



BECOMING
Gertrude

HOW OUR FRIENDSHIPS
SHAPE OUR FAITH

JANICE
PETERSON

Jan's words here are like a literal gift to your heart and soul. Her masterful, luminous wisdom will not only inspire and encourage you to do the hard and holy work of digging deep into true community but will gently hand you the tools necessary to become a truly safe place for someone else's heart. Her life is a living, breathing example of friendship personified, and you'll close the pages of this book a better person because of it.

ANN VOSKAMP, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Broken Way* and *One Thousand Gifts*

Spending a few hours with Jan Peterson is delicious! *Becoming Gertrude* is not only about spiritual friendship—it is a taste of the real thing. The most personal is the most universal, and this book is truth conveyed through personality. Read Jan's heart and then watch how she gently moves you forward in your faith journey. What a gift and what a delight!

R. PAUL STEVENS, professor emeritus of Marketplace Theology and Leadership at Regent College; chairman of the Institute for Marketplace Transformation

Jan Peterson's book *Becoming Gertrude* is a must-read. I find such inspiration in its life lessons that I walk away uplifted and motivated to care, accept, serve, offer hospitality, and encourage others in new ways. Her insights reveal how each of us is uniquely made and called to make a beautiful impact for the cause of love in tangible ways. I can't wait to live out this book's life-giving principles.

STASI ELDREDGE, *New York Times* bestselling author

I only recently met Jan, but her writing mirrors my experience of her: warm, direct, and insightful. We should all become Gertrude, we should all receive Gertrude, and we should all keep this book close by to read and read again.

ASHLEY CLEVELAND, Grammy-winning singer/songwriter and author

With warmth and wisdom, Janice Peterson beautifully reveals how loving others not only deepens our love for God but also brightens an often dark and lonely world. What a little gem this book is.

SUSAN MEISSNER, bestselling author of *As Bright as Heaven*

Like her welcoming friend, Gertrude, Jan Peterson welcomes her readers into a winsome, gentle conversation about the meaning and value of spiritual friendship. Through stories accumulated over decades of marriage and ministry alongside her pastor-husband, Eugene, Jan illustrates how each of us can create relationships that nurture our own soul and bless the world at the same time. I finished *Becoming Gertrude* with a reluctant sigh, because I wanted to hear more from this unpretentious and vibrant woman who possesses a true servant's heart.

KAY WARREN, cofounder of Saddleback Church

For sixty years, Jan Peterson has served Christ's church. But what stands out to me is the way she's done it. Instead of white-knuckling her way through, Jan has done this work with a gentle touch and an infectious joy. Her life is proof

that the life of pastoral ministry can be a yoke that's easy and a burden that's light. While so many are familiar with Eugene's ministry, anyone who knows the Petersons knows that Jan has made Eugene's work possible all these years. She is one of those hidden figures that makes the Kingdom of God go. As I hold this book, I rejoice because the treasury of Jan Peterson's life is now available for generations to come. Now take and read.

DANIEL GROTHE, associate senior pastor of New Life Church,
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Everyone needs a friend like Jan Peterson. She honors friendship as the sacrament it is, and in her personal and heartwarming story, *Becoming Gertrude*, Jan doesn't just celebrate this sacrament—she gently shares how to exercise our “caring muscles” in ways that truly matter. Jan's soulful and intentional approach to friendship is refreshing in this day of device-based interactions. She has inspired me, prompted me, and taught me more about the importance (and necessity!) of caring, acceptance, service, hospitality, and encouragement in our everyday, ordinary lives. The world needs more people like Jan and Eugene Peterson, who are day-to-day Christ followers in all they do—marriage, ministry, family, and friendship. *Becoming Gertrude* is a book that helps you become more like Jesus.

ANDREA SYVERSON, author of *Alter Girl: Walking Away
from Religion into the Heart of Faith*

Having spent time in the Petersons' home, I can say that Jan lives what she writes. She exudes spiritual friendship

with authenticity, passion, and grace. In our day of division, anger, and intolerance, we need people like her more than ever. Read this little gem slowly, soak it in, practice it faithfully, and live into it personally.

AARON STERN, lead pastor of Mill City Church,
Fort Collins, Colorado

We all need spiritual friends—people who will walk beside us in our journey of faith, accepting us, helping us, encouraging us, and opening their lives to us. In *Becoming Gertrude*, Jan Peterson helps us see our need for such friendship through stories and experiences from her own life. May we, like Gertrude, show the love of God to others in real and tangible ways.

CHRISTINA FOX, author of *A Heart Set Free: A Journey to Hope through the Psalms of Lament* and *Closer Than a Sister: How Union with Christ Helps Friendships to Flourish*

Having experienced firsthand the hospitality of Jan Peterson, I know that what you're holding in your hand is not really a book; it is lived wisdom. Jan shares warmly and openly about her journey into discovering her identity and ministry through the gift of spiritual friends. If the early church grew exponentially largely because of their radical hospitality, Jan's words here will be more than advice for pastors' wives; they will be a pathway for recovering our great calling to share not only the gospel but also our lives with those around us.

