

Of Friendship

Introduction

Francis Bacon (1561–1626) is called the father of the English essay. His essays give practical wisdom and observations about human life. One of his important essays is *Of Friendship*. In this essay, Bacon explains why friendship is necessary in human life. He says that solitude without true friends makes life empty. He also shows that friendship brings three great benefits: (1) it comforts the heart, (2) it clears the mind, and (3) it helps in action. Bacon proves his points with examples from history, especially the lives of great kings and rulers.

Paragraph 1: Aristotle once said, “Whosoever is delighted in solitude is either a wild beast or a god.” Bacon comments that this saying mixes both truth and untruth. It is true that a man who naturally dislikes society is like a beast. But it is false to think that solitude is divine, unless it is chosen for higher purposes, like prayer or meditation. Some ancient men, such as Epimenides, Numa, Empedocles, and Apollonius, were thought to live in this way. True hermits and holy men of the Church also did so. Still, we must understand that “a crowd is not company; and faces are but a gallery of pictures; and talk but a tinkling cymbal, where there is no love.” In large cities, true friends are scattered, and fellowship is weak. To live without true friends is a miserable kind of solitude, and anyone who is unfit for friendship is like a beast, not a human.

Paragraph 2: The first benefit of friendship is that it relieves the heart of its burdens. Just as stoppages are dangerous in the body, hidden emotions are dangerous in the mind. Medicines can treat the liver, spleen, lungs, or brain, but no medicine can open the heart except a true friend. Only to a real friend can one share griefs, joys, fears, hopes, suspicions, and advice. This is like a “civil confession” that lightens the mind.

Paragraph 3: Even great kings and monarchs value this benefit of friendship. Many of them risk their own safety to have companions who can share their cares. Because of their high position, princes cannot freely open their hearts to ordinary subjects. So they raise some men almost to their own level and make them their favourites. In modern languages, such men are called “favourites” or “privadoes.” The Romans had a better name, *participes curarum*, meaning “sharers of cares.” This shows the true purpose of friendship for rulers.

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Paragraph 4: Bacon gives many historical examples. Sylla, the Roman general, raised Pompey to such power that Pompey felt equal to him. Julius Caesar trusted Decimus Brutus so much that he named him heir in his will, but this same man later led him to his death. Augustus made Agrippa, though of low birth, so powerful that he even married Augustus's daughter. Tiberius trusted Sejanus so much that the Senate built an altar to Friendship for them. Septimius Severus loved Plautianus so much that he forced his son to marry Plautianus's daughter and wished that Plautianus might outlive him. These examples prove that even the wisest rulers needed friendship to complete their happiness.

Paragraph 5: The French writer Commines observed that Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy, never shared his secrets with anyone, especially those that troubled him. Because of this, his judgment became weaker over time. His next master, Louis XI of France, also kept secrets too closely, and this caused him torment. Bacon recalls the dark but true proverb of Pythagoras: "Eat not the heart." A man who has no friend to open himself to destroys his own heart. Sharing thoughts with a friend has a double effect — it makes joys greater and griefs smaller. To share joy is to rejoice more, and to share grief is to suffer less. This is the true power of friendship.

Paragraph 6: The second fruit of friendship is for the mind and understanding. Just as friendship clears the storms of emotions, it also clears the confusion of thoughts. Talking with a friend helps a man arrange his thoughts, see them more clearly, and even grow wiser. Themistocles compared speech to a piece of tapestry: when it is spread out, its figures are clear, but when folded, they are hidden. Similarly, thoughts become clearer when expressed. Even without receiving advice, a man becomes wiser by sharing his thoughts with a friend, just as a knife is sharpened by a stone that itself does not cut.

Paragraph 7: The second fruit also includes good and faithful counsel from a friend. The advice of a friend is "dry light," pure and free from personal feelings, unlike the advice a man gives himself, which is often mixed with emotion or self-deception. Friends can advise us in two ways — about manners (personal conduct) and about business. A friend's correction is the best medicine to keep the mind healthy. It is often better than self-examination, moral books, or observing others. Many great men have suffered loss of reputation and fortune because they lacked a friend to warn them.

Paragraph 8: In matters of business, good counsel is equally necessary. A man who depends only on his own judgment may deceive himself. Some men ask advice from many different people in different matters, but this has two dangers: first, such advice may not be honest, and second, it may be harmful because the adviser does not know the whole situation. It is like a physician who can cure one disease but harms the patient in another way. Only a true friend, who knows a man's whole condition, can give safe advice.

Paragraph 9: The third fruit of friendship is help in action. A friend can do for us many things that we cannot do for ourselves. For example, a man may die without seeing his children settled or his works finished, but a true friend can continue these cares. Thus, through a friend, a man lives a second life. A friend can also speak or act in situations where a man cannot do so himself. For instance, it is not graceful for a man to praise his own merits or to beg, but a friend can do these things for him. Similarly, a man is limited by his role as father, husband, or enemy, but a friend can act freely in all these cases. Therefore, where a man cannot play his part, a friend can take his place.

Conclusion

To sum up, Bacon's essay *Of Friendship* shows that friendship is one of the greatest needs of human life. A true friend lightens sorrows and increases joys. A friend also helps us to think clearly and gives faithful advice. Finally, a friend helps us in actions that we cannot easily do ourselves. Even the greatest rulers in history depended on friendship. Without it, life is lonely and incomplete. With it, life becomes happier, wiser, and more successful.
