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Friendship

The writer discusses the nature of true friendship.



Task

Comment on the writer's use and style of language.

I've just had an old friend to stay and I feel as if I've had the emotional equivalent of a break at a luxury health spa! Alison and I go back a long way. As children, we joined the local church choir together, sharing the excitement of being allowed to stay up late to sing at Midnight Mass. We went for walks through the countryside where we lived, talking about the strange new things that were happening in our lives... We faced the tough transition from primary to secondary school, and shared the ups and downs of being teenagers. In short, we grew up together.

During her visit we worked out that it had been more than 30 years since we had last spent any real time together... without the distractions of husbands, children or other friends. We were horrified. Where had the years gone? And then we hugged, and crammed that lost time into two days.

So what did Alison's visit do for me? If I had to sum it up I would say that she made me feel complete, as though I were gathering up all the bits of me, past and present, that have made me into the person I am now. There's something infinitely comforting about being with someone who remembers you in an Aertex shirt and navy gym knickers. And it was the same for her. We validated each other in a way that perhaps only friends – real friends – can.

The feeling stayed with me for several days and it made me look at my friendships in a new light. What is it that marks out a 'special' friend? What separates the many acquaintances we make at work, say, or on the school run, from the lasting and life-affirming relationships that nourish the soul?

... Dr Valerie – a psychologist – who has made a particular study of friendship, explains why it is that friends increase our feeling of well-being. 'One of the central features of a good friendship is that your self image is enhanced', she says. 'If you regard your friends as good and successful people whom you respect, and who value you, it provides a great boost to your self-esteem. It's not articulated, but you feel a sort of glow.' Exactly!

... That brings me to the ultimate test – my favourite definition of a true friend is someone you can call on at three o'clock in the morning. It also embodies one of the cardinal qualities of friendship: trust. If you ring someone in the middle of the night it probably means you're in trouble or despair. You need to be able to trust that person not only with your burden but with the imposition itself. It's a good exercise: run through your friends in your mind and see how many you could call at a very unsocial hour.

If you find that you can count the answer on the fingers of one hand, that's a good sign! Between two and five friends is about right – any more than that and you're spreading yourself too thin.

... Many friendships end up having a bit of guilt attached to them (have you ever tried to avoid someone when you're out shopping because you know you haven't phoned them for weeks?). But maybe we need to look at the source of that guilt. If a friend is far from our mind, perhaps it isn't just because our lives are frantic – maybe that friendship has run its course. Long-standing friendships can become a habit. What we once had in common with someone may no longer be important because we have moved on. I admit to doing an occasional 'spring clean' of my friends... Life's too short to waste on third-division friends.

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