GLENN PACKIAM, lead pastor of New Life Downtown,
Colorado Springs, Colorado

Jan Peterson's reflections on spiritual friendship exude warmth and wisdom, just as she does. Her dedication to the practice of hospitality and faithful friendship over a lifetime is evident in every gracious word. *Becoming Gertrude* also invites us to explore our own unique calling to love and service and assures us we will never regret the journey. I am really grateful for this gem of a book.

JILL PHILLIPS, singer/songwriter, Nashville, Tennessee

Jan Peterson is more than the woman behind the man behind *The Message*. At heart, she is a friend. These words on friendship are deep waters, but the best part is that they flow so naturally from her heart. And the words in these pages are winsome and true.

ALAN BRIGGS, pastor, coach, consultant, and author of *Staying Is the New Going*, *Everyone's a Genius*, and *Guardrails*

In *Becoming Gertrude*, Jan Peterson makes friends with the truth that all are equal in the sight of the heavenly Father. In a culture addicted to leadership and hierarchy, this journey through the precious intricacies and intimacies of spiritual friendship is what our world needs. We all learn to accept the beautiful love of God, as experienced through the presence of the one sitting beside us.

LISA JOY SAMSON, author of *Quaker Summer*, artist, mother, and friend

Spiritual friendship is an idea whose time has come again. In fact, it never went out of style. In our world where so many are desperate for genuine connection, Jan Peterson

offers a refreshing call for us to go deeper with one another. I am thrilled to recommend Jan's warm account of how friendship shapes our faith.

DR. WINFIELD BEVINS, author and director of church planting at Asbury Seminary

There is much talk about spiritual friendships, but it has been going on for a long time . . . since at least the incident on the road to Emmaus! Jan has been on that road all her life—and we are invited to travel along with her, getting glimpses of what spiritual friendship actually looks and smells and tastes like when taken off its high-sounding pedestal. I was one of those who, at seminary, were taken under Jan's wing. That was twenty years ago. And we are still friends.

JULIE CANLIS, author of *A Theology of the Ordinary* and coproducer of *Godspeed*

Jan has written the kind of book that makes you feel as if you've had a refreshing, easy, honest conversation with her over coffee. It's a conversation that I desperately needed to have, one inspiring me to engage in the important work of caring and of receiving care. I know I will be visiting this book repeatedly when I need encouragement and clarity of vision from a spiritual friend.

PHAEDRA JEAN TAYLOR, writer and artist



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JANICE PETERSON

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For Eugene





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INTRODUCTION

The Way of Spiritual Friendship

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you:
Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping,
eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—
and place it before God as an offering.

ROMANS 12:1



*W*HEN I WAS around thirteen years old, I discovered the treasure of spiritual friendship through a woman named Gertrude Floyd. Gertrude and her husband were our back-door neighbors. On summertime Saturday evenings, we usually had a cookout with the Floyds in our backyard, around a picnic table laden

Becoming Gertrude

with meat from the barbeque pit my dad had built. There was always a lot of good food—hamburgers, salads, baked beans, delicious desserts—rich conversation, and laughter around that table.

As I entered into my teen years, I was growing in my heart and soul. I had recently been confirmed in the Presbyterian church and was involved in youth fellowship, where a lot of kind folks helped me center my life in the Lord. But a good deal of that growth came from just on the other side of our backyard fence. I often found myself walking through the back gate and knocking on Gertrude's screen door, where I was always received with a warm welcome and a "Come in—I'll get us some lemonade. You go on out to the porch."

I would freely talk to Gertrude about God and Jesus and things that were bothering me about school or one of my girlfriends—anything that might be on my mind. She always listened attentively and occasionally broke in with a question for clarification or to share a story that would help illuminate what I was talking about. She was always present. Always caring.

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Those visits had a profound influence in my life. Even at thirteen, I was beginning to understand the kind of woman I wanted to be as I grew up: I wanted to be like Gertrude. Her loving friendship showed me how powerful it can be to live a life of being readily available to others—to listen, to care for them, to engage with their lives.

Several years ago, my husband, Eugene, was asked to speak to a conference of pastors and their wives in Colorado. After the first evening of worship and introductions, several women came up to me and asked if I would be willing to meet with them after breakfast each morning, the hour before the general session. The next morning, we sat in chairs around the open fireplace and talked about where we served with our husbands and what kinds of things we were wrestling with. Those were good hours together. Most of the women contributed in some way, and the honesty and wisdom that emerged through the conversations were deeply meaningful. The gathering would not have been as rich if even one of them had not come. As I listened to the women around me, I felt in my heart a quickening,

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a desire to listen more and speak into their lives when it seemed appropriate. I saw in that group the same kindness and relationship I'd seen in Gertrude—the desire to encourage, to share wisdom, not from a compelling need to speak or prove ourselves, but to care and love well the others around us.

I recently received a letter from the husband of one of these women. He told me how helpful those long-ago conversations continue to be to his wife. That is the value of profound friendship, of investing deeply in the lives of others: Our words and actions have an impact beyond what we can ever fully see.

Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker movement, said:

We cannot love God unless we love each other, and to love we must know each other. We know Him in the breaking of bread, and we know each other in the breaking of bread, and we are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet and life is a banquet, too, even with a crust, where there is companionship.

