

Friendship as a Virtue: Nurses Care for Themselves and One Another

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New Zealand College of Primary Health Care Nurses, NZNO, Conference:
'Nurses Live Better, Laugh Sooner, Care More'
Wellington, New Zealand 15-17 August 2014

It is surely true that for us to practice nursing well, we must care for ourselves and one another. In this presentation we will consider to what extent we actually bring this idea to life in our practice, and some factors that can obstruct in this doing this. Then we will consider friendship as a virtue, how this differs from our ordinary idea of friendship and how it could help us to care for ourselves and one another, practice nursing very well, and enjoy our practice.

Care for ourselves and one another?

How well do we care for ourselves and one another? What happens to us when we don't do this? The literature on this topic falls into two areas. One is an area of extreme cases of bullying as it is defined in the New Zealand government Worksafe document published earlier this year. The other area includes the more subtle disagreeable, discouraging and even hostile ways in which we can interact with one another in our work-place, often also referred to as bullying. Under the stresses and strains of our practice settings we can be hard on one another. Research findings internationally suggest that from 50% to 80% of nurses surveyed have observed or experienced varying levels of this kind of behaviour.^{1,2} Reports in the New Zealand nursing literature suggest that this is problem here as well.

What does this mean for us here today? It means that probably a good number of us have experienced a work colleague being disrespectful, impatient, dismissive, or subtly hostile in their interactions with us and that, as a result, we have felt hurt, excluded, discouraged, or demoralized.

Further, if this is the case, I think that it is safe to say that a good number of us here today have been disrespectful, impatient, dismissive or subtly hostile to fellow-nurses we work with. How many of us can stand up and say that we have never engaged in such behaviour; that we've never been mean-spirited, condescending, resentful, patronizing, or impatient with colleagues? That we have never gossiped, or ignored or made fun of a colleague? How many of us can say that we have never had times when we have felt discouraged and irritable and not taken this out on a colleague to some extent. I, for one, cannot stand up and say I have never done any of these things.

Also, when we act in these ways, we are very likely not respecting, and thus harming, ourselves; being hard and impatient with ourselves; neglecting and abusing our capacity to be kind and gentle with ourselves; to live a good life generally and in relation to our nursing practice.

Our human nature

The problem for us here is that as human beings we have a human nature. Our human nature is complex and encompasses many aspects of our bio-physiology, our emotions, and our attitudes and actions toward one another. It can be the source of much goodness but it also can be the source of many obstacles and constraints to us leading a good life. Our human nature is, of course, part of our practice. But, when the disagreeable aspects of our nature are expressed in our practice we are in trouble.

In nursing we tend to see a certain sort of manifestation of this which is well-illustrated in mythic images and symbols present in all cultures. Some theorists view these as ‘inward image[s] at work in the human psyche’.³ Here are some extreme examples from Greek mythology, images of the Gorgon:



Gorgon means terrifying and dreadful. Gorgons are associated with snakes that are venomous. They have a powerful gaze that can turn their victims to stone. They have a big mouth and many teeth because they eat and devour their victims. Although these symbolic images represent extremes, they nonetheless underlie any degree of such disagreeable behaviour. When we look at these, can we see aspects of someone who has hurt us? When we look at these can we see aspects of ourselves that we might let loose in being disagreeable toward colleagues?

We all have to learn to live with our human nature and despite its wayward tendencies, to learn to live good lives in relationships to one another. Here, in contrast to the Gorgon, is a symbolic image associated with nursing in the Western world, Hygieia the Greek goddess who is recognised in our history books as a goddesses of nursing, associated particularly with nourishing, gentle hands and healing, and in the Eastern world Quan-yin, the goddess of compassion:



