Of Friendship Essay | Summary by Francis Bacon

## Introduction

The essay ***Of Friendship*** by [Francis Bacon](https://englishsummary.com/tag/francis-bacon/) celebrated the intimacy between friends which is subjected to both prosperity and adversity without succumbing to the clouds of doubt and jealousy. **The essay was written on the request of his friend Toby Matthew.**

## Human need for company

Bacon introduces the text with **thoughts of Aristotle** on companionship. He posits that **human nature demands company and social contact**. Isolation and solitude are traits of either wild beast or heavenly god. **Human beings require other human beings** and anyone who avoids such interaction is not doing justice to his natural state. Bacon does not criticize people who feel shy in a crowd and head for therefore seek isolation in the wild. Such people find great value in peace and it aids their mental processes to contemplate of profound issues. Through their extensive analysis, they journey on a path of self-discovery. Such hermits search for truth and knowledge in continued social sequestration.

However, the consequences of such isolation can be like a double-edged sword, desirable or detrimental. Bacon points to philosophers like**Epimenides the Candian, Numa the Roman, Empedocles the Sicilian, and Apollonius of Tyana,** who postulated theories unique to their age and contemporaries. Their works are of immense philosophical wealth. Even several spiritual men find great benefit and progress through prolonged abstention from public life. Therefore, voluntary retreat from society can have positive consequences too. Bacon attempts to differentiate between kinship and general crowd. For him, there is a big difference between strangers of society and known friends. **A person can feel lonely in a crowd too**. People may become transient glimpses which are lost if a person does not interact with them.

If a person does not feel passionate or interested in a conversation then it becomes an exercise in futile monologues and is similar in meaning to the undecipherable notes of musical instruments like cymbals. Bacon uses a Latin adage which means that a big city is filled with great solitude. In a large city, people are separated and encamped in distinct areas that are difficult to bring closer together. These long distances cause separation between friends and relatives. Therefore, **for cultivating friendship a small city or town is more conducive**. In smaller townspeople live closer by and mingle a lot more regularly. Thus, these small cities have strong and united communities. According to Bacon, a friendship demands the involvement of passions and feelings. They form the foundation of any friendship. Emotions are the threads that bind the hearts together.

## A cure for ailing hearts

Bacon points to the ailments of the heart that it suffers if it stops or is suffocated. A healthy heart required vigour and the same is provided by an intimate and friendly conversation with one’s pals. The bonhomie is the cure for depression and various diseases of the heart. Friendship is the panacea for heartaches. **A true friend acts a secondary valve for the heart to pump life into a sick person.** Amusing and pleasant badinage acts as a stress reliever for the burdened and ailing heart. It elevates the mood of gloom and deathly isolation that a patient feels and makes him feel good again. Patients take medicines like sarza for the liver, steel for the spleen, flowers of sulphur for the lungs, castoreum for the brain etc, but for the issues of the heart, the love and affection of a friend is the best cure.

## Friendship can be bought

The elite of society like kings and leaders are really adept at making friends. They understand the value of friendly ties with worthy people. The rich and the powerful often try to buy friendships of noble and influential people through gifts, badges of reverence and their wealth. But such friends lack emotional attachment with their patrons or benefactors. Their loyalty or friendship is tied to generous rewards and they are susceptible to corruption and greed.

**Friendship requires a quantum of parity if not equality.** Therefore, the massive chasm between the king and his subjects cannot be bridged that easily. Even if the princes admire certain ordinary individuals they find it difficult to befriend them. The only solution is to elevate such individuals so that they come nearer to the monarch in terms of power and influence. But such trade in friendship is often problematic. The intentions of someone whose friendship can be bought are not reliable and subject to greed and wickedness. The people who do enter the caucus of such powerful elite become favourites to them.

Bacon tells us that the Romans had a special name for such individuals, ‘**participes curarum**’ meaning people who share one’s fears, doubts and worries. This **sharing of one’s burdens is a true quality of friendship** and a strong tie of camaraderie. These favoured individuals gain the confidence of the elite and offer advice to them. This practice and ploy of befriending individuals have been prevalent throughout history, from able and proud monarchs to weak and cloying rulers. The empowered elite has used their political wits and acumen to enlist such friends at par with the ranks of nobility and governance.