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We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love and that love comes with community.¹

I would call that community, those dear people who show us the love of God, “spiritual friendship.”

What do I mean by “spiritual friendship”? Well, let me tell you a story. A young woman once asked me if I would be her spiritual mentor. It was the first time in my life anyone had asked me that. I sat there for a few seconds before replying, “I don’t think I can do that, Jean. But what I can do is be a spiritual friend with you. If that sounds okay to you, I’d love doing that. I always think of a mentor as someone knowing more than the other person and being ‘above’ them. I think you and I could have some good sharing in our conversations that would encourage each of us—I would see our time as mutually beneficial. I probably have more life experiences to share, but you also have life to share with me, even though you are younger than me. This is a back-and-forth sharing we can do together.”

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Being in this kind of friendship means that someone cares about me and is willing to listen attentively—and I do the same for them. These kinds of friends are precious; they are not people who only take or who choose to keep me at arm’s length. No, a spiritual friend chooses to love in tangible ways and wants me to grow in the things of God.

The reason I think it’s important to distinguish spiritual friendship from the idea we know as “mentoring” is that spiritual friendship isn’t any kind of hierarchy—it’s not one person as the “expert” and the other as the “learner.” Spiritual friendship is learning to see the worth God has placed in each person and appreciating the gifts individuals have to offer. It’s being willing to share when you need to share and learn when you need to learn. It’s caring for the well-being of the other person, and letting her care for you as well. Giving and receiving. Walking side by side through different seasons of life. We are all richer for understanding not only what we have to offer the people in our lives, but understanding what they have to offer, as well.

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In my richest friendships, I've made intentional decisions to love the other person well. I've made myself available so they know I'm there to listen. I ask them questions that help me understand what they're feeling. It takes time and creativity, but the spiritual value and growth that come through these relationships are so important. We all need these kinds of spiritual friendships to weather both the good and the bad of life—to encourage others forward in their faith and to find encouragement ourselves.

And we women so often find ourselves in life situations or seasons in which we need encouragement, don't we? One thing that came up several times as I talked with pastors' wives was how much they needed someone to talk to when they were struggling with something or someone in the church. Being a pastor's wife can be very isolating. One can feel very alone. And that goes for so many of us, no matter what our role. Life itself can feel isolating. How many of us feel lonely even when we are surrounded by people? Perhaps you are home with small children and wondering when you will get to have a grown-up

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conversation. Perhaps you feel you are running ragged to-and-fro from work and feel too tired to find friends after a long day. Perhaps you simply struggle to connect with the people around you, and you wonder if anyone will ever see you for who you are.

I've felt that way myself, especially in the early days of our pastorate. Eugene was off tending to the people in our congregation, and I was at home raising young children. It was hard to find the time or energy to really get to know someone, or to be known. Which is a discouraging place to be, particularly as a follower of Jesus.

Relationship in the body of Christ is where we grow best. Of course, we must pursue our relationship with God day in and day out as well: having a quiet time in the morning, an intentional time with God, and participating in regular worship. But community is vital for spiritual growth; our friends can challenge us, sharpen us, and restore us in unique and powerful ways. We experience his presence with others just as much as when we're alone in prayer with him. In our friendships, we are pointed to him again and again, we

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are refined, and we are encouraged, even when we feel like we are failing. But when we feel isolated, we feel stuck. And I don't want to downplay the struggles of being in that place. I don't want to make it sound like there's some magical, simple solution to your isolation. It's not easy to build spiritual friendships. It's not easy to invest in the lives of those around you in a way that grows both of you more in Christ. But I can promise you this: It is absolutely worth it. The hard work you do now to carve out time, to push through weariness and discouragement, will enrich your life and your faith in ways you can't imagine. We need each other. It's just part of how we were meant to be.

I had to make that choice to reach out and find spiritual friends. Those early isolating days were a significant season in my life. I was wrestling with a fundamental question: Just who is this person Jan Peterson? And so, in the midst of all the busyness of that time, I made the decision to pursue help. I didn't know I was looking for spiritual friendship, but that's what I needed. And one person who became a spiritual friend to me in that time was Ray.

Becoming Gertrude

Eugene and I had first met Ray when he served in our town as a Roman Catholic priest. This was around the time of Vatican II, when both Catholics and Protestants were encouraged to break down the walls that had been erected in Luther's day. Eventually, Ray wrote to the Vatican, asking to be relieved of his priesthood; he became a Lutheran pastor and married one of the ex-nuns he had worked with in our town. They served in a Lutheran church west of our town, close to Washington, DC.

Our family was on vacation when I wrote to Ray, asking for advice. Eugene had invited a family in our church to come stay with us in Montana. He had been counseling them in their troubled marriage and thought it might help them to get away together and spend time with us. Frankly, I was kind of mad. No, more than mad—I was having to do on our vacation what I do the other eleven months of the year at home! More cooking and tending to the needs of others when I needed a change from all that. I'm not sure what I expected of Ray, but I just needed to talk to someone I respected and get my frustrations out in the open.

