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The best friend of Marcus Tullius Cicero was named Atticus.

His real name was Titus Pomponius, but he took the name Atticus because of his love for Greece, especially the city of Athens in the region of Attica, where he spent many years of his adult life. He and Cicero became fast friends as young men and remained so throughout their long lives. Cicero was devoted to Roman politics and spent most of his years in that turbulent city during the first century BC, a time of tremendous upheaval and civil war. Atticus, on the other hand, watched Roman politics from the safe distance of Athens while remaining in close contact with the leading men of both sides.
back in Rome. Even though they were often apart, Cicero and Atticus exchanged letters over the years that reveal a friendship of rare devotion and warm affection.

In the year 44 BC, Cicero was in his sixties—an old man by Roman standards—living on his farm outside of Rome removed from political power by the dictatorship of Julius Caesar. He turned to writing to ease the pain of exile and the recent loss of his beloved daughter. In a period of months, he produced some of the most readable and influential essays ever written on subjects ranging from the nature of the gods and the proper role of government to the joys of growing older and the secret to finding happiness in life. Among these works was a short essay on friendship dedicated to Atticus.

*How to Be a Friend*—or in Latin *De Amicitia*—is arguably the best book ever written on the
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subject. The heartfelt advice it gives is honest and moving in a way few works of ancient times are. Some Romans had 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.

Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle had written about friendship hundreds of years earlier. Indeed Cicero was deeply influenced by their writings. But Cicero 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.
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The fictional setting of the book is a discussion that took place in a garden many years earlier in 129 BC between an aged Roman general and orator named Gaius Laelius and his two younger sons-in-law, Gaius Fannius and Quintus Mucius Scaevola. Laelius was in mourning, having lost his best friend Scipio Africanus just a few days earlier. The two younger men plead with Laelius to tell them what he and Scipio learned about true friendship over their lifetime together—which, after some preliminary protest, the older man does. Cicero says that Scaevola in turn revealed to him decades later what he learned that day. Cicero was a young man at that time studying at the feet of Scaevola, who was by then an elder statesman and distinguished lawyer. Cicero then records for his friend Atticus and all his readers through the centuries the words of Laelius—in truth the words of Cicero—on the nature of friendship.

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How to Be a Friend is filled with timeless advice on friendship. Among the best is:

1. There are different kinds of friendships:
   Cicero acknowledges that there are many good people we come in contact with in our lives we call our friends, be they business associates, neighbors, or any manner of acquaintances. But he makes a key distinction between these common and quite useful friendships and those rare friends we bind ourselves to on a much deeper level. These special friendships are necessarily rare, because they require so much time and investment of ourselves. But these are the friends that deeply change our lives, just as we change theirs.

2. Only good people can be true friends:
   People of poor moral character can have friends, but they can only be friends of utility for the simple reason that real friendship requires trust,
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wisdom, and basic goodness. Tyrants and scoundrels can use each other, just as they can use good people, but bad people can never find real friendship in life.

3. **We should choose our friends with care:** We have to be deliberate about forming our friendships if for no other reason than that they can be very messy and painful to end if we find out the friend was not the person we thought. We should take our time, move slowly, and discover what lies deep in a person’s heart before we make the investment of self that true friendship requires.

4. **Friends make you a better person:** No one can thrive in isolation. Left on our own, we will stagnate and become unable to see ourselves as we are. A true friend will challenge you to become better because he appreciates the potential inside you.
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5. Make new friends, but keep the old: No one is a sweeter friend than someone who has been with you from the beginning. But don’t limit yourself to the companions of youth, whose friendship may have been based on interests you no longer share. Always be open to new friendships, including those with younger people. Both you and they will be the richer for it.

6. Friends are honest with each other: Friends will always tell you what you need to hear, not what you want them to say. There are plenty of people in the world who will flatter you for their own purposes, but only a real friend—or an enemy—will risk your anger by telling you the truth. And being a good person yourself, you should listen to your friends and welcome what they have to say.

7. The reward of friendship is friendship itself: Cicero acknowledges that there are practical
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advantages to friendship—advice, companionship, support in difficult times—but at its heart true friendship is not a business relationship. It doesn’t seek repayment, and it doesn’t keep score.

8. A friend never asks another friend to do something wrong: A friend will risk much for another, but not honor. If a friend asks you to lie, cheat, or do something shameful, consider carefully if that person is who you really thought he was. Since friendship is based on goodness, it cannot exist when evil is expected of it.

9. Friendships can change over time: Friendships from youth will not be the same in old age—nor should they be. Life changes all of us with time, but the core values and qualities that drew us to friends in years past can survive the test of time. And like fine wine, the best of friendships will improve with age.

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10. Without friends, life is not worth living: Or as Cicero says: “Suppose a god carried you far away to a place where you were granted an abundance of every material good nature could wish for, but denied the possibility of ever seeing a human being. Wouldn’t you have to be as hard as iron to endure that sort of life? Wouldn’t you, utterly alone, lose every capacity for joy and pleasure?”

Cicero’s little book on friendship had a tremendous influence on writers in the ages following him, from St. Augustine to the Italian poet Dante and beyond, and was one of the earliest books translated into and printed in English. It is no less valuable today. In a modern age of technology and a relentless focus on the self that threatens the very idea of deep and lasting friendships, Cicero has more to say to us than ever.

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