The Blessing & Curse of Too Many Good People at APU:

Relational Capacity and The Paradox of Choice

**Committed Friendships are Healthier than Transient Friendships**

Introduction to this section about how committed consistent friendships are suggested to be healthier than transient friendships on a philosophical, theological, and psychological level.

**Philosophical Support for Few Committed Friends**

The ideas surrounding friendship have joined the ranks of meta-physics and other abstract thoughts in the minds of philosophers. Three acclaimed thinkers, Aristotle, Cicero, and Kant, will be briefly discussed with a focus on their beliefs about friendship’s quality and quantity.

In Book VIII and IX of Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle describes three kinds of friendship and explores the qualities of the highest friendships: those that lead one another to the virtuous life ([Aristotle, 1999](#_ENREF_2)). Three types of friendships are proposed: those of utility, those of pleasure, and those of virtue. The most perfect friendship, according to Aristotle, is the friendship of virtue. The characteristics of this type of friendship will be discussed.

Aristotle is quick to acknowledge the commitment side of virtuous friendship. Citing the proverb that men cannot know each other until they have “eaten salt together,” good friendship requires time and familiarity ([Aristotle, 1999](#_ENREF_2)). In addition to this quality, Aristotle argues that friendship of the perfect type cannot be shared with many but only with few, “just as one cannot be in love with man people at once (for love is a sort of excess of feeling, and it is the nature of such only to be felt towards one person)” ([Aristotle, 1999, p. 67](#_ENREF_2)).

Cicero provides similar insights about the importance of goodwill, virtue, and time in friendships along with implications about commitment ([Cicero, 1991](#_ENREF_4)). For example, Cicero responds sharply to the idea of replacing old friends with new friends – much like changing tired old horses for young fresh horses. Friends, Cicero asserts, are not to be treated the same way! Instead, friends are like wine, getting better with time.

Cicero also criticizes commitment anxiety. Responding to fears about intimacy and the potential for hurt, Cicero argues that “If we run away from trouble, we shall have to run away from virtue, too, for it is impossible for virtue to avoid trouble in some degree when she shows her contempt and enmity towards things incompatible with herself” ([Cicero, 1991](#_ENREF_4)).

Kant, the most recent philosopher considered in this section, resonates well with his antecedents. For example, he proposes three types of friendship roughly analogous to Aristotle’s three types of friendship. For Kant, the highest form of friendship is dispositional friendship – of wishing good will. Very explicitly, Kant articulates that dispositional friendships can only occur between 2-3 individuals ([Kant, 1991](#_ENREF_7)).

Each philosopher contributes to the notion that quality exceeds quantity in the case of friendship and that friendships of the highest quality can only occur between a few. This notion will further be discussed from a theological view.

**Theological Support for Few Committed Friends**

Friendship has also served to occupy the minds of theologians. Augustine and Aelred each provide a theological perspective on friendship that supports the need for close, committed friends.

Augustine’s thoughts on friendship are widely distributed in his writings but have been collected in the work *Becoming Friends* ([Waddell, 2002](#_ENREF_15)). Friendship is described as a crucial experience, one that demonstrates God’s love for us through the love of our friends. Augustine also speaks of a deep intimacy and unity achievable in long-term friendships, such that the friends may be one in spirit and soul.

Over 700 years later, Aelred of Rievaulx reflects similarly on the weight of friendship ([Aelred, 1991](#_ENREF_1)). Considering the importance of friendship, Aelred suggests a criteria and process for approaching friendship that one might compare to arranging a marriage. Selection, probation, admission, and perfection are the four stages Aelred furnishes for the development of friendship. He additionally appeals to the commitment aspect of friendship, urging readers to not dissolve friendship unless the direst of circumstances warrant so.

**Psychological Support for Few Committed Friends**

With the relatively young momentum of the positive psychology revolution[[1]](#footnote-1), friendship has joined the many nascent topics surrounding happiness and well being. A number of studies have been conducted on the effect of friendship on well being with surprising and thoughtful discussions. This section explores the young psychological study of friendship and how the majority of research tends to support the healthy effects of having a small set of high quality friendships.

It was previously thought that happiness was related to the number of friendships one had ([Bukowski & Hoza, 1989; cited in Demir, Özdemir, & Weitekamp, 2007](#_ENREF_5)), but more recent studies have suggested otherwise ([Demir et al., 2007](#_ENREF_5)). Analyzing results from 280 college students (192 female, 88 male, mean age = 22.56), several pertinent findings arose. Using the definition of a friend as “someone who you enjoy doing things together with, count on to support you when you need it, provide support when he/she needs it, talk about your everyday life, problems, concerns, ideas, and intimate thoughts,” researchers found that the average number of friends reported was 4.27 ([Demir et al., 2007, p. 253](#_ENREF_5)).

