

# How to Win Friends . . .

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My ability to resist temptation is never so weak as when I am shopping in a bookstore. I have little ability to discriminate. I like almost all books. I'll read almost anything. I associate reading with some of the most enjoyable times in my life.

In this I am unusual. The average American reads less than a book a year. As I observe the behavior of people, it is easy to determine their latest acquisition.

When a person asks me to preach a sermon on their favorite social issue, and tells me that if I do, the entire world will change, I know he's been reading *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*.

When a person walks into my office, gives me a firm handshake, smiles, pats me on the back, and asks about the photographs of my children, I know she has been reading *How the World's Greatest Salespeople Develop Winning Careers*.

When a couple invites me to lunch, and feeds me only salad and steak, I know they've been reading *How to Get the Most out of Your Low Carbohydrate Diet*.

Some scholars suggest that how-to-do-it books are America's special contribution to the literature of the world. Amazon.com currently lists 62,996 books that includes the word "how" in the title.

Of all these, the most famous and the most successful is Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. First published in 1937, it is still in print today and has sold over 15 million copies.

I read Mr. Carnegie's book this week. I discovered that the book is not really about winning friends. Instead it contains common sense advice about how to be an effective salesperson. I particularly like this passage:

Why read this book to find out how to win friends? [Mr. Carnegie asks] Why not study the technique of the greatest winner of friends the world has ever known? Who is he? You may meet him tomorrow coming down the street. When you get within ten feet of him, he will begin to wag his tail. If you stop and pat him, he will almost jump out of his skin to show you how much he likes you. And you know that behind this show of affection on his part, there are no ulterior motives: he doesn't want to sell you any real estate, and he doesn't want to marry you. . . . [Mr. Carnegie concludes] You can make more friends in two months by becoming interested in other people than you can in two years by trying to get other people interested in you.

Ministers who are effective in churches develop the skills Dale Carnegie described. We don't do it all perfectly but most of us enter the ministry because we are genuinely interested in other people. We want to get to know you, we want to hear your stories. If we had tails, we would wag them when we see you coming in the door. We are glad you are here.

Still, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* only covers the first step in developing a friendship. A friendship is much more than a friendly greeting. A friendship is a relationship of caring and respect between two people that lasts over an extended period of time, and includes a commitment to be there in the hard times.

I remember a friendship I developed about 35 years ago. I met Jim in high school. We sat next to each other in speech class and we worked together on a project, a humorous play we wrote and tape-recorded. As we worked together, we found we shared a lot of the same ideas. We would sit at the same table for lunch each day at school. After high school we went to the same university. When Jim joined Campus Crusade for Christ and tried to get me to join, our friendship was somewhat strained. But then he dropped out and admitted what had drawn him to the group was an attractive young woman he wanted to date. When she showed no interest, his religious commitment disappeared. When Jim did get a girlfriend he talked with me about the intensity of his feelings. Their relationship lasted a couple years. Towards the end they would fight and breakup and then get back together. Jim would call me to talk and try to get a sense of what he should do. A year later when he got a contract to publish a small book of poetry, we celebrated together. Perhaps a friend can be defined as someone with whom we want to be when something exciting, pleasing, or wonderful has happened to us. I knew how much that book contract meant to Jim, and he wanted me to be a part of his happiness.

A year later, when Jim became ill, I went to see him in the hospital. I am not sure what all the rules are for friendship, but perhaps a friend can also be defined as someone we want to visit in the hospital when we hear that they are ill.

To maintain a friendship, I have to do the hard work of intentionally keeping in touch. I became good friends with a man named Harlan when he and I were both studying for the ministry. In the twenty six years since then, the two of us have never lived in the same city. Nevertheless, we have gotten together on many occasions. For example, I drove eight hours to attend his wedding. And when he is in the area for work, he schedules an extra day so we can get together. We have known each other through job changes, marriages, a divorce, the births of our children, spending some time together, and keeping each other informed of the important events in our lives. These are the ingredients that can make for a friendship.

I wonder, how many of you are lucky enough to have friends from grade school? I attended the same grade school for eight years. Some of those friendships continued into high school, but none lasted into college. Today I do not know what has happened to any of the kids with whom I spent eight years of my childhood.

How many of you are lucky enough to have friends from high school? I attended the same high school for three and a half years. Some of those friendships continued into college and for a few years after college. But today I am no longer in touch with any of the people with whom I went to high school.

And how many of you are lucky enough to have friends from college? I attended the same college for four years. Some of the friendships I had continued for a few years after graduation. Still today I have lost contact with almost everyone I was close to in college.

Researchers have discovered that most people have very few friends outside of their immediate family. When persons are asked how many friends they have outside of their families, the most common answer people give is zero, none. The second most common answer is one. The highest number is seven. Only a few people say they have as many as seven friends.

Of course, in the jobs I had I made friends. Some of those friendships were quite close. A few lasted for a few months after I left the job. But without the structure of seeing each other each day, the friendship faded. I noticed this also with my father. Although he worked for thirty years for the federal government in the same office, after he retired he did not remain close to the friends with whom he had worked.

In my life, the place where I have been able to develop and sustain friends for many years has been in the church. I am still occasionally in contact with some of the people that I met in the church youth group in high school. I am still good friends with a number of the people with whom I went to school to study to be a minister. And I have lasting friendships with people in the congregations that I have served as a minister.

The church is a good place to develop and maintain friendships. When I was a child, my father would say to me that the most interesting people he knew were the members of the Unitarian Church. What he told me years ago is still true today. Some of the most interesting people you will ever meet are right here in this church. Here at Cedar Lane, the weekly gathering on Sunday morning gives us a chance to nurture friendships. We know that the church gathers on Sunday morning, like clockwork, and our friends will be here.

Of course, it does take time. It takes commitment and work to develop and sustain relationships in a church community. Some people visit a church for a while and eventually stop attending because they were not able to develop friendships.

People need encouragement to make the commitment and to do the work. Each of us can do our part to welcome people who seek us out. Before and after the service all of us should smile at visitors and let them know they are welcome here. I hope every member will do so.

Of course, in some ways we do not make it easy for visitors. We do not offer a feel-good sugary religion with an easy-to-digest theology. Here we believe in the worth and dignity of all people. For example, The Universalist Church was the first to officially declare back in 1792 that slavery was wrong. The Universalist Church was the first denomination, back in 1863, to recognize the ordination of women. And the Unitarian Universalist Church was the first denomination back in 1980 to call openly gay men and women to serve as ministers of congregations.

Our goal is not just to attract members. If more members was our only goal, we would avoid all social and political issues which might alienate some members, split the church, or otherwise affect the level of fund-raising. Our first goal is to be true to the traditions and values of Unitarians and Universalists. We offer a strong, positive commitment to religious liberalism. A second goal is to welcome those who seek us out and to provide a place where friendships can be developed and sustained.

I began by saying that I like almost all books. I'll read almost anything. I associate reading with some of the most enjoyable times in my life. Still, I could live without books, but not without friends.

The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber was once asked which he preferred, books or people. He replied that he was more often disappointed by people than by books. He liked to shut the door of his study and sit down and enjoy reading a good book. However, he admitted, he enjoyed the book in part because he knew that at anytime he chose, he could get up, open the door and visit a friend.

May it be so for all of us.