## History teaches the toughest lessons

Now, Bacon comments on some historical examples. He says that Roman ruler Sylla gave Pompey the moniker of **‘the Great’.**However, consumed by arrogance Sylla’s friend Pompey reprimanded and rebuked him in public when they had some disagreement. Pompey derided Sylla as the setting sun while calling himself the rising sun of Roman power. Similarly, Decimus **Brutus gained**[**Julius Ceaser**](https://englishsummary.com/julius-caesar-summary/)**’s friendship and became his most trusted advisor**. Ceaser was so entrenched in his devotion to Brutus that he made him his heir apparent as well. His **blind trust in Brutus caused Caesar’s final downfall**. Ceaser, fearing a calamity owing to his wife Calpurnia’s bloodied nightmare, had decided to dissolve the Senate.

Brutus, however, convinced him to delay his decision. He had such powerful hold over Ceaser that Antonius would call him an enchantress (**venefica**) with evil machinations. Even though Agrippa was from an ignoble birth, Augustus befriended him and honoured him with royal commendation. Agrippa was showered with praise, privilege and power. When Augustus decided to marry his daughter Julia, his counsellor Maecenas suggested marrying her to Agrippa.  According to Maecenas Agrippa was the best man for her and in the emperor decided otherwise, Agrippa had to be killed. Bacon gives the example of friendship between Tiberius and Sejanus. Tiberius was charmed by Sejanus they became inseparable companions. This brought great stature and honour to Sejanus.

Their friendship was considered as venerated as a goddess. Even an altar was attributed to their companionship by the Senate. Bacon then praised the friendship between Septimus Severus and Plautianus. Septimus’s son and Plautianus’ daughter were married against Plautianus’s wishes. Even when irate Plautianus condemned Septimus’ son, their friendship did not weaken. On the contrary, Septimus praised his friend beyond reason and logic. He even wished Plautianus a longer and more fulfilling life than his own. Bacon reiterated that **all the historical figures** he mentioned **were hard and practical men**. They did not have the noble heart or compassion like Trajan or Marcus Aurelius.

## A valuable blueprint

Every decision they made was strategic and careful and not impulsive or emotional. However, it was their longing for friendship that made them gush in praise of their friends. **Even with all the power in the world, luxuries of life, doting families, they were dependent on the whims of their friends. In the end, these favoured individuals became their nemesis and cause for their demise.** Bacon goes on to highlight the requirement of a friend to share joys and sorrows, successes and failures with. He gives the example of Duke Charles Hardy and French king Louis XI through their diplomat Comineus.

He says that in their last years both of them became reclusive and isolated themselves from others. They grew suspicious of everyone and were afraid of divulging any information that could bring their empires to a collapse. Bacon points at the parable given by Pythagoras i.e. ‘**Cor ne edito**’, meaning ***‘eat not the heart’***. Pythagoras had his suspicions of who can be called as true friends. He felt that a worthy friend who can be trusted with one’s intimate secrets and even then there would be chances of his trust being broken. He likened it to cannibalizing one’s own heart.

## Two sides of a coin

**Becoming intimate and excessively dependent on a friend can be a double-edged sword**. It can help unburden the baggage of the heart and weight of worries. But on the flipside, it can all be just an illusion of comfort. Realistically no such friend exists who can reduce one’s own grief and pain. Palliation and reduction of pain through such miracle friends are all but fool’s gold. He goes on again reaffirm the **ability of true friendship to comfort one’s ailing heart but at a risk of hurt**. Even Nature testifies to the fact that when two elements combine, they form a better and improved thing. Even if there is an element of faith and risk, human friendship can cure and soothe the injuries of the heart.

Personal bonds can have an embalming impact that enhances one’s quality of life, strengthens mental prowess and. They provide cover in the midst of a storm.**Friendship is like the glorious sunlight after that turbulent storm has passed over the horizon.** Bacon proffers a caveat that friends will not guarantee great advice all the time. But when a person does not have clarity of thoughts and emotions or biases cloud his/her judgment, a friend can be a sounding board or even an enlightened perspective. This can be more productive than hours of contemplative meditation in isolation.

He quotes Themistocles who thought **speech can be appreciated only if heard**. It was similar to the rich textiles of Arras that needed to be seen to be appreciated and admired for their beauty and craftsmanship. In the same vein,**human thoughts when shared can unlock cluttered minds**. Packs of folded tapestry lie underappreciated and overlooked until it is unravelled. Even a not so clever and witty can have an illuminated opinion when one propagated his thoughts to him. This puts them under a different light. Bacon gives the analogy of the thinker as tool sharpened on the obtuse friend acting as the whetting stone.

