

On all of our journeys through life, there are people who help us in ways they might not even know. Through their encouragement and support; through their sound advice; through their patience and most of all through their love, they help us to find ourselves, to gain confidence, and to become better people.

Odds are you might know the name of Art Carney, the actor famous for playing Ralph Kramden's best friend on "The Honeymooners" who had a long and successful career, winning an Oscar in 1974 for Harry and Tonto.

But a big reason he found his way in life was because of a friendship that emerged in his childhood.

In 1961, he wrote about it.

He says that under a glass dome on his dresser was a gold pocket watch, not expensive, but very precious. It belonged to Rich. Whenever Art looked at it, he would see him, and hear him. And he remembers how he filled his youth with love and wonder and the special magic of hero worship.

His name was Philip Richardson. He was once the mayor of Woburn, a small Massachusetts city; he was an editor, and gave Art's father his first newspaper job. He and Dad became firm and life-long friends with an enduring affection for each other. Art's mother loved Rich, too. Everybody did.

Rich had an unhappy and childless marriage, and when he was about 50 he was alone. Naturally he came to live with the Carney family. Art's parents wouldn't have it any other way. He quit newspapering and, until he retired on a pension at 65, worked for the American Telephone and Telegraph Company.

Meanwhile, Rich gave all the love he wasn't able to give elsewhere to the six Carney sons. Art was the youngest, so the relationship between Rich and his was the longest, and, he likes to think, the deepest.

Art's parents were unstinting in their love for the kids but Rich added a new dimension to that love. As Art puts it, his parents were the security, the authority, the insurance. Rich was the hero, the friend, the reassurance.

The Carney house was always full of frantic people. Any minor event could quickly reach the proportions of a major crisis. But Rich had this wonderful calm that always punctured any crisis. Once, after eating a lot of junk, Art got a fierce stomach-ache. He yelped. His brothers yelped at him to stop yelping.

Amid the bedlam Art's mother and father sternly ordered me him to take some milk of magnesia. That was for babies. Stubbornly Art yelped back: "No! No! Never!" They appealed to Rich.

He silenced the din with his smile, then swallowed a spoonful himself, filled the spoon again, and held it out to Art. It was the gesture of an equal to an equal. Art took it without a word.

Art says Rich had a way of leaving anyone, young or old, with his dignity intact.

You were never conscious of his age. He was never older than the person he was talking to. He looked like a medium-sized, gray-haired General MacArthur without the severe face, but with the same meticulous air of distinction.

Even when he played marbles with Art he never lost that air. The Carney's had a crazy rug in their dining room with big colored squares in it and almost every day before dinner they'd play marbles on it. Then Rich would go into the living room to read his paper.

While Rich read Art would comb his hair into weird hairdos, pulling it up to points from every part of his head. He'd just go on reading the paper until he asked him to look at the hairdo in the mirror.

Rich would get up, look, smile his approval, or frown his disapproval, then return to his paper. And Art would start another weird hair comb.

Rich got Art his first ball, his first baseball mitt, his first two-wheeler, and his first dog. He was always at the games when Art and other boys played baseball. He also took him to see the Woolworth Building. But mostly he remembers walking with him. Long walks, in a lot of silence and always feeling his love.

It seemed that Rich never had any problems of his own. But, Art knew he did. Plenty. But he never burdened anyone with them. Art suspects he

eased his problems by being with kids, especially him. Or maybe with painting.

He was a good artist. He used oils, charcoal, water colors, or pen. And sometimes on their walks, they would stop in a nice spot and sit, and we'd both paint or sketch.

Those walks. They were great. Every Friday Rich and Art would take a special long walk to his Aunt Mabel's, a cousin of Art's father. Once, on the way there, Art thought he smelled gas coming from the ground. He yelled "Gas! Gas!" Rich didn't think he was crazy. Anybody else would have. But, not him.

He went over, bent down, sniffed very seriously. Sure enough, there was part of an old gas pipe there with a strong gas smell. From then on, every Friday night, when they got to that spot they'd both stop, bend down, sniff, look up knowingly, and walk on happily, sharing their great, dark secret.

