Seeking Friendship at Baylor for Life

By Frank Shushok, Jr.

Our American Culture

“Got a friend? They’re dwindling, study says.” On a recent flight, this headline in the Dallas Morning News caught my attention. According to the research published in the American Sociological Review, McPherson and colleagues found that Americans report having only two close friends, down from three close friends when a similar study was completed in 1985. Even more surprisingly, the number who report having no one with whom to discuss important matters has doubled to one in four during the same time period. This is the culture from which you likely come to Baylor.

Why should you be concerned? In a time when we accumulate “friends” by the hundreds on Facebook, we are also reporting loneliness and mental illness at unprecedented levels. Furthermore, the declining propensity for Americans to engage in meaningful conversations with friends ultimately results in shaky support structures during times of crisis, less involvement in community-based activities and an overall poorer quality of life. In his book The Loss of Happiness in Market Democracies, Robert Lane presents evidence that humans have a genetically programmed necessity for camaraderie and companionship fundamental to our physiological health and well-being. In another book, Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah and his colleagues argue that the implications of a declining culture of friendship extend far beyond individual happiness. American individualism, they argue, is having destructive consequences on society. While Americans involved in civic activities (e.g., not for profit organizations, churches, and local government initiatives) value relationships that develop as a result of this participation, Bellah and colleagues suggest that few understand the moral meaning once attributed to such relationships and thus fail to aspire toward the best kinds of friendships. They argue that friendships embedded in moral commitments provide the fuel for offsetting the destructive consequences of an American propensity toward individualism.

Even though a utilitarian philosophy of happiness (the greatest good for the greatest number) undergirds the prevailing American political and economic systems, Lane asserts that the primary source of happiness in advanced economies is friendship. In fact, beyond those living in poverty, income levels show little correlation with happiness. Those with friends, however, experience life in qualitatively different ways—they are happy.

Friendship is perhaps one of the most important gifts a human being can possess throughout life—and while some are fortunate enough to find it by chance, luck, or blessing, many find themselves surrounded by familiar faces but overcome by loneliness. The good news, it seems, is that the pursuit of friendship is something that can be learned.
My Surprising Journey

A few years ago, two surprising things happened in my life. First, a colleague asked me to co-design and co-teach a Great Texts in Leadership class. In this course, the cast and characters within Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, Plutarch’s Lives, Cicero’s On Obligations, Machiavelli’s The Prince, Jane Austen’s Emma, Shakespeare’s plays, and Flannery O’Connor’s short stories provided ample opportunity to analyze how characters did or did not exhibit leadership. The role that friends played in the exercise of leadership crept into almost every conversation. Aristotle and Cicero, among others, take on the topic of friendship directly, offering specific discussion about the concept of friendship. By semester’s end, I found myself knee-deep in discussion about friendship—its role, purpose, and mechanics. I realized, like the students in the class, that I never seriously considered a theory of friendship, much less my own theory, despite my assumption that I had been practicing it for years.

In daily reflection papers, students began writing about their friends, whether or not friends helped them live virtuous lives, and whether or not their friendships possessed depth. One student reflected, “I’m discovering that I have many relationships, but probably no friends in the truest sense. I want this in the future. I wonder how to begin. If Emma and Coriolanus (character’s of Jane Austen and Plutarch respectively) had different friendships, perhaps they wouldn’t have made such tragic decisions.” Another student writes, “Cicero said that all people are naturally social, just like Aristotle did. This being the case, we need to not only exercise the virtues in proper relation to self, but also in proper relation to others. This made me think about how I treat my friends. I’ve done things to my friends that have been unfair and vicious.” For these students, what was being learned as part of the formal course curriculum was being applied to their daily activities. They were redefining what friendship is (creating a theory or philosophy of friendship), and testing new behavior in the context of their communities.

In the end, I found myself exploring my own definition of friendship, whether or not my friendships encouraged sustained depth and even whether or not my own leadership was affected by the kinds of friends that surround my life. Aristotle (trans. 2004) offers one of the great commentaries on friendship and describes three different varieties. Some friendships exist for the sake of pleasure and are especially prevalent among the young given a propensity to be regulated by feelings and opportunities of the moment. This is perhaps best seen as we filter in and out of relationships as our affections change. The end result, when pleasure is the primary aim, is the risk of being in constant transition from one superficial friendship to another. Friendship based on pleasure is not in and of itself a bad thing—in fact; this is how the most meaningful friendships begin. Even so, these kinds of friendships do not usually transcend the borders of the college experience. Once graduation concludes, so do most of these friendships.
Another variety of friendship, according to Aristotle, is one based on utility. These friendships change with circumstance and most frequently occur between the elderly since utility is more important than pleasure at advancing ages. In college, friendships develop around a group project, class, residence hall experience or student organization, then, might diminish once the mutual benefit of maintaining the relationship ends. Once again, however, friendship based on utility is not in and of itself a bad thing; in fact these utility-origin beginnings can be the catalyst for meaningful relationships. With both friendships based on pleasure and utility, there is no doubt the chance that more meaningful, enduring friendships will emerge.

