

INTRODUCTORY NOTE: The following passage comes from *Habits of the Heart*, a 1985 study of American communities written by Robert N. Bellah and associates.

CITIZENSHIP AND FRIENDSHIP

The civic tradition has provided important resources for thinking about human relationships in the United States. The very status of citizen provides a concept of rights and duties, of mutual respect and obligation, that in a variety of contexts has been decisive for how Americans relate to one another. Americans spend a good deal of effort in "getting involved" in civic associations and citizen groups. They value the associations and friendships that flow from these activities, but today they do not understand very well the moral meaning that was once given to such relationships.

The classical idea of friendship put forward by Aristotle was well known to Americans in colonial and early republican times. It is worth remembering that the traditional idea of friendship had three essential components: Friends must enjoy one another's company, they must be useful to one another, and they must share a common commitment to the good.

Today we tend to define friendship most in terms of the first component: friends are those we take pleasure in being with. To us the issue of usefulness seems slightly out of place in a relationship that should above all be free and spontaneous, though we are quite aware of the importance of being "friendly" to those who are potentially useful to us. What we least understand is the third component, shared commitment to the common good, which seems to us quite extraneous to the idea of friendship. It is easy for us to understand the components of pleasure and usefulness, but we have difficulty seeing the point of considering friendship in terms of common moral commitments.

For Aristotle and his successors, it was precisely the moral component of friendship that made it the indispensable basis of a good society. In this profound notion of friendship one loves one's friend but, first of all, the good in one's friend. For it is one of the main duties of friends to help one's friend and be able to count on a true friend to do likewise. Traditionally, the opposite of a friend is a flatterer, who tells one what one wants to hear and fails to tell one the truth. The "unconditional acceptance" that was supposed to go with true love and friendship did not mean the abandonment of moral standards, even in the most intimate relationship. One has a duty to forgive, and indeed forgiveness is the very mark of true love and friendship. But to forgive is not to excuse. Forgiveness and the struggle better to exemplify the good go hand in hand.

It is also part of the traditional view that friendship and its virtues are not merely private: they are public, even political, for a civic order, a "city," is above all a network of friends. Without civic friendship, a city will degenerate into a struggle of contending interest groups unmediated by any public solidarity.

The classical idea of friendship made sense more readily in the small face-to-face communities that characterized early American society than it does to us. In such small communities, it was obvious that people not only helped one another and enjoyed one another's company but also

participated mutually in enterprises that furthered the common good. But friendships were by no means confined to local communities in early American society. Particularly where a common cause united them, people of quite different backgrounds could become friends. The revolutionary struggle against Britain and the founding of the new nation brought together men from all the colonies and produced some remarkable friendships, in spite of tensions, hostilities, and rivalries.

Perhaps the classic example is the friendship of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, chronicled in the extraordinary series of letters that passed between them during their lifetimes. Frequent in the 1780s, the letters tapered off in the 1790s when the two took opposite sides in the republic's emerging party struggle. They ceased altogether after the bitter election of 1800, when Jefferson defeated Adams's bid for a second term. But as a result of a reconciliation arranged by friends, the letters resumed in 1812 and continued with increasing richness almost up to the day on which they both died, July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the new nation. Their reconciliation after a period of bitter estrangement illustrates their capacity to put their common concern for the public good ahead of their partisan disagreements. Jefferson expressed the basis of their friendship in a letter he wrote Adams in 1820, when they were both old men: We have, willingly, done injury to no man; and have done for our country the good which has fallen in our way, so far as commensurate with the faculties given us....In the mean time be our last as cordial as were our first affections."

TOPIC: What does Bellah suggest is the major difference between the way early Americans thought about friendship and the way people today think about friendship? What do you think about his views? To make your essay convincing, you should discuss specific examples from your own experience, your observation of others, or any of your reading--including "Citizenship and Friendship" itself.