

Friendship, a higher calling than romantic love

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Abstract: This article is part of the "Story, Archetype and Healing" series written by Dr. Linda G. English. We are transported to a place in rural southwest Arkansas to a time which appears simpler than the early twenty-first century of today. The characters are real people who lived ordinary lives. We see our own struggles reflected within theirs. The essay illuminates the lives of readers as they identify with the story's characters.

Through story, these archetypal characters come to life and help us reflect upon our own lives and accept the sometimes painful, yet always truthful, messages that we may have missed. In the search for truth, we often overlook the unremarkable within the lives of others. It is through the window of Dr. English's story, we are given the opportunity for second sight to see the unique and universal truths that are necessary to move forward. We are left with enhanced vision and wisdom via the story which reflects the unique and universal within all lives.

The text of the essay: With my knees squarely situated in the "tall stool with padded seat and back" custom-made for Mother for her work in "the store," I heard the 1963 Chevelle Malibu Super Sport pull into my parents' business, Brown's Grocery and Station. I could hear the "glass packs" as well as the sound the tires made on the cool blue-gray shale gravel "special ordered" for the front of the store. Mother and Daddy owned and operated a Mom and Pops store in Prescott from 1960 until the mid-70's.

I was six years old at the time. If I placed my knees just right, I could see over the top of the cash register and "watch for customers." Mother and Daddy had "put the store in" when I was three that they might make a living and raise "the baby." I recognized the sound immediately and knew it was William Hillery stopping to "gas up" his car, get a snack and "flirt" with his littlest girlfriend and secret admirer.

I yell "William's out front" and away I go "just to be in his presence." Growing up in small town Southwest Arkansas and part of a caring community, I went outside "to be with William" while he performed the daily maintenance ritual on his vehicle.

While there, William would visit with my folks about his day at school, how "Mr. Mack and Miss Nadine" were doing and how the work on the farm was coming along.

William's dad, "Mr. Mack," was County Judge of Nevada County during the late 50's and early 60's. I did not realize this until I was much older, when former Governor Orval Faubus was running for re-election, and I got to meet him. In those days, all political candidates visited rural stores and "stumped" or spoke during their re-election campaigns.

One day when I am in the fourth grade, I am “up at the shop” with Mr. Cliff White. Mr. Cliff worked for Judge Hillery maintaining county vehicles and heavy equipment. I loved Mr. White. The community joke in our neighborhood was “the Browns, the Whites and “Green” McCain all lived “a stone’s throw apart” from each other. The first time I ever heard the word, friend, Daddy was introducing “Mr. Cliff” to Dick Harvey, our rural mail carrier.

In my worldly fourth grade way, I spy a picture of then Governor Faubus. I ask Mr. White, “Why does “Mr. Mack” have a picture of Governor Faubus in this office?” Mr. Cliff’s soft reply was that my “Mr. Mack” was a very important man in Nevada County and within the state. Mr. Cliff takes the time to explain that county judges can “make or break” the governor, by supporting or not supporting their campaigns and plans for the state.

As I walk over to the picture, pick it up gently and look at the signature, I realize for the first time how important Mr. Mack and my own father were in local and state politics. What a treasure. As I write this, I am struck with how these relationships shaped my definition of strength and friendship.

Within the mosaic of the customers in the store, our “regulars” as Mother called them, “helped themselves” with tasks like pumping their own gas, checking the air in their tires, and adding oil, if needed. Otherwise, Daddy, Mother and I would pump your gas for you and “visit with you” while you made your purchases.

By the time, I get out there, William has already set the pump to automatic and is checking the air in his tires. When he stooped, I stooped. If he squatted, I squatted. Instantly, I am “in his space” and I am literally “under foot.” He is trying desperately “not to step on me.” I am all “doe-eyed” and silly, while trying to act more William’s age than mine.

I can remember still being squatted down “helping him” inspect his tires, while he is hurriedly moving from task to task. Today, having to “watch out for ‘the baby’” brings irritation, not adoration for the very first time. This is a bit unusual for I am unaccustomed to not having William’s “undivided attention” while I am in his presence.

I continue to seek his usual level of being enamored with “the baby.” Today, for the very first time that I can remember, I am not “first and foremost” in his thoughts and actions. I am having to try and “stay out of his way” instead of his usual “tending to me.” I begin to question the obvious changes in William’s attitude and behaviors toward me. I would not have to wait long for my answer.

He was certainly “breaking training” today.

There is a briskness to his step and mannerisms that excludes me. Crestfallen, I begin to withdraw and watch as he completes the tasks at hand. I begin to feel a tug in the general area of my heart.

With the car maintenance ritual completed, I follow him into the store. Even following William was a new concept; he had always opened the door for me before. What in the world was going on? I would have my answer soon enough.

He lifts me up onto the counter that I might be eye level. His favorite after school snack is chips and a small coke. (Daddy and William both believed that “little cokes” tasted better than the big ones.) While he munches Tom’s corn chips and washes it down with a nickel coke, Mother, Daddy and I listen intently to his thoughts and notions at the moment. Mother, Daddy and I offer our reflections, comments and admiration.

