

Friends: Sustaining relationships that challenge and affirm

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [June 27, 2006](#) issue

"What people find out in time" writes Meg Greenfield, "is that the false self they are inhabiting isn't much of a friend after all. Nor is it any great shakes as a refuge or consolation. They begin to live lives of pantomime, in which gesture is all. They spend more and more time attending social functions with 'friends' they don't much like, smiling when they want to frown or yell or tell someone off."

Greenfield's description of the plight of contemporary politicians in her essay "Mavericks and Image-Makers" (in her book *Washington*) is as unpleasant as it is unsettling. It is unpleasant to imagine anyone living such a life of pantomime. It is unsettling to realize that her description isn't just true for politicians, but portrays the loneliness of many accomplished people who live public lives—including clergy.

Greenfield continues: "But life inside the image doesn't leave all that much time for real pals in any event, because the image requires continuous care, feeding, and above all, protection. That is the worst of it. Merely contemplate having to pretend 24 hours a day that you are a single-minded, perfectly comported, morally unimpeachable, endlessly motivated toiler for the public good. It's like never being able to get undressed. People who take this course will become increasingly lifeless."

She concludes that people who follow this path will increasingly feel a need not to protect themselves from the public persona, but rather to protect and preserve the persona itself. "Those who fall into the image-as-reality trap develop a kind of deadening Midas touch. It turns everything not to gold but to the equally lifeless cardboard of public presentation."

The dangers of such a life include the impact on spouses and families, loneliness and an inability to know who one really is or is called to be. Worse, such people often turn to destructive means of propping themselves up: giving in to lust, greed, unbridled ambition and narcissistic obsessions; grasping for power; using alcohol

and drugs.

If we could confine this analysis to political public figures, then we could rest comfortably in our disgust with “those people.” But what if they are a microcosm of the tendency in our culture to focus on the public persona of leaders of any kind? What if they highlight a failure to attend to the friendships and communities that support leaders in their work as teachers, lawyers, physicians or clergy?

Our Christian communities have resources that offer powerful alternatives to the world of pantomime. I asked a devout Christian who is also a well-known lawyer what sustained him in his vocation. He described a small group of people in his church who had covenanted to meet every week to focus on their spiritual lives and their vocations. “My life has been very different, and my commitment to Christ much richer, because of the sustenance I receive from these friends. They tell me what I need to hear, and I’m learning to tell them what they need to hear.”

All of us, especially those who have public vocations, need friendships that nourish our souls. We cannot survive for long with only “friends” from social functions. We long for holy friendships that shape and deepen our discipleship in authentic ways, so that we become the people God calls us to be.

My own sense of holy friendships arises out of reflection on the Wesleyan class meetings of the 18th century. These gatherings nurtured community because of their formative and transformative power and because the ways in which they addressed people’s yearnings created a significant movement of faithful living.

Holy friends are those people who challenge the sins we have come to love—they know us well enough to see the sins that mark our lives. It isn’t difficult to find people who will talk with us about sins we already hate. But the sins that we love we tend to hide from others and even from ourselves. This is why we need other people to hold us accountable.

Holy friends also help us discern God’s work in our lives and affirm gifts that we are afraid to claim. They help us to dream God’s dreams in ways we otherwise never would have. It isn’t difficult to have sycophants telling us things neither they nor we believe; nor is it difficult to find truthful people who affirm gifts about which we already know. But holy friends point us to new avenues of relationship and activity that can enable us to grow in relation to God and others—and thereby also to discover the selves God calls us to be.

In offering both challenge and support, holy friends also help us dream God's dreams for the future. Sinful activities cause our world to shrink, often into a narcissism where we can no longer see beyond ourselves. The challenges and affirmations from holy friends cause our world to enlarge again, and they call us to dream God's dreams in new ways that give life and offer hope to others.

When my life has been healthiest and most faithful, I have been able to point to holy friends who sustain me through challenge, affirmation and a willingness to dream—and I can point to those who depend on me. Greenfield's critique of lives of pantomime call us all, and especially Christians, both to attend to the relationships in our own lives and to cultivate those structures, practices and friendships that provide a faithful antidote to our culture of pantomime and its lifeless cardboard of public presentation.