

My Sister Patty

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Someone once wrote that we have to live a long time to fulfill ourselves. It can also be said that we have to live a long time before finding a truly fulfilling relationship with one of our fellow beings. Throughout our lives, we come into many relationships and experience various fits and starts of generosity for and from those toward whom we feel deeply. But we all, in our innermost hearts, long to find that person with whom we can be completely free and to whom we can confidently give and open our hearts. As Emerson put it: "We mark with light in the memory the few interviews we have had, amid the dreary years of routine and sin, with souls that made our souls wiser, that spoke what we thought, that told us what we knew, that gave us leave to be what we inly were." We all await such an enlightening and fulfilling relationship.

It took me 33 years to find such a relationship, to find my true friend. When it happened, it took me completely by surprise because my ideal relationship turned out to be with someone toward whom I didn't instantly feel a spiritual affinity, as I had toward others who had played important roles in my life. Rather, it was a relationship that crept up on me, without my really suspecting what was

happening until it was in full bloom. And yet, there was one meeting which foretold, at least the possibility, of such a deep union between us.

It occurred at a meeting of state pioneers from the New England area in September of 1975. The purpose of the gathering was to understand the "real" situation of the pioneers. As each gave an account of his experiences, it was obvious that they were all trying to be as encouraging as possible, despite their difficult situations. But when Patty Zulkosky gave her testimony, she, in essence, made a public confession, pouring out her heart in complete honesty and telling how difficult it really was and how devastated she had been by the sudden arrival, without forewarning, of a brother who announced that he was now the state leader. Her total honesty and willingness to lay her heart before everyone moved me to tears. I knew that here was a person who valued honesty so much that she was willing to publicly express her deepest struggles, and even resentments, in order not only to overcome her own situation, but also to help the other pioneers who later admitted to experiencing similar struggles. I admired her honesty and integrity.

But we didn't get to know each other until over a year later when we returned to Barrytown together after the Washington Monument campaign. Shortly thereafter, Patty was put in charge of 21-day training, and it was then that our relationship began to take root and grow. I don't remember exactly how it happened, but I do remember that many times when Patty would talk to me, she would put her elbow on my shoulder and lean on me. It was symbolic of what was happening between us. She needed someone from whom she could gain internal support and on whom she could depend, and I somehow became that person. I began loving her without realizing that I was.

Consciously, I didn't want to become deeply involved with anyone because I was tormented by a relationship with someone else, and I didn't want to open my heart up to more disappointment. And ironically, I remember sharing with her something that Heavenly Father had told me about the true nature of sacrifice when I was pioneering: that's it's not a matter of how little you eat or sleep or how hard you push yourself externally.

True sacrifice means the willingness to repeatedly put yourself in a position to be hurt, humiliated and even destroyed by strangers, those you love and even God. This is the course of sacrifice our Heavenly Father has travelled for 6,000 years, and also that our Father has endured. And that was exactly what Heavenly Father was leading me to do at a time when I least wanted to. While I remained cautious, God confidently drew us closer to each other.

One night as we were going to bed Patty told me that my life of faith was inspiring to her. I really didn't understand why, because I didn't think my faith was anything special, but I was very grateful to her for saying it because no one had ever said anything so encouraging to me before. That night I cried myself to sleep because I knew that, through Patty, Heavenly Father was trying to comfort me.

At the beginning of January, Patty left for Ohio with the IOWC. I didn't go immediately, and during the three weeks I was alone at Barrytown, I realized how much I loved her and missed her. When I did join the team in Ohio, we didn't see each other so often because we were in different cities. But we spoke regularly on the phone, and our love for each other blossomed.

I knew now that I had found the true friend I had longed for all my life. Here was the one I could express not only my deepest hopes and feelings to, but someone who always showed confidence in me as a person and gently encouraged me to go beyond my inhibitions to become what I had the potential to become. Here was someone who valued my relationship with God so much that she sometimes told young members to talk to me if they wanted to know someone who had a relationship with God. When one of them first told me that, I felt very anxious and immediately called her and said, "What are you doing? I can't handle that. And anyway, lots of people have a relationship with God."

She calmly replied, "Don't worry. I know your limit. But you have so much to offer young members, and I want you to share your faith with them." How could I argue with someone who found such value in me and made me feel I had something significant to give to others? I knew how very sincere she was and how deeply she cared when I learned that she also encouraged our central figure to give me responsibilities that would necessarily put me in a position to publicly inspire others. Her faith in me was truly amazing to me.

But most heartening was the way in which Patty let me love her, the way in which she accepted my love, however I chose to express it—spiritually, physically or materially. Never before had I felt such acceptance or freedom in loving. Relationships had always been difficult for me. When I felt deeply toward someone, I wanted to give everything and have a total relationship. Physically, I couldn't stand to have anyone touch me, but spiritually I was willing to invest myself completely. Somehow that frightened people, and they backed away. After joining the church, I had a deep experience with someone who unlocked within me emotions I hadn't known were there. But they were feelings she herself couldn't handle, and so that relationship became a very frustrating one for me.

When Patty accepted my love so willingly and completely, it was as if a part of me that had always been imprisoned was released. Suddenly loving, which had always been painful, was such a joy. For the first time I felt fulfilled in love. I knew this was a great gift from Heavenly Father because on the day Patty had left New York I had had a very deep experience in which I realized that I had no right to ask to be able to love freely until God was able to love freely. And now He was giving me that wonderful blessing. I felt it was only possible because He, too, could find joy in our relationship, a relationship that had Him at its center. Because of that, Patty and I have been able to find God in each other, and to inspire and stimulate each other. And this is really what a true relationship is all about.

One day we debated whether it was more precious to be true friends or true sisters. Being an only child and always having longed for a sister, I said sisters were closer and could have a deeper relationship. Patty, who has four sisters, thought a true friend was more valuable. But after a couple of days she changed her mind and agreed that to be true sisters was more precious, and so we became sisters.

Of course, all relationships go through trials and struggles, and ours has too. But whatever happens between us, I know that she understands my heart in a way that no one else ever has, and that is a great comfort to me. I don't have to worry about being misunderstood or having my motivation questioned by her. I can be myself and express myself freely. In our world, and even in our church, words are often spoken carelessly, without much sincerity behind them, and I am frequently upset at how little people really mean the things they say. It's very true that words are cheap. But over and over again Patty has shown through her actions that her love for me is sincere. For true love consists not only in working together harmoniously toward the same goal, but in helping one another, through positive support and encouragement, to become all that God desires us to become. As Patty said to me recently, "The relationships that have been most joyful and inspiring to me are those in which people have seen in me something greater than I am at the moment and have pushed me toward fulfilling that greatness. It's a kind of unconditional love that accepts me where I'm at now but urges me to become something better. And I recognize that that is really God revealing, through those people, His hope for me."

That's the kind of relationship and the kind of love she has given to me—and that's why I thank Heavenly Father every day for my sister Patty.