This year, instead of the usual format for my Crown Forums, in which I update you on the major developments on campus, I want to spend my time talking with you about issues I believe have broad relevance for society, and particular relevance for Morehouse.

Now, no one should worry; there will be ample opportunities for you to keep informed about what is going on at the College. In addition to my regularly scheduled office hours, residence hall visits, and meetings with students at Davidson House, we will soon be launching a new, student-oriented communications vehicle on our website called Campus Pipeline. Stay tuned for more information about that.

Today, I will talk with you about friendship. This is such a common term that one might wonder what there is of any importance to say about it. We all have friends and friendships. In fact, most of us have had them since we were toddlers. I would bet that most of you still remember your friends from elementary school, perhaps even the first grade.

We have had “best” friends. We had our first girlfriends. We had our groups of buddies we hung out with. And, of course, there was always the family – our first friends – in that they were the ones who loved and supported us. Later, we had friends we might not see very often because we moved away, or they did, but they still are our friends. Over time, we have made new friends and lost track of old ones, but we still can conjure up their faces and personalities.

The concept of friendship has deep historical origins. The Oxford English Dictionary gives the first written reference to the English word “friend” in the classic saga, “Beowulf. But, of course, the concept is much older. Throughout history – in fact and fiction – close friendships have formed the basis for legends, stories, and myths. Perhaps one of the best known is the legend of Damon and Pythias.

You may recall that Damon and Pythias were two young men who lived in ancient Syracuse, which was ruled by a tyrant named Dionysius I. Pythias committed a crime against the regime and was caught and condemned to death. He begged to be allowed to take care of his personal affairs before he died, so Dionysius agreed to let Pythias leave the prison temporarily – after Damon pledged to give his own life if his friend did not return. Pythias did return – just in time to take his own place for the execution. But Dionysius was so impressed by their loyal friendship that he released them both. Now that is true friendship.
Another well-known story is that of Jonathan and David from the Old Testament, whose relationship speaks to the joy and tragedy that can accompany a close friendship. Today, so many movies and television shows are based on “buddy” figures that it would be difficult to name them all. And, from our own Morehouse community, the close friendships between Andrew Young and Martin Luther King Jr., Spike Lee and John Wilson, and many others remind us of the significance of friendships.

Those of you who have studied the Greek philosophers – or who heard Professor Preston King deliver the Coca-Cola Leadership Lecture here in April – will recall that Aristotle wrote extensively on the topic of friendship. Dr. Richard Mulgan, professor of public policy at the Australian National University, in commenting on Aristotle’s writings on the subject of friendship, notes that he placed friendships in three basic categories: those based on virtue, those based on pleasure, and those based on advantage.

Professor Mulgan quotes Aristotle as saying that a friendship based on virtue – that is, one in which people love each other for their virtuous character – “is complete, both in respect to duration and in all other respects.” These kind of deep relationships are the ones in which the friendship grows not only out of mutual admiration, but also out of shared values and character.

In such friendships, we think alike. We agree on the most important issues, such as what is right or wrong, good or bad, honest or dishonest. We may not like the exact same movies or the exact same foods, but on deep fundamental issues, we share values and views. In such friendships, we are able to reveal our innermost thoughts and feelings, to talk about our anxieties, concerns and fears, and to share our happy times. In such friendships, using the phrase, “I know how you feel,” is not a hollow cliché. Most important, in friendships based on virtue, we know whom we can call on in times of despair – we know who our true friends are.

Now, I am going to date myself even more than I usually do when I tell you this, but when I was a student, we called these very close friends “ace boon coons.” I must admit I have no idea what ace boon coon means or from where it was derived. I am told the terms you use today are “homey,” or “my boy,” or “my dog.” It is interesting that no one I asked seems to know where these terms come from, either. The point is that whatever the name we call our closest friends, we are all lucky to have – or to have had – such relationships.

The second category of friendship Aristotle identifies is friendship based on pleasure, which includes, but is not limited to, sexual relationships. Friendships based on pleasure may also come from being part of a club, a team, or an organization that gives one enjoyment. For example, you have friends based on the fact that you live in the same dorm with them, or belong to the same fraternity, or play together on an athletic team, or even, and this is new to me, come from the same state – so you have the Tennessee Club, the Louisiana Club, and so forth. These are good, close, fun relationships or friendships, but if someone leaves the organization, the dorm or the club, the friendship with that person may or may not last.
Finally, Aristotle writes about friendships based on advantage. These friendships are formed for convenience or built around temporary, or at least transient, goals. In these relationships, it is less important that people share broad, common interests, personal values, or world-views. It is more important that they can establish friendly, working relationships that allow tasks to be completed for the mutual benefit of everyone involved.

So, you might engage in friendships based on advantage for the purpose of electing officers for the SGA, or completing a project for class, or preparing for Homecoming activities. Or, if you desire a dormitory life where there is mutual respect and consideration of others and concern for the physical ambience, then entering into friendships of advantage might be an appropriate strategy to achieve this. In this case, one need not be best of friends with his dorm mate, nor have deep, shared values and character with the other residents, nor even derive the same pleasure one gets from associations with friends outside of the dorm. Nevertheless, the end result would be a more pleasurable, satisfying dormitory experience.

