

The Secret of Friendship

Smith: When I was recently ruminating on the matter of friendship, which I am wont to do, not in a dream or a vision, but totally present with all my wits about me, I was surprised to behold the great Samuel Johnson standing above me. He took my hand and led me, from where and towards it is impossible to remember, until I found myself in a garden of sorts. Johnson directed us across the way over towards a table with seven chairs and five seated figures, rapt in conversation. Johnson took his own chair and gestured for me to sit in the remaining one.

Smith: What is this place? who are these people and what are they doing here?

Johnson: Why these are my friends. There's Immanuel Kant, C.S. Lewis, Francis Bacon, Michel Montaigne, and Elizabeth Telfer, please go ahead and introduce yourself. We're just a group of friends who like to talk about friends and friendship, for friendship is certainly a noble art worthy of study.

Smith: Why how fantastic, I wish that I could take part in such a society. I have just been reading Aristotle, quite the expert on friendship. He says that without friends no one would choose to live, even though if he should have all other goods.

Johnson: Yes quite a true observation, but please take a seat and join our conversation for a bit, it may prove to flush out your understanding of this great virtue.

Smith: I would love to, thank you for the offer. I confess that it may be hard to get Aristotle out of my head, the tone he writes in makes me want to dedicate my life's work to finding and making great and true friendships. Tell me, can there be anything more wonderful than the friendship they speak of, it seems so perfect and untainted.

Johnson: Yes he does put it on quite a pedestal, but it is by no means perfect. It has its flaws as well.

Smith: Flaws? Do you mean to suggest that this pinnacle of humanity is imperfect?

Johnson: Indeed it can only be so. For in entering friendship an individual stands to gain much, and as gain is only amassed at the risk of loss, friendship must also hold capacity for harm.

Smith: This concept is quite foreign to me. Oh you wise souls of philosophy and literature instruct me then, what is there to fear from this friendship that seems so complete and pure.

Johnson: It is lucky you should ask because we were just on that train of thought ourselves. What confuses you is the inherent difference between the idea friendship and friendship in practice. I will first stop to agree with you though that friendship as ideal is certainly wonderful, that is friendship in its truest and purest form. How should we bring you up to speed though?

Montaigne: Well if I may interject, I have lived my life under the guiding principle that it is often best to start at the beginning. A beginning in this sense may beg a definition under which we may ground our discussion, yet herein lies the first problem we will encounter: friendship is hard to describe. Its exact nature is amorphous and as a concept it is recognized but not easily verbalized so we will not even make an attempt to pin it down in any way except to say that friendship is a connection between people, full of mutual admiration and love. Luckily the effects of friendship can be more easily discussed so we can start there.

Lewis: I would also like to add that out of all the loves, friendship is the least natural. It is unnecessary in many ways. Biologically we have no need of it. Socially, the community and its leaders may distrust or dislike it. Yet we are drawn towards its sweet irresistible nectar from some inner impulse that beats in all of us. We are all searching through our lives following our own truths, and when we run into someone who sees the same truth that we do, we make an instant and lasting pact of true friendship un beholden to any philosophy.

Bacon: Yes and this true friend is not only a mirror that reflects, but also amplifies. It opens the heart by tremendous degrees and provides pleasures found nowhere else in human life.

Kant: I often think of man as stuck between two overarching loves, the personal desire of self-love and the selfless love of humanity. On their own, each principal is valuable but pathetically incomplete, and it is only a true friendship that allows the combination of the two. Thus with its promise of equal and certain reciprocity of good will we can find a perfect moral framework under this type of friendship.

Johnson: All good points, yet at times it is painful to consider that this sublime enjoyment may be impaired or destroyed by innumerable causes, for there is no human possession of which the duration is less certain.

Smith: Could you clarify what you mean by that? When the ancients speak of this friendship it seems indestructible, almost divine in its prescription, how then can such a union be broken apart by time?

Johnson: You are once again misunderstanding the difference between true friendship and common friendship.

Smith: Well certainly I would like to focus on true friendship, why would I wish to attain anything else?

Johnson: You have much to learn yet, for striving towards true friendship is no way to live your life. Travelling along that road you only set yourself up for failure and disappointment.

Montaigne: Yes I quite agree, the divine form of friendship prescribed by the ancients is exceedingly rare, it may only happen once in every three centuries. I think I may have been privy to such a relation myself but it is only by divine grace with much help from Fortuna herself that I should have been so lucky to have experienced such a friend.

