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Just Among Friends

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Just Among Friends

Abstract

Opening address at Mythcon 21, expanded. Uses Lewis's *The Four Loves* to open a discussion of friendship within the society, reminding members of the dangers Lewis pointed out, chiefly that of friends "looking at each other"—that is, focusing on "mutual self-approval" to the exclusion of remembering to look "in the direction of our shared interest."

Additional Keywords

Friendship; Lewis, C.S. *The Four Loves*

Just Among Friends

Founder's Focus by Glen GoodKnight

[This is an expansion, with added comments from the reading I did at the Opening Session of the 21st Mythopoeic Conference, held in August of 1990.]

In keeping with the theme of this Conference, and the book that inspired that theme, I'd like to read some passages from *The Four Loves* by C.S. Lewis. He points out that there are many meanings for the English word *love*, and describes what he sees are four basic kinds of love: Affection, Friendship, Eros and Charity. This is a book for both thought provoking and pleasurable reading, and I recommend it to all who have not read it.

Lewis has some important things to say about Friendship, which is the most applicable of the loves one can ideally anticipate to encounter in The Mythopoeic Society, or for which should be our inspiration and mutual goal. I can think of examples of the three other kinds of love in the Society's history, but Friendship is the most frequently encountered kind of love to be found within the Society. Lewis points out that in ancient times, "Friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the school of virtue." In modern times we tend to ignore its importance. Its need is marginal and diversionary and it is considered one of the optional pleasures of life. Why has this view of Friendship changed? Lewis tells us "few value it because few experienced it." Friendship is considered the least *natural* of loves — "the least instinctive, organic, biological, gregarious and necessary." It is basically between individuals, who in becoming friends are in some degree "drawn apart together from the herd." He points out that without Eros none of us would have come into the world, and without Affection none of us would have survived childhood, and further "we can live and breed without Friendship. The species, biologically considered, has no need of it." Friendship was valued in ancient and medieval times, because it did not affect the physical body; the nerves; it was the most independent of the forces of nature. "This alone, of all the loves, seemed to raise you to the level of gods or angels." In modern times however it has been devalued because it cannot be identified with an animal origin or having survival value. Group values, whether they be authoritarian or democratic, are suspicious of it "because it is selective and an affair of the few." Lewis then attacks the notion that Friendship is a disguised form of erotic feelings:

Those who cannot conceive Friendship as a substantive love, but only as a disguise or elaboration of Eros betray the fact that they have never had a Friend. The rest of us know that though we can have erotic love and friendship for the same person yet in some ways

nothing is less like a Friendship than a love-affair. Lovers are always talking to one another about their love; Friends hardly ever about their Friendship. Lovers are normally face to face, absorbed in each other; Friends, side by side, absorbed in some common interest. Above all, Eros (while it lasts) is necessarily between two only. but two, far from being the necessary number for Friendship, is not even the best.

Here Lewis gives us some biographical understanding, from his perspective of the inter-relationship of his friendship with J.R.R. Tolkien and Charles Williams.

Lamb says somewhere that if, of three friends (A, B, and C), A should die, then B loses not only A but "A's part in B." In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity: I want other lights than my own to show off all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Caroline joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him "to myself" now that Charles is away. I have less of Ronald. Hence true Friendship is the least jealous of loves. Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth, if only the newcomer is qualified to become a real friend.... [I]n this love "to divide is to take away." Of course the scarcity of kindred souls — not to mention practical considerations about the size of room and the audibility of voices — set limits to the enlargement of the circle; but within these limits we possess each friend not less but more as the number of those with whom we share him increases.

Lewis tells us that there is something he calls *Companionship*, which is to him the "matrix of Friendship" which the community does indeed need.

[The] pleasure in co-operation, in talking shop, in the mutual respect and understanding of men who daily see one another tested, is biologically valuable. You may, if you like, regard it as a product of the "gregarious instinct." To me that seems a roundabout way of getting at something which we all understand far better already than anyone has ever understood the word *instinct* — something which is going on at this moment in dozens of ward-rooms, bar-rooms, common-rooms, messes and golf-clubs. I prefer to call it *Companionship* — or *Clubbability*.

This *Companionship* is, however, only the matrix of Friendship. It is often called Friendship, and many people when they speak of the "friends" mean only their companions. But it is not Friendship in the sense I give the word. By saying this I do not at all intend to disparage the merely Clubbable relation. We do not disparage silver by distinguishing it from gold.

Friendship arises out of mere Companionship when two or more of the companions discover that they have in common some insight or interest or even taste which the others do not share and which, till that moment, each believed to be his own unique treasure.... The typical expression of opening Friendship would be something like, "What? You too? I thought I was the only one."... It is when two such persons discover one another, when, whether with immense difficulties and semi-articulate fumbings or with what would seem to us amazing and elliptical speed, they share their vision — it is then that Friendship is born. And instantly they stand together in an immense solitude.