Using psychometrically validated tests, Demir and colleagues found that individuals reported to be best friends were also reported to be significantly higher in quality than first, second, and third closest friends (2007). When compared with happiness, it was found that friendship quality of only the best and first closest friend were related to happiness. After performing a step-wise regression analysis, results suggested that only best friendship quality was a significant predictor of happiness ([Demir et al., 2007](#_ENREF_5)).

The researchers also examined the level of conflict among friendships. They found that those with higher levels of conflict were happier than those with less conflict, assuming that their friendship was of high quality. There was no significant relationship between conflict and happiness for friendships of low quality ([Demir et al., 2007](#_ENREF_5)).

Additionally, researchers performed a regression analysis to find that only one feature of friendship, companionship, was found to significantly predict happiness. Other features that were evaluated were intimacy, reliable alliance, and affection. In this study, companionship meant “spending time and doing things together” whereas intimacy referred to “talking about personal issues and involves self-disclosure” ([Demir et al., 2007, p. 251](#_ENREF_5)). Gender was accounted for in each of the described results and revealed no difference. The different features of friendship and how they relate to happiness will be discussed again later in the paper.

In one last memorable article, researchers provided a touching study of how the steepness of an uphill slope appears less to individuals with friends than when an individual is alone ([Schnall, Harber, Stefanucci, & Proffitt, 2008](#_ENREF_11)). In particular, the duration of the friendship was inversely correlated with the perceived steepness of the hill. In other words, the longer the individuals had been friends, the less steep the hill was reported to be. This study adds to the collection of literature that supports the importance of meaningful long-term friendships.

**APU Experience as Conducive to Transient Friendship**

One of APU’s cornerstones is community and the school’s social programming takes this concept very seriously. From Alpha groups to D-groups, missions teams to freshman halls, intentional community is exacted. Additionally, APU is a community not of activities but of beliefs and values. Students can find solidarity in the scores of supportive, enthusiastic, and kind Christians that make up the majority of the student body. These efforts of intentional community and the effects of being with so many similar individuals may undermine some of the most valuable aspects of friendship, however. The quantity and intensity of friendship produced from intense extracurricular activities seems to result in an unsustainable number of friends and the consequences of having so many friendable individuals at APU confronts a perilous paradox of choice. These concerns will be further discussed and connected to a survey performed during spring semester 2013.

**Intensity of Extracurricular Activities**

D-groups, Alpha groups, walk-about groups, dorm halls, missions teams, intramurals, clubs, student leadership teams, and other organizations are each forms of school-sanctioned intentional community. Each seeks to deepen the experience of students’ relationships at APU by cultivating intimacy and connection among individuals that the students may not otherwise meet. Azusa Pacific University deservedly prides themselves on the depth and extent of community intentionally developed among students on campus.

The extent and depth of these extracurricular activities can be rather overwhelming, however. For example, the first day of Alpha leader training, students are asked to share their life-stories. During RA training on WalkAbout, students are asked to exchange life stories. Throughout a student’s participation in a D-group, life stories are exchanged. As missions teams attempt to develop group cohesion, life stories are exchanged. Clearly, there is a pattern to these forms of intentional community. When precious personal life stories are exchanged, combined with the shared experience of Bridges (an Alpha leader training experience in San Francisco), Walk About (an RA training experience in Yosemite), D-Group bonding activities, or on a missions trip; deep, intimate friendships are forged.

At first, these connections are vital and thought to boost freshman retention rates, for example (although APU’s rate, 85%, trails behind all of the UC’s, ~94%). After the initial value of the first quickly developed intimate friendships, perhaps among a student’s dormitory or Alpha group, other experiences begin to create new deep intimate friendships. Ultimately, a student can end up with a trail of friends from their Alpha group, their freshman hall, their D-Group, their Alpha leader group, and their Walk About group, for example. The amount of intentional communities created, however, would become arguably unsustainable. Instead of Aristotle or Kant’s idea of healthy friendship among a select few, these intentional communities establish friendship among many! Instead of a focus on long-term *companionship*, the focus seems to be short-term *intimacy*.

When intentional community is manufactured so profusely by the activities at APU, it is very difficult to remain connected among a small consistent group of friends when intimacy is exchanged so openly and transiently among the many extracurricular activities. The challenge between promoting student involvement along with healthy, committed, and sustainable number of friends is one that needs to be recognized by both students and those involved in student life.