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Eugene has always encouraged me in what I do and appreciated the things I do for others, but I was in need now of an outside confidant—someone who could see things more simply without getting distracted with all the other stuff a spouse might know. Roman Catholic priests are trained to listen and give good guidance, which is why Ray seemed like the right person for me to call on. I really thought he would make a suggestion of someone in our town. He said he didn't know of anyone to suggest but that I could come and see him. So that is what I did.

When I drove the two hours to see Ray that initial time, we first caught up with each other's lives, and then he asked me to tell him again why I was so frustrated with my dear husband. Quite practically, he suggested that I talk to Eugene and express to him that I was in need of a vacation as much as he was. He was helping me see what was beneath my frustration: that as a pastor's wife, I was in ministry as much as my husband was, and Eugene and I needed to understand our common ground. But then Ray pushed me a step further. As a true spiritual friend,

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he saw that my angst was also connected to identity—to that question of who I was and what my purpose was, particularly in this season of life. He suggested that I write down for him what I saw as my gifts and how I was using them. The next month, when I went back and read my list aloud to him, we talked about the expressions of my gifts.

Ray wasn't the only person who taught me about spiritual friendship during that time. In fact, because of Ray, I learned that our spiritual friends can play different roles in our lives. Ray exhibited spiritual friendship in some of the big things in my life.

My new companion, Clare, was a friend to me in the ordinary things of life—all those things that have to be repeated over and over, day by day. I like how writer Kathleen Norris phrased it in her book title *The Quotidian Mysteries: Laundry, Liturgy and Women's Work*. Clare and I knew that language well. Caring for a home and family can often be boring, repetitive work. But we talked about how we could see all of this work as being offered up to God. She and I met weekly to talk and pray with each other

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about how we could live the ordinary things of life to the glory of God.

While our friendship was focused on those everyday rhythms, we found that God led us into deeper and even more powerful things. We learned to trust each other with the harder questions and conversations because we knew we could trust each other in the ordinary things. For example, Clare was the daughter of a Lutheran pastor, so she knew what my life as a pastor's wife was like. I was able to share what I was going through and learn from her wisdom and experience as well.

Sometimes, Clare and I would go to the Catholic church in her neighborhood and pray together the stations of the cross on a circular path in the garden. We learned that Mary, the mother of Jesus, had prayed *fiat mihi*—"be it done unto me"—and Mary's prayer became an important part of what we were doing and talking about together. When Eugene and I moved out of the state, Clare and I gave each other a simple necklace with *Fiat Mihi* embossed on the front and *F.F.* on the back—Faithful Friendship.

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As a young person, I always felt that I compartmentalized my Christianity. It was easy to see how I was supposed to follow God in the traditional rhythms of church and reading the Bible but harder to understand what it looked like in my everyday life. It always bothered me that my Christianity didn't permeate all areas of my life. I was a Christian, but that didn't always come out in all my normal, day-to-day activities. Having friends like Clare and Ray helped me integrate it into all aspects of my days—especially the ordinariness of life, where Christ is in my daily living.

In both the big and small things of life, I learned and grew more by having a friend who was processing things with me. That's why spiritual friendship is so important. God created us for community, not for living this life in Christ by ourselves.

Choosing to see friendships as an integral part of my faith brought me into a new way of living. Once a month, I would drive over to see Ray and have rich conversations with him, and every week, Clare and I met to encourage each other to live to God's honor and glory in the common, daily ordinariness of life.

Introduction

Up to that point, I had lived my Christian life compartmentally. Now, my faith was feeling more whole, more integrated, as a big part of who I was as a child of God—the person I was allowing God to shape.

When Eugene and I moved to Regent College in Vancouver, Canada, things got reversed—after being fed and growing through the investment of people like Ray and Clare, I was suddenly equipped to do the same for others, and God brought all sorts of opportunities for me to do so. That's the thing about growing spiritually—it always pushes us into new places and new experiences, and we get to pass along what we've learned.

If we are intentional in our friendships, those people can help us see how God is working in our lives. Good friends challenge us in the areas where we are weak and encourage us forward. Spiritual friendship takes us to a depth of relationship that enriches us both—it's hard to stay shallow when we decide to be honest about our relationship with God and what he is teaching us. When we invest in those sorts of friendships, every part of our lives becomes richer,

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because we are allowing God to speak into all of our experiences.

And of course, spiritual friendships are not a one-way path of growth. As we allow people to build into us, we are enabled and strengthened to build into others. In healthy friendships, we care deeply for our friends, seeking to hold them up in their weak places. We learn to lovingly accept each person's heart and gifts. We develop the desire to serve those around us. We reach out in hospitality, providing a safe and warm space for our friends to be with us. And above all, we learn to live in the rhythm of encouragement, speaking life and hope often. I have found these five elements of spiritual friendship—caring, accepting, serving, offering hospitality, and encouraging others—woven throughout my life and relationships. Each of these things overlaps and flows through the others, creating a strong cord of friendship that cannot be broken.

As you and I step forward into this book, I hope I can share a little of what I've learned so that you may both receive and give to others in rich relationship.

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I'm not here as a teacher or to tell people how to live. Everybody's got to do that on their own before God. I'm here as a friend. Let's walk together and uncover the beauty of spiritual friendship.