Lovers seek for privacy. Friends find this solitude about them, this barrier between them and the herd, whether they want it or not. They would be glad to find a third.... All who share [the activity or interest] will be our companions; but one or two or three who share something more will be our Friends. In this kind of love, as Emerson said, *Do you love me?* means *Do you see the same truth?* — Or at least, "Do you care about the same truth? The companionship was between people who were doing something together — hunting, studying, painting or whatever you will. The Friends will still be doing something together, but something more inward, less widely shared and less easily defined.... Hence we picture lovers face to face but Friends side by side; their eyes look ahead.

That is why those pathetic people who simply "want friends" can never make any. the very condition of having Friends is that we should want something else besides Friends. Where the truthful answer to the question *Do you see the same truth?* would be "I see nothing and I don't care about the truth; I only want a Friend," no Friendship can arise — though Affection of course may. There would be nothing for the Friendship to be about; and Friendship must be about something, even if it were only an enthusiasm for dominoes or white mice.

Later on in the chapter on Friendship, we see another biographical glimpse into what it must have been like to be among the Inklings when they gathered.

...of course we do not want to know our Friend's affairs at all. Friendship, unlike Eros, is uninquisitive. You become a man's Friend without knowing or caring whether he is married or single or how he earns his living. What have these "unconcerning things, matters of fact" to do with the real question, *Do you see the same truth?* In a circle of Friends each man is simply what he is: stand for nothing but himself. No one cares twopence about any one else's family, profession, class, income, race, or previous history. Of course you will get to know about most of these in the end. But casually. They will come out bit by bit, to furnish an illustration or an analogy, to serve as pegs for an anecdote; never for their own sake. This is the kingliness of Friendship. We meet like sovereign princes of independent states, abroad, on neutral ground, freed from our contexts. This love (essentially) ignores not only our physical bodies but that whole embodiment of which consists of our family, job, past and connections.... It is an affair of disentangled, or stripped minds. Eros will have naked bodies;

Friendship naked personalities....

In a perfect Friendship this Appreciative love is, I think often so great and so firmly based that each member of the circle feels, in his secret heart, humbled before all the rest. Sometimes he wonders what he is doing there among his betters. He is lucky beyond desert to be in such company. Especially when the whole group is together, each bringing out all that is best, wisest, or funniest in all the others. Those are the golden sessions.... Life — natural life — has no better gift to give. Who could have deserved it?

But like *each* of the other human loves, Friendship has its own limiting dangers. Lewis points them out with objective analysis.

A circle of Friends cannot of course oppress the outer world as a powerful social class can. But it is subject, on its own scale, to the same danger. It can come to treat as "outsiders" in a general (and derogatory) sense those who were quite properly outsiders for a particular purpose. thus like an aristocracy, it can create around it a vacuum across which began by discounting, perhaps rightly, the plain man's ideas about literature or art may come to discount equally his idea that they should pay their bills, cut their nails and behave civilly. Whatever faults the circle has — and no circle is without them — thus become incurable. but that is not all. The partial and defensible deafness was based on some kind of superiority — even if it were only a superior knowledge about stamps. The sense of superiority will then get itself attached to the total deafness. The group will disdain as well as ignore those outside it. It will, in effect, have turned itself into something very like a class. A *coterie* is a self-appointed aristocracy.

...the *they* and *them* are also, from another point of view *we* and *us*. Thus the transition from individual humility to corporate pride is very easy.

The snob wishes to attach himself to some group because it is already regarded as an elite; friends are in danger of coming to regard themselves as an elite because they are already attached. We seek men after our own heart for their sake are then alarmingly or delightfully surprised by the feeling that we have become an aristocracy....

We can thus detect the pride of Friendship — whether Olympian, Titanic, or merely vulgar — in many circles of friends. It would be rather rash to assume that our own is safe from its danger; for of course it is in our own that we should be slowest to recognize it. The danger of such pride is indeed almost inseparable from Friendly love. Friendship must exclude. From the innocent and necessary act of excluding to the spirit of exclusiveness in an easy step; and thence to the degrading pleasure of exclusiveness. If that is once admitted the downward slope will grow rapidly steeper.... **The common vision which first brought us together may fade quite away.** [emphasis added] We shall be a *coterie* that exists for the sake of being a *coterie*; a little self-elected (and therefore absurd) aristocracy, basking in the moonshine of our collective self-approval....

