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THE BIG PONDER

In Friendship

By Bilal Qureshi

Bilal Qureshi: Sunday, March 29th, 2020

[BIRTHDAY PARTY ZOOM AUDIO]

Bilal Qureshi: Two weeks after the Coronavirus was declared a global pandemic, I threw my first virtual birthday party. It was March and so in the spirit of Spring, I bought flowers, draped fabrics over the sofa and wore pink. Friends gathered from around the world in a series of video screens, smiling, blowing horns and kisses.

Bilal Qureshi [ON ZOOM]: "... that all of you and all of your families stay super healthy. That we stay close while staying apart and that we continue to be in touch and I'm so grateful to all of you and i really have the utmost gratitude of love for each of you and thank you guys so much for coming."

Random friends [ON ZOOM]: We love you BQ. Love you. Love you!

Bilal Qureshi: It was a wonderful birthday party – but once everyone left the Zoom screen, I felt a tinge of loneliness ... and a sense of distance that has only deepened with time. As I began thinking about friendships after that party ... why this distance from these non-familial relationships hurt so much, I stumbled onto a 15-part radio series by British academic Thomas Dixon. In the age of Facebook friends he set out to ask what exactly was the history of friendship. Thomas Dixon told me recently that if he could, he would update the series with a new chapter.

Thomas Dixon: If I could do a kind of bonus episode on it, it would be about connection and contagion 'cause connection and contagion are essentially the same word. They're about touching each other and touching another person, making contact with another person physically and the way that the idea that other people are the sources of contagion, which is so potentially terrifying and has put this distance between people and the way that that militates against that fundamental urge to connect as in E.M. Forster's motto "Only Connect." So connection and contagion would be Episode 16 if I got to make one.

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Alex Tyson: It's her birthday just say hi.

Chelsea Crawford: Hey Gabby. Happy birthday! [LAUGHS] Hey!

Alex Tyson: Okay, go get your breakfast. [LAUGHS]

David Gura: Are you in your studio right now?

Creighton Irons: I'm in it man, of course.

David Gura: Creighton built this studio, Bilal. He in his garage has made a studio.

Bilal Qureshi: As national borders sealed and we disappeared behind masks in 2020 and 2021, the golden threads of friendship endured. Technology could suddenly transcend reality in HD video and digital sound. People called, connected, laughed, cried, and shared their fears with each other with more ease than ever.

Alex Tyson: You wanna see the view?

Chelsesa Crawford: Yeah. Ooh beautiful. Aww.

Anushay Hossain: But you guys I've been watching Bridgerton and have you been watching it?

Bilal Qureshi: Brooklyn-based broadcast journalist David Gura reunited for long 'Zooms' with friends from home in North Carolina.

David Gura: And I remember those first Zooms would go on for hours, you know four to five hours. They were fueled by drink and excitement at seeing each other after a long lapse.

Anna Schmitz: This morning I was thinking about that random jazz café in Paris that we started dancing ...

Willa Obel: Oh my god that's one of my favorite memories! That was so weird and so lovely.

Anna Schmitz: And I think it either started or finished with us eating an entire block of butter together.

Willa Obel: Yes, yeah and we were there with Jimmy and Richard and how unexpected?

Jessica Lewis: Wait, Richard was there? [LAUGHS]

Willa Obel: Yes, yes Andrew and we were dancing ... it was literally something out of Aristocrats.

Oliver Brod: Through all this pandemic, it was very, very important for me to have the ability and the possibility to share my thoughts and feelings over telephone, over video conferencing tools, whatever and being connected to a soul that is very important for me.

Bilal Qureshi: Oliver Brod and I met ten years ago in Berlin as professional colleagues working in radio. Hallo Oliver, this is Bilal.

Oliver Brod: Hi from Berlin.

Bilal Qureshi: We've become dear friends and edited this program together virtually.

Oliver Brod: I feel a kind of, a lot of strength and power coming from this connection and also sharing other people's problems and other people's fears and angers about this pandemic situation and being not able to see the other one but to imagine the other one because you know your good friend so well that you can imagine how he would say that, and how he's sitting there. So this imagination of someone being very close to me ... seeing his picture while we talk, is building up a very, very important emotional stability factor in my life.

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Anjana Das: Every conversation I have is one where at some stage we're talking about our feelings, ourselves, our emotional state and that is not something I would say I do a lot of in non-pandemic times.

