

Friendship: A Powerful Antidote to Racism

Have you had this happen to you? The topic of racism comes up in casual conversation. Some white person defensively says that he has black friends. He is immediately (and implausibly) denounced. The thinking is that the claim that “some of my best friends are black” is an old canard to cover up...racism. The accused stands there humiliated, stripped bare, seeming to have affirmed his own evil with the invocation of a simple and common-sense point.

The claim that having black friends is a lame excuse – and even evidence of racism – came up in MTV’s [recent video](#): White Guy Resolutions 2017. The video was taken down following the claim it itself was racist. Among the statements in the video: “just because you have black friends doesn’t mean you’re not racist.”

How Racist Ideology Break Down

It’s technically true of course. You can be a white racist and have black friends. However, it’s harder. The ideology of racism – the view that some races are less deserving of dignity and human rights than others – is more difficult to maintain in light of friendship. It strikes me as counterproductive and even destructive to put down friendship as a path toward universal human understanding.

Cross-racial and cross-cultural friendship is the best antidote to tribalism, bigotry, and racist ideology. Friendship generates empathy and connection, and builds networks of harmony that overcome bias and conflict. Friendship is brilliant at breaking down barriers in language, race, sexual orientation, religion, physical ability, and gender.

I can recall sitting with some black friends (ok, yes, I have some black friends, so I'm implicated, I suppose) who were talking about how annoying movies can be about race. Some awesome black character gets introduced, but halfway through the movie, he is killed off. They all agreed that this is a pattern you see in movies.

Bias You Never Noticed

Frankly, I had never noticed this pattern before. After I was present for an open and light discussion of it, I began to notice it too, which is to say that my perception broadened. No, this did not turn me into a "social justice warrior" who rails against a racist Hollywood, but it did help me understand a bit more and caused me to hope for better storylines in movies.

It's the same with police bias. When you hear black friends talk about what they face – and it's the friendship aspect that gives their voices credibility – you hear harrowing stories of unrelenting suspicion and harassment. True, the police can be terrible to everyone (I dread few things more than the flashing blue lights in my rear-view window). But hearing evidence that it is worse for some than others helps you understand the extra sense of alienation that many feel from public institutions. That's surely a good thing to know.

And this is not just about race. Having a friend with a severe disability is a wonderful, consciousness raising experience. When we see how difficult it can be to get around, even accomplish small tasks like going to the bathroom in a restaurant, your sympathy for them and respect for their lives grows. That only comes about through friendship. We should all value that. We need that.

The more diverse friendship networks we cultivate, the less we think in categories of "us vs them." We come to realize that "we" are different from "them." Rather, all of us as

individuals, are different from everyone else, which is to say we are all unique. At the same time, all of us are struggling with similar problems based on common features of the human mind. This struggle is easier when we do it in relation to others, in peaceful cooperation. That realization is crucial to fostering a liberal worldview.

In contrast, putting down friendship accomplishes nothing; in fact, it is destructive because it spreads unhinged guilt that leads to anger and resentment. The left is actively doing harm by putting down the capacity of friendship to build a more peaceful and just society.

Friendship and Trade

This is one reason I value markets. They specialize in bringing people together in friendship, even through brief commercial encounters. Just a few weeks ago, I was in an Italian restaurant, but my waiter didn't seem Italian, so I asked where he is from (whoops, another no-no, according to the PC police). He said he immigrated from Iraq. That immediately opened up a discussion about his country and all that it has been through. I learned so much from that encounter, much more than I could by reading a Wikipedia entry. It was a brief friendship but a highly valuable one.

The commercial marketplace specializes in bringing people together who might not otherwise ever meet. And this is a fantastic way to break down prejudice and tribalist thinking.

Friendship Improves Your Worldview

Think of the brilliant [case of Derek Black](#), the son of the founder of a Nazi website who was raised in a white-supremacist household. It was his whole worldview. When he went to college, he was outed and ostracized. Everyone treated him like vermin. It got so bad that he had to move off campus. His next-door neighbor was Jewish, and befriended him.

After long conversations, video game evenings, and just hanging out, Derek's views began to change. Everything he thought about the world began to fall apart. Eventually, Derek repudiated the ideology of hate in which he was raised, and became a happy person with a humane outlook on others.

Friendship did this! I can't imagine that it was easy for the Jewish guy to do this, to take on a quasi-Nazi as a bestie, but it was a brilliant and loving act. It accomplished so much more than ostracism, shaming, and meeting hate with hate.

Another example is the case of Daryl Davis, a black man who has convinced [around 200 Klu Klux Klan members to disavow racism](#) by [becoming friends with them](#). A [documentary](#) about Davis was released earlier this month. "At the core of it, although they won't at first admit it, they express superiority," Davis says, "but truly feel inferiority and in order to elevate themselves, they have to push someone else down."

This captures the whole essence of what gives rise to all kinds of non-empathetic and tribalist ideologies. People who feel undervalued as individuals wrongly believe that this can be corrected by group identity. Becoming friends with people as individuals, showing them that they are valued as individuals, especially by people they have otherwise demonized, can unravel threads of belief that make up the tribalist mind.

Better than Force

What, precisely, is the alternative to friendship as a means of making the world a more peaceful and harmonious place for everyone? Shutting people out accomplishes nothing. Perhaps the people who put down friendship think that forcing people to associate does the trick.

That's not the case. We've been through plenty of that for decades, and this only breeds seething resentment that ends in

political and personal backlash. This is the path of politics, which is often the real point that people who put down friendship are trying to make: they claim we need change that only the state brings. But politics doesn't change the human heart; it only introduces force in ways that harm our ability to learn from and cooperate with each other.

Friendship, even the seemingly superficial sort that you get on Facebook, leads to empathy, appreciation of the value of others, and even that most precious thing: love. I like what Albert Camus said: "Don't walk behind me; I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend."

If you like that one, you can read hundreds of other quotes on friendship [here](#). If you put down friendship, you are playing a dangerous game. Friendship should never be cited as evidence of a problem; it is the means by which we build a more humane and freer world.

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