

## FRIENDS

Commencement Address to the Graduating Class of 1989  
Tamaqua Area Senior High School  
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In my job, I attend many graduation ceremonies. Usually I sit on the platform looking out over the graduates and their assembled guests. As the commencement speaker delivers the address, I sometimes find myself trying to guess what the audience is thinking. For many of the addresses I have heard, I am sure that the central question on everyone's mind is: When is this guy going to sit down?

Just in case you might be wondering that about me, let me tell you that I will be back in my seat twelve minutes from now.

Graduation speeches usually stir up excitement by describing the challenges ahead, or offering sage advice on how to meet these challenges. Once asked, a speaker is well advised to talk about things he knows. And so I had planned to talk to you about teaching, something I believe I know fairly well.

This sounded like a wonderful theme for a graduation speech, and I was having a grand time working out different approaches to it. Then, while driving home from work about a month ago, I heard Fats Domino and Chubby Checker on one of those radio stations specializing in the music of the fifties and sixties; we called it rock when I was in high school; now the announcers refer to it as "oldies but goodies." I had been musing about what I was going to say to you, so my mind was already on Tamaqua and my high school days. Hearing Chubby Checker and Fats Domino evoked a powerful memory.

It was of my high school classmate, Terry Krause, announcing the new rock hits nearly every morning before school began. He had to listen to some station in Buffalo to hear them--radio in Eastern Pennsylvania wasn't too progressive in those days--and I remember quite vividly Terry telling us how to tune in that radio station (which could only be picked up at night).

I could not think about Terry and rock music without thinking about the Saturday night dances at Wenzels, and how much time I spent wishing that all the girls I loved were not going steady with guys I obviously hated. Once that thought got hold, the memories began to pour out. There was Moose, Ron Fegley, souping up his latest car; he and several other of the Dutch Hill gang were the kings of hot rods. There was Jo Ann Caputo, sitting across from me in the S&A on Broad Street, listening to my tales of woe, being entirely too kind in her response (I think she liked me, at least I hope so--I liked her--but at the time I thought she was just interested in what I was talking about). Then there were my morning excursions to the East End to pick up Ruth Ann Ghares for school. At the time, I thought of these daily trips as a kind of pilgrimage, and always wondered why her mother and mine used to tee-hee about such serious business.

The next page in my memory book showed Frank Ditchey and me driving Miss Britton bonkers in German class; as I look back on it, I hope I am as forgiving of my students as she

was of hers. I thought, too, of Danny Hess, who was the only first-string athlete I knew who seemed to want to hang around with me (to understand why that was important, you have to understand that every coach in the school breathed a sigh of relief when, in my senior year, I finally abandoned football and track for the editorship of the yearbook).

As I thought about these times, I thought about how much fun I really did have (despite all the hurt and difficult times). I genuinely liked these people, and found I missed them a lot. Why had I only ever made one high school reunion? Why haven't I kept up on what Danny, Jo Ann, Moose and Terry are doing? Does anybody know where Bobby Lusky is? Somebody once told me that Frank Ditchey is a pilot for American Airlines, and every time I fly American, I hope that the flight attendant will announce that he is the pilot and I will see him again. But it hasn't happened yet.

Thinking about the good times of high school, and the good people I knew there, led me to drop the topic of teaching in favor of something I don't know nearly as well, but that I believe is every bit as important. Instead of talking about teaching, I want to talk about having friends.

You hear a lot about friends, but not a lot about having friends. We spend quite a bit of time talking to our friends, but not much talking about what is involved in friendship. It is one of those topics, like being a mother or father, that we are somehow just supposed to pick up on our own. There are few, if any, courses in friendship, and not much wisdom that gets passed from generation to generation. It's a shame, for friendship is an immensely important part of lives. You already know how much it means, for friends have been very important to you during your school days.

You may be surprised to learn that friends are going to be even more important after you graduate. Life becomes more complex, with more occasions for joy and sorrow, ecstasy and pain, happiness and anger. It is our friends who help us over the rough times, and with whom we want to celebrate the good times. It is our friends who help us become what we aspire to be, and it is our friends who help us avoid what can hurt us.