Friendship, then, like the other natural loves, is unable to save itself. In reality, because it is spiritual

and therefore faces a subtler enemy, it must, even more whole-heartedly than they, invoke the divine protection if it hopes to remain sweet. For consider how narrow its true path is. It must not become what the other people call a "mutual admiration society"; yet if it is not full of mutual admiration, of Appreciative love, it is not Friendship at all.... Friendship is not a reward for our discrimination and good taste in finding one another out. It is the instrument by which God reveals to each the beauties of all the others.

I am not greatly concerned that our Society in any greater danger than any other group into falling into the deadly pitfalls of Friendship, *nor am I any less concerned*. It is *when* we cease looking together at our common interest and *instead* turn and begin looking at each other that we stand in danger of assuming a sense of superiority; to be an exclusive coterie (the number of which is not an issue); to become a self-appointed elite absorbed in collective self-approval. I have seen this happen in other organizations and groups and find it both pathetic and repelling. As I see it, we are in neither greater or less danger than others who consider themselves Friends. I do believe that as we continue to look in the direction of our stated interest, and not become overly preoccupied at looking *either* at ourselves as a primarily physical organization *or* as individuals within the organization.

As there are both incorrect and proper forms of self-love, there can be both misdirected and wholesome forms of group love which we call Friendship. Keeping that

delicate balance, that "Middle Way" if you will. Lewis offers us this challenge, taken from the same chapter:

It is one of the difficulties and delightful subtleties of life that we must deeply acknowledge certain things to be serious and yet retain the power and will to treat them often as lightly as a game.

May we all be aware and skillful players in this serious and therefore joyful game.



Tales Newly Told — continued from page 55

from him from military school. Although they appear to be moral opposites of each other, contradicting each other's tastes and values at every turn, Arlin and Nazhuret are mutually entangled in a curious love-hate relationship. Arlin is not at all, of course, what he seems to be. Through him Nazhuret is brought into the presence of Rudof, the young king of Vestinglon, just in time to resolve the tensions of a rather conventional political crisis. Nazhuret's parentage is disclosed (as are Powl's and Arlin's), and the place destined to him by society from his birth comes to coincide with the place he has earned by his own efforts.

If the book has a major weakness, it is the banality of the dénouement. Although it is designated as "first in a series," allowing us to expect further developments and tying up of loose ends in future volumes, the tale is constructed so as to stand on its own, and on those narrative terms it seems incredible to the reader that Nazhuret, with his exceptional education and unique position in his world's society, should not play a more spectacularly significant role in it than the mere foiling of a very mundane conspiracy. And although Powl's identity and previous history are exposed, the true nature of his motivation remains as inscrutable as ever. This may well be intentional — another way of showing the limitations of Nazhuret's "lens" — but it is not very satisfying as *story*. Still, we must suspend judgement until the other volumes appear, and the full shape and extent of MacAvoy's project become clear.

Such reservations should not, however, dissuade anyone from sampling the riches of what is, all things considered, a beautifully crafted work. Nazhuret comes alive in his distinctive voice, and compels us to take his story in earnest. In its presentation of a highly complex universe through the eyes of a single individual who is mostly ignorant of the larger pattern that shape events around him, *Lens of the World* (though obviously less dense in design) reminds one of Gene Wolfe's *The Book of the New Sun* and *Soldier of the Mist*; and it must be said to its credit that it does not suffer all that much by comparison with those masterworks. Even with this first glimpse, we can tell that the universe it depicts is quite engaging in its complexity, and are made eager for a second look — through Nazhuret's lens, or another's.

MYTHOPOEIC CORE READING LIST

MYTHLORE frequently publishes articles that presuppose the reader is already familiar with the works they discuss. This is natural, given the purpose of this journal. In order to be a general help, the following is what might be considered a core reading list, containing the most well known and frequently discussed works. Due to the many editions printed, only the title and original date of publication are given.

J.R.R. Tolkien

The Hobbit, 1937; "Leaf by Niggle," 1945; "On Fairy-Stories," 1945; *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* 1954; *The Two Towers* 1954; *The Return of the King* 1955; *Smith of Wootton Major* 1967; *The Silmarillion* 1977

C.S. Lewis

Out of the Silent Planet 1938; *Perelandra* 1943; *That Hideous Strength* 1945; *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* 1950; *Prince Caspian* 1951; *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader* 1952; *The Silver Chair* 1953; *The Horse and His Boy* 1954; *The Magician's Nephew* 1955; *The Last Battle* 1956; *Till We Have Faces* 1956.

Charles Williams

War in Heaven 1930; *Many Dimensions* 1931; *The Place of the Lion* 1931; *The Greater Trumps* 1932; *Shadows of Ecstasy* 1933; *Descent Into Hell* 1937; *All Hallow's Eve* 1945; *Taliessin through Logres* 1938, and *The Region of the Summer Stars* 1944 (the last two printed together in 1954).