Kant: But even in such rare friendships as these it is not certain that you have actually attained the status of *true* friends. For you can never be sure that you are in such a friendship, it is an idea only and not something that ever happens in the real world. As Socrates famously said, *friends there are no friends*. True friendship requires total mutual devotion and absolute conformity of two souls, in this way it is impossible to put into practice, you can never reach a degree of trust high enough to accomplish it.

Smith: So you are all saying there is no point in seeking this type true friendship?

Johnson: The kind of true friendship that you desire is unattainable, in everyday life the friendship we strive for must have its conditions and effects muted.

Lewis: Yes, but in this task just remember that you cannot just go about searching for friendship. If you exclusively *want friends*, then you cannot have friends. The only way to have friends is to want or care about something beyond friendship, to love a thing over which the friendship is born out of.

Smith: If common friendship is the only thing available to me is it still desirable. How is it in principle different from the friendship that the ancients spoke of, how is it lesser?

Johnson: To ask how this common friendship is lesser is to ask about the theoretical problems with the truest friendship. Finding the weaknesses in the ideal will illuminate the problems of the practical, for practical is always a corrupted version of the abstract. We can examine how degraded friendship has the potential to harm the parties involved in its union.

Telfer: Exactly right Johnson. For example, in all friendships we are aware that friends perform services for one another. So in true friendships and corrupted ones both there is the matter that friends contract duties and requirements when entering a friendship.

Smith: What kinds of duties do you speak of?

Kant: In a friendship one must have confidence that one's friend will agree to a demand or request if asked. This is a necessary condition in all friendships. In a true friendship though there is mutual understanding that this privilege is extremely powerful and should not be tested. I should not make demands of my friends lest I upset the friendship and lose their goodwill. In lesser friendships one may not respect this privilege properly.

Lewis: Yes friends must help one another with everything, if they are able, but that is not what friendship is about. Helping a true friend is nothing more than an inconvenience. Benefiting a friend is an accidental occurrence, as it is not derivative from the heart of the friendship and therefore we do not wish to mention or dwell on such occasions. This is why in these situations we say to our friend *don't mention it*, in the hopes that we may keep our friendship pure.

Montaigne: In its ideal form, friends cannot truly give to one another, or be beholden to one another, because they embody the same self, they form an indivisible unit. A Friend would do anything for another friend, as a person would do anything for themselves. You do everything for a friend because you know exactly what they would ask of you and you have accepted that about them into your very being.

Johnson: An excellent point Montaigne, all well in true in a perfect friendship, but in the common friendship you may be well required to act upon these bindings even when there is clearly separation between friends.

Smith: But still I am at a loss, what could be so bad about acting on behalf of my friend, shouldn't I want to help anyone who is my friend?

Telfer: Well if someone is a friend, then we must feel affection towards them. This affection results in us receiving pleasure at their good fortune, us feeling pain at their misfortune, and us incurring anger with those who injure them. Under the rules of friendship, we must help friends under attack, or when they are in trouble, and when needed offer them advice and criticism. Yet not all of these actions may be agreeable to us in every circumstance.

Johnson: For example, this criticism might put you in a position where your only course of action, according to the friendship, is to dissolve the friendship itself. There are some truths that only friends may communicate, but sometimes they are not received well. Other actions originating in friendship may be worse and can even have effect outside of the friendship, which if you prescribe to friendship in its idealized form you would be obligated to perform.

Smith: Yes I now see that in creating a friendship with someone who would ask these sorts of actions from me, I open myself up to harm and threaten the friendship itself, but

what if like Aristotle suggests I simply create friendships with those who I know will not test myself or the friendship in this way?

Johnson: To ensure you will agree to all actions that come from the friendship you would have to assume what Aristotle does, that all friendship is based around virtue and the good, yet this does not appear to be true especially in the common sort.

Lewis: Friendship is by nature ambivalent, it can be of a school of virtue or a school of vice. It is want to make good men better and bad man worse, for friendships are centered around objects and ideas and it is just as easy for them to be about evil as it is for them to about good.

Telfer: Feelings of affection cannot often be explained rationally. We would like to believe that our friends are moral, but more commonly the basis for our friendships is of a historical sort: I have known him and thus I feel affection towards him, not that I have judged his heart to its core and it is good and true. We must reject the two notions that our friends are necessarily good and that man's virtue is static. Virtue is fleeting and changeable, to examine it once is not enough, so unless one constantly challenges one's friend, it is impossible to verify their virtue.