Thus picking friends, caring for them, and changing them is an important part of life. I hope you will allow me to share with you what I have learned in fifty years of friends and friendship. I share this with you not simply because I believe it is something worth knowing, but also because most of what I know about having friends I learned since I was forty. I wish I had known it much earlier. Perhaps by sharing it with you now, you won't have to wait until you're as old as I am to be smart about friendship.

The first thing to understand is that a friendship is a human relationship, and like all human relationships of any value, it requires work. Having and keeping a friend requires taking an interest in that person, staying in touch by letter, phone or visits, and staying informed about his or her health and welfare.

The second insight is that having a friend means caring about that person, helping the person be what he or she can be. I know you already know that. But what you may not know is whether you're easy or hard to care about, easy or hard to help. A lot of us are tough, quiet, and protective of our privacy, or we like to think of ourselves as tough and private. So we don't let people see us on the inside, we don't talk about our needs and our feelings, and thus we

don't let our friends know who and what we are and what we need from them.

Another point to remember is that the people you pick for your friends have a big impact on you. They will influence what you do with your time, how you feel about yourself, what you come to value, and how you construct your future. It took me a long time to learn that the friends I have are not just the result of who and what I am, but are, in part, the cause of who and what I am.

So it is important to choose friends who support what is best in you and what you want most to become. Friends should not just happen, like headaches or snowstorms. Rather they should be chosen, in the sense that you should make a conscious decision whether or not you want this person as a friend.

Remember what I said about friendships requiring work? Sometimes that work comes in the form of sitting in a hospital room for long hours, caring for a friend. Or dropping what you are doing and traveling far to be with your friend. Friendship sometimes calls for sacrifice, where you give up time, perhaps even money, to be with a friend who needs you. What is even more challenging, is the friend may not tell you that you are needed, but because you are a friend, you know you are. So you go to your friend even when unasked.

Because good friendships carry duties and require sacrifice, it soon becomes evident that you can have too many friends. More than you can care for, and more than you can allow to care for you. We deal with this problem by having different kinds of friends. The hierarchy begins, I think, with acquaintances, persons we have met just recently or have known superficially for some time. It is here that we begin to make the kinds of decisions that move the relationship from the level of acquaintance to that of friend, and once a friend, from the level of "just a friend" to "good friend," and thence to "best friend."

"Just friends" are usually for the good times, the good conversations, and perhaps even a few secrets. "Good friends" are those you travel to see, write to, hold in high regard, and consider it a special treat to be with them. "Best friends" are all of the foregoing, plus a strong bond of affection and intimacy. Not intimacy in the sense of physical contact, but in the sense of sharing deeply held feelings. Best friends are the ones to whom you feel not only great warmth, but a willingness to sacrifice in order to care for them when they need you.

It is these friends who nurture both your strength and your strengths; it is they who walk with you on your journey into yourself, saying "Look there, that's really you," and you smile because you want that to be you. They say, "Are you sure you want to do that?" and you frown because you, too, were worried about it but too busy or too frightened to see it clearly. They say, "I didn't know you could do that! You were wonderful!" and you beam all over because you wanted so much to do this right. They say, "Whoops, that wasn't the best foot you ever put forward. I think you ought to reconsider that," and you get mad because you're hurt, but you know they're telling you the truth and you decide that if you must hear it, you would rather hear it now from someone who cares.

You see, I know how these things work. Out there among you is my wife, a son, two brothers, a sister-in-law, a nephew, and my mother- and father-in-law. They are, as you can plainly tell, my relatives. But they are also friends, for they made a sacrifice to be here to share my joy at being asked to speak to you. Because they are true friends, they will, after you get

your diplomas, tell me what a great job I did--no matter how well or poorly they really think I did. For, you see, there is something about friends I have not told you yet. If they love you, every once in a while, when the occasion demands it and no one will be hurt by it, they will lie to you. And you will feel wonderful.

Like every other commencement speaker, I cannot close without offering you my congratulations, best wishes and some advice. So, here in as few words as I can do it, is my offering to you:

May you have many just friends, several good friends, and a few best friends, all of whom you have chosen with care, and with whom you share your joy, your sorrow, your difficult problems and the great deeds that lie ahead for you.

May you have friends who help you become the best of what you can be, and may you be just such a friend to those you love and hold dear.

Tonight you are Tamaqua's proudest accomplishment. May the future bring you all that you deserve and desire, including the wonder of having friends.