

“Acrobatic Friendship” as a Means to D tente?

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Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind. “Pooh?” he whispered. “Yes, Piglet?”
 “Nothing,” said Piglet, taking Pooh’s hand. “I just wanted to be sure of
 you.”¹

Friends, even fictional bears and piglets, recognize and affirm each other’s needs, something made possible by their shared intimacy, mutual caring, and historicity. Their relational actuality in time and place, and the facts of that history, compose their mutuality so that simple utterances and silent gestures between them can communicate profound meaning. Often in friendship, speech and sightless sound are ferried by linguistic communion (*Piglet sidled up to Pooh from behind. “Pooh?” he whispered. “Yes, Piglet?”*); and friendship’s intimacy and mutual caring is consummated in kind affection (*“Nothing,” said Piglet, taking Pooh’s hand. “I just wanted to be sure of you.”*). Friendship’s emotions and noble actions can’t be more evident than in *The House at Pooh Corner*.

In “Acrobatic Friendship: A Path to Nurture Friendship in the Midst of Political Dissonance,” Kanako W. Ide offers a means to friendship for political antagonists through lessons learned from “the art and friendship practice” of Ikebana, the disciplined art of flower arrangement. Through an analysis of Allen’s arguments for “political friendship,” Saito’s “Emersonian friendship, and Ikebana International’s practices, Ide presents a case for an “acrobatic friendship” that can “hold both disagreements and intimacy alongside non-verbal communication through the mediums of art and nature.”² The desired end is to have a “type of friendship” that resists political tension.

But is resistance to political tension as offered by the conflict-free space of Ikebana really able to build the path to mutual respect and consensual agreement that characterize friendship between adversaries? If, for example, we consider Derrida’s account of the *politics* of friendship, the actions and emotions

that enable the virtuous social bond so necessary for community, friendship’s *politics* include intimacy and hurtfulness, both tension-filled states of being.³ The politics of friendship—and by extension, I would argue, political friendship—is messy; it’s full of communicated anxieties, intimacies, animosities, vulnerabilities, and responsiveness. It is in (and through) the messiness of the politics of friendship that friends communicate emotions of woundedness, affinity, and reciprocity. Ultimately, it is through the friendship’s *politics*—the negotiations of the messiness—that we can settle dissonance by recognizing ourselves in the Other in time and place. It seems to me that Ikebana International’s silent, disciplined, minimalist, and “politically gravity-free space where people can gather without conflict” ignores the messiness, or more to the point, disregards and discounts the messiness as a historicity that makes friendship possible. This is especially important to ponder given the contexts that define friendships, especially cross-cultural political friendships, for example. In cultures where silence is a sign of resistance, for example, how does the silence in Ikebana practice help those friendships develop when there is a disagreement?

Chelsea Clinton’s “friendship” with Ivanka Trump does not serve Ide’s analysis well, in my view. If acrobatic friendship is to serve as a “path to nurture friendship in the midst of political dissonance,” Clinton and Trump must first be friends, and it’s not certain that they ever were truly “friends.” What do you really know about the Clinton-Trump friendship? Did it even *really* exist? When Clinton announces in 2020 that they had not spoken since 2016, what was their friendship like before then? What evidence is there of shared intimacy? Mutuality? Their historicity, as far as we know, extends only to their parents’ political careers. Their status and experiences as “First Daughter” are quite different and unshared, as far as we know. Clinton was a First Daughter as a young adolescent through her young adulthood; Trump became a First Daughter in adulthood at age 36. What evidence do you have that they were anything other than *acquaintances* in political circles in which the term “friend” is used as a polite casual reference meant for public consumption? As such, I worry many unfounded claims about a Chelsea-Ivanka friendship weakens the argument about the value of “acrobatic friendship.”

Perhaps a better example of friendship that can serve as a theoretical anchor is the long friendship between ideological opposites Supreme Court Justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsberg, especially because it is well-documented. Their mutual love of opera and theatre bonded them in ways that may be consistent with the conceptualization of “acrobatic friendship.” The Bader Ginsburg-Scalia friendship began in the 1980s when they were both serving on the federal circuit court in Washington, D.C. The Justices shared similar histories growing up in Brooklyn, N.Y. Each born to immigrant parents, they connected over their shared outsider status in the legal profession: Scalia, a conservative Catholic Italian-American man, and Bader Ginsburg, a liberal Jewish woman of Austrian-Russian descent. For decades, these friends and their families vacationed together, and with their families, spent each New Year’s Eve together. In a sense, their opposing views on the Constitution was “acrobatic,” and could be understood as a “space of social paradox” for the Justices, but not as a “politically gravity-free space where people can gather together without conflicts.” In fact, it was their emotions and noble actions as friends that enabled them to engage with the *politics* of conflict. Their conflicts were never context-free. Rather, it was the messiness of their friendship that was unavoidable and actually enabled resolution. In their case, the friendship resolution was their decision to agree to disagree, and as friends Bader Ginsburg and Scalia did so very, very often. They respected and admired each other; they enjoyed each other’s company. Bader Ginsburg and Scalia were *sure* of each other.

