On the Significance of Friendship Day: An Interview with Gustav Neibuhr
By David Clark, Class of 2012, Oberlin College

Q How has your conception of friendship evolved? What was it as a child? As an adolescent? How have your ideas changed as an adult and what were the turning points? That's a broad question...

A
Yeah, that's a broad question, a good one though too, an essential one. I think as a child my first thought is a friend is someone you like to do things with, someone you like to hang out with and in some ways that doesn't really change. It's just that as you go on and as you develop you realize that you're gaining, you're gaining ideas and also you're having things checked in some ways. A friend is a person who helps you experience things in life and at the same time will call into question, sincerely, some of the aspirations or immediate plans you might have. A friend in that way, it's like there's a certain equality and a certain sharing and a certain enhancement of experience that are all bundled together. A friend is a person you can relax with too regardless of your own emotions and that friend's emotions. A friend is that you think of as well, a person you think you'd like to see and with whom you can pick up, and now I'm talking as an adult, after long absences. Someone said recently the obvious that picking up with a friend that you may not have spoken with for a year and yet you feel you're really at the same place you were when you left off the conversation, you're just picking it up and it's just that easy, which is a marvelous thing.

Q How has your experience with Oberlin's Friendship Day confirmed or altered your conception of friendship?

A
Yeah, it's making me think about the component parts of friendship. Friendship is something that I think is kind of easy to assume it exists because you experience it, but to think about what makes it valuable and what makes it uplifting means essentially defining it and defining what it is about personal friendships that have so much value. What I said earlier about someone with whom you have enough in common, enough common experiences, enough knowledge that you just simply feel relaxed with that person or you feel like you could go out and do something with that person regardless of what the weather or external circumstances are that's fundamental with friendship and I think Oberlin's Friendship Day what it does is it encourages one to think about what friendship means, how to define it.

Q What was the fastest friendship you've made and under what conditions did that happen?

A
That's like friendship at first sight, and it's happened when you don't expect it, when you sense a sort of interest and a vitality in another person that corresponds to what you're feeling that you need. I realize that I'm being abstract right now, but there are people in my adult life who I've met them and found something admirable about them but not in a heroic way, but in a practical, “that person is right, I could learn from that person,” and it turns out that it's reciprocated too. There's something intangible and in that sense we've heard about words for 'love' that the Greeks use, there are those three different types, but there is that type philia and that is the type in which you sense a bond, and it can be very immediate. “I just want to talk to that person I just want to do something, go somewhere, hangout. This is a person I could go hiking with, bicycling.” I got a friend like that who lives two doors down from
me in upstate New York. Both him and his wife I feel very closely to, and have right from the start. I'm not sure we're that much like each other other than we're close in age, but whenever we get together we just have great conversations or we have ordinary conversations, and I just feel very relaxed in their presence. Is that helpful there?

Yes, it's helpful and it's making me reflect about friendship definitely. I have a hiking buddy, him and I are so tight but we don't talk all that frequently. He's at college, I'm at college, we're both busy, but whenever we see each other it's just so close.

That's it, as I said you just pick up the conversation, or “what are you doing? Oh, you're doing this,” and then you talk a little bit about it and then you hike. Another thing about friendship is you don't always have to be talking; you're just comfortable with the other person. You have to have an idea about what that other person is going to want, and if you are out hiking “he's gonna need a break here” or I need a break and he knows it and we sit down, look out and admire the scenery.

What are some of the most memorable moments of friendship in your life?

I'm still close to someone that I've known since I was three so that's more than half a century and we've just always been friends. We lived next door to each other growing up and then he stayed in New England and went on to become a doctor, he's a doctor in Boston, and I've moved around the east, but whenever I see him it's like (snaps) we just pick things up like that. It's just no demands or anything, it's like “let's go get a cup of coffee, let's run, let's go see a movie,” or something like that. We take his kids somewhere, or take my kids. His name is Stephan and he's the closest friend I think I've ever had. Other most memorable moments of friendship, I got very close in college and still am to a group of people, one of whom lives in Miami Beach who I see every three years, the other lives in Washington D.C. and it's been more frequent with him. And in my profession I've kept close to people, my former profession journalism, there's someone I haven't talked to in a couple years a woman named Tracy who just sent me a chapter from her book that she's going to have published to show me what it's like. It's funny, I mention these things and it's not like there's anything really radical about it or really huge like Matterhorn type peaks, but they're meaningful. This friend Stephan and I traveled across Europe one summer which was really great, actually one winter which was still great. My friends from college and I, I went to school in California, we used to go up and down the west coast and just explore things.

