



'Roseto Effect'

Don't Take The Journey Alone

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October 16, 2011

A while ago Jerry introduced me to something which is called the Roseto Effect. The study of the Roseto effect came up in a chance conversation in the late 1960's between a local doctor and the head of medicine at the University of Oklahoma. The Doctor said that as a physician who had a practice in Roseto (a mainly Italian immigrant town in Pennsylvania) as well as in the town of Bangor (a non-Italian town about 6 miles away), he had found something amazing. He found that in the town of Roseto the people there seemed almost immune to one of the most common causes of death. He found that almost no one ever died of myocardial infarction (In Lay terms: A heart attack, which is the death of heart muscle from the sudden blockage of a coronary artery by a blood clot). Gladwell the key researcher wrote this, 'In Roseto, virtually no one under fifty-five had died of a heart attack or showed any signs of heart disease. For men over sixty-five, the death rate from heart disease in Roseto was roughly half that of the United States as a whole. The death rate from all causes in Roseto, in fact, was 30 to 35 percent lower than expected.' What made this more confusing was that if you look at the chart below you will see that the difference in the death rate between Roseto and Bangor (only 6 miles away) was astounding.

TABLE 1—Age-Adjusted Mortality Rates (MR) per 1000 and Number of Deaths for Roseto and Bangor Residents over 35 Years of Age

	1935-1944		1945-1954		1955-1964		1965-1974		1975-1984	
	MR	No. of Deaths	MR	No. of Deaths	MR	No. of Deaths	MR	No. of Deaths	MR	No. of Deaths
Myocardial infarction										
Bangor men	39.7	49	64.9	94	75.2	118	82.6	137	76.3	124
Roseto men	23.0	6	43.0	13	49.6	19	94.6	36	78.5	38
Bangor women	23.5	30	27.4	48	38.5	78	33.6	88	34.5	101
Roseto women	12.5	3	19.1	6	25.0	10	36.1	18	36.6	27
Congestive heart failure										
Bangor men	53.9	67	37.4	56	28.6	47	34.7	60	18.9	27
Roseto men	43.9	11	31.3	10	25.3	10	29.5	11	8.6	5
Bangor women	50.3	64	31.3	58	29.7	65	23.9	64	15.1	51
Roseto women	52.9	12	42.3	13	23.5	10	26.5	13	13.2	11
Myocardial infarction and congestive heart failure										
Bangor men	93.6	116	102.3	150	103.8	165	117.2	197	93.2	151
Roseto men	66.8	17	74.3	23	74.9	29	124.1	47	87.0	43
Bangor women	73.8	94	58.6	104	68.2	143	57.5	152	49.6	162
Roseto women	65.4	15	61.4	19	48.5	20	62.6	31	49.8	38
All causes										
Bangor men	242.0	299	209.8	306	217.8	346	244.1	406	222.4	351
Roseto men	186.9	48	179.9	57	174.0	66	262.8	100	172.5	82
Bangor women	202.0	257	141.6	247	158.0	326	127.7	317	124.3	369
Roseto women	193.0	46	159.5	50	125.1	51	150.0	75	93.9	70

So the researchers descended on the town trying to find out why this was happening. They checked the water source, the hospital care, and the content of the air. They poked and prodded the people and checked all their death records twice. Finally, someone said 'well it must be that the diet and work conditions of this Italian community must be better that of Bangor'. But it didn't take long until they realized that this Italian community drank more, smoked more and worked in more dangerous jobs (many worked 200 feet underground in the slate quarries). Someone said maybe it is their Mediterranean diet, which often uses a lot of

olive oil. But they found that because they were poor immigrants they had substituted lard for olive oil and ate lots of fried sausages and meat balls. This left the researchers completely baffled. They then noticed that there was no suicide, no alcoholism, no drug addiction, and very little crime. They didn't even have anyone on welfare. That is when they noticed how often they visited one another, stopping to chat in Italian on the street, and how often they saw them cooking for one another in their backyards.

They were taught about the extended family clans that underlay the town's social structure. They saw how many homes had three generations living under one roof, and how much respect grandparents commanded. They noticed that they went to mass at Our Lady of Mount Carmel and saw the unifying and calming effect of the church. They counted twenty two separate civic organizations in a town of just fewer than two thousand people. What they found out was that in this insulated group of people who cared for one another, that their community care had a positive affect on their emotional state, on their joy in life and on their spiritual condition and that it had profound affect on their health. Here is their one line conclusion 'People are nourished by other people when they are in true community.'

