

## **“Love Beyond Hallmark”**

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### Part 1: Love Beyond Hallmark: Animals

See video on the First Church Boston [YouTube channel](#) for [the story, “Dog Tails.”](#) and reflection by the Rev. Hank Peirce

### Part 2: Love Beyond Hallmark: Love in the Last Chapter

When I was in high school and college, I spent several Spring Breaks with my grandparents at their little condo in Stuart, Florida. As there was just one-bedroom, I slept on a blow-up mattress on a three-season porch off their bedroom. Separated only by a sliding glass door cracked open for air flow, I would overhear their nightly ritual of saying goodnight to one another. Their voices were gentle, their quiet kisses unmistakable. Married nearly fifty years at that point, they were still one another’s sweethearts.

From childhood I had heard their story of courtship. Harold picking up Betty in his 1939 green Ford convertible—with rumble seat!—to take her to the dance hall. I knew this because Grandpa still played the same Big Band tunes as he drove us around, reminiscing about those dances. I also knew that one of the first gifts he ever gave Betty was this gold locket—a picture of each of them tucked inside. Through all my memories of her, the locket was always there around her neck. Like many couples of their generation, the war in Europe called and Harold enlisted in the army. Marrying on August 1, 1942, they spent only 10 days together before he left for basic training. For most of the next three years, all there would be was letters.

During those years apart, Betty lived off income from her job while saving Harold’s pay. When Harold finally safely returned, she surprised him with the savings, enabling him to buy a new car. Harold was always a car guy! However, they struggled to join the baby boom, eventually adopting two children to create the family they longed to have. By the time my brothers and I came on the scene decades later, their modest brick home was lined with mid-century modern furniture, shelves of bowling league trophies, and a landscaped garden to rival that of any city’s in design and care if not in size. Laughter came easily to them both and love felt abundant in their presence. I loved my grandparents, and they loved each other.

Betty's unrivaled energy had us convinced that she would be the last of our grandparents to die. Unfortunately, she ignored some spots on her skin and by the time she saw a doctor the melanoma had begun to spread through her body. By this time, I was living in Boston, attending grad school. But when the time came, I flew home to my parents where Betty was in home hospice. Over her last couple days, Harold did not leave her side, holding her hand as the morphine eased her pain but kept her distant from us. We sang to her, my grandfather's baritone as mellow as ever. And when she finally died, he bowed his head over her and wept.

As difficult as this was to witness, I remain humbled by the gift I received from their love for each other. While their love had begun with a heady, romantic courtship, the decades since had included significant joy, but also heartbreaks, including struggles with family that were unresolved at their deaths. Theirs is not a story immune from loss or pain. Nor were they perfect people—my grandmother could use religion as a cudgel; my grandfather could be overtly racist. *And* theirs is a story of love beyond Hallmark cards that can only ever capture fragments of a decades-long narrative of two entwined lives.

Since becoming a minister, I have had the privilege of bearing witness to other such decades long love between elderly couples. I have sat in living rooms with couples in their nineties as they spoke openly of their discussion of who may die first. And then I have met with the surviving spouse to plan a memorial service for the other. To be invited in as a witness to such sturdy love is a sacred gift. Such stories deserve to be preached as holy scripture for what is possible for some people. This is not to say that all couples should stay together just to grow old together—I for one remain confident that divorcing in my 20's was the right choice. Also, lauding the gift of a decades-old love is not to say that all couples who stay together remain sweethearts. I have witnessed those stories as well. Even so, on this Valentine's week, bringing to mind those who have found a way to nurture and sustain love for decades throughout life's tumult depicts a significant kind of love. Love is not only for the young, the fit, and the well-heeled as some Hallmark or Hollywood movies might have us think. Love—real, deep, affectionate love—can also exist within the decades-old love of an elderly couple . . . right on through to the last chapter of life.

### Part 3: Love Beyond Hallmark: Friends

If you watch the Hallmark channel, you will notice that the budding romance in a story is not the only kind of relationship presented. There are also co-workers, neighbors, and best friends. This I agree with! We all need love in our lives. But I don't think romantic love is the only way we *must* or perhaps even *can* meet all our needs for love. Rather, we all benefit from the gift of friends.