3. What are you currently wrestling with that would benefit from someone speaking into your life? Who do you know (even if you don't know them well!) who could provide insight and help?

4. Who in your life can you reach out to and invest in? How has God equipped you to do that?

5. Jan shares five elements of spiritual friendship that have particularly impacted her life: caring, accepting, serving, offering hospitality, and encouraging others. Which of these is hardest for you? Which of these comes easily to you?



CHAPTER 1



CARING

Choosing to See Others

. . . and place it before God as an offering.

ROMANS 12:1



How do we become caring people? When I pondered that question, one word came to my mind: *practice*. We all start out self-centered—me, me, me. In order to develop a caring spirit, we need to become intentionally aware of the needs of others. As we begin to see the needs all around us, and make it our mission to address those needs, caring for others gets worked into the fabric of our lives.

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Our first practice of caring often comes through the home we grew up in. All of us are selfish as little people. Our wants are our world. And so perhaps a parent, an older sibling, or a grandparent identified and corrected our behavior time and time again, pointing out when we were being uncaring and coaching us toward behavior that showed love for others.

Perhaps we saw a caring spirit modeled by those closest to us in our growing-up years, as I saw in my visits with Gertrude, visit after visit. My parents also showed me what it looked like to care for other people—my father particularly. And I just soaked that in. Part of growing our caring muscles, practicing how to care for someone else, is paying attention to who is doing it well around us.

If you didn't grow up in an environment where caring was normal, I'm so sorry. My heart aches for the young people I see in our community who are trying to live in the midst of painful circumstances. More and more families are broken, and more and more kids are growing up in difficult situations. But just because you grew up in a hard home doesn't mean

Caring

you can't develop rich spiritual friendships. You, too, can exercise your caring muscles. Observe someone you admire. Find someone who could sit with you and talk about what caring for people looks like. We become like those we spend the most time with. So choose to spend time with people who are caring.

But at some point, simply seeing caring in action or being told to do it isn't enough. We have to choose to look outside ourselves. We have to choose to see the hurting people in our community—or right next door. And in our friendships, we have to choose to say, "You first." What does that mean? Well, it means being slow to speak and quick to listen. What does the person in front of you need? Are you willing to make yourself uncomfortable and even inconvenienced to step into those needs with them? Maybe it's simply listening and offering words of love and encouragement, or maybe it's taking the time to help them move or to watch their kids or to make them a meal. Jesus said, "Do to others as you would have them do to you."² And "love one another; for love is of God."³ This others-focused life is the life God wants

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us to live—a life of not overlooking the needs around us but of choosing to see and deciding to care.

But—and this is important—sometimes in all that caring for others, we need to learn how to care for ourselves as well. This is different from a selfish, me-first attitude; instead, it's being aware enough to not overdo it, to take a deep breath and maybe seek out a spiritual elder or soul friend to talk to if your caring gets off-balance. We cannot care well for others if we are burned out and exhausted. We are not supposed to set our needs aside completely. We must understand when we hit our limit and when our caring for others becomes unhelpful because we're doing it from a completely empty place. And, like all aspects of spiritual friendship, this is when we need to be humble enough to receive. Let your friends care for you. Let them help you when you are in need of support, whether emotional or physical or spiritual. And as you are filled, pass the gift along.

It's appropriate that we should look at this idea of caring first, because if we do not care for others, the foundation of spiritual friendship is nonexistent. We

Caring

cannot accept, serve, show hospitality, or encourage others without first caring for them.

As we seek to care for others, we can easily limit ourselves to wherever we feel most comfortable. But to truly develop a caring spirit in our spiritual friendships, we need to be intentional, to care for people in all aspects of our lives. We can't simply choose to care for those who are easy to care about. It's like Jesus said in Luke 6:32-33 (NIV), "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? . . . And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you?" We all like to care for people who are easy to love. But caring needs to go beyond that to people who are hard to love, whether because of personality differences or relational struggles or simply the fact that they're strangers.

As we unpack this component of caring in spiritual friendship, we need to pay attention to every single aspect: caring for the larger world, caring for the needy in our communities, and caring for the people we're in regular relationship with. Keeping in mind this larger vision of caring will develop a

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compassion and sensitivity to see each and every person as God sees them, and it will help us know how best to reach out to them with care. In spiritual friendship, we need to trust God's leading for how to best care for the people he's placed in our lives. Learning to care in every aspect of our lives will help us do that.

CARING FOR THE WORLD

Caring for the larger world involves awareness, compassion, and sacrifice. We need to develop hearts that are aware of what God is doing, where people in the world are being treated unfairly or hurting, and what we can do about it. Caring always involves action. It's not just a feeling.

For me, caring in this way first emerged in the '60s, as I was faced with the issues of peace and racial justice. But as I saw the racial tensions around me and I became more and more aware of the unjust ways African Americans were treated, I knew that caring meant I needed to get involved. I joined our county's

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Fair Housing Committee to advocate for what I knew was right.