## Self vs others

Bacon sage advice from well-meaning friends often leads to desirable consequences. Sometimes intuition, instincts, and emotions can tint and obfuscate one’s own judgment. Our inherent biases can create complexities that can be eased by wise friends. Bacon points at Heraclitus who considered such invaluable advice as ‘**dry and pure light**’ enlightening and comforting. Bacon warns against cultivating sycophants and men of tact. He considers the counsel of such cloying individuals as more dangerous and lethal and even vain judgments.

Notwithstanding that one should be aware of one’s own limitations of value judgment. It is very rare that men are adequately self-critical and inherent weakness should not cause us to reject the sound advice of able and well-intentioned men. Such advice can have two purposes. **Firstly, personal** i.e. out of the goodness of one’s heart and **secondly, conduct**for the preservation of self-interest i.e. for business. Such criticism acts as a check on one’s pride and a cure for vanity.

Bacon says that reading books on good conduct and morality is uninspiring and learning through observation of other people’s behaviour is not always advisable or even possible. In such condition having a friend who is willing to evaluate and criticize our flawed judgments act as a remedy. **History is replete with examples of powerful men who committed the biggest of blunders and damaged their name and position only for a want of some good advice from good friends.**

Bacon quotes St. James who warned people against the blindness induced by self-deception regarding one’s own faults and limitations. People often cannot see their own flaws, especially when met with some success. To them, another set of eyes sees the same things and they do not need other’s advice. Similarly, a gambler thinks he sees better than the onlookers or a gun can be fired as efficiently from a rest as from the arm. These musings reflect an arrogant and conceited mind which can lead to dire consequences for the individual.

Any good business advisor always weighs the pros and cons and extends the best counsel without hesitation. A man can ask different advice from different friends and**it is better than always gunning by one’s own instincts.** However, there could be an element of envy or complacency on the part of anyone advisor if there are multiple advisors. Only loyal and principled advisor the intention behind the advice remains questionable. Bacon says that**every counsellor is limited by his own ability to analyze and study the matter**, even if he intends well. Therefore, there always exists a risk that the outcome of such advice is undesirable. Bacon gives the analogy of a well-meaning but incompetent doctor who gives the wrong medicine to the patient without enquiring about his medical history.  Instead of getting a cure, this could lead to more damage and even death.

## To conclude

To conclude the essay **Of Friendship**, Bacon claims that **every businessman must have a single reliable counsellor**. A confidant who understands every little detail of his work and proffers correct advice based on sound judgment and analysis of the business. Multiple counsellors might lead to multiple and often conflicting paths be. **The two main advantages of friendship are emotional support and good advice**.

Bacon enlists the third benefit too. He explains it in terms of the pomegranate fruit. He says that**a good friend has many parts for different occasions just like the many kernels inside the pomegranate.** Every human being is faced with things that he cannot accomplish on his own. It is here, a friend is more than one body. He is more than his own self. As discussed in ancient times, a friend is a replica of one’s self. Bacon feels that **a loyal and self-sacrificing friend is a friend not just for life but even in death**. A true friend will honour is departed friend’s wishes and take care of his responsibilities like taking care of his family, finish all the unfinished things like repayment of debts etc.

Another advantage is of the **delegation of authority**. At any given point of time, a friend can fill in for any person. Be it running a business or defending the house or safekeeping secrets, a loyal friend is a true blessing. He is the best deputy anyone can ask for. There are numerous things for which a man requires another set of hands, a pair of eyes and even different perspective. It is here a true friend becomes invaluable. Bacon feels that when someone is trying to convince others of his value and qualities, he tends to be consumed with haughtiness and thus is easily ridiculed by them. On the other hand, **sometimes people become too self-aware and shy and find it difficult to praise themselves.**

They feel awkward in asking for a favour or even something they deserve or merit. These problems can be obviated through the agency of a loyal friend who has more social utility and functions that people normally assume. **A trustworthy friend acts a great arbiter or intermediary.** He becomes a conduit for messages when it is to be relayed to a pugnacious child or disgruntled spouse or even avowed enemy. Thus,**friends bring a lot easy in such difficult situations and help break barriers of communication**. Bacon ends the essay condemning an unsociable man without friends as an aloof being not fit to belong to society.