



The Gift of Friendship

It is a privilege not given to everyone to have friends, but most of us take it for granted. Here we consider the unusual thing called friendship: What it is, what it means, and what to do to keep it alive . . .

□ Was there ever a sadder man than Howard Hughes? With all his wealth, he could have had anything money could buy. But what he did not have and could not buy left him in the most miserable spiritual poverty. For, as far as anyone knows, he was without a friend in the world.

A thousand popular songs have been written to tell us that a life without love is not worth living. It was Hughes's apparent fate to live and die without love, because friendship has love at its core.

When most of us think or speak about friendship, however, we rob it of its rich emotional value. We have been conditioned to see love as the romantic passion celebrated in popular music, overlooking the less effusive and less volatile love that exists between friends.

This is partly because we use language loosely. We will say that "so-and-so is a friend of mine" when what we mean is that he or she is an acquaintance or an associate or a companion. We are not really talking about someone who is joined to us "in intimacy and mutual benevolence independently of sexual or family love," as the Oxford Dictionary describes a friend.

The great thinkers of history applied an even stricter definition. They lavished attention on the question of what constitutes friendship because of the importance they attached to its role in civilized society. They recognized that if people did not love one another outside of their family or tribal groups, the whole social structure would crumble. Perhaps because they put so much stock in it, they tended to idealize the relationship as an exalted condition towards which people must strive.

Modern men and women think of friendships in categories and degrees: business friends, social

friends, good friends, best friends, etc. The philosophers and writers of earlier times made no such distinctions. To them friendship existed only in its highest and closest degree.

The intimacy demanded by their uncompromising criteria was no less (and in many cases, more) than that which exists in a happy marriage. Aristotle said that friends are "one soul in two bodies." Francis Bacon characterized a friend as one "to whom you may impart griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, counsels, and whatsoever lieth upon the heart to oppress it." Clearly friendship of this order of intensity is extremely rare.

"One friend in a lifetime is much; two are many; three are hardly possible," wrote the historian-philosopher Henry Adams. Dr. Samuel Johnson went beyond this to say that "so many qualities are requisite to the possibility of friendship and so many accidents must concur to its rise and continuance" that the greatest part of mankind must content themselves without it and engage in alliances of interest and dependence instead.

It may indeed be that lesser creatures than Dr. Johnson and his partners in wisdom must make do with lesser forms of friendship than the ideal state which they envisaged. But we ordinary souls can at least try to approach it by keeping in mind that it is not a passive state, which means that it cannot be taken for granted. True friendship is not beyond our reach if we give our friendships the care and attention they deserve.

What are the qualities that make true friends? Probably the first one a person asked this question would name is loyalty. It is easy to keep up a friendship of sorts when everything is bright; it takes effort and perseverance to remain a faithful friend when another's life is plunged into dark-

ness. The expression that you can only tell who your friends are when you are in trouble dates back at least as far as the ancient Roman philosophers. The other side of the coin is that you can only tell if *you* are a real friend to a person if you are willing to stand by him or her in times of distress.

Whether friends should lend or borrow more than minor sums of money between themselves has always been a tricky question. The balance of opinion is that they should not, if they wish to remain friends. Still, one test of real friendship is whether you are willing to do what you can to come to another's financial aid in an emergency without a firm expectation of repayment. An even greater test is presented to the other party — to do everything possible to see that the sum is repaid.

Yet another test of loyalty concerns reputation. It may be expedient for business or social reasons to put a distance between you and friends when their fortunes are at a low ebb. Even more trying circumstances could arise. Say a friend is charged with a disgraceful crime: Would you insist on his innocence at the risk of your own reputation in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary? Say he is convicted: Would you continue to uphold your friendship no matter what people might say?

Sharing what a friend is entitled to share

A friendly relationship of any degree entails a measure of sharing. Friends routinely share experiences, ideas, efforts, wishes and material things. As an intimate friend you might be called upon to share mental pain and heartbreak. Much as you might dread it, you might have to see a friend through the fear and loneliness of a serious illness or the death of a loved one — knowing that he or she would do the same for you.

