



Death by Suburb

[How to keep the suburbs from killing your soul]

Study 7

of an 8 Week Study

The Environmental TOXIN:

WHAT WILL THIS RELATIONSHIP DO FOR ME?

The Spiritual PRACTICE:

BUILDING DEEP AND MEANINGFUL FRIENDSHIPS

Introduction

Someone once told me that three years after her divorce, she had none of the same friends that she had when she was married. She lived the idyllic suburban life: several kids, big house, Cancun vacations. After the divorce, she says, people who she considered friends would see her in an aisle in the grocery store and go down a different one, just to avoid her.

I don't know if her perception is accurate. I'm sure she changed some as well. Divorce is awkward, period. But the story illustrates that many of our relationships are transactional or at least situational. Many friends are not really friends but acquaintances. We serve as president of the PTA or have kids on the same high school football team, so we strike up a "season of life" friendship.

That's fine as far as it goes. But after the divorce, who's left? While you endure years of stress with a child who is chronically depressed, who really wants to hear another one of your prayer requests? And who can celebrate with you when you do get the big house? Only a Friend. Others are secretly envious.

Most of us crave deep friendships, those that sweeten life and take the edge off its difficult parts. Authentic friendships are subversive in a culture that values who you know, what you own or what your status is, and whether you got invited to the party of the summer.

—Dave Goetz

Reading the Chapter

This study is based on Chapter 8 of *Death by Suburb: How to Keep the Suburbs from Killing the Soul*. Chapter 8 explains the toxin as well as the key spiritual practice. Read the chapter before completing the study.

Understanding Your 'Burb

Suburbs are so diverse. In the Midwestern community where I live, there are many "gathering places," where you run into people from the elementary school or church. That's not as true in some of the suburbs in Colorado, where I lived in the late eighties and early nineties. Colorado friends who visit us often comment about how many people we know. They are surprised that we bump into people at Starbucks, at the local ice cream shop, at the post office, at the pool.



In Colorado, you tend to drive 20 or 30 minutes to everything, so it's not as common to run into someone you know.

No one suburb is like another, of course, but there may be some similarities in how we collect friends and acquaintances.

1. List some of the "communities" where you find friendship in your suburb?

- a. Park District or Travel Team sports
- b. Church
- c. Health club
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.
- h.

2. Would you consider yourself someone who has deep friendships? What has been some of your frustrations in finding friends, if any?

- a. "I didn't grow up here, so I feel like an outsider ..."
- b. "I don't really have time, since I work outside the home full-time."
- c.
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.
- h.



3. Mentally, run through your list of people you'd consider friends. How many of those, in the end, are largely transactional or situational (stage of life)? List some of the qualities of those you'd consider Friends:

- a. There's a mutual "initiation." I'm not always making the call to do something or get together.
- b. There's a sense of history—we've endured difficult parts of life together.
- c.
- d.
- e.
- f.
- g.

Discovering Biblical Spirituality

Besides a few Proverbs, there is not a lot of direct teaching about friendship in Scripture. It's assumed. You see David and Jonathon's friendship in the Old Testament, Jesus' close relationship with three of the disciples, the apostle Paul with friends in almost every port. Friendship created the context for life and ministry.

I think we should resist the temptation to overspiritualize Friendship, as if it is "spiritual" in a religious sense. I think Friendship is holy, a gift, one of the sweet parts of the kingdom of God that we get to experience in this world.

1. Read the following passages:

- a. Proverbs 17:7
- b. Romans 16:1-16
- c. Ps. 132:1
- d. 1 Samuel 19-20

What are some of the characteristics of Friendship that you find take the edge off the pressures of suburban life?



2. C.S. Lewis makes the point that we are to treat all people with divine-enabled gift love—something that, to me, seems impossible at times. Have you ever needed to unstitch a Friendship (to back away from a close friendship)? What did that look like or feel like? What precipitated the unstitching?

3. Aelred of Rievaulx writes that in Friendship the things of God unite rather than divide. How have you experienced this unity in your Friendships?

4. When do you know when a friendship has moved to Friendship? What are some of the indicators?

Spiritual Exercises

Guys don't talk about friendship much. At least I don't. We never have the talk: "Are we Friends, yet." There's simply a natural progression that leads to an unspoken assumption. So this subject is almost too personal to discuss candidly.

Group Activity: Have your discussion leader guide the group in a few moments of reflection:

- **What, if anything, is preventing you from deeper friendships?**

- **How do those with many Friends not exclude those who are in desperate need of one?**

Quote to Live by

"Friendship, therefore, heightens the joys of prosperity and mitigates the sorrows of diversity by dividing and sharing them. Hence the best medicine in life is a friend."

AELRED OF RIEVAULX, SPIRITUAL FRIENDSHIP

A Final Word from Paul

"Greet my dear friend Epenetus. He was the very first person to become a Christian in the province of Asia."

ROMANS 16:5 (NEW LIVING TRANSLATION)