



Thoughts from Linda:

**How to Be a Friend:**

*An Ancient Guide to True Friendship*

Marcus Tullius Cicero

44 BC

Translated and with an introduction

by Philip Freeman

2018

This little book of 177 pages (only 88 of them in English) is among the last written words of one of the world's most important people, Marcus Tullius Cicero, who lived from 106 BC to December of 43 BC. It is presented with his written Latin on one page, facing the English translation on the other page. As a former student of Latin (5 years of it, a long time ago) I loved reading the book and enjoyed the scan of the Latin at the same time. Whether you know any Latin today or not, this book is filled with wisdom and presents a view into the mind of one of the greatest orators and writers of all time.

Cicero was a Roman statesman, scholar, philosopher, lawyer and academic who held to what were called 'optimate principles' during the chaotic years that led to the formation of the Roman Empire. While there is a debate among historians about this term, it is generally believed to reflect a support of the Roman Senate as the ultimate source of power in the state. His life story (check him out on Wikipedia) is most interesting and the conditions of the time have a strange resemblance to many of the fundamental political issues of today. Plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose.

Cicero is considered one of the greatest of Rome's orators and served as consul in 63 BC. His influence on the Latin language was remarkable. He wrote over  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the Latin literature that is known to have existed during his lifetime.

For those of you who have not suffered through years of Latin, here is a quick aside and overview. The Latin language is a classical language and was originally spoken around present-day Rome. It became the dominant language throughout the Roman Republic and later throughout the Roman Empire. It lived on after the fall of the Roman Empire and became the ancestor of the Romance languages. It is today a dead language. Not so easy to learn, it has three distinct genders, six or seven noun cases,

five declensions, four verb conjugations, six tenses, three persons, three moods, two voices, two of three aspects and two numbers. The alphabet used is based on the Etruscan and Greek alphabets.

Few languages have had the impact of Latin in the world, and languages are disappearing at an accelerated rate today. Of the 7,000 documented languages currently spoken across the world, some 50% of them could be endangered. Predictions are that 1500 of these known languages may no longer be spoken by the end of this century. In this book, we have the opportunity to read the master of the Latin language and a man who influenced speech and academic thought for centuries. To hear his voice as he reflects on the topic of friendship, is quite a journey through his values and ethical beliefs about right and wrong. His writings also reflect his many years of living as a powerful man, in a society where politics were dominant and many sought favor with a man of his stature.

Cicero's letters were rediscovered by Petrarch and are given credit for initiating a Renaissance of public affairs and humanism in the 14th century. According to Polish historian Tadeusz Zieliński, "the Renaissance was above all things a revival of Cicero, and only after him and through him, of the rest of Classical antiquity." His works influenced not only the Romans and subsequent 14th century thinkers, but are also credited for their influence on the 18th century Enlightenment notables such as John Locke, David Hume, and Edmund Burke. His writings today still constitute an important body of primary material for understanding Roman history, especially the last days of the Roman Republic.

He wrote this treatise in 44 BC, when he was in his 60s, and shortly before his death at the hand of Mark Anthony. He was an old man for the times, living in exile, having been sent away by Julius Caesar. The politics of those days were complex and Cicero, who had actually been invited to join Julius Caesar as a fourth member of his leadership, but declined, had been pushed aside and sent away from the active conversations and heated debates of Rome. He had refused Caesar's invitation some 20 years earlier, thinking it would have undermined the Republic, which of course, was true. In December of 43 BC he suffered an ignominious death at the hands of Mark Anthony, who had him both beheaded and otherwise disfigured, so that his body could be publicly displayed in Rome, signaling the brutality of the revolt underway and the fall of the Republic.

This treatise on friendship was written during the year, 44 BC, prior to his death and the subsequent events. Living in exile, over a period of several months he wrote some

of his most significant essays, ranging from the nature of the gods to the correct role of government among men to the “joys of growing older and the secret to finding happiness in life.”

This book was entitled *De Amicitia* in the Latin, and it builds on the works of Plato and Aristotle written hundreds of years earlier. It was dedicated to his long-time friend, Atticus. The editor, Philip Freeman, notes that “The heartfelt advice it gives is honest and moving in a way few works of ancient times are. Some Romans viewed friendship in mostly practical terms, as a relationship between people for mutual advantage. Cicero doesn’t deny that such friendships are important, but he reaches beyond the utilitarian to praise a deeper kind of friendship in which two people find in each other another self who doesn’t seek profit or advantage from the other person. He goes beyond his predecessors and creates in this short work a compelling guide to finding, keeping, and appreciating those people in our lives we value not for what they can give us, but because we find in them a kindred soul.”

Here are a few of his pieces of advice:

1. There are different kinds of friendships.
2. Only good people can be true friends.
3. We should choose our friends with care.
4. Friends make you a better person.
5. Make new friends, but keep the old.
6. Friends are honest with each other.
7. The reward of friendship is friendship itself.
8. A friend never asks another friend to do something wrong.
9. Friendships can change over time.
10. Without friends, life is not worth living.

These may not sound like revelatory thoughts, but in his day, many of them were just that.

And, the pleasure in reading his logic behind each of these beliefs is worth the read. I highly recommend this book for anyone interested in classical history and the minds of historical figures, especially in the domain of interpersonal relationships. There are not so many original writings that take you so deeply into the thinking and emotional landscape of a man of this stature.

The author/editor, Philip Freeman, is a graduate of the University of Texas, and received his PhD from Harvard. He has taught at Boston University, Washington

University, Luther College and now holds the Fletcher Jones Chair of Western Culture at Pepperdine University. He is an enthusiastic professor and writer of the classics and is also active on NPR and as a visiting lecturer at the American Academy in Rome and at Harvard Divinity School.