Being There

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I want to begin this column by sharing with you one of the worst things I ever did. I was only 18 years old, but that was no excuse. Late one night I got a call from a close friend. "My dad's on the way to the hospital," he said. "It's really bad." His voice was shaking.

I was shocked. I didn't know what to say. More important, I didn't know what to do. I told my friend that I was so sorry. I told him I'd pray for him. And then I went to sleep. I called my friend the next morning. No answer. I asked around. He was at the hospital.

The same pattern repeated for two long days: I'd call. No answer. I'd ask about him and find out he was at the hospital. But I didn't go. To this day, I can't replicate the thought processes that kept me away. I remember feeling some irrational confidence that his father would be fine. I remember being busy. I remember feeling not quite prepared to face such pain and loss. Then I got the call: My friend's father had died.

I did go to the visitation. I knew — at the very least — that's what friends do. What happened next is burned into my heart. When I walked in the door, my friend came up to me, looked at me with immense hurt and said, "Where were you?"

I had no answer then. I have no answer now. I failed, and the older I get the better I understand the magnitude of my failure. I had violated the first commandment of friendship: presence. Simply being there was all that had been required. I couldn't pass even that one simple test.

Last week I read a poignant piece arguing that the male loneliness epidemic was afflicting a surprising group: American fathers. In one sense, these were men who were surrounded by love. They were typically married. They had children. Yet they still felt alone. They struggled to make friends.

The longer we march through these anxious, sad and divided times, the more I'm convinced that the bigger story, the story behind the story of our bitter divisions and furious conflicts, is our loss of belonging, our escalating loneliness. And one of the markers is the extraordinary decline of friendship.

According to an American Perspectives Survey, between 1990 and 2021, the percentage of Americans reporting that they had no close friends at all quadrupled. For men, the number had risen to 15 percent. Almost half of all Americans surveyed reported having three close friends or fewer.

The statistics raise the question: Why? I'd suggest that a big part of the answer lies in the story I told above. Ever since I've started thinking and writing about America's loss of belonging, I've been asking people what virtue they value most in a friend. I've asked people who are religious and secular, white-collar and blue-collar, men and women, Black and white. And it's remarkable how often the answer boils down to the single virtue I mentioned above, of presence, of being there.

Time and again I hear versions of this answer, one that grows more salient the longer you live and the greater the headwinds you face: "A friend is there when you need him." "A friend picks up the phone when you call at 2 a.m." "A friend stands with you."

The temptation of absence destroys the virtue of presence, and that absence, as I showed as a younger man, need not come through shocking neglect or selfishness. It can occur simply because you're busy. I've seen it with my own eyes. [Most Americans make their close friends through work](). So what happens when friends change jobs and they're suddenly just gone?

There are times, too, when friends can almost seem to disappear owing to parenthood, especially if their kids play sports or are engaged in extracurricular activities. "This summer is rough for me. Travel soccer is destroying our calendar." And yes, you often make friends with other parents while you watch your kids play. But next year your child might be on a new team, with new parents around, and all the parent friends you just made are suddenly gone.

I've never met a person who *wants* to lose friends. But I've met many, many people who suffer from loneliness and say that they just "lost touch." What happened? I ask. "Life happened," they say. At each new stage of life it was easier to say no to a friend than to say no to work, to a spouse, to one's kids. And while each individual no can be understandable and even justifiable, the accumulation of noes suffocates friendships, even without an argument, a breach or a betrayal.

During the early pandemic, when Zoom calls were a brand-new thing to many of us, I received an unusual invitation from a reader, who wrote that he and his old college friends all read me and would I mind joining one of their weekly Zooms? It sounded fun, so I said yes. When I joined I was struck by the obvious joy of their friendship — the inside jokes, the easy camaraderie. They were much younger than me, in their 30s, and before we signed off, they asked if I had any last thoughts.

Stay together, I said. It's going to get hard. Your kids are young. Your careers are just starting to take off. But stay together. Be there, even when it's hard. Even when it's inconvenient. After I got off the call, I kicked myself for not remembering a quote by C.S. Lewis: "Friendship is unnecessary," [he wrote](), "like philosophy, like art, like the universe itself (for God did not need to create). It has no survival value; rather it is one of those things which give value to survival."

That single quote says so much. Compared with the competing demands of family and work, in any given moment friendship can *feel* unnecessary. But as the years roll on, and countless justifiable individual absences wear down our relationships, there will come a time when we will feel their loss. But it need not be that way, especially when our simplest and highest command is merely being there.