**Homogeneous Society and the Paradox of Choice**

**“**Birds of a feather flock together,” so the saying goes. Research within social psychology affirms this colloquialism, suggesting that similarity breeds attraction ([Folkes, 1982](#_ENREF_6)). Sociologists use the term homophily to describe the tendency of people to associate themselves with similar individuals, manifest among friendships, religious groups, marriages, and other social networks ([McPherson, Smith-Lovin, & Cook, 2001](#_ENREF_10)). Among college settings, for example, students tend to associate themselves with similar individuals whether by ethnicity, values, or other cultural aspects, which often facilitates communication and relationship formation ([McPherson et al., 2001](#_ENREF_10); [Stearns, Buchmann, & Bonneau, 2009](#_ENREF_14)).

The question, however, is what happens when one is immersed in a homogeneous society. APU makes commendable efforts for attracting an ethnically diverse student body, but with regard to values, beliefs, and interests, there is a large homogeneous majority of post-modern Christian individuals. Considering that friendship typically occurs among like-minded individuals, it is arguable that APU provides many ‘friendable’ individuals for those within the majority culture. With the presence of many friendable individuals, two issues arise: (a) that when friendship is easy to find and establish, it can be treated like a disposable commodity with no need for commitment and (b) when there are so many friendable individuals to choose from the effect of the paradox of choice occurs.

*Friendship as a commodity*

Because of the readily available nature of friends, commitment and effort are not required to engage with compatible individuals of convenience. For example, many friendships freshman year are dictated by their living area. Sophomore year, students are scattered across several different living areas and often their friendships change because of the change in distance. In the current survey, 48% of respondents answered agree or strongly agree to the statement that the friends they spent the most time with had changed between freshman and sophomore year. Fifty-five percent of respondents answered agree or strongly agree to the same statement for sophomore and junior year. Because of the availability of friendable individuals, there is no need to go the distance (literally or figuratively) to maintain old friendships.

This pattern of transient friendship connects well not only with changing living areas but changing extracurricular activities. When friendable individuals are not just readily available but intentionally made into intimate friendships through the extracurricular programs at APU, there is little reason to devote extra effort to maintain old friendships. Although every APU student would argue to the contrary, the sad consequence of ‘serial friending,’ however, is the treatment of friendship as if they were disposable. Because of the constraints of time and relational capacity, students are more likely to focus on new relationships than to maintain older ones.

*The paradox of choice with friends*

In addition to the effect of disposable friendships, when friendship becomes a commodity, individuals may experience decreased satisfaction with their current friends overall because of something called the paradox of choice. In 2004, Barry Schwartz published the acclaimed book: *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*. Several major arguments are made about the detrimental effects of too many choices. First, the multitude of choices results in paralysis rather than liberation. Second, individuals end up less satisfied with their decisions when choosing among many choices compared to few. Lastly, Schwartz suggests that depression is strongly related to the overwhelming and subtly pervasive effects of too many choices ([2004](#_ENREF_12)). Although Schwartz primarily discusses consumer choices among commodities such as jeans, stereo systems, or coffee, it can be argued that the same effect of the paradox of choice can occur with friendship when friendship becomes akin to a commodity.

In particular, the issue of dissatisfaction when choosing from among many options has a corrosive effect among friendships at APU. When the selection pool of friendable individuals becomes exceptionally large, it hard not to compare one’s current friends with potential other friends. *What if I stuck with that other group of friends from freshman year? Or what if I gave up my friends from Alpha to focus on my friends on my missions team? Or when I compare the quality of my D-Group to the friendships I have from Walk About, I wish I just met the people from Walk About right away instead of dabbling around in my D-Group.* These thoughts are pernicious worms that can eat away the core of a meaningful, trusting friendship. Thus is the blessing and curse of having so many great individuals at APU.

**Survey Data From Fourth Year Seniors at APU**

To substantiate the above arguments, a survey was designed and conducted among fourth year seniors at APU. Five constructs were intended to be measured: (a) extraversion, (b) homogeneity at APU, (c) identification with the majority, (d) social involvement, and (e) transience of friendships. A copy of the survey items can be viewed in Appendix A. Over the period of 8 days, 58 students responded to the survey. An acceptable reliability was found for each of the constructs, although a few items had to be removed.