Let me add one more note, because the goal (like so many other first generation immigrant families) was to see their kids get a head start. It didn't take long until many of their children became better educated and moved to newer more expensive communities with less social connection and began to follow the American way of trying to get ahead. The result was that within a generation, Roseto now has the identical death rate and heart attack rate to any other place in America. As soon as they lost their tight knit society where true community happened they lost the protection that the community was giving their souls and their bodies.

It was as if their community not only nourished them but was almost like a guardrail that kept them safe from some of the things which could harm them. This morning I want to take us to what I feel is the next important ingredient in us becoming a church, a people who really make an impact on our world. It is necessary that we don't take this journey alone. God has made us to not only need to be involved in a community of faith, but He has made us in such a way that we thrive best within that community of faith. For the friends we have here should nurture us and protect us in our walk of faith.

In (Genesis 2) one of the very first comments God makes regarding Adam (a man who has a close walk with God, situated in a marvelous garden with the best job in the world) was that "it was not good for him to be alone. While he was given a wife (soul mate), don't miss that the underlying issue is that deep within all of us is that deep longing for friendship, connection, and community. The Roseto effect is part of who we are as people.

It is easy to miss that from day one, as Jesus established the New Testament church that his goal was to place us in nurturing communities where we would never be alone. Where there would always be a friend to speak with, a brother or sister to carry our burden to the Lord with. Someone who would say 'I love you too much to not send you an email, to pull you aside so we can get this right, so I can gently warn you of something I have just come across'.

The danger is that we live in a world that has gotten so busy, so amped up on getting ahead and getting things done that not only does it blur our souls, but it washes other friends and believers right out of our lives. When that happens we rob ourselves of that which will calm our hearts, feed our souls and care for our health. That will be what we will be looking at in more detail next week.

For this morning I want to piggy back on their one line conclusion which is 'People are nourished by other people when they are in true community.' That means that the friendships we have will determine the people we will become, the impact we will make, and it will be a key factor concerning how happy we are in this journey of life, especially when we are trying to make an impact with our lives. Because of that, this morning I want to begin by talking about putting some guardrails in place concerning those whom we choose to have in that inner circle of our friendships. I use the word guardrails because a guardrail will keep you away from things that may be dangerous to you and it keeps you in a place where you will stay the healthiest and make great time along your journey.

Most of us would probably admit that some of our greatest regrets in life could have been avoided if two things (Guardrails) were in place. First, that in our lives we had some kind of Red flags in our conscience which told us when the activity we were about to be involved in was getting too dangerous for us, which we had decided ahead of time to listen to. Here is the problem; most of us who have grown up with faith or with good moral teaching from our parents have a list of do's and don'ts in our mind about how we should live. I've watched those same people go to University, move to a new town, go away on a business trip and somehow end up setting aside some of those beliefs 'for a while' and do things which they would have never considered doing before. When I asked what made the difference (why they stepped away from what they believed) in almost every case they said (and here is the second guardrail) they said it was because of the influence of the friends they were with.

1. Friendships and Consequences go hand in hand

I think we often don't understand how our friends can influence the direction and quality of our lives. This is important; the thing which makes a friendship so great is the exact thing that makes a friendship so dangerous. When I am with a friend, I drop my guard. The reason we are attracted to certain people goes back to what (Genesis 2) says 'We don't want to be alone' and that means that we want to be accepted by others. What happens when we find acceptance by someone else? They accept us; we often drop our guard and become the most open to the influence of those we believe are our friends. We assume that they have our best interest at heart. That is what a friend does, isn't it? Here is the huge aha moment; 'Acceptance leads to influence.' Think about it, when you or I are in an environment where you feel accepted, you open up to those in your group. That is what makes friendship so great. It is also what makes friendships so dangerous.

For example when you took your first smoke, for some of you that struggle with an addiction, I'll bet you weren't alone when you got involved, you were with friends. I'll also bet that probably for some of us, we would admit that our greatest regret didn't revolve around

what happened with an enemy but revolved around what began with friends. For some, as you look back you can think of examples of things you would never have been involved in, that you once believed were wrong. That you are now open to today, because as you hung with your friends, somehow because they were your friends the actions at first didn't seem so bad and eventually seemed something that you felt 'ok' being involved in. Maybe even right now you find yourself looking in the mirror and saying 'who is that person I am now seeing in the mirror?' What you have been missing is the simple principle, that our friends influence the direction and quality of our lives. That idea can work for you or against you.

I mention this, because when I worked in the mine I saw guys who were young and married, who loved their wives being influenced by the single guys who told them it wasn't cool to want to spend time caring for and being with their wives. As those words took root in them, their actions led to a divorce. The opposite is also true, for many of us have listened during a testimony at a Baptism and heard again and again someone say 'I was involved in such and such and then I met this friend and I want to thank them because their influence has brought me to this day and changed the direction of my life'. From personal experience and observation all of us know that friendship can influence the direction of our lives. But don't miss the fact that once we consider a person a friend, to some extent we let down our guard and are more open to their influence than we may have realized, which means that we need to understand that we need to look at who our key friends are. Those we spend the most time with, for we will probably become like them in action and belief.