Bilal Qureshi: Designer Anjana Das also lives in Berlin.

Anjana Das: Because you only want to bare your soul or your worries or your insecurities to people who are really, that my definition of sanctuary kind of friends, for me I've really stopped talking to people who I don't trust with my life.

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Bilal Qureshi: The conversations that required so much effort and often so much brutal honesty clarified friendships. Some became stronger and others faded. As I began asking friends about their own friendships, I discovered that many people turned over this year to old friends.

Dawn Benedetto: I've been friends with Melissa since college, and honestly I don't know the year, it would be before '93.

Melissa Gray: 1989.

Jody Lambert: Uh well I think Marisa and I have known each other since 1993. Is that correct?

Marisa Katz: 94.

David Gura: I've known Creighton. Oh my god ... since like elementary school sort of?

Creighton Irons: We've known each other at least 25 years.

Marisa Katz: 27 years of knowing each other, I've gotta make sure that I speak to Jody because I know that his perspective, his lived experience is going to help me in understanding my own.

Jody Lambert: Oh, thank you.

Bilal Qureshi: Relationships seasoned and weathered with memories. Lived-in friendships.

Anushay Hossain: I mean I've called her crying from Dhaka, I have called her crying from Brighton, I've called her crying from Florence, from Rome, I've called her crying from so many ... she is ...

Krystal Hawke: All right Kendall and I met in third grade. So 30 years. 30 years. [LAUGHS]

Kendall Rice: 32 for me because I'm like a year older than most of them.

Bilal Qureshi: But I also started thinking about the vocabulary of friendships. How we learn the idea of friendship. What exactly are these relationships? Who do I call a friend? And why? Beena Kamlani is a literary editor and novelist in New York City. She thinks deeply and professionally about language.

Beena Kamlani: I'm going to look at this word 'friendship.' What does it mean really? So I thought okay we all know what this is but try defining it. Uhm, apart from these really simplistic words – love, affection, devotion, companionship – the complexities of true friendship are just hard to define. Hard to pin them down.

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Oliver Brod: [LAUGHS] First thing that comes to my mind is an old 'Schlager' from the 30s or 20s from the Comedian Harmonists, an a cappella band. Maybe you know them. "Ein Freund, ein guter Freund. Das ist das Beste, was es gibt auf der Welt."

[SINGING]

"Ein Freund, ein guter Freund
Das ist das Beste, was es gibt auf der Welt
Ein Freund bleibt immer Freund
auch wenn die ganze Welt zusammenfällt."

And I don't know the text anymore.

Bilal Qureshi: And the translation of it would be?

Oliver Brod: A friend, a good friend, is the best thing that is in in the world. A friend always stays your friend, even if the whole world collapses.

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Bilal Qureshi: The collapse of the world as we knew it led me to return to the city where I met Oliver Brod, who you just heard singing in German. I met Oliver during one a one-year exchange program in 2011 sponsored by the Bosch Foundation. Before I moved to Germany with 19 other Americans that year, we had an orientation session in Washington D.C. What I imagined would be a straightforward introduction to international exchange programs, turned out instead to be an emotional guide on how Americans and Germans were not natural friends. This is the story of the Coconut and the Peach.

Willa Obel: And we were all at some hotel conference room and they described Americans as peaches. Like very soft and sweet on the outside but like a pit inside. [LAUGHS] Like, hard potentially and I think the real metaphor there was more like it's hard to get much further than the surface with Americans even though they seem real friendly on the outside. And then with Germans the comparison was coconuts so they're hard and scratchy and odd and difficult on the outside but lovely on the inside and like once you're in, you're in.

Bilal Qureshi: Jessica what did you remember about that discussion around how not to make friends or to make friends?

Jessica Lewis: It's really funny to me because they really do think that we're fake. They think that like us going around and being like, hey, how are you! Like, how's your day? They don't think we mean any of that which I think maybe there's a little bit of truth to that but I think also we are maybe genuinely nice. I kind of think that. [LAUGHS] So it seems a little bit of a stretch. The coconut metaphor does make some sense to me for Germans, because they are a little bristly.

Bilal Qureshi: Anna it's your turn.

Anna Schmitz: It seemed to me like they were kind of trying for us not to be discouraged by that kind of interaction so they were trying to help us understand that not very many people will get into the coconut at all.

