Friendship in an Age of Economics

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What is "true friendship" and how does our world today challenge it?

Excerpt from “Friendship in an Age of Economics” by Todd May, July 4, 2010:

...Aristotle thought that there were three types of friendship: those of pleasure, those of usefulness, and true friendship. In friendships of pleasure, “it is not for their character that men love ready-witted people, but because they find them pleasant.” In the latter, “those who love each other for their utility do not love each other for themselves but in virtue of some good which they get from each other.” For him, the first is characteristic of the young, who are focused on momentary enjoyment, while the second is often the province of the old, who need assistance to cope with their frailty. What the rise of recent public rhetoric and practice has accomplished is to cast the first two in economic terms while forgetting about the third.

In our lives, however, few of us have entirely forgotten about the third — true friendship. We may not define it as Aristotle did — friendship among the already virtuous — but we live it in our own way nonetheless. Our close friendships stand as a challenge to the tenor of our times.

Conversely, our times challenge those relationships. This is why we must reflect on friendship, so that it doesn’t slip away from us under the pressure of a dominant economic discourse. We are all, and always, creatures of our time. In the case of friendship, we must push back against that time if we are to sustain what, for many of us, are among the most important elements of our lives. It is those elements that allow us to sit by the bedside of a friend: not because we know it is worth it, but because the question of worth does not even arise.

There is much that might be said about friendships. They allow us to see ourselves from the perspective of another. They open up new interests or deepen current ones. They offer us support during difficult periods in our lives. The aspect of friendship that I would like to focus on is its noneconomic character. Although we benefit from our close friendships, these friendships are not a matter of calculable gain and loss. While we draw pleasure from them, they are not a matter solely of consuming pleasure. And while the time we spend with our friends and the favors we do for them are often reciprocated in an informal way, we do not spend that time or offer those favors in view of the reciprocation that might ensue.

Friendships follow a rhythm that is distinct from that of either consumer or entrepreneurial relationships. This is at once their deepest and most fragile characteristic. Consumer pleasures are transient. They engulf us for a short period and then they fade, like a drug. That is why they often need to be renewed periodically. Entrepreneurship, when successful, leads to the victory of personal gain. We cultivate a colleague in the field or a contact outside of it in the hope that it will advance our career or enhance our status. When it does, we feel a sense of personal success. In both cases, there is the enjoyment of what comes to us through the medium of other human beings.

Friendships worthy of the name are different. Their rhythm lies not in what they bring to us, but rather in what we immerse ourselves in. To be a friend is to step into the stream of another’s life. It is, while not neglecting my own life, to take pleasure in another’s pleasure, and to share their pain as partly my own. The borders of my life, while not entirely erased, become less clear than they might be. Rather than the rhythm of pleasure followed by emptiness, or that of investment and then profit, friendships follow a rhythm that is at once subtler and more persistent. This rhythm is subtler because it often (although not always) lacks the mark of a consumed pleasure or a
successful investment. But even so, it remains there, part of the ground of our lives that lies both within us and without.

...We might say of friendships that they are a matter not of diversion or of return but of meaning. They render us vulnerable, and in doing so they add dimensions of significance to our lives that can only arise from being, in each case, friends with this or that particular individual, a party to this or that particular life.

It is precisely this noneconomic character that is threatened in a society in which each of us is thrown upon his or her resources and offered only the bywords of ownership, shopping, competition, and growth. It is threatened when we are encouraged to look upon those around us as the stuff of our current enjoyment or our future advantage. It is threatened when we are led to believe that friendships without a recognizable gain are, in the economic sense, irrational. Friendships are not without why, perhaps, but they are certainly without that particular why.

Excerpt from Of Mice and Men:

of the trees and the curving branches overhead. Lennie crawled slowly and cautiously around the fire until he was close to George. He sat back on his heels. George turned the bean cans so that another side faced the fire. He pretended to be unaware of Lennie so close beside him.

"George," very softly. No answer. "George!"

"What you want?"

"I was only foolin', George. I don't want no ketchup. I wouldn't eat no ketchup if it was right here beside me."

"If it was here, you could have some."

"But I wouldn't eat none, George. I'd leave it all for you. You could cover your beans with it and I wouldn't touch none of it."

George still stared morosely at the fire. "When I think of the swell time I could have without you, I go nuts. I never get no peace."

Lennie still knelt. He looked off into the darkness across the river. "George, you want I should go away and leave you alone?"

"Where the hell could you go?"

"Well, I could. I could go off in the hills there. Some place I'd find a cave."

"Yeah? How'd you eat. You ain't got sense enough to find nothing to eat."

"I'd find things, George. I don't need no nice food with ketchup. I'd lay out in the sun and nobody'd hurt me. An' if I found a mouse, I could keep it. Nobody'd take it away from me."

George looked quickly and searchingly at him. "I been mean, ain't I?"

"If you don' want me I can go off in the hills an' find a cave. I can go away any time."
Thought Questions:

1. How would you describe the relationship between George and Lennie in this excerpt?
2. Which of Aristotle’s three kinds of friendships would you say describes theirs? Why?
3. How does the time we live in threaten the third, and most precious, kind of friendship, according to Mr. May? Why is it important to cultivate such friendships now?
4. Discuss this statement in relation to George and Lennie: “They render us vulnerable, and in doing so they add dimensions of significance to our lives that can only arise from being, in each case, friends with this or that particular individual, a party to this or that particular life.” How does their friendship render each vulnerable? How does it add significance (good or bad) to each of their lives?
5. On the ranch in Steinbeck’s novella, which could be described as “a world often ruled by the dollar and what it can buy,” how exactly does “friendship, like love, opens other vistas”? What is the relationship between friendship and dreams?

Friendship in Your Life:

In a world in which “friending” and “unfriending” have become verbs, use Aristotle as a lens through which to think deeply about your own friendships. Which are “for pleasure”? Which for “usefulness”? Who do you consider to be your true friends? How did they come to be your true friends? Why are they important in your life? How does technology affect these relationships? Would you add any categories?

What have these relationships taught you about the nature of friendship?