The third kind of friendship that Aristotle describes is the perfect friendship based on goodness. He writes, “And it is those who desire the good of their friends for their friends’ sake that are most truly friends, because each loves the other for what he [or she] is and not for any incidental quality . . . Friendship of this kind is permanent reasonably enough; because in it are united all the attributes that friends ought to possess” (p. 205). Aristotle acknowledges that these kinds of friendships are rare because those who earnestly pursue goodness and virtue are rare. Moreover, time and intimacy are the ingredients that allow a wish for perfect friendship to mature into such a relationship. But perhaps there is another reason that such friendships are rare—we have not been encouraged to seek them. My experience tells me that Baylor is full of our society’s best and brightest—pursuing truth and goodness—pursuing virtue. While Aristotle’s contribution to the conversation about friendship is profound, I differ with him on one particular account. Friendships are rare not because few pursue goodness, but instead because too few know how to do so in the context of relationship.

At roughly the same time that I was reacquainted with friendship theory through reading several great texts, another colleague on campus suggested we get together for a cup of coffee. When we met, he invited me into “friendship.” This seemed like an odd request since I was under the impression that we were already friends—thus, the reason we were having coffee. During our conversation I realized my colleague had a more fully formed philosophy of friendship, one that required mutual commitment. He sought a long-term relationship that had agreed upon moral boundaries. Essentially, he was requesting that the nature of our conversations strengthen in commitment to substantive dialogue about the most important things in life—living virtuously, exploring questions of vocation and calling, as well as providing accountability for each other becoming the people we aspire to be. Without labeling it as such, he was suggesting what Bellah and colleagues say is the least understood notion of the classical view of friendship—a shared commitment to the good. They write, “In a culture dominated by expressive and utilitarian individualism, it is easy for us to understand the components of pleasure and usefulness, but we have difficulty seeing the point of considering friendship in terms of common moral commitments” (p. 115).
My friend was asking me to create a relationship where we sought the best for each other—through thick and thin—for today and tomorrow. Our relationship still has elements of pleasure and utility. We are both college administrators—something that we find useful. We both like to run, explore the outdoors and tell funny stories—things we find quite pleasurable. Even so, our relationship has expanded beyond these elements and though we live a thousand miles a part today, our commitment to calling out the best in each other remains firm. It is this third component, viewing friendship as encompassing common moral commitments, that seems more difficult to grasp for the present American culture that Bellah and his colleagues describe as “dominated by expressive and utilitarian individualism” (p. 115). They write:

For Aristotle and his successors, it was precisely the moral component of friendship that made it the indispensable basis of a good society. For it is one of the main duties of friends to help one another to be better persons: one must hold up the standard for one’s friend and be able to count on a true friend to do likewise . . . This profound notion of friendship in which one loves one’s friend but, first of all, the good in one’s friend, includes the notion of conjugal friendship as well (p. 115).

**Marking the Moment**

For many students, college life serves to facilitate the exploration of romantic relationships and often marks the beginning of the journey toward life-long marriage. Our culture teaches us that these partnerships require significant investment, discernment, and self-reflection necessary to understand personal expectations and moral philosophy. Students seem to understand that making this type of commitment has far-reaching implications for life beyond college.

Perhaps friendships of the non-amorous sort need to be considered with the same seriousness. Understanding that significant life-changing relationships of all kinds require sacrifice is important. Anyone in a long-term committed amorous relationship likely agrees with me on this point. A colleague recently joked that the only sort of relationship more challenging than those of the romantic kind are the non-romantic. If this is true, and I believe it is, we must be presented with appropriate expectations—that friendships of the best kind require work and sacrifice.

One of my favorite biblical stories, especially as paraphrased in The Message and reported in 1 Samuel 18, is the “soul friendship” of Jonathan and David. It says:

> “1 By the time David had finished reporting to Saul, Jonathan was deeply impressed with David—an immediate bond was forged between them. He became totally committed to David. From that point on he would be David’s number-one advocate and friend. 2 Saul received David into his own household that day, no more to return to the home of his father. 3-4 Jonathan, out of his deep love for David, made a covenant with him. He
formalized it with solemn gifts: his own royal robe and weapons—armor, sword, bow, and belt.”

What stands out most to me is the covenant—the marking of the friendship. As the story unfolds, an extraordinary commitment to friendship follows that was also undergirded by a common pursuit of a life with God.

It is commonly understood that colleges and universities are linked to the futures of education, economics, and welfare. It is also true that they help perpetuate the next generation of relationships. By default, institutions will contribute to friendships of utility and pleasure; by choice, some will choose to foster friendships of a higher moral value. In so doing, these friendship forerunners will create a new moral norm, which will provide an axis of self-sacrifice and other-focus upon which a better world will turn.

References

Consideration:
Questions for Further Reflection
1. How do you define friendship? Who are your friends? How would you classify them according to Aristotle’s three kinds of friendships?
2. For what do you hope when you think about friendships at Baylor?
3. What, if anything, might be holding you back from meaningful friendships with others?
4. In the essay you just read, the following was stated:

“For Aristotle and his successors, it was precisely the moral component of friendship that made it the indispensable basis of a good society. For it is one of the main duties of friends to help one another to be better persons: one must hold up the standard for one’s friend and be able to count on a true friend to do likewise . . . This profound notion of friendship in which one loves one’s friend but, first of all, the good in one’s friend, includes the notion of conjugal friendship as well.”

What does this mean to you?

5. What friendships in your life have required work and sacrifice?

6. What can you learn from Jonathan and David about making a friendship covenant?

7. As you begin your Baylor experience, what kind of friend do you hope to be for others? How will you go about making friends?

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