IN AN article, “True love: Let’s calculate the odds”, which appeared in the Sunday paper on Oct 6, Mr Michael Kaplan writes of the rarity of true love. Statistically, we may find true love only once in a lifetime. But if we keep looking, one realises he means, by his reference to “true love”, romantic love.

If the only true love one can find in one’s lifetime is romantic love, this does not bode well for people who are single, or the numerous young persons of marrying age that I interact with in my job, many of whom earnestly seek to find the love of their lives.

While romantic love is what most of us gravitate towards, the happy secret is that true love may be found in other than what the ancient Greeks called eros or romantic love. Eros has been contrasted with three other types of love: philia (friendship), storge (parental love), and agape (God’s unconditional love as understood in Christian thought), or what St Augustine referred to as caritas or charity.

The sad truth, however, is that unfailling or true love of any sort between humans is a rarity in a postmodern world preoccupied with the self, where we are congenitally given to our little goals of making ourselves feel good, and flee at the first sight of trouble in our relationships.

Indeed, our unconscious emphasis on romantic love—seeing how the word “love” has been hijacked for this alone—sometimes belies self-centredness and the preference for safe investments in that one person who would give love back to us, and who would hopefully prioritise us just as we prioritise him or her.

True, most of us profess that we do not think that romance is all we need. To match our romantic comedies, Hollywood has produced occasional friendship hits such as Stand By Me, Beaches, Fried Green Tomatoes and Simon Birch. But our actions and thought patterns reveal the contrary: finding one who believes in true friendship tends to be easier than finding one who believes in true romantic love.

As C.S. Lewis once noted: “Very few modern people think friendship a love of comparable value or even a love at all... To the Ancients, friendship seemed the happiest and most fully human of all loves; the crown of life and the school of virtue. The modern world, in comparison, ignores it. We admit, of course, that besides a wife and family a man needs a few ‘friends’.

“But the very tone of the admission, and the sort of acquaintanceshapes which those who make it would describe as ‘friendships’, show clearly that what they are talking about has very little to do with that Philia which Aristotle classified among the virtues or that Amicitia on which Cicero wrote a book. It is something quite marginal; not a main course in life’s banquet; a diversification; something that fills up the chinks of one’s time.”

Our downplaying of friendship in adult life is somewhat sad when, from our childhood days, we have had a tendency to veer towards a best friend. Most come to expect less of friends after disappointments and the experience of waning friendships as people go through different phases of life.

The lack of expectations is not necessarily healthy because it may express a lack of confidence and an unwillingness to commit, in the same way we do not expect anything of an animal in the zoo.

Still, most of us would not have any difficulty describing what we think ideal friendship consists of: Friendship involves free choice and particular persons; it involves reciprocity; the parties participate in it as an end in itself; it involves a commitment into the future; it involves a predominance of reactive rather than detached attitudes.

Of course, there exists friendship of varying intensities: Kant speaks of ideal friendships of disposition, in contrast to those of need or taste; Aristotle speaks of true friendships of character, in contrast to friendships of pleasure or utility. We do not share our deepest secrets with our business associates; we may eat a satisfying burger with an acquaintance, but it is with our best friend that we think of sharing with great relish the description of our discovery of something mundane like delicious food.

That satisfaction friendship in adulthood should be a matter of regret, as friendship is potentially a rich relationship in which we experience.

In the West, there has long been two prevailing schools of thought about the value of friends. A stable friendship met one’s needs for human association and support, while the second was that friendship was a school of virtue in which one rises above instinctive self-interest and trains one’s character.

Perhaps neither view is complete. It is loathsom to treat another person solely as the means to satisfy one’s needs, as the friendships which turn inward to becoming good persons, when we perhaps do the infinite value of our friend justice only when we treat our friend relationally, by the other-directedness of love.

If it is true that love requires self-giving, putting others above one’s self and even laying down one’s life for others, it is unsurprising that we who count our interests first in a postmodern world run into immense difficulties giving true love to another human being. As one of my friends wrote even of her best friend, she has seen “how inadequate Man’s love is, how small our means”.

Still, as the writer of Sirach, a book of the Apocrypha, wrote: “A faithful friend is a sturdy shelter; whoever finds one has a treasure.”

At the end of the day, statistics aside, we cannot deny that our selfishness is one hindrance to finding true love. We may have all the opportunities in the world to know another person, but until we learn to prefer another, our budding relationships will remain potential. May we remember Emerson’s words, that to form friendship, one must first be a friend. To find the love, be prepared first to love.

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