Then, coming to the hedges before Aunt Mabel's house, Art would duck behind one, then dash up the steps before Rich would catch him. Art doesn't

know if he started that or if Rich did. But like the gas-smelling, it became a regular ritual on the Friday night walks to Aunt Mabel.

When Art got older, much older, near 13, the walks got longer, much longer. He mapped them out to pass the house of the girl Art was madly in love with at the time. Rich never protested. He knew that he knew, but he never let on.

Rich was at the heart of my world, really, but once, when I got articulate enough to tell him he was, he said: "I'm not the center of your universe or any universe. God is."

And whenever there was any trouble, big or small, his calm hovered over both of them, and he and his family would hear him say: "God and time will take care of it. Just ask, 'Lord Jesus, help me,' and if you really mean it, He will."

At school Art spent more time in the principal's office than in his classes because of this irreverent urge he had to mimic his teachers. In one class, off

in a corner, there was this bust of Beethoven, very severe-looking, very cold.

One day Art just couldn't resist: he rushed up, pulled out his handkerchief, and blew Beethoven's nose. The class broke up.

The principal didn't. "Arthur William Matthew Carney," she said, "you will never amount to anything."

Art believed her. But, Rich didn't. Under his auspices Art gave his first professional performance. He was nine when one day he got the idea of a one-man show.

It was Rich who promptly sat down and wrote 12 invitations in his own beautiful script, mostly to relatives: "You are invited to a special evening of entertainment by Mr. Arthur Carney called 'Art by Art.'"

Art danced and had funny disguises, doodled on the piano as his father had taught him, and he got by on drums, slide whistles, and flexitone, a kind of musical saw.

Art always wondered if he would make it in show business. Sometimes he still wondered even after all his success. Rich though never did. He was always there, through the years, even when out of sight, when Art was knocking about the country with Horace Heidt, in night clubs, in vaudeville, when he couldn't get work of any kind.

He was there in the early days of radio, and he was there when, as an infantryman, Art set up his machine gun on one of the Normandy beaches and got a piece of shrapnel in his right leg before he could fire it.

And he was there, out of sight, when Art drank. Art says he once was able to drink pretty good as a young man. When he got older and had real responsibility, the remorse was worse than the hang-over. Art told himself he was headed for that endless lost weekend. He tried to quit.

It wasn't easy. He could fool a lot of people about it. But, as he said, when you talk to yourself or to Rich you have to tell the truth. He was gone when Art dropped to the depths as a drinker. But at the lowest point he heard him remind him:

“Just ask, ‘Lord Jesus, help me’, and He will—if you really mean it.”

Hearing Rich say that, even when he wasn't there, Art learned to mean it.

By middle age, Art had seen much success in his battle against alcohol. He would write that he did not beat the temptation every time but, whenever he would say “Lord Jesus, help me”, and mean it, he would win, and the drink loses.

When Rich was 70 he was still playing tennis with Art. When he was 81 he got a blood clot in his heart, and survived it. But he was never really right after that.

For a time he lived with Art and his wife Jean, and one night, sitting by his bed, holding his hand, listening to his calm voice, he saw Art's worried look, and suddenly smiled reassuringly, and asked: “Do you think I'm going to make it?”

“Sure,” Art said, “you always will.”

He died shortly after that. But Art says, he made it. He made it here, and elsewhere too.

All of us want to make it elsewhere too, the problem is sometimes we don't know quite how to get there. And that is why our connections to one another matter so much.

In heaven, we have a perfect connection to God and one another; we enjoy being with God forever. And while we all have a different faith journey, other people help us on that journey find the way to heaven. To be a human means we need one another; so much of our well-being is dependent upon others. Our parents teach us how to tie our shoes and how to respect others; but inside all of us what we also see is the deeper need to do good to other people. Aristotle argued that friendship is more than just mutual need, and the example he gives is the rich man who wishes friends so that he may do good to them.