Smith: It seems that I don't know if my friend is truly good that there must be profound implications from this uncertainty.

Bacon: Yes, indeed for it is under this assumption that most of our traditional advice about friendship comes from. Take for instance the adage that best way for self-improvement is from hearing faults from a close friend. This adage does not relate that for this to hold your friendship must be true, for otherwise your friend may in fact deceive you. For in this there are two dangers, that your friend is not true and aims to deceive you with flattery and thus withhold your faults or that your friendship is not close

enough and he does not know your character well enough to give accurate advice. So even though we can only get some truths through friendships, as we can never verify true friendships it is hard to know when we are receiving truth versus falsehood.

Smith: Then it seems I cannot totally trust my friends, yet this seemed to me to be the great advantage of a true friendship: finding a second self in which to confide in and unload all of one's burdens.

Montaigne: Beware for even in the ideal friendships trust should have limits. If you are ready to trust a friend more than yourself, if you are ready to trust a friend more than anything, then friendship becomes a process of rampant elevation for either your friend or for both of you. Under this model friendship quickly blends into idolatry as friends start to treat one another as more than human, as demi-gods on the earth. Moreover upholding a friend's virtue is great but it can be similarly unbecoming. The truest friendship is formed between equals so praising a friend in exaggeration is nothing short of disgusting self-congratulation.

Smith: Then it seems I must hide myself, or at least a part of myself, from my friend, and in this way there will always be a degree of separation between us.

Montaigne: Quite so, in common friendship you must show reservation. It is good not to be too open, too trusting. Love your friend as if you are to hate him some day.

Kant: Yes we should be mindful that we do not give our friends ammunition to use against us. We should not let our friends be able to send us to the gallows in a moment of passion.

Johnson: Indeed, for in the common friendship men will be sometimes be surprised into quarrels. Even if they might both hasten to reconciliation as soon as their tumult had

subsided, two minds will seldom be found together, which can at once subdue their discontent, or immediately enjoy the sweets of peace, without remembering the wounds of the conflict.

Telfer: Certainly it is not uncommon for a man to lose concern temporarily for a friend, even if later some of the concern is re-instituted.

Smith: Yet surely I should share more with my friend than with others who are not my friend. Thus there is a degree of intimacy between any friends even if it is tempered in a way that Aristotle might disagree with. Is this not worth something?

Johnson: Well certainly it is worth something, yet there is danger in it too, as this intimacy also contains an isolating factor.

Smith: Isolating? Tell me now, how can a friendship be isolating?

Montaigne: Friendship in any form is necessarily isolating, even the true representations of friendship. You cannot be friends with everyone, under the ideal versions of friendship you can only be friends with one person, any more than that and you risk introducing conflicts in a friend group.

Lewis: Friendship can be thought of as a special interest in parts of the world shared by a group. But what is often forgotten is that this special interest results in a partial indifference to other parts of the world that are uninteresting. This partial indifference can be justified but one has to be careful that it does not spiral into wholesale indifference, which cannot be defended.

Kant: When we speak of friendship, we must realize that we are discussing a concept that is not of heaven but of the earth. The complete moral perfection of heaven must be

universal; but friendship is not universal; it is a man's refuge in the world from his distrust of his fellows.

Lewis: Yes quite an apt description Kant. Authority frowns on friendship because it is a sort of secession or rebellion against a larger community. Friendship creates necessary divisions in a larger group, which is its inherent flaw, but in this way it is also our strongest safeguard against complete servitude in a practical sense.

Smith: So then the problems of friendship are not just limited to the difference between the common and true variants I see.

Lewis: Assuredly, for we have just shown how friendship creates a systematic divide between groups of people. Moreover, as it amoral by nature, these groups of friends may even start to form around the idea of separation itself; there have been friends who find delight in the degrading pleasure of exclusiveness which begets from a sort of collective self-approval. Even in friendships which center around good, exclusion begets envy from others, so even if this segregation is pure it can still have negative effects.

Smith: I think I truly now see the dangers that may stem from friendship, how blind was I before.

Johnson: Yet this is not all, we have not even reached the worst part.

Smith: There is woe beyond this, I cannot even imagine it.