When my neighbor across the street learned of my involvement, he wasn't very happy. He was a member of St. Margaret's Catholic Church in Bel Air and was apparently getting his ears full from the priests about the injustice of unfair housing. He said to me one day, "You people who don't own your own houses can talk this way because you don't have any investment in a house. You have nothing to lose. We do. If a black family were to move into our neighborhood, our property value would go way down."

As he criticized me, I realized that a lot more was at stake than just a good idea about equality for all. What I believed couldn't just stay an idea. Standing up for what was right was going to take action. I needed to actively care for people who were being treated unjustly.

I stayed on the Fair Housing Committee.

The Catholics were being very outspoken about the issue of fair housing, so one day I asked Eugene why he didn't preach about fair housing and other

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civil rights issues. He said, “I believe if I preach biblically and show people the gospel as lived out that they’ll ‘get’ it. That they will see and grow into this from who they are learning to be and not by having it imposed on them from the outside.” I respected that. We each cared for others, but our approaches were different—his was preaching the gospel and encouraging people toward heart change, and mine was getting more actively involved in specific issues.

In the places and ways we care for the larger world around us, change doesn’t take place overnight. Growth is slow. I have learned that firsthand over the years. I know that the end results are more solid and true if change emerges out of God’s work in our hearts as he shows us how to care for the people around us. If I just do what someone tells me to do out of my Christian duty, my care for others doesn’t get embedded as deeply in my heart. If my character and conscience are informed, my care for others is more solid, more real, and more true.

As we work out our “care muscles,” we might be surprised by how our hearts expand to reach out

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further to the world around us. This was certainly true for me. Around the same time that I started working for fair housing, I began reading about world hunger. The denomination was speaking up about it, and the more I learned, the more I wanted to learn and figure out what I could do. I couldn't solve world hunger, but I could learn to see the needs of others and understand the impact of how we live here in America. I could do something tangible to remind myself of the needs around the world and help others see them as well. That's the thing about developing a heart to care for the world: You don't have to do big things. You can simply do small things right where you are.

The concern about world hunger was in the air at that time. It wasn't just something I was wrestling with—it was on the minds and hearts of people who were conscientious about the world around them. Choosing to be a part of that conversation was another way of practicing caring; I was observing the caring people around me and what they were paying attention to, and that helped me choose to pay attention to the struggles in the world around me.

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Being observant like this also sensitizes you to people around you who are less fortunate. It makes you aware of what other people are going through. Having that spirit within you helps you notice more and more and see things that are not the way they should be.

As I learned more about world hunger, I decided that a practical way for me to understand the struggles of others more deeply was to change how I cooked and ate. I got books out of the library. I bought the *More-with-Less Cookbook* by Doris Janzen Longacre. Then I came across Frances Moore Lappé's work in eating less or no meat using her study of complementary proteins in her *Diet for a Small Planet*, and I read its companion book, *Recipes for a Small Planet*, by Ellen Buchman Ewald. We started eating fewer meat-based meals and more complementary protein dishes. Using food resources differently seemed like a simple and sensible way to remind myself of the hunger of others in my everyday life.

After getting into the rhythm of cooking and eating this way, I wanted to share what I had learned

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and get other people engaged with the hunger issues in our world and how our eating habits could make a positive difference for others. So I put together kitchen labs for any women in our church who might be interested. Then, at the beginning of Lent, I put together a program after our Lenten dinner to talk about what we as a congregation could do to help alleviate some of the magnitude of suffering that other countries were facing. I showed a film during the program to help provide broader perspective; it was mostly on multinational corporations and how we Americans were using much more of the world's resources than any other nation per capita.

It was at this point that I was once again faced with the choice to evaluate my commitment to care for those facing injustice and pain in the world around me. (I'm not saying everyone is going to be led to care for the same things—but this is where I had been drawn to.) A man in our church who was (and still is) a good friend was fairly offended by the point made in the film—because he worked for a multinational company. Ouch! Here I was again, facing pushback for

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where God was leading me in caring for others, just as I'd experienced with my stance on fair housing. More soul-searching. More prayer. More commitment than I had bargained on. (After all, I'm just a sweet southern belle!) But my heart and spirit said I must share about the poverty and injustice in the world.

We're not necessarily going to change the world with our decisions. I knew that. But if we're faithful to act and engage, maybe our hearts and commitments will follow—and maybe those around us will be encouraged to care more deeply in turn.

We had a good friend visit us as I was engaging with this conversation about world hunger. He traveled a lot with an organization that worked with helping people. And this friend of ours loved meat! He always ordered steak when eating out in a restaurant because “you can't do much to hurt steak.” I was having a meatless meal the night he was with us, so I told him a little apologetically what I was doing. “You're not going to make much impact on world hunger around your dining-room table!” he said.

“I know,” I told him, “but it might change me so

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that I'm more aware, more conscious of others with much less than I have." And I know it has. And I hope it changed some of the families in our church as well, and—who knows?—their children, too.

CARING FOR THE NEEDY

Jesus tells us to care for others. We live very selfishly as a culture. Choosing to see what others are going through, caring for them in the midst of what they're dealing with, helps us get outside of our selfish mind-sets and understand what other people need. We need to choose to be aware. Caring for others doesn't mean looking down on them. But it does mean entering into their world, coming alongside them, showing them compassion and respect. While caring for the larger world is a good start, we can put our commitment into even more direct action by caring for the needy in our communities.

