyers-Briggs.

If ever there was a time when you and I need a support system, it is now. The world becomes more impersonal everyday. One can "go to church" in television and not know a person at the church or ever touch the pastor. One can have an active checking account and never step a foot in the bank. I heard of a lady who was so lonely that she would call for information and the time and temperature just to have contact with people, but soon information cost money and time and temperature were recorded. A student at Florida was found dead in his college apartment weeks after his death. There were several eviction notices on his door and the TV was still on. Christmas had passed and no one had missed him.

I will never forget a conversation I had most of the night with a campus director in South Arkansas. Monticello is a small town, and the college is several miles out of town. Our director was single, and probably had little emotional support. At two or three in the morning my friend said, "I'm neither fish nor fowl. I am not a preacher and have no pulpit. I'm not a professor and have no classroom." Tragically we soon lost him as a campus minister. I had failed to help him realize that he was in the most important spot in Southern Baptist Life, the local campus. I have no doubt that the most important, the most nurturing, and the most prophetic position in Southern Baptist life is the local campus job.

There are levels of support systems and levels on intimacy in them. The Association of Southern Baptist Campus Minister is a professional support system, and every Baptist Student Director/Campus Minister in the country should be a member. We need each other and have much to learn from each other.

There are other similar professional support groups. If you serve in a large city where Baptists are strong, there are other Baptist student workers in the city, and you probably already have regular meeting times. A large majority of campus ministers work on campuses where other denominational campus workers are assigned, and there is a religious campus workers

organization where one can both give and receive. All of these groups give professional support.

Perhaps there is even a greater need for close, personal one-to-one relationships. My dentist and I have met once a week for 25 years. Sometimes we talk about church and pastor problems. Sometimes we talk about our marriages and our children. The most helpful times, however, are when we talk about "me" problems. If Sidney Jourard is correct, we are still not "out of the woods." Jourard says that none of us is safe until there is a least one person who knows everything about us, and Buddy and I are still in the process of self disclosure.

Let me suggest some principles of building or improving your own support system.

1. Be a friend, first of all, to yourself. Bernard of Clairieux says there are four steps to spiritual maturity:

- A. The love of self for self's sake. This is an infantile approach. One can almost see a baby and a pacifier. But it is a step.
- B. The love of God for self's sake. This is an adolescent step and quite selfish. It is using God. It is foxhole religion.
- C. The love of God for God's sake. This is adult. This is mature religion. I would have thought this was "arrival." But Bernard says there is one final step:
- D. The love of self for God's sake. This was a shocker, but then I saw it. The most difficult person for me to love and the most difficult person for me to forgive is myself. This is the final step to maturity.

2. Keep your relationships honest, unless to do otherwise would harm someone. Those who know me well know that I have a close friend from Iran, Rezy Mobarak. Rezy was a student at Arkansas Tech when I first met him. Later I married him in our home, one of our sons played the guitar, a next door neighbor bought flowers, and my wife made cake and punch. The couple spent their honeymoon in one of our Baptist Student Centers. Talk about an inexpensive wedding!

Rezy works for New York Life in Little Rock and provided our muscular dystrophy son with the only job he

I have had with each other there have been two very difficult ones. We both became very angry with each other.

I do not know anyone who cares more for people than Rezy. I do not know anyone who goes out of his way to help people as much as Rezy. I do not have a lot of friends whom I can call at 2:00 in the morning if I need help. I have called Rezy and would do so again if I needed help. One of the reasons we are so close is that we have been honest with our feelings with each other, even our anger.

So often in life we come against a brick wall. The pain is so intense at times. One of the ways God comes to us in times like these is in other people. They are his language. And God has come to me in this Moslem from Iran.

3. Speak clearly your needs and listen well for other's needs. It is hard for some of us to ask for help. Yet we get angry when people don't do for us what they should. "He ought to know I wanted that." "She ought to have known I needed that." Many times others do not know know because we don't speak clearly our needs. And we also ought to listen well. Otherwise we won't realize others' needs. The average speaker speaks 125 words a minute. We can process over twice that many words in a minute. So true listening depends on what we do with the "intervals" and the "spaces."