Johnson: Up to now we have only talked of the effects of active friendship but still we must reckon with the eventual fall out of the friendship, as all earthly unions are bound towards.

Smith: This is the second time you have mentioned the inevitability of fall out. Tell me how and why then are all friendships destined to doom, is there nothing that can be done to maintain them?

Johnson: There is not much that can be done to stop its end. Friendship is often destroyed by opposition of interest, not only by the ponderous and visible interest which the desire of wealth and greatness forms and maintains, but by a thousand secret and slight competitions, scarcely known to the mind upon which they operate. The most fatal disease of friendship is gradual decay, or dislike hourly increased by causes too slender for complaint, and too numerous for removal.

Bacon: Yet let it be said that in life, friendship redoubles joys and cuts griefs in half.

Montaigne: But my dear Bacon in death there is a greater loss still. Who will not say that the loss of a friend is devastating? Ask any if it is not crippling, ask any if it is not the very death of one's self, and if he answers no then know he is either lying or has never felt love for a friend as have I. Where once I was doubled by my friend's presence and complete in his life, after his death I only drag out a weary existence. I am half dead and the very pleasure that comes my way, instead of consoling me, redoubles my grief for his loss.

Johnson: Although we will not always outlive our friends there is no way to stop a friendship's eventual dissolution. Friendships can dissolve without fault by either party, as we can't always give pleasure to one another. Time is its great enemy, as they can be destroyed by long absence, and no expectation is more frequently disappointed than the meeting an old friend because time alters them.

Telfer: It is known and well understood that friendship is not a harmless engagement, it increases our potentiality for pain as well as for pleasure.

Smith: Why then it seems clear, the costs of entering into friendship are too great. Why then do the ancients speak of its praises, shouldn't it be avoided at all costs like the sirens of the Greeks. Friendship calls to the passersby only to break their hearts and minds on the rocks of its jagged truth.

Johnson: Just because friendship holds dangers does not mean that it is evil or shouldn't be sought, you overreact.

Telfer: Indeed, although we have up to now dwelt on the negatives in friendship, as it was your initial line of questioning that put us on this path, it is also true that we can set the pleasure of making a new friend against the sorrow of losing an old one, or the pleasure of a friend's company against the pain of his absence, or the pleasure of discovering his excellences against the pain of disillusionment with him. But, importantly, there are some pleasures of friendship which have no corresponding pains. These are the pleasures which arise from performing actions with a friend, as opposed to doing them alone or with others. Friendship only leaves us vulnerable because it initially increases our stake in the world and hence our capacity for emotion.

Bacon: Yes certainly there are some advantages that cannot be enjoyed without friends. In friendship you can do more things: a friend is like an extension of the self and with a friend a man has two lives which increases his capacity for action.

Telfer: Moreover, even some of the negatives we described have unheralded benefits. From a universal view we may even want friendships that lead to separation. Separation implies specialization, if we give help to friends with particular status over another random person it will be beneficial as one, we can concentrate energies on a singular person, and two because we are more intune with precisely the needs of a small group,

so we can be more effective in our actions. There are particular services that a man can receive only from his friends and perform only for them.

Smith: So there is still hope left to be found in friendship regardless of its dangers and demands which are associated with it?

Telfer: Yes certainly, although friendship may not be for everyone, especially those who are risk averse or feel no need for companionship. We need not show that a particular person is mistaken in deciding that it is not for him.

Montaigne: Yet the ancient Menander declared that man happy who had been able to meet even the shadow of a friend, and even I who have lost much agree with him. I would not take my friendship back even though it has left me hollow now, for it is greater to gain and lose than it is to not attempt anything at all.

Johnson: Friendship's vulnerability is also its strength. In opening up yourself, you have to throw yourself into the world. Although this act is ultimately devastating, so is life itself, so you must ride the wave of pleasure that friendship throws down upon you, for life has no pleasure higher or nobler than that of friendship. What you do not realize is that life itself throws you towards the siren, and if you are destined to end up there why not listen to their song on the way. Friendship and enacting friendship hold great virtue, do not let its dangers cause you to avoid it. Community and relationship are the dominion of man, so rather use the knowledge we have given you to inform and moderate friendship. Friendship should be carefully cultivated, not attempted as the ancients propose unhindered and free. Keep a level head and you cannot go wrong, love carefully and slowly, but also know that friendship holds great bounty so do not be afraid of it lest your fear injures you worse than what might have resulted from the friendship itself.

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