As I reflect on this episode “in the store,” I believe the real reason customers frequented the store was for the conversation and “to visit” with my folks. Mother was very serious, even stoic and offered practical advice and her considered opinion about all of life’s issues from parenting to relationship woes. I wonder if my future profession of counselor was not born right there in Brown’s Grocery and Station as mother “helped” all those who came in contact with her in the guise of store owner and clerk. She may have been selling you milk and bread, but she was actually “tending to you” in a real and personal way.

Daddy was much more of a practical joker and a storyteller. I still have folks reminding me of “Luther stories” from my childhood, both the ones he told and the ones he actually lived. I wonder if my profession of counselor educator was not developed as I sat in rapt awe as he “told stories” to inform, enlighten and entertain.

What I tell myself is that I do “my mother’s work” in “my father’s way.”

I learned the love of story first from my father.

Today, for the first time, William shares that he has a girlfriend named Jeanette and she lives in Nashville, a town approximately thirty miles away. He gets all “doe eyed” and silly when he says her name. I instantly feel a snarl begin to creep across my face.

As he continues to regale us with Jeanette’s many pleasing qualities, I have this rather instantaneous notion to shout, “No!” aloud. I think better of it and decide to “hold my peace” until bedtime. I knew I had best look away lest Mother, Daddy and William witness the first snarl I ever experienced still upon my lips.

Does not he realize that no woman, young or old, wants to know or hear about how wonderful or beautiful another woman is?

Mother and Daddy never bragged on other children in front of me. I could not understand William telling me about the womanly wiles of another female. Ugh!

I get this rather sick feeling in the pit of my stomach and feel as if something very dear and precious was being taken from me. It just was not fair.

Now, I knew that William had “dated” or “gone steady” with Lynn for a year or two, but I knew they were “just friends.” Her real name was Retha Lynn, but she did not like the Retha part. Lynn was a local girl and “not at all” a threat to me or my relationship with William.

I did not know until that evening that there was a word for this new feeling, even a color and a brand new facial expression.

That evening as Mother is putting me into bed, I confess my deep “feelings for William” and I learn a brand new word, jealousy. I did not realize that there would be “lessons to be learned” before I would be able to handle this brand new word and feeling. Some of life’s issues are just “better off” handled with a little help from our friends, sometimes even disguised as parents.

Mother, always with a pragmatic and practical response, quietly states, “Baby, William is a young man and you are a little girl.”

Mother’s thinking response does not quell the stirrings in my soul. Mother continues with “This is William’s last year in school and your first.” I begin to cry and state “Then William does not really love me.”

Mother assures me that he does. Through Mother’s questioning expression, I see that Mother does not know how William feels about me. Or was Mother unsure about how to respond to my very human quandary?

For the first time, Mother does not have a quick verbal response. As Mother’s eyes soften, I see and sense a recognition and understanding of the human condition, especially “her baby’s.” Safe in Mother’s embrace and gaze, I softly state, “I love William.”

“Of course you do,” was Mother’s stoic answer. “Why William has helped to raise you, even though a young boy, himself.” “Your daddy and Mr. Mack have been friends for years.”

“I’ll go get your daddy to tuck you in tonight,” as she quietly leaves my room.

Mother’s plan and favorite coping mechanism was “When in doubt, bring in reinforcements.”

Daddy was my defender, my confidant and my friend. He knew all and kept all to himself. Daddy’s response was “I’ll talk to William and get him to help us with this.”

I was just horror stricken... It was a secret... Now what had I “gone and done”... Mother and Daddy knew... And William would know tomorrow.

I went to sleep that night listening to Mother and Daddy running the daily receipts in the store and talking softly about what to do about William and “the baby.”

The next morning, Daddy began his gentle chiding immediately. “Linda has a boyfriend.” “Linda has a beau.” The reality was Linda is jealous.

Best I remember, I talked Daddy out of “speaking to William.” As I remember, I did not ever again “go out” just “to be in his presence” as before. I decided to “let him be.” He was “spoken for” now. I would just have to learn to live with that.

Daddy teased me daily. It really hurt my feelings, though I could not tell him. Humor was Daddy’s favorite coping mechanism. Many years later, I was studying Freud and defense mechanisms, when I read “Humor and Sublimation are two (2) of the highest defense mechanisms according to Freud’s taxonomy.” What I know about psychology and counseling, I first learned at Brown’s Grocery and Station in and among the mosaic of characters that frequented “the store.”

Shortly after this incident, William went away to college in a nearby town. Prior to his leaving, he came by to tell my folks and “his littlest girlfriend” and “not so” secret admirer, “Goodbye.” William asked my folks, “Could I come outside and help him service his car one more time?” I followed him outside and as we begin our old familiar ritual, William said to me, “Girlfriends will come and go, Linda, but friendship lasts forever. When you are given the chance to choose, choose friendship, Baby. I choose friendship and you.

And he was gone. And I was OK.

I knew from experience, he was “a young man” and I was “a little girl.” I knew that I would not share my secret this time with my parents. Though I had enjoyed many years of “riding tractors with William Hillery” and our car maintenance ritual, our relationship would be forevermore altered and changed.

What Freud would call the Electra, Carl Jung could call the Animus, I would call Daddy and William Hillery.

There is nothing so gentle as true strength and nothing so strong as true gentleness.

Biographical sketch

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