Oscar Wilde had a good deal to say about the pure spirit of friendship when he wrote that if a friend had a feast and did not invite him to it, he would not be upset in the slightest. "But if a friend of mine had a sorrow and refused to allow me to share it, I should feel it most bitterly. If he shut the doors of the house of mourning against me, I would move back again and again and beg to be admitted, so that I might share in what I was entitled to share."

It should not, however, take a crisis to test the strength of a friendship, because "the one who will be found capable of great acts of love is ever the one who is doing considerate small ones," as the English preacher and man of letters F.W. Robertson put it. Though friendships are often forged in the crucible of mutual adversity — as witness the lasting devotion of old armed service buddies — they are more commonly constructed piece-by-piece of little kindnesses over the years.

The saying that there is no friend like an old friend mirrors the simple truth that a friendship must stand the test of time to confirm itself. It is true, too, that the older we grow, the more we cherish our friendships; and the friends we are likely to cherish most are the ones with whom we have travelled long and far over the rough patches of life along with the smooth.

It carries us far towards our main goal in life: happiness

The benefits of friendship in those good, smooth times should not be underrated. People do not strike up friendly relations as insurance against future adversity. They do so because, if their psychological make-up is somewhere near normal, they must have contact with their fellow human beings. The everyday conduct of friendship satisfies this deep instinctive need.

The basic appeal of friendship is the pleasure we derive from it. Our enjoyment of the world is magnified when it is shared with someone of similar attitudes and tastes. One of the chief things we share with friends is laughter. Friends find the same events and situations funny because they have roughly the same slant on life.

The philosopher William James once made the point that the only goal which is common to all mankind is to attain happiness. Friendship carries us some distance towards that most desirable state. It "doubles our joy," as the great essayist Joseph Addison phrased it. We formally acknowledge this fact when we make sure that close friends are on the scene of such joyful occasions as weddings and birthday celebrations. But many of us fail to appreciate the happiness they bring to our lives day in and day out.

In our modern mobile society, it is sometimes impossible for friends to keep in regular touch because they are separated geographically. We can become quite lazy about showing our faraway friends how much we value them with cards, letters or telephone calls. For those of us who are thus remiss, there may be some comfort in Ralph Waldo Emerson's thoughts on the essence of friendship: ". . . To feel and say of another, I need never meet, or speak, or write to him; we need not reinforce ourselves or send tokens of remembrance; I rely on him as on myself. . ."

Where friends are concerned, absence may indeed make the heart grow fonder. When two people are regularly together, they grow all too well aware of each other's moods, failings and faults.

But friendship is a matter of give and take in every way, including the allowances that must be made for each party's lapses. We are obliged by the nature of the relationship to accept our friends as they are, flaws and all.

This is not a bad thing, since it teaches us the valuable lesson that even we are not exactly perfect. If a friend with whom we share so many characteristics can have so many faults, it follows that we must have a few of our own.

No one can keep a friendship alive without practising consideration, which is the reason exceedingly self-centred persons are almost invariably friendless. It is the essence of consideration to refrain from saying things that may wound our friends' feelings. When they inadvertently hurt *our* feelings, we should be equally silent. The observation has been made that the chief qualification for partnership in a successful marriage is to be a "good forgiver." The same applies among friends.

On the other hand, tact can be carried too far in some cases. There may come a time when it is your bounden duty to call attention to the potential folly of a friend's acts. We would not, after all, stand by in silence and watch a friend suffer an injury from a third party without intervening. By the same token, we should not stand by and watch a friend injure him- or herself.

A Middle Eastern proverb defines a friend as "one who gives you warning." That nicely delineates the difference between criticism of a friend for his own good and criticism for its own sake. Human nature being what it is, people are far less zealous about seeking out their own failings than those of others. It is not the function of a friend to be a judge or censor, and we should guard against the habit of gratuitously nagging people when their welfare is not clearly at stake.

When one is unquestionably obliged to let a friend know where he is going wrong, one is just as strongly obliged to see that the criticism goes no further. "Reprove your friends in secret, praise them in public," is advice that goes back to the 1st century, when it was written by Syrus, the Roman slave-poet. Unfortunately, it is often honoured in the breach: "If men knew what others say of them, there would not be four friends in the world," wrote Pascal. If you can find nothing good to say in public about a friend in a given situation, say nothing at all.

