

Friends

The impetus for this sermon came from an FUSW member who wondered if they could be friends with people who hold very different political beliefs. Lifelong friends, at some distance but reliably friends until recently, their friend praised a politician they find repugnant and policies they see as destructive. I have repeatedly heard of people becoming enraged with friends and family for the moral standing they attribute to the other's opinions. Today, I will outline some qualities of friendship, glance at different kinds of friendship, and then consider what to do when we encounter a radically different, apparently obnoxious, and mistaken viewpoint in a friend. Or they find us to be terribly, deeply, morally mistaken. The very nature of friendship is then at stake in an atmosphere poisoned by polarization.

Polarization is an abstract label for how emotionally heated it can become when people hold radically different political ideas freighted with anxiety, anger, identity commitments, competition, and/or projections of moral inferiority. Presently, wearing a mask for some people is of the utmost importance, either because it symbolizes caring for our own and others' health or it can symbolize being an arrogant, presumptuous elitist. Fear and resentment can be heavily loaded on either opinion. The Supreme Court abortion decision, likewise, stirs deep fear, guilt, resentment, and sympathy in opposing camps.

The most basic kind of friendship is where several people band together to accomplish a task or stay safe, as in Ecclesiastes:

I saw emptiness under the sun: a lonely man without a friend, without son or brother, toiling endlessly yet never satisfied with his wealth. . . . Two are

better than one; they receive a good reward for their toil, because, if one falls, the other can help his companion up again; but alas for the man who falls alone . . . (Eccl, 4:7-11)

When we consider complex and mature friendships, we recognize that many people have various kinds of friends. We may have picnics and share light pleasantries with some and we may enjoy working with others on projects, but may not share more deeply with them. Some friends are dear to us because our affection dates back decades and some--for complicated reasons--feel like comfortable old shoes when we're around them. Years ago, sociologists asked some Unitarian Universalists how many friends they had, and on average they reported they had five friends. The sociologists were initially surprised, but realized that friendship for UUs was so intimate that few relationships could meet that high standard. David Brooks claims that "your friends are not just by your side; they get inside you. IF you want to help people change, help them change their friendships. . . . behavior happens in friend networks. If people in your friend network quit smoking, then you're more likely to quit smoking. . . .our friends shape what we see as normal." (David Brooks, What Is It About Friendships That Is So Powerful?" New York Times, Aug.4, 2022) You probably see Unitarian Universalists as normal! You are here because you want to be influenced by FUSW's people. You want to take in the relatedness we offer, person-to-person.

Now, pair Brooks' assertion that "friends get inside you" with Aristotle's idea that the "friendship of virtue," or ideals, unites people in a common pursuit. Further, Emerson said that it is Truth that is a major part of friendship, the

openness and honesty that told him this is a person “with whom I may be sincere,” a man so real and equal that the social “hedging” we need to do when another is so highly opinionated but unreasonable that we must not speak our truth plainly, with self-revelation. He pairs Truth with tenderness, so that with friendship we interact fully ‘for aid and comfort through all the relations and passages of life and death. It is fit for serene days, and graceful gifts, and country rambles, but also for rough roads and hard fare, shipwreck, poverty, and persecution.’”(Enright and Rawlinson, FRIENDSHIP, pg.14) A friend will at least tell you something like, “That blouse doesn’t look good on you” because they want the best for you. And the best friends will follow John Stuart Mill when he envisioned “a society in which people express their opinions and listen to those who have a different opinion. In the absence of such free exchange . . .people miss out: “If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth: if wrong they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error.” (Kwame Anthony Appiah, “Is It OK That My Co-Worker Keeps Her Anti-Abortion Views on the Down Low?” The New York Times Magazine, 8/28/2022, pg.16) Mills is simply saying that if you hear an idea from a friend that contradicts what you think, you either have an opportunity to learn a greater truth than you had or the confirmation of your own truth as surviving the “collision with error.”