The women from our church, along with people from other churches in the county, had a clothing center where needy folks could come and buy clothing.

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Yes, *buy*. A quarter for a pair of kids' jeans, fifteen cents for a shirt. A quarter for a pair of shoes, etc. Being able to buy something ourselves, no matter how small the cost, helps us find self-respect and dignity, even in financially hard situations. Now, if someone really wanted something but didn't have any more money, we'd laugh and say something like "I can see you can't live without that dress. So just take it. And enjoy wearing it because the color is great for you."

I currently volunteer at our local food bank and enjoy that so much. I need to volunteer working with those less fortunate than myself. When you live in suburbia with all your neighbors financially on par with you, you need to be reminded that some people have harder lives and struggle to make ends meet.

In the early years of our marriage, I sometimes felt like I was the "other." Eugene and I were right down near the poverty level. Our home was provided for us by the church, so our salary wasn't on par with our neighbors'. But I eventually realized that we were making less each year because we weren't getting a cost-of-living increase. I was married to a pastor who

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wasn't making that much anyway—and still, for years, he wouldn't accept a raise in salary when the financial committee suggested it because he “just wanted the church to get on its feet” financially.

It was during these times of need that others reached out and showed me what caring truly looks like. I remember walking down the aisles of the grocery store one summer day, trying to figure out what I could possibly buy for supper that night. But cooking everything from scratch helped. No prepared foods. It was right after that summer day that a woman in our church started bringing us produce from her wonderful garden. A lifesaver! She also loved our children and bought them a pony for them to ride at her place.

In the midst of all of our caring for others, loving and serving a church congregation and stretched thin financially, someone cared for us.

We were a one-car family at that time, so Eugene and I had to plan ahead for when I could use the car for grocery shopping. One day, friends from our former church in New York called us up and told us

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they had a Renault that the husband had been using to drive to the train station for his daily commute into the city. He wouldn't be needing the car any longer—would we have use for it?

Would we? We drove up the next week to pick up our little car. But at the same time our friends cared so generously and specifically for our needs, I remember feeling like a charity case. As someone born at the end of the Great Depression, I had never been given much in life and I never really expected anything, much less a car. But I had to push down my pride. We were not within walking distance of anything except our church, which was a quarter mile away. This had been a cornfield one-and-a-half miles from the town of Bel Air, our little colonial town. With a second car, Eugene and I didn't have to jostle the use of a vehicle.

I had to push down my pride a number of times. Parishioners who were moving to Florida had a freezer they weren't taking with them and wondered if we might like to have it. Someone also gave me blankets and sheets they weren't using. I put them to

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good use on my daughter's twin beds. A number of other gifts came along the way.

I was grateful for the generosity of our friends. I was glad I learned to push down my pride and allowed our friends to show me what unselfish caring looked like.

Caring for the needy makes me more sensitive to what all the people around me are going through. It helps me sense when someone in my life is struggling, and it helps me have the awareness to speak kindly and carefully into a friend's life when I understand that they may be going through all sorts of things I can't see.

CARING FOR THE PERSON IN FRONT OF ME

Of course, caring for others is perhaps found in its most important form in our everyday relationships. Reaching out to the larger world and serving the needy among us are both ways to develop a caring heart, but we are pushed into more specific and sacrificial forms of caring for others, and spiritual friendship is most fully evidenced, when we care for the

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person right in front of us—the woman at church, the friend going through a hard time in her marriage, the coworker or next-door neighbor.

As with so many things in life, I learned this for myself in an unexpected way. When we first moved into our “house church,” I wanted a garden—but I was much too busy tending to babies and keeping the church clean and picked up in case someone from the congregation showed up (and my house “showed up” what kind of a housewife I really was). So I postponed having a vegetable garden. I planted a few flowers; we had the yard landscaped (with the help of a former parishioner from our New York church, who was also a good friend). And, because I love having flowers in my house, I had Eugene dig one flower bed toward the back of our half-acre lot, close to where our back-door neighbors’, Mike and Alma’s, joined ours. One morning, when I looked out my back window, I saw Mike at my flower bed, just looking at it. I walked out and greeted him, and he said, “Humpf. I grow food.” I smiled at him and said, “That’s nice.”

The children and I would see him in his vegetable

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garden, working under his spotlight in the evenings. We even started referring to him as “Farmer McGregor.” When I told him what the children were calling him, he was confused. He had never heard of Farmer McGregor. I said, “Peter Rabbit, you know?” He had never heard of Peter Rabbit! This man was totally deprived. I wondered what his home life had been like growing up.

He and Alma had no children, which meant he hadn’t had that second chance to learn of Peter Rabbit and Farmer McGregor. So the next opportunity I had, I delivered the large-print picture book of *Peter Rabbit* for Mike to read. I would have loved to watch this chemist from Edgewood Chemical Biological Center sitting in his living room and reading about the farmer chasing Peter Rabbit out of his vegetable garden.

