

## Life

## Note from the FTW editor



One step forward – one step back? I sat on the roof of the FT's HQ for lunch on a hot, hot day, gazing out over St Paul's and the City, and saw barely a soul in neighbouring offices or streets. The words of a nephew, a graduate trainee at a marquee London employer, rang in my ears: this is a revolution, he said, arguing that his generation believe they have the power to decide where and when to work.

I drew his attention to a column by William Hague, a British former foreign secretary, on how the serendipity of offices and encounters helped forge his career. "OK boomer," my nephew replied.

It has been an especially tough time for theatres. On Thursday on my way to the office, I slipped to the Theatre Royal Drury Lane to see its exquisitely revamped premises. The agony of actors hoping audiences can at last return is matched arguably only by this year's experience of Olympians.

Despite the trials of the Tokyo organisers, there is something timeless and reassuring about the return to our screens of those athletes who have trained four plus years for this moment. I refer you to the interview on page 14 with swimmer Adam Peaty.

Possibly my favourite line in the edition though is from Susie Boyt's review of Elif Shafak's latest novel on page 9. "I wasn't certain I could accept a novel largely narrated by a fig tree," she writes before saying how enchanted she was. They will both be at our festival on Sept 4 – as, I can reveal, will Sir John Major, in a rare interview. Details are on the back page. I hope to see you there.

Alec Russell

**A funny thing happened during** lockdown. In the midst of quarantine I made a new friend. Not a casual acquaintance but someone with whom I really stay connected, share news and ideas, give and receive encouragement, and send check-in messages between our WhatsApp video chats.

The other funny thing is that we've never met in person. Yet. She lives several states away and is a couple of decades older than me. But some time last spring we began following one another on Instagram and, between our posts and captions, we realised we had uncannily similar thoughts.

Before long we were exchanging DMs. A month or so after that we scheduled our first video friend-date, and talked for almost two hours. We continue to cultivate our friendship.

The experience led me to a more expansive way of living, to be more courageous about acting on friendship chemistry. We all know about romantic chemistry: two people meet, feel a connection and, if both are available, are encouraged and expected to pursue something to see if their initial attraction has any substance. It's what movies, novels and fairy tales are made of. We grow up steeped in the rituals of romantic chemistry. But friendship chemistry, who talks about that?

I love the painting "Party Frocks" (pictured) by Arthur B Timothy, a Ghana-born and London-based architect and painter, whose work often draws on memories from growing up in Ghana, Sierra Leone and the UK. In the work, four older women, dressed in cocktail outfits and gold jewellery, hold glasses of wine and pose casually in the middle of a soft salmon-coloured canvas, peering at the viewer as though we are taking a picture of them.

There's a subtle vibe of familiarity between them, as though they've known one another for a long time and are used to being together and exclusive. The women in blue and white dresses bordering the group have fixed, almost practised, smiles on their faces, as if being photographed is a regular and welcome activity. They appear friendly but not necessarily warm. The woman in a green satin-like dress has a somewhat uninviting look on her face, as if questioning who invited us into their clique. It is the woman in the flowery dress holding a white shawl who gazes out with a warm inviting smile on her face. I imagine her open to widening her social circle.

With their vintage-style dresses, the painting reminds me of my childhood, of watching my mother and her friends gather at consistent points throughout my life. She's had a group of friends she's known since they were all teenagers in secondary school.

I was raised by a woman who always made time for her old friends despite working full time and being a mother. So much so that her friends are still a part of my life now. It's a beautiful thing, especially because even with these old friendships, my mother is still the sort of person who makes friends everywhere she goes.

But for many of us, after our school days, when it is often relatively easy to meet and bond with others, our



## Friends for all seasons

THE ART OF LIFE  
ENUMA OKORO



cultural messages don't necessarily encourage us to act on friendship chemistry. Rather, we are steered towards the idea that there are no friends as good as old friends.

**I love music by Drake and DJ Khaled** but their 2013 hit song, "No New Friends" seemed to spark a pop cultural motto among a younger generation that made it seem cool and desirable to keep a tight, immovable boundary around your circle of friends. But with the busyness of work, family and partnerships, I think we all at some point convince ourselves we haven't the bandwidth to nurture new friendships, because cultivating friendship does require time and effort. Not to mention trust and vulnerability.

And yet to encounter someone new with whom you feel a genuine connection and affinity at any stage of your life is an immeasurable gift. Perhaps because we reside in cultures that from when we are young over-emphasise the pursuit of romantic relationships, we take the extraordinariness of friendship for granted and forget how rare and valuable it is to meet people our spirits seem drawn to platonically.

