

FRIENDSHIP

“No man is an island,” uttered the metaphysical English poet John Donne in his *Meditations*. He was expressing the profound idea of connection – the fact that human beings do not thrive when isolated from each other and when friendship in its many guises brings people together it can change our lives. All of us have experienced the power of friendship. It is an enduring and universal topic that touches us all and that has intrigued artists, poets, philosophers and the world’s greatest thinkers over the centuries.

Four hundred years ago the French philosopher Michel de Montaigne wrote an essay entitled *About Friendship* in which he said: “We are embraced by its penetrating, even and comfortable warmth, constant and mild, centred with a calm splendour, there is nothing caustic or consuming in it.” In his *Metaphysics of Customs* Emanuel Kant in 1785 declared from his Konigsberg hideaway that a real friend is as rare as a black swan. Further he noted that the universal philanthropist would also add: “He who is a friend of all, cannot name any friend in particular.” Present day American philosopher Marilyn Friedman (1997) declared that friendship is “in our culture the least controversial, most established and rewarding of all personal relationships” – even for those who seek to avoid oppressive closeness.

Trust, comfort, nourishment for the soul – philosophical explorations of friendship portray it as the answer to the perennial question: what can a person rely on, when society, love, or marriage cannot give them the knowledge that as an individual they are valuable, irreplaceable and unique? But how can we reconcile the uniqueness of individual friends and the notion of equality of all? How is it that we can care deeply for our chosen friends but not just anybody? The knowledge, that one person is my friend, does not answer the question, who will be my next friend, or what might it take to convert a stranger into a friend? There are underlying tensions too. Just as friendship is about trust, it can also be coloured by fear of betrayal or loss.

To translate this into the political, we are also dealing with the rejection of strangers who might be perceived as our enemy. The Algerian-born philosopher Jacques Derrida opened wide the debate in *The Politics of Friendship* in which democracy and individuality, society and the private realm were part of a new dialogue. Democracy is open to things that are different. Democracy is rooted in hope – that there is not just the one friend, but rather there is asymmetry and no one needs to be excluded. The links of friendship and the humanity that connects all people beings as world citizens are growing ever closer.

Uniqueness and equality, freedom and security, trust and independence – since early times these concepts have constantly sought a new balance when new friendships form. For one can still grasp at the anchor of a friendship and yet still be open to the unknown, even if this is risky. As human beings, we have always been bound to each other, joined by the same sea which is the shared history of mankind. Friendship and kinship have the power to connect us – for no man is an island.

**lavie
& belle**

