

The Growing Friendship Deficit



Note: An earlier version of this column appeared in my 'Daly Grind' newsletter.

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National Review published an interesting piece a few weeks ago by Daniel Cox, director of the Survey Center on American Life. Its headline read “American Men Suffer a Friendship Recession,” and the topic, in my view, was culturally important.

Cox cited polls and trend-lines showing that the number of close friends Americans have has – in his words – “plummeted” over the last three decades. What he calls the “friendship recession” has been especially bad for men:

“The percentage of men with at least six close friends fell by half since 1990, from 55 percent to 27 percent. The study also found the percentage of men without any close friends jumped from 3 percent to 15 percent, a fivefold increase.”

Single men have fared the worst (20% don't have *any* close friends), and even guys with one or two tight buddies don't feel any less lonely or isolated than those who have none. Beyond the numbers, men are saying that they feel less emotionally attached to the friends they *do* have.

Some of this seems to be baked into the cake based on gender. Generally speaking, women are more successful at building and investing in close, intimate relationships while men are less comfortable opening up to others and soliciting emotional support. Part of this is due to old-school tenets of masculinity, but even younger men (who are less likely to adopt such tenets) have a hard time developing close friendships.

Other considerations, which apply to both men and women, include a decline in religious involvement and an increase in workplace mobility (people working from home rather than meeting friends through work).

Truth be told, Cox's piece resonated with me on a personal level. Like many, I had a large group of tight-knit friends in high school, and a similar group in college. After graduating, I got to know lots of coworkers at the company I worked for, but while a few became solid friends (that I still keep in touch with), most were really more of acquaintances that I rarely saw outside of the office. I lived alone (in a basement apartment) for a number of years during that time, and being that most of my good friends (who'd gone their separate ways) lived at least an hour away, my close connections kind of dried up.

It wasn't a great situation. I've always been an independent guy, which I suppose is what helped keep me trucking along, but as actor Alan Alda once said, "Loneliness is everything it's cracked up to be." That statement is true even for independent types.

Fortunately, I found my lifelong companion (with the help of some mutual friends), got married, and started a family. For this, I'm thankful every day. But outside friendships (especially close ones) were fewer and harder to come by. After my employer sold off half the company, the remaining half struggled for years to stay afloat. We shed a lot of employees over the years, and I was putting in many extra hours to compensate. This left little time for my own family, let alone making friends.

Even after the Great Recession finished the company off, and my wife and I took our careers in different directions, intimate friendships were elusive. The two of us tend to get along with pretty much everyone we meet (unless we're given a glaring reason not to), but cordiality isn't the same thing as closeness and having confidants.

Cox's proposed solution was pretty generic: people need to put in more time and effort to foster such relationships, whether it be at work, with neighbors, or even online.

That's easy to say, of course, though I mostly agree with his advice. The one caveat I would add has to do with the 'online' component. I think the Internet is much better suited for maintaining existing friendships than seeking out new ones. There are definitely exceptions to the rule, and I do consider a few people I've never met in person to genuinely be friends, but a lot of purely online relationships (whether they be connected by politics, sports, or some other interest) aren't intimate ones... and they probably shouldn't be.

As for close friendships, I'm fortunate these days to have a good number of them – including with guys who I can talk to freely about anything, and would be there for me and my family at a moment's notice. I figured I'd share a couple specific things that worked for me and my wife...

The first one has to do with something Cox touched on early in

his piece: religious involvement.

I'm not going to get into my faith today, but rather faith fellowship.

When our kids were little, my wife and I joined a local church where we became acquainted with a number of families close to our own ages. We'd always had polite conversations with them, recognized some things in common, and enjoyed their company. But with everyone so busy in their lives (including us), the relationships didn't amount to much more than Sunday pleasantries and parental anecdotes.