Bilal Qureshi: It was a funny session, but lessons were learned. I'd never really given the abstract idea of 'friendship' much thought. To what extent did I have an American idea of friendship. To what extent was it actually rooted in my Pakistani heritage. Surely, we're all experts on friendships and know what we're doing. After we finally arrived in Germany, I began language school, where my teacher Stefan Endres explained that this more formal German culture of friendships included linguistic distinctions, too. Unlike the American word 'friend' – used casually across categories – the German word 'Freund' was reserved

for a small batch of relationships. The majority of people could be catalogued without guilt more precisely as colleagues or acquaintances.

Stefan Endres: 'Bekannte.'

Bilal Qureshi: A word that's since become one of my favorite German words.

Stefan Endres: Someone you know from work or you know from maybe your neighborhood but is not a direct neighbor. You know from other interactions. Bekannte.

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Mena Hanna: I have become much more rigorous and defensive and territorial about friendship as I've aged [LAUGHS] so like I think that like made me understand the German model or the German paradigm a little bit more, of friendship.

Bilal Qureshi: Mena Hanna is an Egyptian-American composer and musicologist living in Berlin.

Mena Hanna: So like as I've gotten older, I have been a bit more tentative and hesitant as to who I can refer to as a friend and who isn't a friend. In America, in Germany, it doesn't really matter where I am.

Bilal Qureshi: During the pandemic, my American friends Melissa Gray and Shereen Abdel-Nabi described how they too began making lists and distinctions between friends.

Melissa Gray: I've totally written a bunch of people off. [LAUGHS] It's just I don't have ... I'm here with a three-ring circus and then I have work and then I have my extended family and so you know during this time of the pandemic, what I have done is ... I don't do this consciously but as I sit here and think about it. It's like I immediately drew lines.

Shereen Abdel-Nabi: For the ones that didn't make the cut, a lot of it is again just not getting what I felt like I was putting into it. You know the old cliché of just growing apart or growing into different people. There are also people you keep in your life for old time's sake or just because. There's a word for it in Arabic called 'aashra,' which is sort of the history that's there. So people stay in your life for that history, but maybe you're not really in touch anymore or maybe you don't have that much in common but you have that shared history.

Anushay Hossain: Aww ...

Shereen Ebdel-Nabi: Yeah I mean it makes ... a history is sort of the shorthand but it's that. I don't know how to describe it. [LAUGHS]

Anushay Hossain: I love that.



Bilal Qureshi: Arguments over politics, over quarantine, over childcare led to unexpected tensions in friendships. And some distances proved difficult to bridge despite all the digital connections. I myself watched some friendships fade to black. Again, my former Berlin teacher Stefan Endres about the German concept of 'Freundschaft.'

Stefan Endres: You know it's a value that can also be hurt, be broken. So it's like 'verletzte Freundschaft.' Like a hurt friendship. So we wouldn't just say okay, we're not friends anymore, wir sind keine Freunde mehr, okay – but there's also the feeling of verletzte Freundschaft which means you know we were trusting, we were sharing ideas and activities and thoughts and values and something broke this bond. That's also like 'Das Band der Freundschaft'.



Thomas Dixon: I'm Thomas Dixon, and I'm a Professor of History at Queen Mary University of London where I work at the Centre for the History of the Emotions. So for quite a long time I've been thinking about feelings and emotions and how they've changed in the past, and how they've changed over time. And a few years ago I made a series for BBC Radio 4 called *500 Years of Friendship* and the title is pretty self-explanatory.

Bilal Qureshi: And can I ask you why you decided to trace friendship in particular and to of course take it as far back as the Renaissance period because in a way I feel it's one of those words that we all think we understand, like, I know how to be friends, everyone has friends. But you chose to give it a much more thorough exploration.

Thomas Dixon: Yes. Well actually only this week, I'm really ashamed to admit this, did I look up the etymology of 'friend,' which as you may know comes from an Old English word meaning 'free' ... and so in fact a friend is someone who frees you, or sets you free, which is really a lovely image which I hadn't come across before. But that's going back more than 500 years. The reason for the approach we took in that series was that we'd been used to the idea of Facebook friends, which seemed to have changed the meaning of that word 'friend' when you could have – in some people's cases, not mine – several hundred or even one or two thousand friends on Facebook.

Bilal Qureshi: Well you know I was really interested in and I became very interested in the subject actually in 2012 because I moved to Germany for some time and as part of our training, one of the things that they talked to us about was how difficult it was for Americans to make friends in Germany.