Of course, these three categories of friendship are not mutually exclusive. By the nature of such relationships, best buddies will often join the same clubs, maybe play on the same teams, and stay in the same dormitories. And, in the most fortunate of circumstances, one’s marital partner also is one’s best friend.

A commonality of all friendships, in Aristotle’s view, is that they involve “wishing for someone what one thinks are good things for that person’s sake, not one’s own.” Let me repeat that: wishing for someone what one thinks are good things for that person’s sake, not one’s own. Often, we wish good things to happen to people we know so that the good will rebound to our benefit. For example, one might hope his roommate’s mother sends him money so he can borrow some. But, in true friendships of all three types, Aristotle suggests that there is some degree of altruism. In other words, in friendships of virtue and pleasure, or even friendships of advantage, complete selfishness is counter-productive.

I believe there is a moral, as well as a practical message, embedded in this philosophy. The moral message is that in all friendships, the old adage, “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,” is applicable. The practical message is that by behaving in this manner, all relationships are likely to be more virtuous, perhaps more pleasurable and, ultimately, more to one’s advantage.

The important idea here is that at their most fundamental level, friendships are our most practical relationships. They provide companionship, solace, enjoyment, pleasure, comfort, stimulation, support, and are, in many ways, a mirror through which we see ourselves – sometimes as we wish to be seen, and in the best of circumstances, as we really are.
Seeing ourselves as we are or, perhaps more accurately, as others see us, is not always pleasant. Friendships are not without their trials, tribulations, and painful moments. But, it is these times and experiences that, if handled properly, result in deeper, more intense relationships and in personal growth and development. Who has not had a serious argument with his best friend? Broken up with a close girlfriend? Quit a team? Left a club? Moved out of a dormitory? Certainly, we all have experienced these challenges to our friendships.

Friendships also entail responsibilities and obligations and require effort to make them work, particularly our close relationships. We acknowledge this fact when we say about a relationship, “I need to work on this,” or “We are trying to work this out,” or “We are working on it.” Such work or effort is required because – going beyond Aristotle – friendships require not just wishing good things for another, for that person’s sake, but doing good things, for that person’s sake.

Doing good for someone else means more than buying gifts, loaning money, or helping with homework. It also means more than “having your brother’s back.” The idea of doing good for another is perhaps best captured in a popular public service announcement about alcohol abuse: “Friends don’t let friends drive drunk.” In other words, friends try to not let friends harm themselves.

Friends watch out for each other, and not just to protect them from external forces, but also to help protect them from internal negative impulses, self-destructive habits, and self-demeaning behavior. To be able to say to a friend, “Hey man, you really ought to quit smoking,” or “You really should not talk to women that way,” or “You know you need to hit the books more often,” can be particularly difficult and can strain, or even break, a friendship. But is not this kind of courage and concern the true test of whether one is, as Aristotle said, “joined with another in mutual benevolence?”

On the other hand, indulging another person’s irresponsible or inappropriate behavior – just because he is a so-called friend – is not the test of mutual benevolence. Unfortunately, the fact is that you cannot always be friends with some people because, sometimes, the differences between your values and theirs are just too great. Sometimes, a person may have to be removed from a dorm because he just will not respect others. Sometimes, you might have to take a step back from a friend who continues to use drugs and refuses to get help. Sometimes you might have to risk losing a relationship rather than condone the behavior of a person whose attitudes and actions threaten you or the well-being of your community.

Fortunately, these circumstances are rare. Most of the time, we can be friends with others. And sometimes, circumstances such as the September 11 tragedy create unexpected opportunities for us to develop friendships we might not otherwise have had. Certainly, friendships of advantage have been developed as a result of this crisis and the unfolding situation. Indeed, the tragedy in our nation has given us little choice but to come together as a campus where we all want good things for one another.
During this time, we hope that people we encounter have not lost a friend or a loved one. We hope they are not distraught or depressed. We hope they are all right, even if we do not know them personally, and whether or not they live in our dorm, are members of our fraternity, or from our home state. And this concern goes beyond Morehouse and encompasses the entire Atlanta University Center. I doubt very many of you confine your feelings to only your Morehouse brothers. We also hope nothing bad happens to colleagues at CAU, Morris Brown and, of course, Spelman.

This way of acting, this mode of behavior, has proven mutually advantageous because we know that others are thinking the same about us, hoping that we are all right, and that makes us feel better. In fact, this kind of caring and concern, this kind of friendship based on advantage, is the basis for the creation of community – a concept I will speak more about in my Crown Forum this spring.

For now, I will challenge you to consider this: How broadly can the concept of friendships of advantage be extended? Is it possible to extend this idea beyond our borders? Even to include those peoples in places that may have been the source of the perpetrators of these heinous deeds? Can we wish good things for them and try to find ways to bring them into our circle of advantageous friendships? Again, it is not necessary that these be friendships of pleasure or virtue, but only that they allow us to work together, as members of the global community – the World House – to the solve problems common to us all, the problems all humans face in living dignified, meaningful and productive lives.

I am convinced that if we are open to it – and if we really work on it – many of our friendships of advantage can turn into friendships of pleasure – and even lead to some long-lasting friendships of virtue. Whether or not this happens is up to you – it is up to all of us. It begins, right here and right now with our decision to extend the hand of friendship to others. It begins with our commitment to be true friends.

I challenge you to join me in doing just that.