Generally, as human beings, we constantly struggle against aggressive tendencies to bring peace and kindness into our lives on individual, family, group, community, national and international levels. Take two international examples from recent history. One is the development of the idea of holism, an idea which is of special interest to us in nursing. The word 'holism' was coined in the 1920s by a South African army general Jan Smuts. He was so affected by the devastating violence wrought by the First World War, he sought to develop a doctrine of the unity of life that would lead to a more harmonious and spiritually-oriented world, a doctrine he called holism and 1926 published its details in his book, *Holism and Evolution*.⁴ The second example is the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* of 1948⁵, created following yet another period of devastating violence wrought by the Second World War. Its basic principle is stated in its preamble; the recognition of the inherent dignity of every human being and their right to respect, justice and peace, a principle reflected in Codes of nursing conduct and ethics.

Sometimes disagreeable behaviour in nursing is called relational aggression. This points to how especially and deeply sad this problem is for nursing, a profession distinctively committed to nourishing, protecting and fostering healing. When we are disagreeable or subtly hostile toward one another, we violate this commitment in relation to our care of ourselves, in our relationships to one another and inevitably, in turn, in our relationships with patients. Thus, it is essential that we each as individuals and as a profession truly work on caring for ourselves and one another.

How we can care for ourselves and one another: friendship as a virtue

There are of course a range of strategies published in the literature to minimize and prevent disagreeable behaviour, such as 'no tolerance' policies, education and training programmes, and programmes for screening, behaviour monitoring, and early problem detection. Research related to the effects of these programmes is, as yet, limited. Of course, these programmes are important but, taken our human nature, they will take us only so far. It would be good to see if we could go further and also use the virtue of friendship to help us enhance our ability to care for ourselves and one another.

In talking about friendship, particularly the virtue of friendship I will be drawing on the writings of a series of philosophers, beginning with Aristotle and continuing with Thomas Aquinas. It is interesting to note that in the second edition of Jan Smuts book on holism that I mentioned, he included a note that it had been brought to his attention that the ideas that he was calling holism had been known about and discussed by philosophers for centuries, and he made specific reference to Aquinas, who built on the thinking of Aristotle. Also, one of the key framers of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was Jaques Maritan, a French philosopher who specialised in the philosophy of Aquinas. A contemporary philosopher who follow this line of thinking is the Scottish-born philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre who writes about virtue ethics, and is particularly drawn on in the nursing ethics literature.

Common understanding of friendship.

The idea of friendship is interwoven timelessly in stories and myths in all cultures. Commonly, we think of friendship as a subjective, private relationship with a relatively small number of people who know one another over a length of time and share affection, sympathy, interests, trust and companionship. MacIntyre observes that this is "for the most part a type of emotional relationship"⁶. In any given nursing practice or education setting we would know many nurses but there would likely be only a few with whom we would share interests, affection and trust; who we would call friends. We all have friends. But, not everyone is a friend.

Friendship as a virtue

Friendship as a virtue is somewhat different. It includes our common idea of friendship but transcends it. As a virtue, friendship is primarily a disposition, or attitude, a state of character or quality of mind. It is an acquired habit of freely choosing and intending to act for the objective good of oneself and others. It is a way of being that can be developed with practice over time. It includes emotions, but it has a deeper quality that originates in the spiritual dimension of the person and encompasses the mind and intellect.

This idea of virtues and friendship as a virtue is very old. We need to take a short detour to see why we are not so familiar with it today. It has been eclipsed for us by Enlightenment thinking, an intellectual movement which began in 17th century Europe. Its philosophers and social theorists argued that human life processes must be guided by reason and individualism only. In the 19th century Max Weber argued fiercely for the abolition of virtues, claiming that we do not desire to do something because it is good, but it is good because we desire to do it. Friedrich Nietzsche coined the use of the term values to replace virtues so that moral, or ethical, ideas came to be understood as subjective and relative.