As the children got a little older and became more independent, I asked Eugene to rent a rototiller and dig a garden for me to grow vegetables. As a chemist, Mike knew what chemicals do to our bodies, which is why he grew all of his vegetables organically. He

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started teaching me what not to do and what to do, like mulching a garden so you didn't have to hoe or weed. I had a good farmer friend, Jeffrey, in lower Pennsylvania who gave me truckloads of sour and rotting hay for mulch. As Jeffrey and I pitched the hay off the truck, we got a bonus as well (if you could call it that). A black racer snake slithered out of the hay pile. Now, snakes are one creature I had always felt we could do without. I still do. But Mike told me that the snake would take care of any mice that might be around. So we let him be.

I planted my seeds and seed potatoes and seedlings in rows, laid newspaper down over the ground, and tossed the hay over the newspaper. I loved my new garden. The potatoes were especially nice—I could pick them by just lifting the newspaper up and taking the small new potatoes off their runners without disturbing the whole plant.

One morning at breakfast, I saw something strange in my vegetable garden. I went outside and started laughing. Mike had “planted” flowers for me. They were plastic. His joke was a sweet sign of friendship.

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He had stepped out of his normal routine and cared for his neighbor by teaching me almost all that I know about organic gardening—and now he was showing me that he was on my side by “planting” flowers for me! Because of Mike, I enjoyed learning all the how-tos and planting a huge variety of vegetables—carrots, broccoli, turnips, onions, tomatoes, garlic, sweet potatoes, white potatoes, okra, corn, kohlrabi, and squash. Each year I would try more and different ones. Our summer season wasn’t quite long enough for me to try watermelons, although Mike did and shared them with our children.

I’d never before had anybody do what Mike did for me. There he was, a chemist with no children, but he chose to get involved in my life. I learned how much it means to have someone choose to see my needs and address them. It was such a surprise—we hardly knew each other! He had no reason to help me. But he chose to take time out of his day, see what I needed, and reach out to help. That’s caring well for the person in front of you. Like him, I want to be a caring person and extend myself to others.

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Many years back, I had a young friend, a girl from our neighborhood. I first noticed her as Eugene and I walked the quarter mile from house to church, church to house; we would often see this young woman riding her bicycle, going really fast and pounding away. We knew that she lived down the street, and we began to learn that she had some struggles. One day, a neighbor called Eugene up and told us the young lady was in the psych ward—and that it was her birthday. Could he go visit her?

When Eugene visited that day, she told him that she was growing tomato plants in her closet from seed (she lived in the woods and couldn't plant anything there), and Eugene told her she was welcome to use our yard. She came into our backyard, and I went out there and helped her grow things. We'd go play in the snow together in the winter, and other times, we'd go to the park and swing on the swings. I tried one day to say something about God to her, and I could tell I'd better not say anything any more. She didn't have any of that in her life. I was going to pray for her—that would be enough for now.

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This young woman needed love and attention. Her parents struggled to understand what she was going through, so I had the opportunity to show her love and remind her of her worth. That little girl finished school, went to a wonderful university, and was going to become a doctor. She dropped out after two years, but then she got her PhD and finished her degree to become a doctor. It's amazing what she has done.

I couldn't help but care for her when she was in a vulnerable season. She was right there. Caring is choosing to see someone. Choosing to be with them right where they are. Choosing to connect with them and listen to what they need. Caring for someone isn't about you—it's about the other person.

A BALANCING ACT

Part of being a good spiritual friend is caring deeply—in emotion and through actions—for the people around us. But being a caring person also requires care for ourselves. I see so many people not balancing their lives well, overextending themselves. We

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can't effectively care for others if we're tired, burned out, emotionally drained—if we're not taking care of ourselves.

I certainly dealt with this. Being a pastor's wife brings with it a lot of demands. How do we keep our lives in balance? How do we keep ourselves healthy and well? In a life of ministry and caring for others, we need to have a center of gravity, a strong sense of self, a centering to keep ourselves sane and well. Even at this time in our lives, when Eugene and I are no longer working out of a church or school and have no secretary, no office with assistants, or even volunteers to recruit, we find that balance hard. These days, I get tired easily. And God has to take care of me outside myself.

When we feel overwhelmed, we need outside help. Sometimes it is in those periods in our lives (and probably before that happens) that we need a spiritual friend we can reach out to and they to us. We can talk it out; lay out our thoughts, problems, and ideas before a spiritual friend; and let them give us ideas to think about and ask good questions for us to think

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and pray and act upon. A good listener can make all the difference in the world as we struggle with issues that are unsettling to and in us. But a spiritual friend doesn't tell us what to do. They make suggestions and help to clarify what we are experiencing. Spiritual friendship is not problem-solving as such. It is about being in their presence and listening to them, caring about them.

As spiritual friends reach out in care to us, we are equipped to do that to others—to see someone else struggling in turn, whether in our world, our community, or next door. We can show care and love to someone else and help them find a place of balance and perspective through how we care for them in spiritual friendship.

REFLECTIONS ON

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1. Who in your life exhibits a caring spirit? What do you learn from observing them?

2. What issues in the world do you find yourself caring about? What small things can you do to put that care into action?

3. Where do you see needs in your local community? How can you care in action for those people?

