

Mel and Alice: Making Friends

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Good things in life do not really happen, they are acknowledged.
- - Asian proverb

When I was eight years old I went over the Betterley's house, marched into the kitchen and exclaimed, "I'm ready!" Needing more to go on, Alice replied, "Ready for what?" "You told me that you and Mel would take me to your cabin in Minnesota when I was ready. Well...I'm *ready!*" And, indeed I was. Mid-July 1976, the three of us drove to Reads Landing, where the Chippewa meets the mighty Mississippi, and spent a week boating, fishing and sharing time together. While the trip proved my fears of Bigfoot to be unfounded, my joy at having such wonderful friends remains real to this day.

With both sets of grandparents hundreds of miles from Iowa City, it seemed a natural fit: me and the Betterleys.¹ I frequently arrived at their home unannounced to play rummy and "hide the candy", read *Dennis the Menace* and eat cherries from their tree. It seemed Alice always had time for me, and as I got older, Mel and I discovered shared affinities in our same birthday (June 13th) and in our music: he, too, was a saxophonist (but, hadn't played in years)! In my high school days, Mel took me into the basement where he played recordings he'd made on the reel-to-reel. With his technological expertise as an engineer, he took pre-recorded tracks, played solos into the microphone and created a virtual *Mel Betterley Orchestra*. Mel even sold me his 1927 Buescher soprano saxophone for what he'd paid for it: \$70. My last high-school experience found me sharing the bandstand with Mel as we performed jazz standards at my sister Nancy's wedding reception. Just days later I was on my way back to Minnesota for enrollment at the U of M. I was on my own this time—and, I was ready.

After college, a sudden reminiscence revealed to me an unexpectedly deep bond of friendship with the Betterleys. As a five-year-old getting an idea from cartoons, I'd set up a trap in their back yard, complete with box, stick attached to string and a carrot. A few times every week I faithfully hid behind the oak tree, string in hand, waiting for an unsuspecting rabbit. Then one day Alice called: something had trapped itself under the box! We gathered the family and rushed up to the Betterleys.² Had the stick been kicked? Lifting slowly, out from under the box was revealed a beautiful white bunny. Oh, the thrill!—my trap had worked, though not as expected (as Nancy scoffed, "I *can't* believe Jimmy caught a rabbit in that *stupid* trap!!!"). While reflecting on the episode some twenty years later, I finally asked my mom, "What's the real story behind Fluffy?" "Well," she said smiling, "Alice called one day asking, 'If Jimmy catches something in his trap, can he keep it?'"³

As Mel and Alice Betterley approach their 70th Wedding Anniversary this June⁴ it strikes me as self-evident: these two understand the meaning of friendship. They shared generously this understanding with me, that friendship is founded in deeds and actions and has not a thing to do with age. Is it not also self-evident that the greatest gifts of all come from those who take us places we've never been...and safely bring us back again? That's what *making* friends is all about!

¹ My next-door neighbors on the other side of the house were, if you can believe it, "the Goods".

² Alice recalled I was wearing only one shoe!

³ Their son, Rich, it turns out, was the person who suggested his parents put a rabbit in the box.

⁴ Mel died on 20 June 2004, seven days shy of their anniversary. Alice died on 17 July 2007.