

About Friendships and Relationships

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Note: Everything I say below is only my opinion, which is based on my own experiences and observations. – *Swami Devanand*

Are friendships and relationships important?

In one word “Yes”! Every one of us comes into this world alone and departs alone. We create *connections* with other people during our lifetime. These connections enrich us and make our lives livable, exciting, and interesting. The people who come in our lives give us emotional support, inspire our creativity, and motivate us to take up challenging activities.

Henceforth I am going to refer to relationships/friendships simply as *connections*.

When the connections are really intimate, our brains create idealistic abstractions of the people involved, i.e. our friend appears to possess far superior qualities than she really does. Much of the art in this world is a result of inspiration derived from such close connections. (On the flip side, the abstract glorification of the person and the connection often results in unreal expectations and disappointment.)

Philosophically speaking, the very phenomenon of having a meaningful connection with someone is as fascinating (if not more) than the specific person involved. *What does that mean?* It means, for example, that we should not wrongly neglect our existing connections in pursuit of newer ones as if they would be different, more enjoyable. (Men who chase other women and neglect a loving woman at home should make a note of this!) It also implies, for example, that the loss of one love is not the end of everything; the *phenomenon of falling in love with someone* is what the nature has offered to you and no one can take away that phenomenon from you.

Connections can cause tremendous emotional upheaval and stress. We experience anxiety when someone acts strange, grief when a relationship is wounded, loneliness during separation, and so on. People who wish to avoid such emotional ups and downs decide to stay aloof and most probably lead pretty dull and boring lives. As for me, I certainly prefer the challenges. With the help of some simple guidelines (as suggested below), I am able to enjoy rich connections and reduce the emotional stress associated with them.

Connections are not permanent.

Like everything else in the universe, connections have life spans of their own, and they seldom last indefinitely. There is no such thing as “forever”. Connections may die, change form or intensity, or even reappear after a period of hibernation. You really cannot control this lifecycle.

You only have to look around and observe what happens to other people to be convinced of this simple truth.

When a connection turns sour or dull, you should try to move on, but, without any finger-pointing or retrospective skepticism like “*Oh, was I cheated? Was she just acting all this while?*” Such analysis is meaningless and unfair.

And while the connection lasts, you must contribute liberally to it. According to poets, love may be an abstract and indescribable feeling, but you must try to translate that abstract love into concrete acts of affection, care, and tenderness. Do little things for your friend, care for her well-being, encourage her in her endeavors, and help in times of need. Then, you will also receive a lot without asking. Receive every favor with gratitude and not as a “right”. In fact, these are also the very things that you can use to judge the quality of your connection with someone. If that someone is respectful, caring, and supportive you probably have a precious connection that you must try to preserve.

This assumption of *impermanence of connections* has actually been extremely helpful to me in developing a healthy view of connections. For example, it ensures that I do not give undue importance (or *authority*) to and consequently become *dependent* on any of my connections. It also ensures that I give my full attention and energy to each of my existing connections.

Every connection deserves its own space, privacy, and independence.

First of all, this means *you should not allow one connection to prevent you from having and enjoying other connections.*

People are always eager to advise us on our connections. For example, a *best friend* might advise you, “*You better not talk with xyz, because I don’t like him/her...*” Or, your spouse may say to you, “*You better stop meeting so-and-so, or else ...*”

I think such interference should not be tolerated. Your connection with your mother is no business of your father’s. Your friendship with someone is no concern of your spouse, your mother-in-law, or anyone else.

It is important to firmly believe in this principle and try to prevent others from controlling and interfering with your social lives.

Secondly, *we should try to keep each connection separate and private – in its own universe.*

This idea actually helps us ensure that people are not able to interfere. Since we risk offending people if we tell them to “*mind their own business*”, we instead have to come up with practical and tactful ideas to achieve this independence. It is useful to create “parallel relationship universes” in your mind (and in practice), and adopt a *need-to-know* strategy for information

sharing among your various connections. No information gets shared unless it is really *necessary* – determining which, of course, is your own prerogative.

All too often, we get confused by ideas such as *loyalty* and *fidelity*. These ideas are problematic because they often imply *exclusivity*, which is an artificial, man-made constraint on human connections. Our capacity to connect with fellow humans is unlimited. Nature does not say that you can love only one person at a time. *Loyalty* also somehow implies that you must not have any *secrets*. Most women feel the pressure that they must inform their partners about all their activities, who they are meeting, who is sending them messages, and so on. If you think about it, when you share a secret, it's not really your secret alone; it is also someone else's secret. *What right do you have to violate that other person's trust?*

In my opinion, these ideas and what they imply are a common cause of the headaches and heartaches pertaining to connections, and hence should be simply thrown out. All that really matters is whether you are honest in your connection (e.g. whether you really mean it when you say "I like you!"), and give your best to each connection, without compromising your right to enjoy other connections.