I do believe age-old friendships are a treasure. There's little like having relationships with people who've seen

you through life experiences and transitions. But the older I get, the more I find myself questioning the notion of a best friend, the idea one person can encapsulate all the things one needs in friendship to the extent they are better than other friends.

At one point or other, our "best" friends can and often do fail to meet our expectations because no one person is capable of being everything you need, not even a partner. In my own experience I've learnt that part of the beauty of cultivating different friendships is acknowledging the diversity of personalities, and how we can engage with one another on a spectrum of meaningful levels.

I have a friend with whom our primary exchange is to pray together. I have another friend with whom I mostly engage with about creativity and writing. I call them both friends and not acquaintances because of the levels of trust, vulnerability and shared understanding and commitment inherent in the relationships. But the friendships would never work the same if I tried to swap the context of one for the other. As people grow and continue to have different life experiences and personal developments, our needs and desires change.

I like the 2019 painting "Spunky Vibes" by Nigerian contemporary artist

Peter Uka. Three casually dressed men are walking away with their backs to us, along a wide patterned corridor floor with lime green walls. There are no objects in the work. It is just the men walking alongside one another down an endless passageway to a destination we can't see. The man on the left of the canvas seems to peer ahead himself, as if he also can't see the destination. The man in the middle with the peach-coloured shirt is one step ahead of the others, his arms outstretched in a gesture that almost reads as: "Why not?"

The seeming simplicity of the painting is what speaks to me. With nothing else in view, the canvas opens wide to hold the three figures on their way, all open to wherever this journey will lead them. I think of starting new friendships in a similar way. It's not about what lies behind, any shared history, but about what lies in front.

**It's an interesting time to be** contemplating the idea of new friendships. We've all just spent almost a year and a half in pod communities of family or people we've known for ages. As we venture out again, many of us are probably just thinking about starting to see old friends and extended

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family we haven't seen in months.

Who has the emotional energy or the psychological bandwidth for cultivating new friendships? And yet, even in unexpected and challenging times, we experience human connection in ways that can leave a lasting impression on us.

The illustration "Untitled" (2020), by Nigerian-Italian artist and textile designer Diana Ejaita, was created during the pandemic in response to the peaceful Nigerian protests on which the army opened fire last year. Three young people hold up a fourth who is wounded or dead. The shoulders of the person in a white shirt, standing in the middle, look almost like angel wings.

Last year was a trial by fire for everyone. Because of that reality we had to be open to the idea of cultivating new relationships where we might have otherwise not done so: paying more attention to the people with whom we crossed paths, whether it was something as simple as shopping for an elderly neighbour who couldn't risk exposure to the virus, or bearing the literal weight of someone during the protests and riots across the globe.

And it seems almost certain that some new friendships must have come from these encounters. It is not always just those with whom we have the most history that end up being the saving graces, the soul-expanders, the joy-increasers in our lives.

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## Macron in the mirror

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right and the Socialists on the left. In fact, the regional elections were marred by a record low turnout and may prove to be of scant relevance for the presidential race, which in the French Fifth Republic is a battle between personalities rather than parties.

The extreme-right, anti-immigration Rassemblement National of Marine Le Pen, who is forecast to be Macron's main rival for the Elysée next year, did much worse than expected and also failed to win a region.

There are still nine months to go, and French presidential elections have been marked by extraordinary upsets over the past two decades. But recent polls suggest Macron is not so hated after all, or at least no more than other politicians: he is twice as popular as his immediate predecessor, François Hollande, at the same time in his mandate and a long way ahead of Nicolas Sarkozy.

His recent address to the nation before Bastille Day making vaccination compulsory for health workers and all but compulsory for anyone who wants to eat out or travel was his "best yet", according to one of his acquaintances from before his time in politics. It prompted protests by thousands of "anti-vaxxers", but also triggered a much greater rush for jobs by nearly 4m people seeking vaccinations for the first time.

The tone was human yet presidential and he used the occasion to lay the foundations for his 2022 re-election campaign by offering something for everyone: for the right, no new taxes and a focus on law and order; for the left, job creation and investment in industry.

**If Macron does win a second term** he would be the first French president since Chirac to do so, and the first since

the presidential term was cut from seven years to five. He is already working hard on his public image.

Since his low point at the height of the *gilets jaunes* marches, when he was subject to venomous personal attacks from the crowds and on social media, he has tried to dispel the charge of arrogance, organising walkabouts and meetings across the nation, including the "great national debate" with mayors and citizens that helped to defuse the crisis.

I have often been told he is out of touch because he does not like meeting ordinary people. From what I have seen from Biarritz in the south to his hometown of Amiens in the north, this is a little unfair. He does like meeting people, and does listen, but he also wants to argue with them and convince them that he is right and will not leave until he has done so, as I have watched him do in factories and at student gatherings. Macron is also surprisingly eager to put himself in harm's way.