Today's feast is the friendships of the saints in heaven for us here on earth. But it also invites us to reflect on the deeper meaning of friendship too; friends help us to attain the vision of God; friends are the people who live

out the beatitudes that take our faith to the next level. So what do with respect to our friends in heaven and on earth?

With respect to the saints, today's feast honors all the saints who are in heaven whose names are known only to God. Art Carney's friend Rich may have met him there when he eternal life. Our friendship with them is pure, because it's not based on any need they have, except perhaps what we might say is the need to allow their joy of love to overflow into the world. I think of the people in my life who I've lost like my grandparents Mike, Henry, Pat and Evelyn; my Godmother Gen and Godfather Joe, and many other great people. I look at all that they showed me in their life; their patience and gentleness; their piety; how they personified these beatitudes and I'm inspired to keep becoming a better person. That's why our connection with our loved ones is so important; the people we knew like Rich for Art, whom we remember not just with the stories of the past, but by being inspired and sharing with our kids and grandkids who may never have even known these people how they made our lives better and helped us stay on the right track.

With respect to the people on the earth, I once had a seminary professor who my friend and classmate referred to as a “living saint,” meaning he was convinced he was in the presence of someone very holy who brought him closer to God. I agree. And this is why when we speak of friendship, we want to seek people out and be people who live out the beatitudes from the Gospel.

Thinking of the friends in our life, we ask ourselves how they help us. We want to make sure we surround ourselves with people who, like Rich, are selfless. People who will tell us not what we want to hear, but what we need to hear. People who will challenge us to grow. People who give us the gift of time. People who keep us on the right track; we all have friends going up we get into trouble with, but as life goes on, sometimes we find friends aren't really true friends in that they cause us to do bad things and make bad decisions that cause us to sin - so it's important we find true people who care about us not just to make us laugh, but about our spiritual well being. We also find people who will listen to us and not judge us but again who aren't afraid to give it to us straight. And most of all like the saints, we find people who, like Rich, aren't asking for anything in return, but are just happy to be in our presence and give us love.

With that, we too must think of that word friend too as we strive to be like the saints. Going through the beatitudes, we can ask ourselves how can we show love and mercy, how can we bring comfort, how can we be a peacemaker, and are we willing to be even hated at times by others when we stand up for what is right? Friend is a term that is used so loosely these days, and it's not just someone you talk to on social media or send an annual card to. Sometimes as life gets busy we can't spend as much time with friends as we used to. But God puts people in our lives for a reason. And we want to ask ourselves what can we do to give someone the most important gift we can give them, namely help in getting to heaven. When we look at our lives, we should think about family and friends, and challenge ourselves asking ourselves do I truly listen to others and try to be with them? Do I give them a chance to speak before giving advice? Do I have the fortitude to challenge people even if it might cause friction in the relationship? Am I spending too much time on other things but not investing in this relationship like I should? Am I leading my friend or family into sin by what I watch, what I say, or how I act? Do I take advantage of my friend or family member's generosity too much? Do I expect something in return when I do something for this person who I say I love? Remember, God

gives us people for a reason. And we can do so much to help one another see God, just like Rich did for Art.

I've been blessed in so many ways, but something I'm so grateful for are the people God has put into my life. Like all of us, I'm a work in progress. But over the course of my life, from both people I've lost and people who are still with me, and to that I'd also add my beloved dogs Kirby and now Emmett, I've learned so much about how to live as a human being as a Christian. From my parents, the faith and patience and the importance of hard work. From my brother priest friends, insight onto how to grow in holiness and to serve people better while taking care of myself. From my dogs, unconditional love without asking anything in return. And so many other things too.

As Art's principal in middle school said to him "you'll never amount to anything" would be true for us all were it not for God and one another. God though knows much better; and He send along people to help us along the way, while giving us the commission to love and serve one another. By realizing the importance of true friendship, seeking out wise people, learning from those who have gone on to be with God forever, and being a true

friend to others, we can join one day with all the saints in heaven and rejoice and be glad, for our reward will one day be great in heaven.