

ON FRIENDSHIP

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“O my friends, there are no friends.” - Aristotle

A friend is a person capable of loving irrespective of whether he is being loved or not. Friendship can exist between the same sex: man-man, woman-woman, or opposite sex: man-woman. It transcends age and could subsist between even an old man and a small boy. Human beings also establish friendships with their pet animals such as cats, dogs, horses, doves and parrots. Friendship can also be felt in familial relationships between father and son, mother and daughter, husband and wife, brother and sister, elder brother and younger brother. Yet, more than friendship, love is the binding force in familial relationships. In a deeper sense, love is below friendship because it is an above/below relation, one of hierarchy and condition. It is implied, then, that friendship is freedom plus equality. It involves choice and volition. The concept of friendship needs exploration because often a man is known by the company he keeps; knowing the company helps one to know oneself and develop his personality to the fullest. Each of our friends mirrors a rejected or acknowledged trait in us. They happen to be our friends because it is ourselves in different forms, and a unified vision of them constitutes to the sameness of our identity.

Generally, friendship exists for three reasons: a) virtue b) usefulness c) pleasure. When virtue is the reason, friendship exists for the sake of friendship; where both like each other and cherish each other for some creditable values in the other's personality. You wish to be the friend of that person for the sheer personality that he/she has. It has a magic in itself. It attracts you. And it is mutual. You know that you would even die to swear your friendship for that person. But you also know that the other would make you live than die for him/her. It is somewhat platonic in concept inasmuch as the other may not be/ need not be all that intelligent and good looking, useful or capable of giving pleasure.

A friendship of the second kind is formed for the utilitarian value of it. How useful so and so is to me? What can I benefit from him? Can I use his car? Will he use his reputation and influence to fetch me a good job? Will he lend me money in need? Thus a person may ask and maintains relationship for practical, professional, and political reasons. I remember the friendship I made with two others on a train journey from Mumbai to Chennai. It was extremely useful for killing time during the journey. Further, all of us had to go to the bus-stand to continue our onward travel. Therefore we took an auto-rickshaw till the bus-stand and shared the money. But then, once we boarded our buses to our destinations, we were looking forward to meet our people at the hometown. That is the quality of this

friendship; it is useful but lasts so long as the need for utility persists. Once we do away with the utility-need the friendship eventually dies. It holds good only for that moment and need.

Friendship of the third kind is formed essentially on account of the pleasure the relationship is capable of giving. He is a joker. The moment he enters, you forget all your worries. You cannot but wonder what new joke he has got up in his sleeve to make you roar into laughter. And he never disappoints you that way. She is cute, intelligent and charming. The very notion that she is your friend makes you feel proud. That she walks, talks and takes tea with you is enough. You are on cloud nine. The point rests here: How good is he/she in giving me pleasure--physically, emotionally, mentally and materialistically?

Now to the question: Which of the three is good? It appears that type A is good, but it is not as useful or joyful as the other types. Type B is good, yet it falls short of longevity and quality. Type C too is good, but how long one enjoys only pleasure in life? How many jokes can a person take in a day? And does it give the same pleasure as it gave to him in the beginning? Doesn't he reach a saturation point, a mental and emotional exhaustion? Where he would rather prefer to be left alone to himself? Would prefer to shed a tear inside rather than go on laughing at the follies of the world?

In close observation, it would be revealed that all these type differences are not watertight compartments. They overlap with each other. A relationship started on the basis of usefulness may also get elevated to the status of virtue in due course. Similarly a virtuous friendship also could soon impart usefulness and pleasure. It would be an ideal package to have all the three together. But you see my friend, how difficult it is to form relationships?