A Pearson’s correlation analysis was performed to examine the relationship between the 5 constructs of interest. A significant relationship was found between extraversion and transience of friendships, *r* = .316, *p* = .019, as well as between social involvement and transience of friendships, *r* = .555, *p* < .001. This suggests that the more extraverted one is, the more transient their friendships may be. Additionally, the more socially involved one reports being, the more transient their friendships seem to be. Again, it would be appropriate to assert that this is not necessarily a bad thing; it just differs from what some literature would suggest. Additionally, there are many other variables among survey participants’ friendship that could not be accounted for in a simple survey.

In addition to the survey, an optional paragraph response was included for participants to provide further reflection, if desired. Although most reflections resonated with the arguments suggested here, a number of responses challenged the hypotheses of the survey. Some sample responses are included in Appendix B.

**Discussion**

These findings provide many valuable points to consider. The implications of this dilemma of friendship have meaning for the entire campus and beyond. This section explores the implications for the student, student life programs, and the future of friendship. Lastly, a theological discussion about commitment is provided.

**What does this mean for the student?**

For students, these arguments have the most personal implications. It would seem that the choice would be between choosing social involvement and long-term friendship. One alternative would be to strategically have your friends involved in the same activities as you, but that runs the risk of developing cliques, something often corrosive to communities. After giving much thought, I believe there is a relatively simple but not easy solution: to maintain meaningful friendships (including strategic proximity) while not letting them becoming wholly exclusive. The balance between commitment to old friends and openness to new friends is one that individuals need to develop on their own. Some people are more extraverted than others and thrive on new relationships. Others are more introverted and may be blessed more by smaller, tight-knit, circles of friends.

What is equally important, however, is for individuals to recognize and respect their own needs. America views extraversion to be a superior trait than introversion. It can also be argued that APU’s culture places an even greater value on extraversion. This may not be the healthiest goal for all people, however, and it is important to recognize one’s needs amongst a culture that may suggest otherwise. Recognizing the implications of this with regard to friendship can serve help navigate the salty waters of friends at APU.

**What does this mean for student life planners?**

For those involved in programming events for student life, it would be important to remember (and/or define/redefine) the purpose of their work. Is it the life-satisfaction and well being of the students or the number friends they create? As previously described research suggests, quantity of friends does not relate to well being as much as quality. Additionally, people involved in student life should also reconsider how to support both students who are extraverted *and* students who are introverted.

Lastly, I would suggest rethinking the idea of intentional community. Do we aim to create a community that is intentional because of external factors or because of the heart? Both are important, but when the convenience of external factors lessens the need for intrinsic intentionality, I am concerned that friendship can lose something. Perhaps one way of addressing this would be to focus on empowering friendships, not engineering them. By empowering friendships, I am thinking of providing space and other resources for friendships to naturally develop. Giving room for friends to develop without artificial support would help develop sustainable friendships that will last beyond the world of APU.

There is a saying that it is better to teach a person how to fish than to simply give them fish. I would modify this notion: give that poor hungry person a fish and then teach them how to fish on their own. In this light, I think the initial events to spurn on friendship at APU are very helpful but soon after the emphasis should be on helping students develop their own friendships (instead of engorging them with engineered friendships). On the whole, I do think APU does a fantastic job doing this, but I think the importance of intrinsic efforts to maintain friendships can be further emphasized.

**Future of Friendship: Choice Over Commitment**

In *The Paradox of Choice*, Schwartz argues that too many choices result in paralysis not liberation ([Schwartz, 2004](#_ENREF_12)). This is true in the case of important, long-term decisions. However, when the decision can be made again and again, it seems that another effect comes as a result.

In an article about online matchmaking, Dan Slater argues that relationships have become disposable ([2013](#_ENREF_13)). Because of the accessibility online matchmaking services provide to compatible individuals, eligible mates are no longer a scarcity but a commodity. As Slater shares about a user, Jacob, and his relationships, there is no longer much consequence to breaking up with an individual because he can instantly find a new mate online. After such serial dating, however, it is unclear if Jacob is any more satisfied with his life and well being ([Slater, 2013](#_ENREF_13)). The research previously discussed would suggest a negative effect ([Demir et al., 2007](#_ENREF_5)). There seems to be a trend that choice – in the process of freeing us – alienates us from commitment and life satisfaction, especially among friendship.

This leads us to a difficult question: what is the future of friendship? How will commitment-phobic and choice-philic generations establish long-term meaningful friendships? No longer forced to deal with what may be their lot, friends from class, from work, or church; the digital frontier expands the eligible friend pool but with unintended consequences. Will engineered “serendipity on steroids” be just as magical as the natural serendipity of friendship? There is much debate ([Keen, 2012](#_ENREF_8)).

**Theological Reflections**

In reflecting about these issues of choice and commitment on a theological basis, the most explored relationship is that of marriage. Marriage provides several key insights about relationships such as the fallibility of one’s partner, the value of commitment, and the recognition of God’s will.