And, of course, Nietzsche is famous for his claim that “God is dead”⁷ and he is associated with the development of the predominantly secular aspect of our contemporary world. Nietzsche went on to say that “God remains dead. And we have killed him. Yet his shadow still looms”. Nietzsche also emphasized that Buddha was dead. He said that after Buddha was dead, his shadow remained. Nietzsche seemed to be saying that although he declared God and Buddha dead, their shadows are still with us. That is, the spiritual dimension of our lives remains, but generally tends to be hidden or overshadowed.

I mention this here because it relates to how we think of the about friendship as a virtue. It has a spiritual dimension and we need to be able to square this with our own individual understandings of spirituality in human life processes. Historically, nursing has always been associated with spirituality but from the 17th century until the late 20th century it was barely mentioned in northern European cultures and new world cultures which developed from Europe. But, beginning in the 1980s the spiritual re-emerged in nursing and now there is a vast literature on the topic. I think it can be argued that if as nurses we lose an understanding of spirituality, we are in danger of losing our professional bearings.

Aristotle and friendship as a virtue

Ideas about friendship as a virtue developed in early Greek society and have come to us through Aristotle, mainly in his *Nicomachean Ethics*,⁸ a series of discussions about how human beings can live a good life. Almost one fifth of this book is about the friendship as a virtue because he thinks it is particularly important for us to live a flourishing life; for us to lead a healthy life. (This is a small book, simply written and very interesting. It’s an easy read, comes in many editions, and is freely available on the web to download).

Aristotle begins by talking about friendship as such. He thinks it to be the ideal social bond and to include “every feeling of affection or attachment for others”. He observes that even the rich and powerful need friends. In poverty and misfortune friends can be the only refuge. Friends help the young to avoid error and minister to the needs of the elderly. With friends, people are better able to both think and act. Friendship holds communities and states together. “Without friends”, he says, “no one would choose to live . . .”

But, he asks, *what is* this friendship? The Greek word he uses for it is, *philia*, meaning a type of love. But, he says it’s different from other types of love, namely *agape*, an unconditional love

and *eros*, sexual love. But he is not sure if this friendship is a type of love or is, rather, something like love, a special sort of liking. His further discussion of this friendship concerns two areas.

Friendship as a virtue and personal self-development. Here he identifies three types of friendship, which depend on *what causes* people to love or like one another. One is *friendship of utility* which develops from a mutual recognition of some useful thing which people think they can get from one another. Second is *friendship of pleasure* which develops from a mutual recognition of some pleasure which people think they can get from one another. Both seem to involve liking more than loving. Initially, he says that these two types of friendship are actually incidental because it is not actually the person who is liked or loved, but the usefulness or pleasure that the person provides. He sees them as being mostly self-seeking and easily ended if one person is no longer useful or pleasing.

Aristotle's third type of friendship develops from mutual recognition of moral or ethical goodness, where friends are alike in virtue. He explains that the virtuous person works out what is good and honest and ethical for himself or herself as a thinking, spiritual human being. Virtuous human beings recognise this process in one another and develop the capacity to appreciate and love both their self and the other at a deeply human level.

He finishes his discussion by reflecting in detail on different types of friendship and the practical activities of friendships. He concludes that friendships of utility and pleasure can be important in the give and take of friendships in every-day life and that friendship as a virtue is in fact "a complex and subtle mixture" of the three types". Most of us will be able to recognise this in our own every-day lives.

Friendship as a virtue and its role in the reciprocity of community life. Here Aristotle is concerned with social responsibility. It is friendship that binds people together in the self-governing life of a political community or a family; or in groups of people working together to achieve distinctive goals for the good of community life as a whole. As examples of working groups he gives soldiers and sailors, but in our time he might have given nurses as an example. In conducting themselves toward one another in the spirit of friendship they 'expel faction as their worst enemy' and foster the achievement of concord, which he observes to be 'something like friendship'. The virtue of friendship is expressed in relation to all the other virtues, but especially in relation to justice. He reasons that 'when [people] are friends, they have no need of justice; for "the truest form of justice is thought to be a friendly quality"'.