While each of us carries our own unique stories of particular friends now or in the past, I suspect there are also many common threads. We may have friends from school, from work, from a sports team, a choir, or, perhaps, from church. We may have a best friend or a friend group, new friends or long-time friends, friends we see a lot and long-ago friends with whom we have mostly lost touch.

According to Facebook, everyone to whom you connect is a “friend”. But does this inclusiveness really capture what we mean by friend? For me, friendship conveys a reciprocity of care, respect, and connection. Friends are people for whom we care *and* who care about us. A friend is someone with whom you share *mutual* care and concern. It is listening to a friend complain about their bad day *and* then trusting that they’ll be there to listen when you need to download about your own day. Or maybe you don’t even need to talk about all that’s going on. You just show up for the meal or the practice and the other can tell you’re not in a great spot that day. But still you hang out, spend time together, and simply be there for the other.

Some friends may indeed be a person to whom you open your heart and mind, with whom you share fears and hopes, longings and uncertainties. Such a friend can be, as the Rev. Kim Crawford Harvie suggests, “the one who sees the beauty, even in the brokenness, and reflects that to us, like a mirror.” Such a friend loves us even with our foibles, annoying habits, and inevitable imperfections.

Such was the deep friendship chronicled by Gail Caldwell in her book *Let’s Take the Long Way Home: A Memoir of Friendship*. Describing the story of her friendship with Caroline, Gail writes, “From the beginning there was something intangible and even spooky that could make strangers mistake us as sisters or lovers, and that sometimes had friends refer to us by each other’s name.” (12) Both writers, Caroline and Gail connected over their shared experience of becoming dog owners. Their friendship developed over long walks with their dogs, rowing on the Charles River, swimming laps, as well as a long, ongoing conversation. On this dual nature of their friendship of action and conversation, Gail writes,

According to the old rulebook, men had sports and women had talking; Caroline and I cultivated both, finding that our logging of miles on river or land enhanced the internal ground we covered. And yet I find now that writing about a friendship that flourished within the realm of connection and routine has all the components of trying to capture air. The dailiness of our alliance was both muted and essential. We were the lattice that made room for the rose.

Friendship, like love or beauty, is not a tangible object that we can point to, pick up, or physically reproduce. Rather, friendship is a quality of connection, a relational experience. And yet, friendship often benefits from material acts of nurture and engagement—like regular walks, frequent phone calls, or even infrequent, but consistent emails or letters. Friendships may be grounded in sense of connection or a poignancy of shared past experience, but friendships remain most vital when valued and nurtured with ongoing actions of care.

Although Gail's book centers on her friendship with Caroline, she also presents an array of other relationships. Notably, both Gail and Caroline have fierce, meaningful relationships with their dogs—another example of interspecies love. Caroline also has a boyfriend, Morelli, as well as a twin sister, a therapist, and many other friends. And when Caroline dies a too-early death, the packed chapel at Mount Auburn cemetery reflects her many, many connections. While some of those people were certainly family as well as her beloved Morelli, so many of those gathered were connected to Caroline in various ways and in different levels of intimacy—including her dear, dear friend Gail.

Friendships are one of many ways that we can connect to others, can find joy, can find support and care. Friendships can be valuable part of the constellation of relationships that buoy us in good times and in bad. Sometimes we're lucky when an extraordinary friendship blossoms. Caroline and Gail had one such extraordinary friendship grounded in shared interests and experiences, but also fostered by deliberate choices to call the other, to spend time together, to open up to one another.

While we may not all have such a profound friendship like Gail and Caroline's, I do believe that friendships of many kinds can bring gifts of care, connection, and even love into our lives. Acting legend Marlene Dietrich once said, *"It's the friends you can call up at 4 a.m. that matter."* While such trusted friends may be very valuable indeed, I think friends and friendships of many kinds matter. So, my hope for all of us is that we value the diverse friendships in our lives—from decade-old friends, to casual friends, to a new friendship begun today at coffee hour.

And, may we believe that love is much more than Hallmark would have us believe. There is not a card for everything.

So may it be. Amen.