My wife came up with an idea to try and change that by forming a "young family" ministry at the church. The two of us pursued it, and created "get to know you" types of events that more often than not took place outside of the church. They included family picnics at parks and swimming pools, and they were genuinely a lot of fun. They resulted in several longtime, sincere, quality friendships that we still have today (though we're not as involved with the church as we used to be).

From that ministry, I created a spin-off men's group that started meeting for dinner and sometimes an activity (cards, bowling, a movie, etc.) one Friday night a month. We still do it (10 years and running), though we moved things over to Zoom during the pandemic.

Just between you and me, us guys have never really talked about faith at these get-togethers, and it was never our intent to do so. The purpose has been pure laid-back fellowship. Some of the group's biggest supporters have actually been the men's wives who've recognized the friendship difficulties described in this piece, and have seen how much benefit their husbands get from just going out with other guys, and having a good time.

Separately from the church stuff, my wife and I have also made it a habit to try and get together with friends – in some

capacity – just about every weekend... even if it's just for an hour or two. Sometimes we'll meet at a (dog-friendly) brewery patio. Other times, we'll go out to eat or invite people over for a visit. It's something we always look forward to.

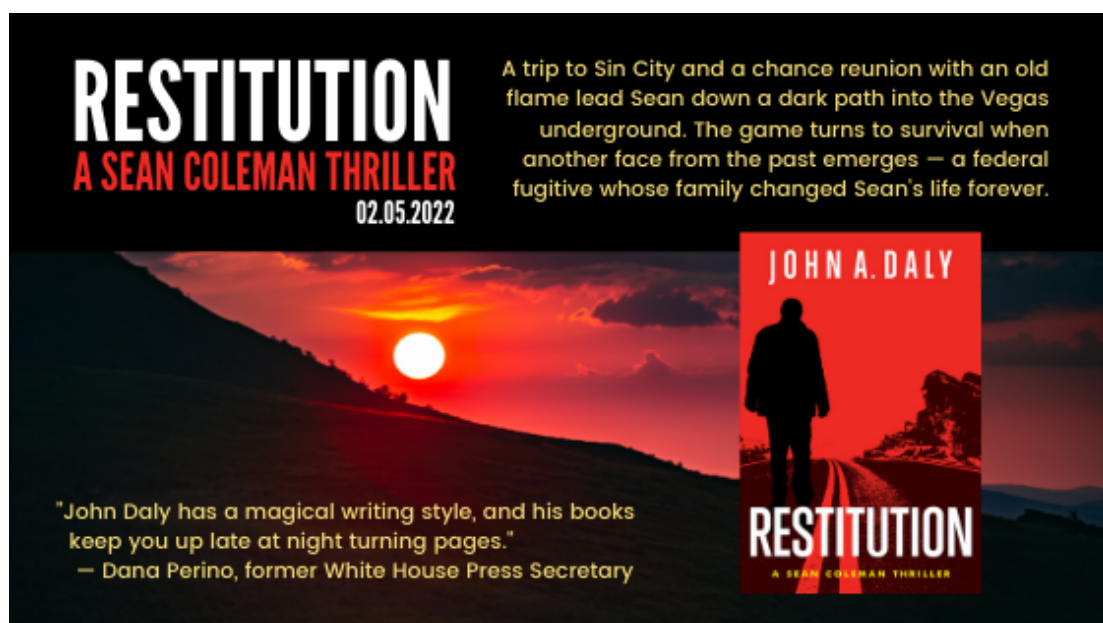
Again, this was harder during the pandemic, but we got a little creative during that time, spent a little money, and upgraded our backyard patio with some lights, cushioned furniture, and a propane heater to safely (and comfortably) entertain company.

Now that we and our friends are fully vaccinated, the sky's the limit.

Back to the larger premise of the *friendship recession*: I get that people are in different situations and at different points in their lives, so saying what amounts to "Just put forth the time and effort" isn't going to resonate with everyone (it probably wouldn't have with me when I was a single guy back in the day), but good friendships really are an important component in living a fulfilling life.

In other words, they're *worth* the time and effort.

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