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"True friendship is like sound health; the value of it is seldom known until it be lost." -- Charles Caleb Colton

BOTH Aristotle and Cicero saw friendship as something that was special and important. It represented, at its highest and best example, a form of love known as philia, for the ancient Greeks and amicitia by the ancient Romans. Friendship for the ancients binds us together at the highest level of our common humanity.

Friendship is for most of us one of the most important and poignant relationships we can have. The observation that he or she "has no friends" is often one of the most cutting and chilling things a person can say of another. As soon as it is said we imagine having no friends and the sense of loneliness and despair that follows is palpable.

Friendship it appears provides our lives with meaning in a day-to-day sense and gives us an avenue to express love, affection and commitment in ways that allow us to express higher and more humane values.

You cannot stress too much that imagining a life without friendship is chilling. Friendship in its simplest form can be one of the purest and most decent relationships we can have. It civilises us and helps us to realise that the highest part of our humanity does not seek advantage, pecuniary gain or profit. The value of friendship, its worth, so to speak, is found in itself. It is a good in itself. The selflessness that comes with good and proper friendships, the sense of warmth and affection are what makes many of our lives so much more bearable.

One sign of a good friendship is the fact that good friends are there for us in our time of need. "A friend in need is a friend indeed". We help our friends selflessly when they are in trouble. We concern ourselves with their woes, we ask after them in times of stress.

Sartre's often misunderstood dictum that "hell is other people" suggests another way of viewing friendship. Sartre's dictum if taken literally and incorrectly does give us a sense of the alternative view that can inform concepts of radical individualism.

After all, why concern ourselves with others if they will eventually let us down or worse? Why develop friendships whose fundamental return is a sense of our humanity, and the reciprocity of affection and the chance for us to selflessly help others in need? Seems like a big burden doesn't it? Where is the return? What do I get out of it? What does it profit me?

How long would friendships last if these were the measures by which we judged their worth? Already we have concepts which seem to provide more pecuniary and instrumental rationales for human interaction. The term "networking", for example does not seem to sit easily with friendship even though we may inadvertently make friends in the process of trying to network. How horrid would it be if all our relationships were forms of networking?
Those like me who recoil in horror at the thought that friendship could be reduced to networking and that our social relationships are all reducible to gain, advantage or career promotion will find that in our contemporary world, true friendship is all the more valuable.

The value of friendship lies in its imperviousness to instrumental utility or advantage.

How many of us have friends who always get themselves in trouble? How many of us find ourselves listening to friends and consoling them even when deep down we are at times annoyed?

The thought that we ought to drop our friend because they are too difficult or worse still that they may not advantage us is for most of us simply dishonourable. A friend is a friend and that's it.

"Friendship" as the 18th century author Susannah Dobson reminds us produces "active benevolence". Selflessness, care and compassion are the cornerstones of a decent society. If we lose these things, all perhaps is lost.

The roots of our desire to ensure that society is just, sustainable and decent can be found in the everyday relationships many of us have hitherto taken for granted. Friendship, properly understood which develops benevolence and care is one important educator in the development of non instrumental relationships among us.

Finally, while our philosophical discussion of friendship as a good in itself is important the more positive and practical social effects of friendship should not be ignored. Again as always educational institutions and the practices and dispositions they cultivate play a guiding role. Education Director-General Tan Sri Alimuddin Dom, for example recognises the value of friendship in schooling as critical for social unity in a diverse society (http://www.nst.com.my/nst/articles/13racers/Article/).

The practice of making friends and developing friendships in schools, especially across ethnic and religious lines is a key part of a school's hidden curriculum. The power of encouraging friendships as a positive educator should not be underestimated in schools.

The practice of active benevolence in schools lays the foundation for the rest of society. As with many other things, positive character and dispositions begin both in the family and in the school. The practice of friendship and the "active benevolence" it develops is a critical foundation for a positively developed 1Malaysia.

The practice of friendship so it seems may be more important to nourishing the roots of national unity and solidarity than we first imagine.

The positive social capital formed by the act of friendship between students of diverse backgrounds in schools can have critical import in Malaysian society. Conversely a failure to develop friendships among students, especially across ethnic lines may have negative repercussions down the track.
Perhaps if we remembered this we might pause for a while and make sure that in our rush to network and advantage ourselves, we reserved time for our friends.

The ancients recognised friendship as crucial to and important in their societies. We are equally bound to recognise its significance as well.

You never know, when the chips are down you might need a friend one day.

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