

A STEADFAST FRIEND

A steadfast friend is the best kind of friend anyone can have. Joe Gilson (class of '57) was my life-long steadfast friend—responsive, dependable and trusting but most importantly, attentive and present when we were together. He was my first real friend. When your first friend turns out to be a steadfast friend, it is one of the richest gifts life can give you. I believe that the character and quality of our first friendships provide the possibility to experience positive and healthy relationships throughout our lives. Joe offered me this kind of friendship at that early, critical stage in my life.

We met each other in 1953. We were thirteen years old, children, and certain that God was calling us to be Franciscan priests. Joe left family and traveled from Sacramento. I left family and traveled from Los Angeles. We arrived in Santa Barbara and made our way to St. Anthony's Seminary. Other thirteen and fourteen-year-old boys arrived on that autumn day to begin their first year of preparation. I don't remember how many – probably around 80. We met. We mingled. We picked up our books and papers, found our beds and clothes lockers. We got oriented. We settled in to our new very different life. We found groups of other boys who seemed to be more to our liking – comfortable and interesting to be with. From those formative groups we discovered certain individuals with whom we were at ease and having fun.

Sometime during that first year, probably in the second semester, I increasingly found that I really liked being with Joe. I think we discovered a common ground where we didn't have to explain anything; jokes and pranks came easy; a kind of intuition developed between us. Maybe the fact that we had sisters but no brothers primed a mutual understanding between us. When there were group activities, we tended to seek each other out and sit or walk together. I didn't know it at this early developmental stage, but I was learning to be a friend, to have a friend. We were teachers and students to each other, learning the unique and essential skills of successfully relating to another person.

Each semester we met with Father Rector to receive an evaluation on our prospects of remaining in the seminary. Father Herbert Patterson was our Father Rector. He was about six feet, ten inches tall, of solid build, kind but serious with a no-nonsense demeanor. He would review how we were progressing, most importantly in our studies, but also our behavior and character and finally the faculty's opinion as to whether we had a "Calling" to become a Franciscan priest. Needless to say, these were knee-shaking experiences as we lined up in the dark hallway outside Father Rector's office waiting for our turn to be evaluated.

On one of these occasions, I believe in my sophomore year, towards the end of an otherwise positive report on my progress as a seminarian, Father Rector informed me that I had been observed associating ("hanging around") with Joe Gilson too much. He said I was forming what he called "a particular friendship." He directed me to be with Joe Gilson less and to circulate more with other seminarians. I know I took Father Rector's directive seriously. I knew if I ignored his "command" (because that's what it was) I along with others who did not make the "grade" would be told we did not have a "Calling" and would be returning home. What I did to remedy the situation, I do not remember in detail. I'm sure I made every effort to be seen "hanging around" with other seminarians, especially when our priest faculty were present and could see me.

What I do know, and for which I am so grateful, my friendship with Joe did not end or diminish. It continued to develop and flourish, perhaps more cautiously in our remaining years at St. Anthony's Seminary. Joe continued to be a steadfast friend through our years together at Mission San Luis Rey College, novitiate at Mission San Miguel and theology studies at Mission Santa Barbara. When we took vows as Franciscans, we became Fraters (Latin for Brothers. Joe was Frater Earl.) We considered ourselves Spiritual Brothers, but we both knew we had been brothers all along as friends.

When Joe decided to change the vocational direction of his life at the end of his second year of theology studies, I and all who were with him during those years of preparation and anticipation felt the loss of his generous presence when he left. We all knew that Joe would continue to follow his "Calling." We were confident that wherever Joe landed it would be in a place that would be better because he was there.

As both our lives went in directions our youthful forecasts could not have imagined, we continued to correspond by letter and then email, telephone and then cell phone, meet each other on occasion, but in the old way, person-to-person. Sandra and I cherish the memories of the winter visits we had in these latter years with Jane and Joe. We wish we could have had more. But that's the problem with steadfast friends; you always want more of them.

Thank you, Joe, for being an important part of my life and the lives of many others. You are not with us physically, but the friendship you shared with us remains alive. When we were young boys learning how to be humans, you were my first steadfast friend. Life could not have given me a better one!

Alban Rosen

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