How we can work towards friendship as a virtue. Aristotle was very aware of our human nature and the obstacles and constraints it can impose on how we live our lives. He observed that we can attain goodness and flourish in our lives, but in our attitudes and actions it is easy for us to miss the mark; that is, we fail to be good in many ways, or as he states more directly, we are bad in many ways. Today, perhaps he might have said that we are disagreeable or disrespectful in many ways or that we fail to care for ourselves and one another in many ways. But, he left us a way to work toward resolving this problem in his virtue theory, which in essence concerns ethics, hence the title of his book, *Nicomachean Ethics*.

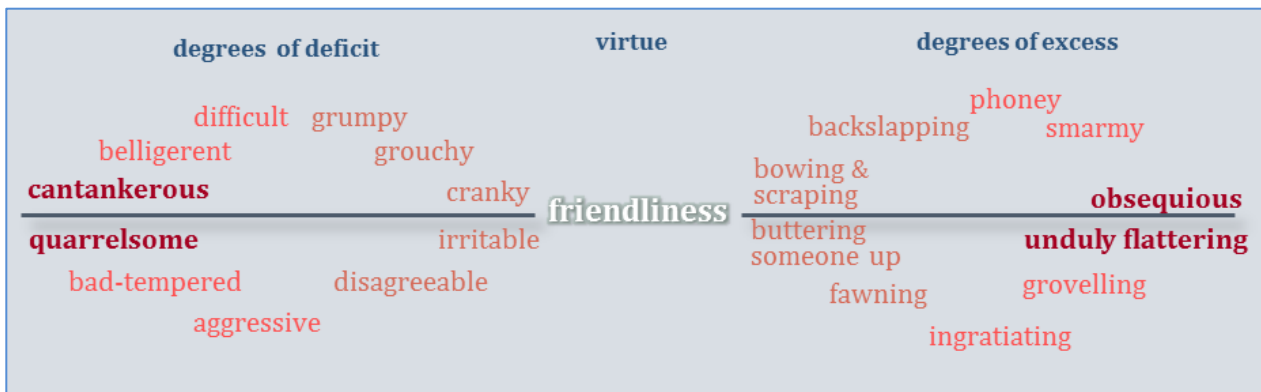
His virtue theory states that our ultimate purpose in life is to work toward becoming flourishing human beings. To do this we must function well in our thoughts and actions and make decisions that reflect the right course of action. We perceive the right course of action through our intellectual understanding and apply this knowledge in virtuous actions. A virtue, or virtuous action, is in many cases a mean, or the middle ground, between two extremes, one of deficit and the other of excess. The extremes are bad ways of being, or vices. He discusses a number of virtues. Here we are considering only friendship, but all virtues are inter-related and some

particularly with friendship.

Friendship as a virtue is a mean, or middle ground, between two extremes, one of deficiency, being cantankerous or quarrelsome, and one of excess, being obsequious or unduly flattering:

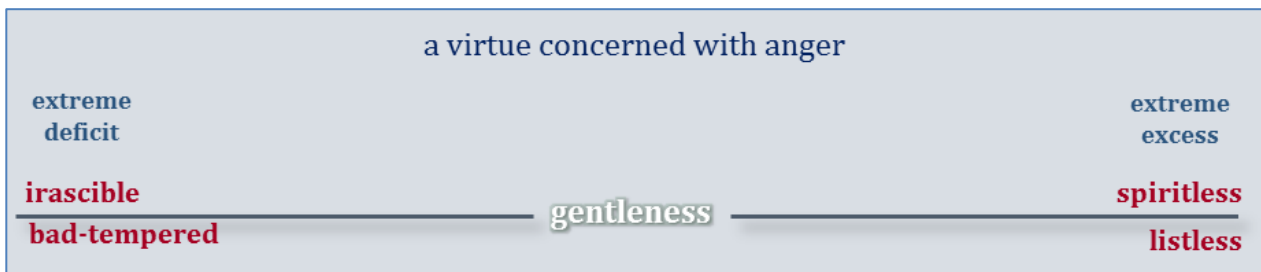


This helps us to see clearly what **is not** friendship. When we can see more clearly things which are **not good**, we can reflect on them and with practice over time work toward correcting them. In reflecting on them, we can think about all our degrees of deficit and excess, and how they can creep up on us or suddenly start driving us when we are having a bad day. This is just a speculative suggestion of the range of attitudes and actions that we might engage in and which are reflected in disagreeable or disrespectful attitudes and actions:

