

Wide bridge of friendship maps path for peace

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There are many kinds of friendship and many types of friends who can enrich our lives. Some are supportive friendships which help smooth out the difficulties in everyday living, while other friendships are more casual or merely expedient acquaintances. There are occasional friends who live far away and others whom we encounter frequently. Some friendships exist because we belong to the same groups or clubs. As we mature, we learn that we value the friendships we have for different reasons. We have different expectations and relationships within a great variety of friendships.

During special events such as weddings, anniversaries, Mothers' Day, special holidays like Thanksgiving, or birthdays, we meet friends with joy and happiness. At sad times such as funerals, accidents or illnesses, we come together to bring care and compassion to our friends.

Ideally, our very best friendships exist with love and caring. These are partnerships often formalized in marriages, though not always. In order to work well these special friendships require trust, and supportive empathy. When very close partnerships work well each partner supports and also depends upon the other. Each feels they can count on this special friendship as a safe place to return to in sharing both their happy times and their times of disappointment. This special relationship is a place where friends can be free to be honest about their views on politics, religion and other concepts concerning their likes and dislikes. 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 also can be among the most rewarding. Perhaps for some people these special close friendships are not workable. But for many people, marriages can be one of the best, most rewarding and long lasting friendships.

Some friendships are practical and useful for their reciprocity value. At governmental levels, countries form agreements such as international trade, or

military or political alliances. Each country benefits by 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 within the same community. Organizations such as NAFTA (North American Free Trade Organization) or NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) are examples. Practical friendships also work at a different level 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 may normally work in opposition can come together to co-operate on similar goals and their individual alliances draw the two parties into practical, but limited friendships. It is ironic that sometimes in military conflicts accidents and misunderstandings occasionally lead to injury or death by “friendly fire”. In these unfortunate cases harm comes about without the intention of harming one’s friends.

Sometimes we encounter friendly waitresses or clerks or salespeople and, while we use the term “friendly” in these situations, we are using it in a different way than when we talk about other friendships. In this case we are thinking about their courtesy, politeness, efficiency, etc. Yet we do appreciate the manner in which they offer service 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 is 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 best long-time friends is a person who differs from me ethnically, politically, religiously, linguistically and culturally. On one of his visits from China to Canada about thirty 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 are unlike in many ways he is, above all else, a fellow human being. If 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.