So what did you learn in your trip to Europe or going up and down the west coast?

What I learned is that it was fun, and if I felt happy I was happy enough to share it. If I felt bummed out or something they could tell, they'd ask me. I'd say, “well, it's because of this” and we'd talk about it. There's a certain transparency, not complete, part of being a friend I think is you know when to ask the questions too. Recently, living in this little town that I do in central New York I've made friends there, as I say neighbors. There, friends are people that you just pay attention to what they're doing and what they have to say, and they laugh at your jokes and you laugh at theirs, and it seem very, very authentic. You're interested in them and you want to find out more. You leave them and you think, “you know, I could drop in on them and find out more.” There's a guy named Dave who's married to a woman named Regina and I see them maybe at best once a month. We don't live very far apart but I always know I can have a good conversation with them; they're just really interesting people, I like them a lot.

What has your work on the interfaith movement taught you about friendship between faiths?

That it's possible. That people who really deeply believe in something can certainly be friends with
people who believe something quite different as long as it's not really conflictual. It takes a certain willingness, curiosity, earnestness and the fundamental assumption that you're dealing with another human being who's your equal and is as precious as you are, if you believe in God then in God's eyes, or if you simply believe in the value of the world then in that part of the world. There are a lot of people who seem to be curious now about different faiths and what they do in people's lives, and then they find out, “Gee, what's happening with you this way is kind of what happens with me in a certain way, according to my faith.” There's a learning experience there.

Yes, as you've already point out. From your experiences, what role does friendship play in the world today? Is it trending up, or is it trending down?

I hope that it's holding steady. I think the thing that American's are always a little concerned about is that the spirit of individualism which is such a hallmark of our society threatens to undermine our community, but I'm not sure if I've seen evidence of that actually happening. Even as various projects emerge, I've seen quite a few over fifty years, they can be distracting but at the same time I don't think that they're inhibiting of friendship because I think people find ways to use products together, ie Playstations and games and things like that, or they use electronics to facilitate communication just in a way though that's different than people several years older ie a lot of texting to each other. I don't see that as an inhibitor of friendship at all. I think it facilitates it, but it facilitates it with its own grammar and at its own length or shortness.

What was the greatest moment of friendship you've witnessed between two people that you weren't friends with yourself? 14:30

Yeah, I probably have, but what would it be? This is a question that I'm sort of paging through images right now. I'd like to say that I've seen scenes at airports where people are greeting each other who have been away from one another for a long time and that's a wonderful thing. You just see the excitement on people's faces. It's a good question, it makes me think are there allusions in classical mythology or classical stories where there's these people who have been separated for a long time and then are united, there probably are.

I come from a family that is diverse as anyone's family is and some of the people are much more sociable than others, but on one side of the family there was an enormous interest in building up networks of friends. My great uncle, who taught at Union Seminary, was friends with Dietrich Bonhoeffer who was a German theologian and was anti-Nazi. Reinhold arranged for Bonhoeffer to come to the United States and escape Hitler in 1939. Bonhoeffer was a protestant, he wasn't a Jew, he wasn't in that kind of immediate danger, but he was anti-Hitler. I know Reinhold must have felt a tremendous sense of loss and foreboding but at the same time respect when Bonhoeffer decided he had to go back to Germany to fight the Nazis, and he did and it cost him his life.

Is there anything you'd like to add in the spirit of Friendship Day, or any questions that I should have asked that you can think of?

No, but I think it's a really interesting idea. At first I wasn't sure what it was, I thought, “What does this celebration of friendship mean?” But you know why I thought that, it's because I hadn't gone through the very question that it raises. Friendship Day raises the question and that is “What do you think friendship is? And, what do you value in friendship itself?” In that sense, it's more provocative than simply a label. It's a good thing.