Thirdly, *we must develop each connection separately.*

Close and enjoyable connections rarely develop in group forums (such as Facebook or group hangouts); they require us to invest in each connection separately and with a personal touch. This obviously puts a limit on how many truly meaningful connections we can have in our lifetime.

Connections thrive on mutual respect and trust, space, and common purpose.

Love or *affection* is really a symptom, and not the root cause, of a healthy connection. Mutual respect and trust, a common purpose, and space create a healthy relationship, which in turn sustains affection between two people.

Respect has to do with respecting your friend's abilities, opinions, life choices, even shortcomings. It is one thing to disagree with your friend, it is quite another to argue, to try to prove her wrong, or to think little of her. *Respect* also means you never disrespect or humiliate your friend in private or public. In turn, *respect* must be at the top of what you should expect from each of your connections.

Trust has to do with feeling assured that your friend will keep your secrets, and not do anything to misuse the connection. It is also the belief that your friend will act and speak in your best interest. You, in turn, must become *trustworthy* for each of your connections.

Common purpose can really be anything that ties you together with your connection, anything that brings you closer. It could be some sport that you take up together; it could a common interest (such as poetry) that you pursue together; it could simply be a shared set of values or

experiences. A *happy marriage*, for example, is usually based on the common purpose of building a family (having kids, raising them, educating them, etc.).

Giving space basically means respecting the other person's right to privacy, freedom and independence. While you protect your own space, you must also understand that the other person has the right to have other connections, which you have no right to interfere with. *Giving space* also means keeping some mental distance (*detachment*) irrespective of how intimate you feel the connection is. It is better to stay *alert* to opportunities of interaction rather than being pushy. I often compare connections with *campfire*: If you go too close to the fire you are sure to get burnt, but if you keep a safe distance you can enjoy wonderful warmth.

Everyone exists independently as a separate human being.

This may sound like a repetition of things said above, but, it is worth the trouble to emphasize certain ground rules in order to maintain healthy connections.

No matter how close you are to someone, it is important to know (and constantly remind yourself) that he/she is an independent, separate, free human being, and as such, carries complete ownership and responsibility for his/her life, problems, decisions, future, etc. You do not own any part of his/her life. You are not responsible for his/her life. You must only do your part to support, provide help, empathize, share his/her joy and sorrow, and so on.

This may sound like a contradiction: How can one form a close and true connection with someone and remain detached and indifferent like that? I am not proposing *indifference* at all; I am simply suggesting that you avoid becoming so entangled that you start feeling *responsible*, *in-charge*, *owner* of someone's life.

Here is an example. This happens a lot with close relatives: parents feel responsible for their children's lives; older parents become a burden for their adult sons and daughters. My point is this: You can be intimately involved in your son's affairs as a helper, friend, sponsor, and what not, without feeling responsible for his life. With the stress of responsibility gone, you may be able to do a better job in supporting/helping and more importantly, to enjoy the connection with your son much better because he is no longer a burden for you. Similarly, you can enjoy a much better connection with your old parents if you truly empathize with their insecurities and fears, but not appoint yourself as *in-charge* of their health and the inevitable and natural decline of their lives.

Communication is the main life-line of connections.

Connections are often unnecessarily destroyed by misunderstanding. And misunderstanding often develops due to poor communication – usually second-hand stories, words taken out of context, etc. It is most important to maintain direct communication even if things aren't going well. You should never rely on indirect communication – messages or impressions conveyed by others. And you should never stop communicating. The moment you say, "*Don't talk to me anymore*" you have lost any possibility of patching up or removing possible misunderstanding.

People are more important than academic ideas or principles.

There are several reasons that are out of our control due to which we will lose our friends. But, there are several that are in our control. For example, academic arguments over ideas, principles, or ideologies are one common cause of bad feeling. My own policy is to avoid such arguments. If I sense a serious difference of opinion (say over the topic of “religion”) with a friend I would avoid that topic altogether. I feel it makes no sense to spoil a relationship for the sake of scoring a point in such arguments – which are rarely about any golden truths anyway!

How do you create connections?

This is probably what everyone wants to know! I don’t think there is a formula to create connections, they just happen. Connections take root and flourish in all kinds of life situations. Some connections are aided by natural forces of attraction. Such naturally aided relationships are the easiest to form and also the most enjoyable. Some connections are also created by specific situations, like challenges of student days and childhood. Connections formed during hardship are usually deep and last very long.