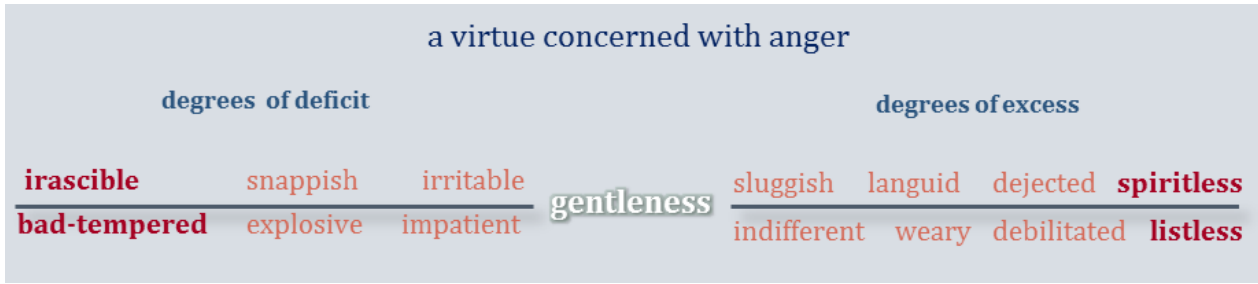


Evaluating ourselves on a continuum such as this can help us to work gradually toward developing the habit of friendship as a virtue and caring better for ourselves and one another.

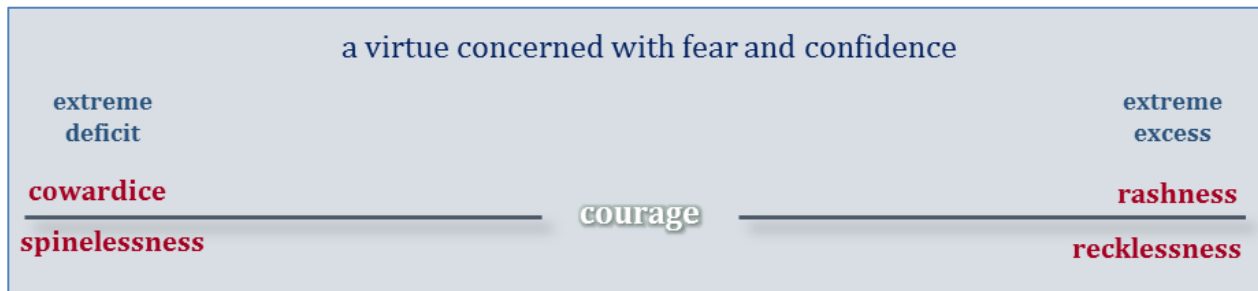
Three other virtues are particularly inter-related with developing and supporting the habit of friendship: gentleness, courage and wittiness. Gentleness as a virtue is the mean, or middle ground, between being bad-tempered and being listless:



