Grown men also needs friends

By Andrea Houchard

Grown men are supposed to be real men. Real men are strong, successful and above all, independent. Real men don't need anybody. Real men can take care of themselves. Real men are their own best friends. If a grown man said what he really wanted was a friend, he would seem silly and soft. Once a man reaches a certain age, he should be fine on his own.

With few exceptions, this is the general expectation in society. Even in the movies, grown men discover friendship not by actively seeking it, but accidentally, through their caregivers.

"The Intouchables" and "Robot and Frank" are two films that were brought to us recently by the Sedona International Film Festival. These films tell stories of two older, economically secure — in one case fabulously wealthy — men who stumble into accidental friendships.

The friendships that develop in these movies transcend the ordinary and accepted forms of male friendship. Of course, though friendship, in business and just in life generally, it is not how many times you fall down, but how many times you get back up that really counts. To give up on relationships because you have been burned in the past is to cut your opportunities short.

And it's not OK to just drop by. Call first. Text first. Chance encounters are not celebrated. Increasingly, we wall ourselves off from the world.

Isolation, loneliness and a lack of social standing lead to moral decay. Violent tragedies at random targets are becoming less anomalous. A U.S. representative was gunned down in a grocery store parking lot.

High schools, colleges and now elementary schools are sites of random shootings. It is possible, and even likely that a lack of close personal relationships and a sense of social belonging is making people not just lonely, but openly hateful toward the world. We now live in a place where mutual exclusion breeds mutual contempt.

Like all serious problems, the solutions are not simple. Technology may be part of the problem, and it may be part of the solution too. "Robot and Frank" raises the possibility of locating "the other" in a machine. Skype and email may strengthen the bonds of friendship. The role of technology in human relationships is not univocal.

It is not "what" the new gizmo is but "how" we incorporate it into our lives that matters. But our society tends to look for the "what" instead of the "how."

We crave technological solutions as we rely on science and its creations. But the most important challenges in society today will not be solved by science, technology, engineering or math. Our most pressing problems are moral problems. Moral problems require the exercise of wisdom and judgment, and call for grace and compassion. We need friends to help us understand how to be wise — to appreciate, acknowledge and affirm the value of our own and others' lives.

It is worth mentioning that in both films the men who needed friends were not looking for surrogate lovers. Though neither man had a full-fledged romantic partner, both had romantic interests. This suggests grown men need friendship in addition to romance, not in lieu of it.

The gift of these films was people left the theater with a desire to look at every person with warmth and understanding. It reminds us everyone has something to say, everyone can listen, and we can all have more friends. We need the courage to be vulnerable and understand that sometimes independence can be a proxy for fear.

These films were good reminders that no matter how old, no matter how alone, no matter how crusty, it is never too late to reach out and connect — even if you are a grown man.

Go ahead, just like when you were a kid. Make friends.

Andrea Houchard is a Sedona resident and director of Philosophy in the Public Interest at Northern Arizona University. The program works in conjunction with the Sedona International Film Festival to explore themes of human interest presented in films.