Thomas Dixon: Oh my goodness. [LAUGHS]

Bilal Qureshi: It was a quite goofy training exercise but they told us Americans were like peaches, warm and fuzzy on the outside ... but sort of rather sort of empty and pitiful on the

inside and that Germans were like coconuts, very hard on the exterior but once you unlocked the shell, you could, this wonderful juice of friendship could flow.

Thomas Dixon: Those are both super weird images to start with.

Bilal Qureshi: Really weird. Peaches and coconuts exactly. And so it created this idea that the cold reserve of Germans that was the stereotype that maybe Americans had in going was just kind of holding a different and perhaps a more demanding idea of friendship within it.

Thomas Dixon: Absolutely and there have certainly been studies that have shown that friendship, you know, varies around the world. Obviously, there are different words for it in every language and some of those more similar to the English 'friend' and some of them more different. Every culture has an idea that's a bit like friendship but it will vary as to how many you have, how important they are and in cultures which are perhaps more traditional and put more emphasis on the family, then the notion of the friend might be less prominent.

Bilal Qureshi: In your series you identify these three systems of friendship, the three distinct forms in which friendship has been expressed and tends to be organized.

Thomas Dixon: Yeah absolutely. So looking across the centuries and trying to organize the different varieties of friendship that we came across and all the different experts we spoke to and the periods we looked at – it seemed to we'd seen friendships go through three phases or three different types, all of which are still with us to some extent. So if you go back to pre-modern times in medieval or early modern Europe, the vast majority of people would live in small villages and would live in close proximity to a lot of people that they are closely related to. So that the first category is familial or kinship relationships, which are described as friends but we might describe as family primarily. So that's one. Then the second sense is perhaps a slightly more modern sense of friendship, which is instrumental. So that your friends really, you're not related to them by blood, you may not have a very emotional relationship with them, but they are useful to you and you to them. They are your allies. They support you maybe in business or politics. If you like, a kind of self-interested relationship. I call that instrumental friendship to draw attention to that practical, and, if you like, self-serving nature of it. And then thirdly is what I think is certainly in the culture I grew up in the dominant sense of friend, which is like BFF, best friend forever, the emotional friendship and that's the one that we inherit from Renaissance writers, classical Greek and Roman writers for whom friendship, in most of those historical examples between men, was held up as the highest form of spiritual and intellectual connection that you could have. It was a meeting of minds, a marriage of minds, some sources said, and that emotional sense that you find your soulmate in your friend. It's, as I say, one that is quite dominant in our culture in the West, but is not the only sense and I think all three senses persist today.

Bilal Qureshi: I want to ask you now about the sort of year that we've been through because some of the essays that people have been writing, and think pieces about the year and the psychology of the year, I suppose the emotional inner experience of the year, have dealt with

loneliness and the kind of the loneliness epidemic that goes alongside this disease. And I wonder how you've been observing and reading and thinking about this time in that regard.

Thomas Dixon: I guess one thing this really brought out was the difference that people still very much experience and are aware of between online connection and physical in person connection. I suppose one of the overwhelmingly obvious things about the last year is that people have found online connections by and large to be a very unsatisfactory alternative. So I guess that demonstrates there's a limit to the extent to which technology can take our friendships and put them entirely online because the evidence would seem to show that most people find that not at all satisfying emotionally.



Bilal Qureshi: My interest in Zooming with friends has faded. I miss my friends desperately, in physical form, in nearness I can see and I can feel.

Ranty Islam: My name is Ranty Islam. I'm an educator. I used to be a journalist and way back I used to be an astrophysicist. And my feeling is that whenever I speak to friends, the talking is the thinking for me so this is where I get my ideas. This is what drives me, what inspires me. Digital technologies that have been hailed as connecting the world, reconnecting you to your friends, they haven't really delivered for me. Because certainly I felt like, I was aware that it's more than just exchanging like wave forms via digital channels but being able to also look other people in the eye, catch the vibes, the kind of haptic feedback if you like in whatever slight way there is ... and that's all been missing. In retrospect, I guess I realized that's part of having proper conversations beyond just exchanging words.



Marc Ohrem-Leclef: And I mean it's also been a year where I've thought very intensely about what happens to this culture of touch and us being close which each other, you know.