I have a vision of John Stuart Mill’s “collision with error” as involving words, metal and plastic pieces violently launched into the air. Can friendships survive such conflict? Although it is important to have friends that are different, as it expands our ability to consider diverse viewpoints, sometimes opinions must be

weighed according to their emotional importance for each person. I once had a close friend who was a UU and a science nerd and we would discuss important issues ranging from climate change and world peace to why he slept with so-and-so. He moved to his childhood home in the South and I visited him there. After dinner one evening I reflected on how, walking around his quaint old town with its crumbling brick sidewalks and ancient buildings, the ghost of slavery haunted me, and I was quite uneasy. I felt a mixture of sadness and anger. He took the position of “Yes, but my Black wet nurse and nanny loved me. She lived with us as a family member.” I countered with concern that her vocational choices were unfairly limited and she had to neglect her own family to serve his. We had an intense discussion. We could agree that racial segregation and oppression was evil but racial oppression was not central to his identity and neither of us sank into hostility as if the other’s viewpoint was immoral so much as occupying different dimensions of personality. I allowed that any person can feel sentimental or nostalgic as well as idealistic.

The difficulty arises when letting our views be known exposes us to the risk of harm, like losing a job, being attacked on social media, or physically harmed. The best kind of friendship wouldn’t hide an opinion that would lead a friend to possibly diminish or abandon affection. Emerson tied the search for Truth to tenderness and if all parties agree that tenderness must be respected then the relationship can endure. Perhaps if you disagree vehemently with someone and it becomes contentious, agree with them to experimentally reverse your respective positions in order to stimulate empathy. Ask your friend how they would feel if Joe Biden, for example, were filmed aggressively fondling a woman at random or tried to cover up having slept with someone by paying her to keep quiet. What

then, indeed? Vigorous debates in a respectful atmosphere are essential to friendship and even democracy. However this would be asking you to take an enormous risk, as the emotional blowback could be scary.

By now, you have probably realized that I am contrasting the beliefs or values that are centrally held by a person with those that are incidental. “‘The perfect kind of friendship,’ Aristotle said, ‘is that of good men who resemble one another in virtue.’” That’s a wildly demanding ideal.” (Kwame Anthony Appiah, “The Elderly Man I’ve Been Helping Turns Out to be a Bigot. What do I Do?” THE NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE, 09-04-2022, pg.14) Any person of high value inclinations may have a blind spot and your own tenderness may be called upon, just as their kindness for you may sometimes be necessary. Yes, it would probably be useful to tell them what you observe, for the sake of their ethical development, even though risky.

Further, friendship demands courage to risk looking foolish or losing the relationship. It can take internal courage to risk exposing a long-held and greatly esteemed opinion, because you might feel embarrassed if the opinion subsequently appears to you to be inadequate or lacking sensitivity. It can take courage to risk that your friend would take great offense to that highly valued opinion. I say “friendship demands” because if you do not take that risk your friendship is thereby limited. You have—reluctantly, fearfully--implicitly guessed that either you are not friend enough or your friendship must be limited. That sounds painful, even if it is ethical, and you can be forgiven for not wanting to drive a conversation to that point.

If, however, a supposed friend aggressively spews an opinion that they know you find disgusting, your friendship may be ruined. That is painfully sad. They may have implicitly said that their identity is such that the Aristotelian resemblance to one another in ideal--the very basis for friendship--has dissolved. You have two difficult but courageous options.

First, you can pay attention to the process of the discussion and ask: What brought this about? Have they long harbored resentment toward you and disdain for your ideals? Have they suddenly had an awakening whereby they need to either convert or exclude those around them? Exploring the process takes courage to put aside your own outrage and hurt in order to lovingly explore the truth of their actions underneath the content of their words.

Second, you can express how hurt you are by this onslaught because the meaning for you is that they are attacking you. It takes courage to even consider the possibility that they have deliberately turned against you. There is possibly great grief in this, as the closeness you remember, or wish you could have, will not come to fruition. But with that courage to face even unwelcome possibilities comes the freedom to know the truth and either repair the relationship or move on. I know, hardly much compensation and you have my sympathy, but there it is.

In conclusion, mutual self-interest and self-protection is a basic kind of friendship, but deeper friendships entail a search for truth in an atmosphere of kindness. Often labeled nonviolent communication, this search for truth with compassion changes everyone involved. It is, simply, love that causes us to do small kind gestures and grand idealistic stands. There is love inherent in the art of reflective listening and being heard between friends. There is loving contentment

in long-standing friendships that are flawed and yet comforting as a warm blanket on a cold night. It is love that helps us get up in the morning because our friends are depending on us and we on them. It is love that we internalize and remember when most everything has gone to hell. It is love that helps us be better for ourselves and better for our friends. May we all experience friendships.