Virtue-based relationships are formed mostly during childhood, schooldays. Sometimes later, at college days, when we live in a state of blissful ignorance, or rather, fool's paradise. But once one tastes the coldness of reality and learns to conduct oneself a successful professional, the circumstance demands one to have friendships on the basis of usefulness/pleasure. Be it sharing a cigarette or going for a picnic or deciding to invest in the same company shares together. Though I said earlier that it is capable of developing a virtue out of it in due course, mind you, it is not a virtue in itself. Virtue-based friendship is fantastic for this reason: it lasts till the end of this universe! Though it is disheartening to realise that most of the virtue-based relationships is formed during our young, immature (ironically because we were thinking at that time that we were the most matured of the lot!), developing stage--the mind then was remarkably uninhibited and the ears listened without prejudice and the tongues twisted smoothly to the words that flew out from the bottoms of hearts--it is gladdening to know that value-based friendships are also formed in a professional/political/materialistic milieu. Often less in number, it is formed, surprisingly, in a short span and lasts till eternity! That telepathic, intuitive Richard Bachian understanding works out here: "You know your friend in a moment, than your acquaintances in a life time."

So far so good about friends and friendships. . . All of a sudden, do I sound cynical a bit? Perhaps (my favourite word in defining relationships) yes! But why?

Frederick Nietzsche feels that the right kind of friendship occurs only when we realise the enemy within and without. Hence when Aristotle said, "O friends, there are no enemies," Nietzsche in his very characteristic way retorted by saying, "O enemies, there are no enemies." While Aristotle implied that friends are really enemies in disguise, Nietzsche conjectured to the contrary that enemies are friends in disguise! He was contemptuous of our tendency to give only to our friends. But not to our enemies. The reader should not confuse this notion with the Christian doctrine of 'love thy neighbours' or 'if a person slaps on your cheek, show him the other' stuff, since for Nietzsche, "God is dead" (an interesting but irrelevant point here, hence I defer a meandering discussion). All that Nietzsche wants to convey is this: while one is so generous in giving to his friends, he must also learn how to give to his enemies. Failing which, for him, there could be no friendship at all.

Taking cues from Nietzsche we should not only concede the enemy in the friend but also recognise in advance so that we may not be caught unawares and be saved of increased blood-pressure levels and doctor bills. Our best friend is endowed with the capability of becoming our worst enemy. It is always for sure. A stranger can be an enemy but not worst enemy. Remember Brutus, for instance. We always say that Caesar was so strong that he would not have died even if millions of daggers were to pierce him but for the one dagger of betrayal that penetrated his heart and took away his last breath. That others were interested in the death of Caesar was of no matter to the mighty emperor, but his bosom friend saw a point in it made him give up all his hope for survival. If my death would benefit Brutus, so be it, thought Caesar and died of heart-break, not of haemorrhage, we may categorically conclude. Nevertheless, this does not always happen in Shakespearean dramas and present Hindi movies, but in reality too. A person who had this soul-bending/mending experience wisely knows that love is just an absence of hate as day is just an absence of night. In the words of Jacques Derrida: if you want a friend, you must wage war on him, and capable of it, capable of having a 'best enemy.' To be capable of this friendship, to be able to honour in the friend the enemy he can become, is a sign of freedom. Freedom itself. Now this is a freedom that neither tyrants nor slaves know."(1997: 282). One should be capable of respecting the enemy, of honouring what one does not love. Incapable of such a respect, incapable of the freedom entailed by that respect, one could never have either friends or enemies as such. "Only a free and respectful consciousness could ever attain to this as such, this phenomenal essence of the friend or enemy, as well as of the couple they form (ibid.)."

In conclusion, recognition of enmity even when friendship is alive and kicking can give a cosmic and comprehensive view of a relationship resulting in its intensified quality and enhanced exchange of friendly love. But leaving this aspect of friendship in the dark, will soon render a relationship arbitrary and leaves its partners in a quandary with rankling fear for continuity/discontinuity. That's why, when we preserve the fond memories of our friends in the attics, refrigerators and pickle bottles of our minds and hearts, let's open those wicket-gates of our souls in esteem of our enemies too! And, from now on, we shall vow together and say: Welcome enemies and happy stay friends!

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