This principle is stated unmistakably in the bible, (Proverbs 13:20) don't miss what this is saying. It is saying, in a positive way, that as in the case of Roseto, the influence of those around them had a positive affect on how they did life and faith, it even affected their health. The second part of that verse, I believe contains two important warnings. First it is saying that eventually if you hang around a fool you will suffer harm. The same goes to hanging around wise people; they will have a positive affect in your life.

Hanging around foolish people will have the opposite affect. By definition a wise person understands that what you do today will have an affect on their future. Biblically a foolish person is someone who blurs the line between what is right and wrong and somehow doesn't get that what they do today will have an affect on their future. They don't get that selling drugs today, will have an affect on their future if they get caught or not. So if your friends don't see a correlation with what they do today and their future. Understand that they won't care how their actions today can impact your future until it is too late.

It is the same sad story every grad, a person has a friend that says that a few drinks really won't make a difference when they drive and then a person who just wants a ride jumps in the car with 'that fool' and ends up paralyzed for life. What Solomon is saying is that 'from my observation, if you hang around a fool, eventually you will be hurt in some way'. Secondly, you will eventually start thinking like those you hang around. I say that because as a pastor who sometimes hears far too many stories of what happens after the accident, after the affair, or after the abuse, that I have seen a pattern. People establish their key friendships with people who by their actions and beliefs are far from their own.

They know they will be ok because they are convinced that they are too smart, too godly, too well rounded and clever to let their friends ideas become their ideas. In so many instances instead of pulling the other person up, they are pulled down into the beliefs and actions of the others. Undercover agents become like the Hell's angels they are infiltrating or the example of standing on a stair and realizing that it is easier to pull someone down than to pull the other person up. I believe with all of our hearts that we need to all have friends whose life styles may be different than ours and that if we are Christ followers and we don't have folks in our lives who don't believe in Jesus, than we are not living out what Jesus teaches. When I look at the inner core of my friendship circle and I don't see key friendships who are believers in Jesus. And if your core group isn't moving in the direction you want you life to go. Then I am living in a way that sets me up for trouble and God says 'Do not go beyond that guardrail' for you're our hearts sake. How do I know if I am getting too close to the guardrail of safety when it comes to my key friendships? I need to watch for the following:

1. If your core friendships aren't going in the direction you want to go, you are getting to close too danger.
2. If you find you aren't acting yourself around them. The way you act and the way you talk is different than it would be when you are being yourself, you are getting too close to danger.
3. If you are considering a behavior you have always considered off limits, you are getting to close too danger.
4. If you find yourself saying, 'I will go with them but I won't take part in what they are doing' you are getting too close to danger.
5. If you are about to do something you hope the people you care the most won't find out about or you are trying to think about how you could explain your actions away. You are getting too close to danger.

When you see this list it is easy to say, oh that list is for the younger group or the midlife men, or someone else. No it is for all of us. For we need to hear very clearly that while God made me to need and be involved in relationships with others, we need to not make sure that the key friendship, key influencers in our life aren't those who will help us get to where we want to go or become who we want to become. Then we are setting ourselves up to a wreck of some kind. Or at the very least, to end up falling far short of what we hope will happen in our lives. For us as believers it will mean that not only in the present but also in the future we will not be the person of impact that God has made us to become.

As you look at your notes, you can see that I wanted to take this a little farther, but we can do that next week. Here is the danger of a sermon like this. We say 'yes I know that I haven't chosen well concerning who I have placed in the inner circle of my friendships or as I look at my key friends I know they can't be a good godly influence because they aren't followers of God or I have not made room for people to even be involved in my life, I have for various reasons ended up alone, though I will get at this sometime in the future.'

Can I remind you that today your Father God is calling you to find that circle of key Christian friends who will be that safe place, that growing place, those who will help you reach those dreams that God has for you. Those who will help you stay on the right side of the guardrails. Despite how you see yourself getting closer and closer to that guardrail (maybe you have already been stepping over it) you are going to leave this place and eventually get around to making the changes you felt God calling you to today. Can I instead ask you to do what you know you need to do with what you have heard today? Will you decided to make a choice to begin to establish some key relationships which will help you reach your goals, a deeper faith and keep you from going across the guardrails that will cause you harm. Because friendship is from God, choose key friends who will help you grow deeper into God and live a life now and in the future where, with the support of Godly friends you will make a profound impact on your world.