But, really, it is very difficult to say what should be done to create connections, other than being alert to such opportunities. It is probably easier to say what should be *avoided* to increase the chances of making friendships. For example, we must give up the habit of judging people. Every time we meet people, we make judgments about them, we label them with adjectives, we try to fit them into some stereotypes or models. More often than not, our judgments are based on inaccurate or inadequate information and are just plain wrong. And they come in the way of building bonds.

Relatives are a special category.

We either despise our relatives (think of in-laws or certain overbearing aunts and uncles), take them for granted (think of parents), or treat them as liability (think of children or siblings). Relations are more likely to give heartache and headache than genuine pleasure. The main reason for this, of course, is that connections with relatives are imposed and not out of choice. The connection is taken for granted, affection is taken for granted, expectations are built-in.

The main problem with close relatives (e.g. spouse, parents, kids, siblings, etc.) is that we either try to take charge of their lives or expect them to take charge of ours. A simpler view that “you don’t own anyone’s life (or their problems) but simply try to give your best to support them and help them” can go a long way in improving your relations with your relatives.

I view a relation, even a distant one such as a cousin or a sister-in-law, as an *opportunity* to build a real connection. Indeed, your wife and children instead of being a liability or responsibility (in which you take ownership of their problems and get stressed) could be wonderful companions (if you instead become a sincere supporter and empathizer). Your parents, instead of just being caregivers and ATM machines, could become your mentors and guides. The key is to view the relation only as a pretext for building a connection and not as a permanent jail sentence.

My strategy with respect to demanding relatives is simple; it is in fact the same as what I use for everybody: I give no quarter to the built-in expectations. I keep my distance from relatives who *demand* affection and respect. Instead I consider *relations* as a possible *starting point* to build new connections.

The most important connection is the one with yourself.

Now, after all this discussion about how to create and enjoy beautiful connections, here is some bad news!

In spite of following all the tips I have given above, it is very likely that you will often find yourself quite lonely!

Why is that?

Well, first, for a variety of reasons you will simply not come in contact with the right kind of people. Or, even if you did and created connections with them, for a variety of reasons those connections may not last long. In today's fast-paced world in which people travel all the time, people whose company you desire will not always be available to you. And finally, as you get older, you will most likely see your social life diminish.

This is why many spiritual gurus don't recommend trying to build connections at all! They simply frown upon the idea of chasing relationships.

I won't go that far, but, suggest a simple idea: I believe that one is never alone if one develops a loving, respectful connection with himself/herself.

Being alone does not bother me because I connect with myself when I am "all by myself". There is so much to do – think, learn, create, read, write, watch, play – that I never run out of ideas. Gulzar suggests this beautiful idea in a poem which I have loosely translated below:

*I somehow passed the day without friends,
The day that was a stranger even to me,
Lonely, depressing, worthless.
I wandered on the beach and buried the hours in the ocean,
And returned to my abode on a lonely street, empty.*

*When I opened the door,
The book on the table
Fluttered slightly on the breeze
And said, "I waited so long for you my friend!"*

While I would always jump at the opportunity to be with a loved one, I am quite comfortable being alone.

Focus on doing interesting things rather than on chasing people. You are as interesting to others as you are to yourself. It is one of nature's unsolved mysteries why two people start liking each other. I simply call it "chemistry". But, it is also very likely that people grow fond of you for the good qualities you possess, the goodness that you carry within you, and the interesting things that you do. So, the more you invest in yourself – in terms of building your physical, mental, and spiritual health and maintaining your love for yourself – the more likely it is that people will also develop a liking for you.

Footnote:

I often get a lot of questions about marriages and divorces, so, I will just attempt to state my views on these things.

I think a relationship of love between two people is a *different* type of connection from a marriage. Two people become close friends, fall in love, do things together, and even live together (married or not). This is a fascinating type of relationship and for the lack of better words I will call it the *love connection*. Marriage must not be confused with a love connection. The sole (or at least primary) purpose of marriage, in my opinion, must be to have family, i.e. to raise children. A marriage may also have love – indeed that's how most people prefer to enter into a marriage. But, when they decide to get married, they must have the purpose of family in mind. That way, the two of them will take the right actions for the children when things go wrong, conflicts arise, love dissipates, etc. The whole point (or definition) of "divorce" would then change. I think it is important that the responsibility of raising children is shared (because it is so complicated), and that the children get an environment in which they can avail of the natural affection and services of both parents, at least until they reach a certain age (say 18).

Some people may object to this idea and say, "You mean I should make a false show to my children that I am happily married when I am not?" I think this question has an inherent contradiction because I define a *happy marriage* as *the association of two people with the sole purpose of raising their children*. It should not be too difficult to be happy raising your own children!

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