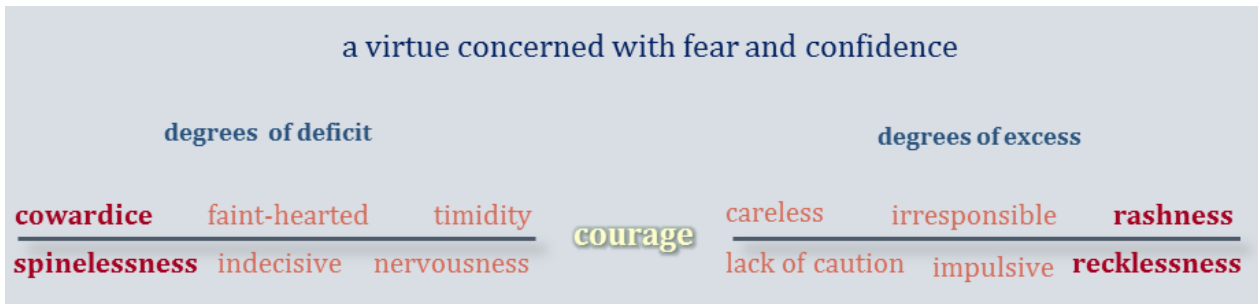
Evaluating ourselves on this continuum can help us to further develop gentleness and support our intention to work gradually toward friendship as a virtue and caring better for ourselves and one another. We can reflect on our gentleness and where we might be, either generally or at times, on a continuum from being bad tempered to being listless toward ourselves and colleagues:



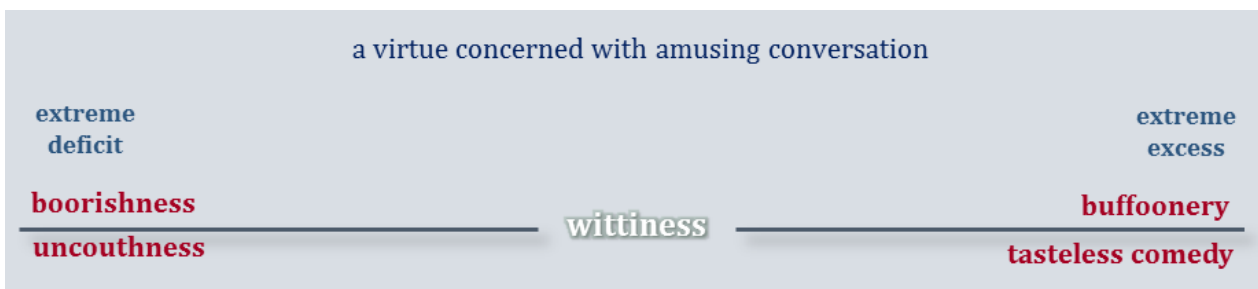
Courage as a virtue is the mean between being cowardly and being reckless:



In our care for ourselves and one another we can reflect on our courage and where we might be, either generally or at times, on a continuum from being cowardly to being reckless towards ourselves and colleagues. Evaluating ourselves on this continuum can help us to further develop courage and support our intention to work gradually toward friendship as a virtue and caring better for ourselves and one another:



Wittiness as a virtue is the mean between being a boor and being a buffoon:



In our care for ourselves and one another we can reflect on our ability to engage in amusing conversation and where we might be, either generally or at times, on a continuum between being a boor and engaging in tasteless humour in our thoughts and behaviour toward colleagues. Evaluating ourselves on this continuum can help us to further develop and support our intention to work gradually toward friendship as a virtue and caring better for ourselves and one another:

a virtue concerned with amusing conversation

degrees of deficit

degrees of excess

boorishness	coarse	bad-mannered	wittiness	loud-mouthed jokes	buffoonery
uncouthness	crude	bragging impolite		crass humour	tasteless comedy

This virtue of wittiness always reminds me how important cheerfulness is in our practice, particularly how important it is to smile at one another.

Thus, Aristotle leaves us with ways of reflecting on our attitudes and actions related to friendship and virtues closely related to friendship – so that we can care for ourselves and one another by gradually acquiring the habit of freely choosing and intending to act with friendship – and as well with gentleness, courage and wittiness.

