

A FRIENDSHIP GROWS ON THE PAGE

BY DANNY HEITMAN, *FORUM* EDITOR



In freshman high school English some decades ago, I sat near a classmate named Betsy who became my best friend.

Our closeness raised questions from others about whether we were dating, which prompted my standard disclaimer that no, we were “just friends.” But that curious expression, “just friends,” struck me then – and strikes me still – as an oddly diminishing turn of phrase, suggesting as it does that friendship is somehow a lowercase form of love.

There was nothing second-rate about the connection I felt with Betsy, who seemed, like any good friend, to simply understand me without explanation. That’s the real essence of friendship, I suppose – to be so consonant in companionship that words are often unnecessary.

All of which made my friendship with Betsy worth preserving when she moved thousands of miles away before we graduated. The only question was how our bond would survive.

The internet had not yet emerged when life separated us. Long-distance phone

Danny Heitman and his friend Betsy in 1981.

In sustaining a friendship with letters, I learned to write for other audiences that have enriched my life, too.

calls cost so much back then that I could speak with Betsy very rarely. In-person visits, which required air fare to Alaska, would be few and far between, too.

By default, we fell upon an old expedient, exchanging handwritten letters through the mail. I knew, from the start, that my letters couldn’t be perfunctory greetings and small talk. To keep this friendship alive, I’d have to put myself on the page; it was the only way to be a continuing presence in Betsy’s life. A friendship kindled on unsaid things would now, ironically enough, be sustained through words.

So began my extended experiment with first-person narrative, a craft I eventually embraced as a professional pursuit. In some four decades as a newspaper columnist and magazine essayist, I’ve written for readers as I wrote for Betsy – in a tentative voice, as a sometimes hapless but habitually curious soul trying to figure things out.

Betsy, my original reader, remains my friend. We’ve supported each other over most of a lifetime as we each built careers, marriages, and families of our own. That’s the first miracle of my long-ago pen pal adventure.

The second miracle was my discovery that the many other readers for whom I’ve written over the years have often been, in their own way, friends, too. I don’t presume that every reader likes me. But the sharing of a story or point of view places its faith in a willing audience, a form of friendship without price.

As a writer, I’ve been humbled by the degree to which that faith has been repaid. Thank you, reader, for the friend you’ve been to me.

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