If committed to Ivanka Trump as the grounding anchor for friendship in an era of political dissonance, I recommend a consideration of Trump’s ten-year friendship with Lysandra Ohrstrom, whose political positions diverge greatly from Trump’s. Ohrstrom’s essay on her long friendship with Ivanka, one forged in adolescence and challenged in adulthood, certainly provides the historicity and friendship politics from which to more effectively make the case for “acrobatic friendship” through Ikebana.⁴ Ohrstrom describes their shared intimacies as young girls, the foundation for their shared recognition. They shared economic and class status, educational comradery, and adolescent and young adult alliances. But despite their historicity, Ohrstrom ultimately discerns that

their “friendship” had always lacked an essential condition, genuine mutuality. After many years, Ohrstrom determines their sororal friendship was based on a counterfeit mutuality that did not allow for the pair to explain or to accept accountability for their actions and positions. In other words, their alliance lacked the mutuality to engage with the messiness. Ohrstrom comes to realize that her friendship with Trump lacked the intimacy and mutual caring necessary to work through the messy tensions of dissonant political positions. Even with their shared history, it seems that Ohrstrom was never really *sure* about Ivanka; that is to say, she was never really *sure* that Ivanka would care enough to hold her hand when Ohrstrom needed it. If, as political opposites they were to engage in friendship acrobatics to reconcile and even create concord beyond utility, it seems that both Ohrstrom and Trump have to be certain of the other; each has to be ‘sure’ of the other’s friendship.

Like Pooh and Piglet, friendship amidst political dissonance appears to necessitate that friends communicate being *sure* of each other within the friendship. They must communicate what the friendship’s historicity has brought to the relationship; how intimacy is developed and shared in the relationship; and how caring for the other is mutual. In this sense, the assertion that acrobatic friendship reclaims the importance of genuine (in my view, tangible) intimacy for resolving political dissonance between friends is spot on. But I still submit that acrobatic friendship, at least as embodied by Scalia and Bader Ginsburg, doesn’t happen “*only* at a moment and *only* in the space when and where people are secured from political tension.” It was their intimacy and mutual caring borne of *communicated* emotions throughout their long friendship while on vacation together, at the opera, sharing briefs and opinions in court, and at their New Year’s Eve family dinners that made them *sure* of each other. I am not convinced that Ikebana’s “non-verbal methods of communication” will enable friends like Scalia and Bader Ginsburg to engage in political disagreement.

But it is true that in friendship we sometimes don’t need linguistic communication to convey our emotions and our positions. Pooh’s is a silent, bodied offering to Piglet that shows care and compassion for his friend. Pooh does not *ask* Piglet if holding his hand is what Piglet needs to ease his anxiety; Pooh just

knows (and feels Piglet's need), and extends his hand wordlessly. Can "acrobatic friendship" as practiced by Ikebana International nurture the trust necessary between political antagonists to silently, wordlessly resolve their differences? I am not convinced that silence between two political adversaries who are not *sure* of each other really pave the path toward détente and a union of hearts.

1 A. A. Milne, *The House at Pooh Corner* (Dutton Books for Young Readers, Penguin, USA, 1988), 130.

2 Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Naoko Saito and Hiromi Kimura, *America no Idainaru Tetsugakusha Emerson karano Dengon: Jibun wo Kaeru _Toiukoto [Message from Ralph Waldo Emerson]*, (Tokyo: Gentosha, 2019), 140-179; Kanako W. Ide, "Acrobatic Friendship: A Path to Nurture Friendship in the Midst of Political Dissonance," *Philosophy of Education* 77, no.3, 2021.

3 Jacques Derrida, "Politics of friendship," *American Imago* 50, no. 3 (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, MD, 1993), 353-391.

4 Lysandra Ohrstrom, "Ivanka Trump was My Best Friend and Now She's MAGA Royalty," *Vanity Fair* (2020). See <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2020/11/ivanka-trump-was-my-best-friend-now-shes-maga-royalty>