How could we use Aristotle’s ideas about friendship as a virtue in our practice? A student in a NetP programme gave an example. In her practice area she was caring for a patient who was receiving a certain medical intervention. Patient safety policy required that this intervention be administered slowly for the first 15 minutes in case the patient had an allergic reaction. However, a senior nurse said to her that she didn’t need to worry about that and just administer it. But, the student was very aware that she was responsible for the patient. Although she felt really nervous about doing it, she said to her senior colleague, as politely and tactfully as she could, that she would actually just administer the intervention slowly for the first 15 minutes, and proceeded to do that. She endeavoured to act toward her senior colleague with friendship, with attentiveness and kindness (even though she was inwardly quaking), while at the same time declining to follow her advice. It was definitely not easy for her because she was afraid of not doing what the senior colleague said. It took much courage for her to do this and it took presence of mind for her to maintain a gentle manner in responding to her colleague.

Although Aristotle is recognised as one of the greatest philosophers of the western world, he was a man of his time. He thought friendship as a virtue possible only between persons of similar dignity and social status, which would have excluded many people. He also thought that it was only possible between small groups of people among whom friendship was returned, and people not separated by distance.

Aquinas and friendship as a virtue

Thomas Aquinas, who followed in the footsteps of Aristotle, can take us further with friendship as a virtue. I am drawing here on his *Summa Theologica*⁷ and using his ideas very broadly. As a philosopher he elaborated on and transformed Aristotle’s ideas. As a Christian theologian he also drew on Judeo-Christian scripture and a wide range of commentary on it.

He extends friendship as a virtue to all persons equally. Aquinas argues that friendship as a virtue is definitely a type of love. He wrote in Latin and the Greek words for types of love are translated to Latin; *philia* becomes *amicitia* and is translated in English as ordinary friendship. *Agape*, the idea of unconditional love, becomes *caritas*, translated in English as charity. However, the word ‘charity’ has lost its original meaning so it is best to use the term *caritas*, which can be thought of as loving kindness.

He begins by discussing friendship as Aristotle wrote about it. He talks in terms of human desire and aggression, both of which he proposes are good and important means of flourishing when they are guided by reason and will, and when they are integrated and moderated. He asks what is the unconditional love of *caritas*. He answers that it is an appetite of desire, expressed in emotions and actions, that seeks useful or pleasurable goods for the self out of love of self, and for friends out of love of friends. As this occurs, desire for good things for oneself and desire for good things for friends overlap and, in the process, self-interests can be overcome by a deeper appreciation of the friend.

Thus, friendship of desire for useful and pleasurable goods can become a means by which friendship as a virtue is cultivated, sustained and developed. The influence of other virtues is important in bringing harmony to this process; here for example temperateness, gentleness, courage, spiritual faith and hope. Disagreements are likely to occur but they are disagreements of opinion and not of will. Aquinas emphasises particularly the fundamental role of communication in friendship; of sharing a common life; being with others, which echoes Aristotle's emphasis on friendship as the quintessential social bond.

Aquinas then takes up his discussion of friendship within his wider conception of human beings spiritual experience. He begins by asking: is the unconditional love of *caritas* a friendship? He defines *caritas* as intimate, loving dwelling with the spiritual sense within oneself. He answers that despite outward physical and sense appearances, a spiritual sense of love within ourselves is open to all human beings through their inward life. Through our inward life we can share in a spiritual fellowship. This gives rise to the possibility of mutual sharing of a loving kindness between all of us for our own sake. He concludes that the unconditional love of *caritas* is friendship as a virtue.

Then, Aquinas takes the virtue of friendship still further. Because, in Aristotle's view friendship as a virtue depends on friendship being returned, friendship with a foe or someone who is hostile would seem impossible. But, Aquinas argues that the love of friendship can be extended to foes or those hostile to us because even though they do not naturally return our friendly feeling, an infinite spirituality within all persons makes it possible for our friendly feeling to be returned from them supernaturally.

Aquinas does not propose that we love them precisely as foes or hostile people but that we love them generally with an act of mind. In reaching out in friendship, we can be ready to love them as individuals and come to their practical aid in case of need. He recommends that we also try by kindness to induce them to personally return the love of friendship.

