

Fortmis's response to "Against Community Building, Towards Friendship" essay by Ziq.

For all its grand gestures of disapproval and fiery declarations of social corruption, you'd be lying if you said you couldn't recognize, in this essay, the description of a community you've known. Even if you are lucky enough to be able to say that the community you are a part of right now is "the good kind," filled with love and links of true friendship... anyone who's been around the same group of people for longer than a week has experienced a community such as Ziq has described. Chances are a lot of us are still in one.

The existence of social hierarchies permeates everything. Acting as if they don't exist can, sometimes, scare them away – ignoring them out of existence. More likely though, acting as if they don't exist will just let them sit comfortable under your nose, collecting stench and resentment, feeding and being fed by corruption of all kinds.

Still the essay can feel like a bit of a shock, even if you're already familiar with the criticisms it presents. It hits close to home. Many of us have probably grown up with the word "community" as sacred – almost more revered than "family." When communities go sour, they're often not referred to as communities anymore. "Cult," "association," "gang," just plain "group,"... but "community" is reserved for the good – it is the goal, it is the may pole.

I don't need to re-iterate any further. Ziq's essay does that quite well enough, thoroughly and rightfully questioning the power wielded in the name of community. Plus, Ziq has been so kind as to provide us with an alternative: (Something that critics of things don't often like to do!) Friendship!

Friendship: "small, personal, intimate, deliberate, voluntary, decentralized." Yes! And, Ziq continues, "Friendship allows you to associate and disassociate with others at will, while always maintaining your individuality, the sanctuary of your headspace and the clarity of knowing who you are and what you need."

Beautiful and yet there are a few sharp edges I get stuck on.

Most of us don't live in a world we can organize and move through as neatly as a purely friendship-driven mode of association would have us do. We are constantly needing to socialize with people we might not otherwise call our friends. Sometimes these people are people we absolutely cannot stand, but a lot of the time these people are simply people we are only interested in having a particularly light bond with. Something maybe between an acquaintance and a friend. How do we reconcile our rejection of exploitative communities with the natural communities we can't help but be involved in? Ziq recommends friendship as an alternative form of bond, but is it

really up to us? Is it possible to cut everything else out? If we cast any other relationships aside due to their lack of qualifying as friendship, I worry we would find ourselves surrounded by clusters of cold, detached, corruptible, heartless associations. It's possible that the answer can still be found in a broader understanding of the word friendship. "Small, personal, intimate, deliberate, voluntary, decentralized." Even in an involuntary context, can we still apply the same concepts of friendship as a way of socially orienting ourselves amongst the people we live alongside?

The other direction I'd like to see this conversation continue in is towards understanding how a community can be differentiated from a large group of friends. Ziq outlines this difference as being that "the community is bigger, more impersonal, more bureaucratic, more policed, with highly diverging values and a centralized concentration of power." Makes sense. And how does this look in practice? At what point does a group of friends *risk* becoming a community? There *is* a way for a network of friendships to grow, transform, adjust, and remain flexible and become, as risky as it might be, a "gRoUP Of FrIeNdS"... we mustn't be relegated to a smattering of one-on-one relationships – and even if we wanted to, it would eventually cause a strain – either on you as you try to maintain isolated friendships, or on others, as they inevitably mingle and a web of connections develops.

I wonder if the way forward is simpler than I'm making it out to be: In as many of your relationships as possible, no matter the depth or degree of the connection, strive to ensure your interactions are guided by notions of friendship – that they are personal, flexible, available to the spontaneity that is natural to any free-acting person. By maintaining relationships that actively reject elements of power, authority, and coercion, you keep the corruptibility of a community at bay. I believe that a "friend group" devoid of this level of thoughtfulness will fall into the same old traps that exist everywhere in the social sphere.

Friendship is not immune to the evil forces at work in an authoritative world, but I feel more and more that it is our best hope at building a life outside of the "concrete walls that contain us."

A toast! To friendship! Keep it real, keep it wild, and may the winds of freedom dance between us!

And I'm just going to put this words from Kahlil Gibran here as a little dessert:

And a youth said, Speak to us of Friendship.  
And he answered, saying:  
Your friend is your needs answered.  
He is your field which you sow with love and reap with thanksgiving.  
And he is your board and your fireside.  
For you come to him with your hunger, and you seek him for peace.

When your friend speaks his mind you fear not the "nay" in your own mind, nor do you withhold the "ay."

And when he is silent your heart ceases not to  
listen to his heart;  
For without words, in friendship, all thoughts, all  
desires, all expectations are born and shared, with  
joy that is unacclaimed.  
When you part from your friend, you grieve not;  
For that which you love most in him may be  
clearer in his absence, as the mountain to the  
climber is clearer from the plain.  
And let there be no purpose in friendship save the  
deepening of the spirit.  
For love that seeks aught but the disclosure of its  
own mystery is not love but a net cast forth: and  
only the unprofitable is caught.  
And let your best be for your friend.  
If he must know the ebb of your tide, let him  
know its flood also.  
For what is your friend that you should seek him  
with hours to kill?  
Seek him always with hours to live.  
For it is his to fill your need but not your  
emptiness.  
And in the sweetness of friendship let there be  
laughter, and sharing of pleasures.  
For in the dew of little things the heart finds its  
morning and is refreshed.