

Bamboo is a very useful renewable material that is used for building projects, but is also used as a food source. It is remarkably strong. As a kid I remember that my dad had some fishing poles made from river cane, a type of bamboo, but I never thought that it grew around our home.

I never thought much more about it until our Scout troop went to a remote place and my son Zach found some river cane – it proved to explode like a firecracker as a section was put into the fire. What fun!

The bamboo world opened up even more to me when my (eventual) wife Soozie, teaching art at the local high school, began working with a very creative student named Ben. This boy was not geared to typical academic structures, and was at risk to drop out and go his own way. Soozie's high school art class was a relief valve that kept Ben in school and so that he was able to graduate; it allowed a student's self-expression in non-standard ways.

They would go and raid places in the county that had bamboo groves and “harvest” poles so that they could make the things that they were involved in creating. They eventually planted some bamboo in the yard, as Soozie wanted a grove to give some privacy. Ben completed school and worked for a while for a jeweler. I got him to craft an engagement ring with a “Starry Night” motif that I used when I asked Soozie to marry me. Ben eventually graduated college, got married, and moved out of the state.

Soozie has told me many times about how important to her view of her own work as a teacher had become because Ben's parents had encouraged her so much and claimed that she had “saved” their son. This was a critical moment in her career and her belief in her mission and abilities.

Twenty-five years after his high school graduation, Ben came by to express his love and appreciation for his teacher and friend, and he discovered the bamboo forest that had developed in our yard from what they had planted. He was so excited that he cut down several large plants to make poles and loaded them onto his car to take back to his home in Milwaukee. He also showed Soozie how to make bamboo strips for basket weaving, which was another of Soozie's artistic endeavors.

It is such a great story is about the strength of their relationship; after such a long period, it got back on track immediately at the creative level they had enjoyed previously. This was a result of the interaction between a great teacher and a sharp student.

There was a second visit by Ben and his brother Thomas not long after this to cut large bamboo sections (18 ft long) for handrails to attach to a ramp being made for their ailing father. This service enabled the boys do something for their parents, and this helped to develop an even deeper connection with us. Their father died shortly afterwards, but I felt that there was something special in that he got to see the results of their latest project.

As I looked at the depth of the relationship between Ben and Soozie, and the connections that developed between our families, I saw that there is truly a strength in bamboo that I had never realized before!

The bond between friends cannot be broken by chance;  
no interval of time or space can destroy it.  
Not even death itself can part true friends.

John Cassian<sup>1</sup>

1. John Cassian; Quoted in Rich Mullins: An Arrow Pointing to Heaven, p.268

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