Nobody we meet will be a perfect friend or perfect spouse; all have sinned and are imperfect beings. When we choose a spouse, however, our expectations may be much higher. In many cases, I worry that people have idolized their future spouse, having known students are APU who pray every night for their future husband or wife. When a relationship (that won’t even persist in heaven – mind you) is put on a pedestal so high, there is a risk for severe consequences and disappointment. Instead of focusing so greatly on a significant other, individuals ought to recognize that we can never be completely fulfilled by one other person but need to rely upon God as well. Aelred begins to suggest this when he describes three people in his conversation with a friend: his friend, Aelred himself, and Christ.

Although this might be considered an excuse for “settling,” I think the value of remaining committed to an individual is more worthy than avoiding the risk of settling. A recent alumnus shared with me his decision to stick with a friend from freshman year and how during sophomore he had serious doubts about whether this person was ideal. Regardless, he stuck with this friendship and after graduating with this person, does not regret the decision as “settling” whatsoever.

Bonhoeffer expresses a similar idea when during his wedding sermon he contends that “It is not your love that sustains the marriage, but from now on, the marriage that sustains your love” ([Bonhoeffer, 1943](#_ENREF_3)). Perhaps it is commitment that makes a friendship most wonderful, whether it is by choice or by default.

Lastly, when we assert our choice, it is also important to recognize God’s will. C.S. Lewis regards God’s as a master of ceremonies among friendship ([Lewis, 1960](#_ENREF_9)). What happens when we make technology, mathematical algorithms, or intentional community our ‘master of ceremonies?’ Whose intentions are they: God’s or ours? It is very important to keep prayerful consideration in all aspects of friendship.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, friendship is a valuable and exciting thing to be shared. It is also a unique and difficult experience to manufacture. Just as trying to force yourself to sleep isn’t as successful as simply relaxing and letting friendship come, perhaps we need to demonstrate greater faith, patience, and commitment with the friends we have. At the cusp of graduation and moving into a new epoch of friendship, these thoughts and the reminder of who is the ultimate Master of Ceremonies are important to consider.

References

Aelred. (1991). Spiritual friendship. In M. Pakaluk (Ed.), *Other selves: Philosophers on friendship*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Aristotle. (1999). *Nicomachean ethics* (T. Irwin, Trans. 2nd ed.). Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.

Bonhoeffer, D. (1943). A wedding sermon from a prison cell. *Lutheran Weddings*, from <http://lutheranweddings.blogspot.com/2007/10/wedding-sermon-by-dietrich-bonhoeffer.html>

Cicero. (1991). On friendship (De amicitia). In M. Pakaluk (Ed.), *Other selves: Philosophers on friendship*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Demir, M., Özdemir, M., & Weitekamp, L. A. (2007). Looking to happy tomorrows with friends: Best and close friendships as they predict happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 8*, 243-271. doi: 10.1007/s10902-006-9025-2

Folkes, V. S. (1982). Forming relationships and the matching hypothesis. *Pers Soc Psychol Bull, 8*(4), 631-636. doi: 10.1177/0146167282084005

Kant, I. (1991). Lecture on friendship. In M. Pakaluk (Ed.), *Other selves: Philosophers on friendship*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company.

Keen, A. (2012). Messing with fate. *The Atlantic*, from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/06/messing-with-fate/308979/>

Lewis, C. S. (1960). *The four loves*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Inc.

McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J., M. . (2001). Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annu. Rev. Sociol., 27*, 415-444.

Schnall, S., Harber, K. D., Stefanucci, J. K., & Proffitt, D. R. (2008). Social support and the perception of geographical slant. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 44*, 1246-1255. doi: 10.1016/j.esp.2008.04.011

Schwartz, B. (2004). *The paradox of choice: Why more is less*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Slater, D. (2013). A million first dates: How online romance is threatening monogamy. *The Atlantic*, from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2013/01/a-million-first-dates/309195/?single_page=true>

Stearns, E., Buchmann, C., & Bonneau, K. (2009). Interracial friendships in the transition to college: Do birds of a feather flock together once they leave the nest? *Sociology of Education, 82*, 173-195.

Waddell, P. J. (2002). *Becoming friends: Worship, justice, and the practice of Christian friendship*. Grand Rapids: MI: Brazos Press.

1. Generally attributed to Martin Seligman, this movement reflects the shift from the medical model of treating “sick individuals” to celebrating human life and talent. It was a shift from just addressing disease but to also study and advance well-being. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)