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## Don't wait until it's too late to tell a friend how you feel about him

*By Diether Haenicke  
January 14, 2009*

The English word "friend," etymologically identical with the German "Freund," is used differently in either language.

Whereas Germans use the word to express particular closeness to another person, Americans apply it much more widely, more in the sense of general acquaintance. We refer to anyone whom we know, who lives next to us, or with whom we work as our friend.

Yesterday I found out that I had exactly 1,500 Facebook friends. Many, if not most of them, are only vaguely familiar to me and certainly not close to my heart.

When Americans want to use the word in its German meaning, we usually say "close friend" or even "best friend," and immediately the relationship becomes clear. The epithets "close" or "best" must be added when we want to denote a special relationship between us and another person. The lucky ones among us have a few close friends; the luckiest can name one other person as their best friend. But that is already rare.

I have recently been watching DVDs of a television series called "Boston Legal." The TV series is not particularly remarkable, except for its many quirky characters, two of whom stand out. One of them is William Shatner of "Star Trek" fame; the other is James Spader, known mainly for his portrayal of unpleasant characters in a string of movies. Shatner and Spader portray two lawyers, Denny Crane and Alan Shore, respectively, who develop a deeply affectionate friendship for each other.

Crane, in his 70s, is an eccentric, who in his long-lost prime was a legal legend in Boston, where their firm is housed. He struggles with the onset of Alzheimer's disease. Crane is quite mindful of his waning powers as a jurist and has a hard time accepting

that his days of professional glory lie behind him. A younger associate in his firm, Alan Shore, is in his 40s, at the peak of his intellectual powers and a formidable lawyer. Both are womanizers, making clear that their relationship does not have even a faint glimmer of erotic attraction.

It is quite obviously not a father-son relationship either, although their different ages would almost suggest that. It is a deep friendship between two men who feel affection for one another, based on complete trust, mutual protection, candid communication, and the readiness to make sacrifices. In one episode the younger lawyer gives a very emotional closing argument in a euthanasia case and describes to what ends he would go to spare his older friend a painful and undignified death. He is unaware that his friend sits in the back of the courtroom, witnessing this declaration of devotion, love, and friendship.

The closing scene of each installment finds the two men sitting on the balcony outside the senior partner's office, all by themselves, reflecting on life and on the events of the day, cigar in one hand, whiskey glass in the other, their day's work done. There they share their innermost thoughts, hug, hold each other, console each other, share many a good laugh, but mainly enjoy their half hour together, uninterrupted by others, free to say anything that moves them, without any fear of being misunderstood, judged, or suspected.

Of course, this is all just television. But I can't help wondering if such warm, close relationships do actually exist among men. I think most of us are much too fearful that an affectionate relationship to another man might be misinterpreted. We men do not easily show our fondness, we are not demonstrative in our feelings, we often don't say what we may feel. Men, unless related, seldom hug.

Maybe it's just fine the way it is. But I for one know that I have given many eulogies in which I expressed, genuinely, my fondness for friends in words that I never would have spoken while they were alive. I am sure some of them would have liked to hear those words, while others would perhaps have been embarrassed by them. Such is our macho culture. We wait until it is too late. Maybe friendship, warmth, emotion, and affection are not for the dead, but for the living, and perhaps we should not be so miserly with them.

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