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Emily K. Ferkaluk
Cedarville University, emilykferkaluk@cedarville.edu

Justin D. Lyons
(Editor), justinlyons@cedarville.edu

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A Beautiful Life in *Charlotte's Web*

Emily Ferkaluk

E.B. White's tender tale of the friendship between a spider and a pig is really a story about the potential beauty inherent in any life. Life is brief, yet it can be lovely if we are willing to risk true friendship.

What is True Friendship?

The friendship that is key to the story begins on a rainy day that spoils the pig Wilbur's plans to stay busy, so that instead he is forced to sit and keenly feel his loneliness. He flounders in dejection, hunger, and a dose of medicine forced down his throat. Charlotte has watched Wilbur's self-wallowing behavior on the worst day of his life but still announces: "I like you."

Thus begins a friendship that enriches both lives. While Wilbur had experienced the love of Fern as a baby, his friendship with Charlotte challenges his notion of love. Fern gave Wilbur an instantaneous love that compelled her to nurture him. It was easy to love Fern in return. Upon first meeting Charlotte, Wilbur thinks: "'But what a gamble friendship is! Charlotte is fierce, brutal, scheming, and bloodthirsty—everything I don't like. How can I learn to like her, even though she is pretty and, of course, clever?'"

Wilbur has discovered the difficulty of friendship. What is true friendship? It is not based on physical beauty or "cleverness"—i.e., what another can do for you. Friendship can be true if it is by choice and compels us towards selfless actions for the sake of the other. Charlotte can hardly see Wilbur at all because she is near-sighted. Unlike Fern, who fell

in love at first *sight*, Charlotte chooses to love Wilbur despite knowing his bad qualities and not seeing his physical ones. Charlotte also chooses friendship with Wilbur despite their differences. Charlotte is cleverer and smarter—she has more “know-how”—than Wilbur. Wilbur is fearful; Charlotte, cool and collected. Yet as far as Charlotte is concerned, Wilbur is terrific and sensational. The beauty in her friendship of choice is that it doesn’t matter what others think, only the opinion of the friend.

Additionally, the spider and pig form a friendship out of mutual respect for the other’s good qualities. The spider is proud to know that Wilbur isn’t a quitter, demonstrated through Wilbur’s trying to “spin a web” for the first time. Wilbur is modest, unspoiled even by fame. Charlotte loves this purity of heart (Proverbs 22:11), and she can love it in part because her own heart is kind, loyal, affectionate, skillful, and true.

Finally, Charlotte serves Wilbur even when she herself is tired, and she serves him faithfully until her death. The ultimate act of true friendship is sacrificial love. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Throughout the tale, Wilbur doesn’t appear to serve Charlotte to the same degree. However, by the end of *Charlotte’s Web*, Wilbur exclaims that he would gladly give his life for Charlotte. And he does, in a way, fulfill that desire. The rest of his life is spent befriending Charlotte’s children and grandchildren. That selfless gift isn’t death, but a life spent in enjoyment of the other and for the sake of the other.

The Beauty Friendship Lends to a Life of Necessity

Eventually Wilbur looks past Charlotte’s beauty and cleverness and instead sees the virtue in Charlotte’s way of life. Charlotte lives according to nature and necessity. Charlotte loves Wilbur in part because his smelly pen and stale food attract the flies she needs to survive (much to Wilbur’s disgust, since he cannot stand killing). There is a utilitarian aspect to her friendship. Yet there are also limits to the role that necessity plays in our life. The spider’s understanding of both the compulsion and limits of necessity ground her friendship with the pig. Charlotte expounds:

“You have been my friend,” replied Charlotte. “That in itself is a tremendous thing. I wove my webs for you because I liked you. After all, what’s a life, anyway? We’re born, we live a little while, we die. A spider’s life can’t help being something of a mess, with all this trapping and eating flies. By helping you, perhaps I was trying to lift up my life a trifle. Heaven knows anyone’s life can stand a little of that.”

In the end, we come to see that Charlotte has acted consistently upon the rule of necessity, and that friendship is, indeed, a necessary part of life. A life lived only according to necessity—only for the sake of living—is impoverished. It is necessary that we acknowledge the limits of living for the sake of our own existence. To have a satisfying life, one needs true friendship.

Wilbur instinctively understands these limits of necessity and the appeal of friendship. He is discontent with the merely necessary physical functions of sleeping and eating. Wilbur loves life and loves to be a part of the world. He wants to “breathe the beautiful air and lie in the beautiful sun.” The pig’s desire to live amidst beauty rightly matches his desire for friendship: both are not merely necessary for his physical existence. As White writes, “Wilbur didn’t want food, he wanted love. He wanted a friend—someone who would play with him.”

In scripture we also see how true friendship enriches our lives. Friends give faithful wounds (Proverbs 27:6), make our hearts glad with good counsel (Proverbs 27:9), and love us even in the midst of adversity (Prov. 17:17, 18:24). Charlotte serves Wilbur in all these ways. She often chides him for his anxiety, gives good counsel as to how to participate in tricking the human farmers to spare his intended butchery, and loves him despite the ominous impending death. These activities of friendship ultimately beautify a life that otherwise would be spent focusing on necessity.

False Friendships: Alternatives to a Beautiful Life

White also pictures for us an alternative to this beautiful life. In contrast to Charlotte, Templeton’s friendly acts towards Wilbur throughout the story

represent a form of false friendship that doesn't beautify one's life. According to scripture, we are not to reproach our friend (Psalm 15:3), withhold kindness from them (Job 6:14), bargain over them (Job 6:27), repay them with evil (Psalm 7:4), or forsake them in time of trouble (Proverbs 27:10). Templeton attempts all such unfriendly actions towards Wilbur, such as when he stalls in obtaining Charlotte's egg sack or whines at Wilbur to be careful not to trample him when getting penned.

These unfriendly acts emit from Templeton's character. Unlike Charlotte, the crafty Templeton is not well liked nor trusted; Wilbur himself doesn't think he is a decent animal. White describes him thus: "The rat had no morals, no conscience, no scruples, no consideration, no decency, no milk of rodent kindness, no compunctions, no higher feeling, no friendliness, no anything." Templeton is above all selfish, always thinking of his own best interest, in particular the satisfaction of his stomach. He is a self-proclaimed glutton. In stark contrast to Wilbur, the rat Templeton doesn't want to live forever; he wants to enjoy the necessary pleasure of eating even if it kills him. His life therefore evidences the limits of utilitarian friendship. He offers a friendship built solely on achieving physical necessities. Templeton participates in the plan to save Wilbur's life through appeals to his instincts for survival, namely eating from the pig's food trough. Hence the rat appears to be a friend but is in truth merely a slave to necessity.

In the end, we see that friendship can be false if we use it as an end towards our own existence. On the other hand, friendship can be true if it is used for the sake of another. True friendship elevates a life of necessity to a life of beauty. While none of us can escape the need to eat or sleep, all of us can choose to cultivate the type of friendship that makes eating or sleeping worthwhile as means, rather than ends. May we each choose to be a true friend to another in our brief lives together.