Bilal Qureshi: Marc Ohrem-LeClef is a photographer and for the past several years he has been documenting the physically intimate friendships between men in India. In contrast to his own German background, he says he was deeply moved by the tenderness, and physical expressions of affection between men in India ... from holding hands to speaking more openly about their affection for one another.

Marc Ohrem-Leclef: You know I grew up in Germany but with the French relatives, I would kiss the whole family including the boys and the men like twice when we would see each other ... but then also thinking about, you know, India and how along with Western culture becoming more of a dominant force in India, it made me wonder if that may push further towards killing those gestures and those expressions of friendship. It certainly makes you think about what makes a friendship, and how to take care of it, how to maintain proximity.

Jessica Lewis: Bilal, you were asking if this past year has helped redefine our idea of friendship, right? And I think it has for me, and this is going to maybe come out sounding a little bit weird but if you think of friendship as you would like kind of also a romantic relationship like when people are gone, do you miss them, you know? [LAUGHS] This year has helped cement that. When you're thinking about people and you go gosh like I miss that person, I miss connecting with them, I miss hanging out with them. And that really cements in your mind that's a friendship I want to keep, that's a friendship I want to foster. And then there are others where you go, gosh I totally forgot about that person, right, and then you go okay well maybe I don't have to spend too much time on that one in the first place.

Willa Obel: Uhm all those people that you just kind of interact with casually, where you're not putting a lot of energy into it, they're not there now. There are no casual interactions. Everything takes effort. Everything you have to put energy into it. And at least speaking for myself, I'm at capacity, basically, all the time now. So to be [LAUGHS] putting energy into something, you have to really want it to be there so you make choices everyday with work, your kids, and your home and friendship.

Beena Kamlani: It is work, but I will say that for me it's the best kind of work. I just love my friendships and during this time – this horrible, isolated time that we were never prepared for, that we couldn't have been prepared for – had it not been for all these friends calling in from everywhere, you know, are you okay? How is it? What's happening? I know that there are protests, I know that this is happening, I know that that is happening. Are you all right? Don't go out. Don't do this. If it weren't for all these people calling in every weekend, wondering about you and how you are, and that they care enough to pick up the phone and call and say, I'm thinking about you. That is so meaningful in the context of our lives today.

Thomas Miller: Well I think certainly future historians of emotions will look back on this as a major turning point in the history of modern emotional life because it has brought all of these things into focus.

Bilal Qureshi: Friendships have been like the flickering candles in the darkness of this year ... ensuring there is light both during and at the end of this tunnel. One of my newest friendships is with my nephew. He turned 11 during the pandemic and he's stayed in touch with his own friends on Zoom and through gaming systems.

Bilal Qureshi: Zayn can you come sit here for a second. I'm going to say hi, I'm Bilal.

Zayn Mufti: I'm Zayn.

Bilal Qureshi: So Zayn I'm doing this project about friendship. I want to know what is your definition of a friendship.

Zayn Mufti: I don't know why you chose this project. It just overcomplicates everything for you. Like you choose your friends. There's nothing to it. You like you someone. You guys have a good relationship and you find stuff that you like in common and everything and you make fun jokes with each other and that's all it is. I don't know why you're trying to over complicate things: what breakout friendship, do they come back and all that. Just relax okay. [LAUGHS] It's just people who are nice to you and people who are like just, you feel that are ... you feel safe being around and comfortable. Com-fort around.

Bilal Qureshi: Point made and taken. Perhaps, friendship is indeed not so complicated. But sometimes the simplest truths can feel like the toughest lessons to learn. I certainly feel closer after this year to a definition and a recognition of true friendship.

In closing, I'd like to thank all the friends who shared their stories with me. In the United States, Anna Schmitz, Willa Obel, Jessica Lewis, Beena Kamlani. The friend couples you heard included Anushay Hossain and Shereen Abdel-Nabi, Chelsea Crawford and Alex Tyson, Melissa Gray and Dawn Benedetto, David Gura and Creighton Irons, Kendall Rice and Krystal Hawke, Marisa Katz and Jody Lambert. In Germany, Marc Ohrem-LeClef, Mena Hanna, Anjana Das, Ranty Islam ... and my trusted co-producer and dear friend Oliver Brod. Last but not least, I'd like to thank my nephew, Zayn Mufti.

Again, I'm Bilal Qureshi and you've been listening to THE BIG PONDER.

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