

Possible to sustain friendships over great distances, absence, even differences

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During our current COVID-19 crisis it's a good time to assess our ideas of friendship.

There are many types of friends who enrich our lives. Some are supportive friendships who help smooth out the difficulties in everyday living. Other friendships are more casual. There are geographically distant friends and also others whom we encounter frequently. Some friendships exist because we belong to the same groups or clubs. We value the friendships we have for different occasions and different reasons.

We used to be together to share care and compassion with friends during special events such as weddings, anniversaries or funerals. In this time of physical distancing, we need to change our concepts of closeness while maintaining warm respect for these special occasions.

Ideally, our best friendships are lasting partnerships often formalized in marriages. In order to work well, these special friendships require trust and supportive empathy. Partners support and depend upon each other. Each feels they can count on this special friendship as a safe place to which to return during happy times and also times of disappointment. This special relationship is a place where friends are free to be honest about their views on politics, religion and other concepts. At the same time, each partner requires a special sensitivity to the feelings and hopes of their spouse or partner. Close friendships require maturity and sacrifice, but they also can be the most rewarding. In my own marriage of more than 68 years, my wife is now confined to a nursing home where direct visits are presently not allowed due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Some friendships are practical and useful for their reciprocal value. At governmental levels, countries form agreements such as international trade or military alliances. Each country benefits from the security and financial stability of such alliances and although they may be called friendly countries. The term “friendly” is used differently from that of two neighbours living harmoniously side by side. Organizations such as NAFTA , now called USMCA, and NATO are examples. Practical friendships also work at different levels when co-workers agree with each other in co-operating on tasks and on creating agreements for mutual benefit.

In political institutions, various political parties that normally work in opposition may come together to co-operate on similar goals and their individual alliances draw the two parties into practical, but limited friendships.

Sometimes we encounter friendly servers, security personnel or clerks and we use the term differently than friendships with people we know. In this case we are thinking about their courtesy, efficiency, etc. We appreciate the manner in which they offer services and their “friendliness” is nonetheless important and valuable in our social interactions.

Human beings are capable of important friendships that go far beyond self-interest. While it’s easier to form friendships with people whom we see as similar to ourselves, it is also possible to go beyond choosing friends who are just like us. One of my long-time friends differs from me ethnically, politically, religiously, linguistically and culturally. On his visits from China to Canada years ago he attended my lectures at Western University. In turn, I have visited with him on several occasions at his University and at his home in Shanghai. I value his friendship because he is rational, conscientious, and open to exchanges of humanistic moral ideas. While we differ in many ways, above all else, he is a fellow human being. When everyone else who is as different from me as my Chinese friend, it gives me hope that surely the world could one day become a more peaceful place than it presently is.

In our current pandemic, phone calls, emails, social media, video conferencing, safe distancing and face masks keep our good friendships together, but also keep everyone safe.