Aquinas also observes the reality of human vices and places two vices in opposition to friendship as a virtue; sloth defined as a sluggishness of mind which neglects spiritual good, and envy defined as grieving for another's good when it is perceived to diminish one's own reputation:



Here Aquinas shows us what **is not** friendship. We can see again attitudes which are **not good** so that we can reflect on them and with practice over time work toward correcting them:

degrees of deficit	the virtue	degrees of excess
sloth apathy listlessness unthinking	friendship	ill will begrudge bitterness envy
lazy mind boredom spiritual apathy		dislike antipathy resentment jealousy

Again, evaluating ourselves on a continuum such as this we can see where we might be on a continuum between being lazy in mind with regard to spirituality and being envious of our colleagues. It can help us to work gradually toward developing the habit of friendship as a virtue and caring better for ourselves and one another.

Aquinas is proposing that as a virtue, friendship can encompass both natural and supernatural love and well-wishing between friends, members of a group and of a state as a whole. Following Aristotle, he also views friendship as the necessary context for justice. Both Aquinas and Aristotle propose that human flourishing, peace and justice can be achieved only if they are grounded in the virtue of friendship.

How could we use Aquinas’s ideas about friendship as a virtue in our practice? We might ask this especially in relation to friendship with a foe or someone who is hostile to us? This is not easy and we would need to draw on all the virtues to support us. We would need the intellectual virtues to boost our knowledge, understanding, prudence and good sense. We would need the moral virtues to guide us in our attitudes and actions.

The key to Aquinas’s view is that the unconditional love of caritas is friendship as a virtue. So, the first step is to be ever-mindful of this. It emphasises the importance of taking at least five minutes of ‘quiet time’ each day, for example in meditation, silence, contemplation, stillness or prayer. In developing the habit of attending to our inward life, the centre of goodness, truth and beauty in ourselves, we are better able to relate with the virtue of friendship to ourselves and one another, especially someone who we perceive to be hostile to us or toward whom we feel hostile.

Take for example a senior nurse manager (SNM) who is responsible to see that the nurses working with her use best evidence/research findings to guide their practice; it is part of their job description. One of the nurses resented this very much (she probably felt threatened). Anyway, everything about this SNM irritated her. The nurse ignored the SNM as much as possible and sometimes she pretended that she didn’t hear her speaking to her. She made jokes about her and talked about her disparagingly behind her back. The SNM tried to overlook this and be kind towards her, and tried not to avoid her, although this was not easy. Then it happened that the nurse decided to enrol in a Masters degree programme. It involved learning about research, which she found very difficult. On reflection, she saw that the SNM, who had completed a research Masters degree, could be useful to her. So, there was a situation in which the nurse’s desire for useful and pleasurable goods could become a means by which friendship as a virtue could be cultivated and developed. In the end, both the nurse and SNM shared in the pleasure of the nurse’s success with research and shared friendship as a virtue.

Conclusion

Friendship as a virtue as it is defined and explored by Aristotle and Aquinas offers us a range of ideas for reflecting on our human tendencies to not always care for ourselves and one another. Reflecting on their ideas provide us with the opportunity to develop the habit of better caring for ourselves and one another. Both philosophers relate the virtues, including friendship as a virtue,

to the spiritual dimension of life, Aquinas especially so. Here in New Zealand/Aotearoa we have special opportunities for taking the period of 'quiet time' each day that is important in developing friendship as a virtue. We are surrounded by vibrant bush and grasslands, soaring mountains, the flowing waters of rivers, lakes and the ocean; the gentle fronds of ferns and ever-present birdsong – all of which echo our own inward lives of goodness and beauty – the source that develops in us friendship as a virtue. Surely, friendship as a virtue is abundantly present at this conference and will remain with us as we return to our everyday lives; as you return to your practice as primary health care nurses. It is a wonderful gift for me to have been with you.

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