"There is a friend who is a friend in name only," the Bible warns. By their ultimate disloyalty you shall know them. From Adam and Eve forward, men and women have been betrayed by seeming well-wishers who were secretly acting for their own advantage. Drama and fiction over the centuries would have been lost without the sinister figure of the false friend.

In real life such figures will be found at work currying the favour of more powerful or more popular individuals. Several vulgar names are used in plants and offices for those who make a point of cozying up to the boss to advance their careers. They appeal to their victims' vanity by feigning admiration and affection. The objects of these bogus sentiments should "be advised that all flatterers live at the expense of those who listen to them," which is the moral of La Fontaine's fable of The Crow and the Fox.

The more power people amass in business, politics or other walks of life, the less they can be sure of who their friends are. The story is told of a newly-appointed bishop who remarked that there were two experiences he would never have again: eat a bad meal and hear the whole truth. He might have added that he would never again make a friend he could trust entirely. The friendlessness



of the high and mighty is compounded when they have dropped their old friends on the way up the ladder of earthly success.

"Friendship is the privilege of private men; for wretched greatness knows no blessing so substantial," wrote Naham Tate, a 16th century poet and dramatist. This is partly so because the relationship between the great and their social inferiors is essentially unequal. The most fulfilling friendships, like the most fulfilling marriages, are between equals who treat each other as such.

In any case, there can be no authentic friendship where one party contrives to get more out of it than the other. It may in fact happen that one helps the other more than vice-versa, but that is immaterial to the nature of the relationship. In a real friendship, the less fortunate party would be just as forthcoming if the roles were reversed.

'Absent friends:' the immortal figures who live in our hearts

It is therefore debatable whether people can deliberately "make friends" for any purpose but friendship itself. We are sometimes advised to strike up an association with more admirable souls to improve ourselves, or to replace old friends with new ones because the old are bad companions.

Faced with this advice, one might do well to think of the young man whose father gave him a copy of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* which he returned with a note saying, "too artificial." It may be possible to seek and find true friends as it is possible to seek and find true lovers; but, as in romantic love, the best results are obtained by letting nature take its course.

Dr. Johnson apparently thought otherwise. He said, "If a man does not make new acquaintances as he advances through life, he will soon find himself alone." But though it is true that we lose friends to death as we grow older, in a way they are immortal. Those who have passed out of our lives in the physical sense will live on in our hearts as long as we do. This phenomenon is recognized in the old army toast to fallen comrades — or, as soldiers say when they raise their glasses, "to absent friends."

While they are still alive, friends should be treated as the precious gifts of fortune they are. In his classic essay "Of Friendship," Emerson wrote: "We take care of our health, we make our roof tight and our clothing sufficient, but who provides wisely that we should not be wanting in the best property of all? — friends?"

'The only way to have a friend is to be one'

The same essay carried Emerson's famous pronouncement that "the only way to have a friend is to be one." To be a friend in the classical sense is no light undertaking. Consider the qualifications for the role, as listed by the Earl of Clarendon: "The skill and observation of the best physician, the diligence and vigilance of the best nurse, the tenderness and patience of the best mother." Bishop Jeremy Taylor was, if anything, more demanding: "The greatest love, the greatest usefulness, the most open communication, the noblest sufferings, the severest truth, the heartiest counsel, and the greatest union of minds of which brave men and women are capable."

There are sacrifices to be made in attempting to raise our friendships to their highest potential state, but the fortunate part of it is that friendship is one of the few human pursuits that makes sacrifice a pleasure. It is also one way in which ordinary men and women can reach for spiritual nobility. This is because "an effort made for the happiness of others lifts us above ourselves," as the American humanitarian Lydia Child said.

The qualities of character required for true friendship are quite simply the best qualities a human can possess: unselfishness, tolerance, forbearance, trustworthiness, faithfulness, honesty. If we fragile mortals feel unequal to the effort of applying all these qualities all the time, we might try a little harder if we remember that we are doing it out of a kind of love which yields love in repayment. And to love and be loved is worth all the effort we can possibly make.