4. One doesn't do for a friend (or expect to receive from a friend) what he or she can and should do for himself or herself. The key words in this principle are "should do." AlAnon says that "rescuing" or "enabling" others robs people of being responsible for themselves. It keeps people immature. It says to people, "you are not capable of taking care of yourself so I am going to take care of you."

A former student called me from California. He was drinking, I think, and it was two in the morning. He was calling to tell me goodbye and said that he was going to take his life. Naturally I was frightened. I had his address at the office, but not at the house. I could not even remember the name of the city in which he lived and so could not call the police without going to town.

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I stayed in bed. I had told the young man that the choice was his and that he would solve no problems by taking his own life. Fortunately for everyone he did not carry out his threat. I am reminded of a story John Sanford tells in *Ministry Burnout*. He tells of a minister who had several people he was counseling who threatened suicide. The minister was always fearful that he was not doing enough and that one would commit suicide. Finally he could take it no longer and directed his anger toward God. He told God that He was responsible for these young people and that if He did not want them to end their own lives He would have to do something about it. He concluded by telling God that he was not carrying the responsibility any longer. Lightning did not strike, and no one committed suicide.

5. Be vulnerable. I learned a phrase from the *Faith at Work* people that I think is good advice in building a support system: lead from weakness. People admire our strengths, but they relate to our weaknesses. We do not help people by telling them of our successes, but we do help them when we share with them our weaknesses. In one of John Claypool's sermons he says that if a man will confess his sins and ask for forgiveness he makes it possible for others to do the same. I have wondered if a part of the problem in our Southern Baptist Convention could be related to our absence of vulnerability. At most of our meetings all we hear are success stories, never stories of failure. I heard Tom Skinner say that instead of using Miss America for a testimony at one of our BSU meetings, we should be using the girl in the wheelchair or the guy whose dropping the pass in the end zone lost the game and the championship for his team. Almost everyone can relate to these people.

Be vulnerable.

6. Don't be afraid to touch or be touched. The popular author and lecturer Leo Buscaglia has a lot to say about our fear of touching. Buscaglia mingles with his audience after he speaks. He says that he never fails to have an older woman hug him and tell him that he is the first man to hug her since her husband died. And when

he hugs a man often he is told that the man has not been hugged since he was a boy and that the experience is like coming home again.

Think of all the times in the New Testament that we are told that Jesus touched someone, and the touching was often part of Jesus' healing someone. Our touching can be a part of someone's healing, and our being touched can be a part of our own healing.

7. Carry your share in a relationship. No marriage is healthy when one does all of the giving. No marriage is healthy when one does all of the receiving. And no support system is healthy when someone monopolizes the giving or receiving. Of course if one is just coming into a group, he or she may not be able to carry his or her share at first.

8. Gain strength from inanimate objects also. Inanimate objects can help us find strength for ourselves. Key words are retreat, sabbath, silence, and nature. Enjoy Sarah Teassdale's blue waves whitened on a cliff, her soaring fire that sways and sings, and her children looking, holding wonder like a cup. A few days of retreat can help one sort out things and help them see how they are goofing up relationships.

9. Allow God to be the ultimate basis for your support system. The Christian view is that no support system is complete without God, Jehovah God, creator of heaven and earth, the Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ who wants to help us, wants to support us. But in the dark of the night our soul cries out, "Where are you?"

The founder of the Carmelites prayed a wonderful truth when she said, "No wonder, Lord, you have so few friends when you treat those few you do have so poorly." You and I both have been there.

In his book *Reaching Out*, Henri Nouwen tells of a former student coming back for a visit. He told Nouwen he had no problems to talk about this time, no questions to ask, no need for counsel or advice. He just wanted to celebrate some time with Nouwen. So they sat on the ground facing each other. Then there was small chit chat. Then silence - not an embarrassing silence, but a

The two could hear the noise of passing cars, and then the noise of someone emptying a trash can.

The silence that grew between them was warm, gentle, and vibrant. The former student said, "It is good to be here." Nouwen replied, "Yes, it is good to be together again."

There was silence again, and a deep peace filled the empty space between them. Then the young man said, "When I am with you, it is as if I am in the presence of Christ."

Nouwen did not protest, but said, "It is the Christ in you that recognizes the Christ in me: From now on, no matter where you go and no matter where I go, the ground between us will be holy ground."

So let us leave New Orleans saying, "no matter where you go and no matter where I go, the ground between us will be holy ground."