The recent slap in the face in the southern town of Tain-l'Hermitage, to a shout of "Down with Macronism!", was not the first time he has been involved in altercations that tested the nerves of his security agents.

He has twice visited an old Whirlpool white goods factory in Amiens to debate the future of their jobs with an antagonistic crowd of workers. Instead of turning away when he was confronted last year by angry protesters while walking with his wife Brigitte in the Tuileries gardens, he started arguing with them. "Be cool," he said. "Stop shouting."

Like other western leaders, he remains vulnerable to the social and political upheavals shaking the world's democracies and the febrile confrontations stoked by social media. It was remarkable during the pandemic to hear the French complain simultane-

ously that Macron was curtailing their freedom of movement and that he was not locking the country down hard enough to control the virus. Exhausted doctors and health workers protested that hospitals were overwhelmed with Covid victims but then proved so reluctant to be vaccinated that Macron finally made it obligatory in order to protect their patients.

On what is probably the most divisive issue in French society – whether to maintain a strict policy of *laïcité* that theoretically treats everyone as an equal citizen and rejects the notion of religious or ethnic identity in public life in a country with the largest population of Muslims in western Europe – Macron has sided firmly with French republican tradition, which conveniently coincides with the views of the centre-right and far-right voters he is trying to court as well as some on the old republican left.

His ministers have been deployed to condemn "Islamist-leftists" in the other camp, while Macron told Elle magazine this month that he was a "universalist" who believed that gender and skin colour were not the only causes of disadvantage. "I could show you young white men called Kevin who live in Amiens or Saint-Quentin who also find it immensely difficult for other reasons to

find a job," he said. Those kind of comments are – and are designed to be – music to the ears of Le Pen's supporters.

Macron senses that for now his main political challenge is how to deal with the tide of populism, nativism, nationalism, anti-internationalism – call it what you will – that was sweeping through the world even before 2016 when the British voted for Brexit and the Americans elected Trump. In France, the phenomenon has been manifested in the

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steady rise of Le Pen and the anti-European, anti-immigration extreme right, and more recently in the uprising of the *gilets jaunes*.

On the face of it, the liberal, centrist Macron began as a sort of populist revolutionary himself, in the sense that he was an insurgent candidate who disrupted the established political order in 2017. Today, however, most of his projects – championing the EU, promoting economic reform to make it eas-

ier to do business in France, excoriating Islamists – place him firmly on the centre-right of the political spectrum, even if he has also tried to keep hold of greens and the left by talking about climate change and subsidising jobs, "whatever the cost", to keep France going through the pandemic. And the right or far right is where most French voters find themselves today.

To understand the extent of this trend, one has only to see the warm public response to an incendiary declaration in April by retired generals mourning the "disintegration" of France because of Islamist radicalism and immigrant "hordes" in the suburbs and hinting at a coup d'état.

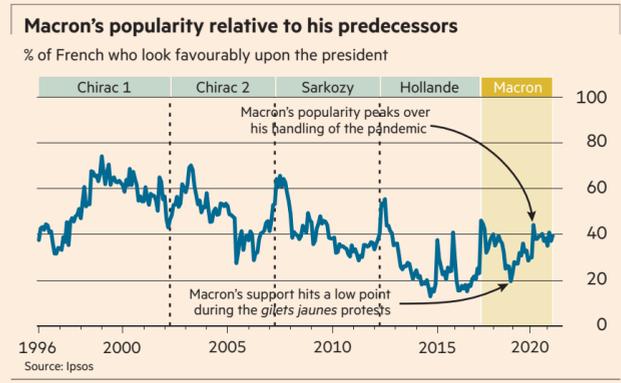
A poll showed 58 per cent of voters, including more than two-thirds of those on the right and the far right and nearly half of those in Macron's party, supported the signatories.

**Modern France has a history of electoral shocks.** At the end of the 2002 presidential election campaign, I was there at Socialist party headquarters in Paris when the startling news came through that Lionel Jospin, the prime minister, would not qualify for the second round against Chirac because he had been beaten by a triumphant Jean-Marie Le Pen, Marine's father and leader of what was then called the Front National.

In 2017, Macron's own campaign benefited from the collapse in support for centre-right candidate François Fillon over an embezzlement scandal in which he paid his wife more than €1m in state funds for parliamentary work she never did.

Like his hero, the sometimes passionate and pompous de Gaulle, Macron has what the general's biographer, Julian Jackson, called a pragmatic "respect for contingency and 'the force of circumstances'".

In an interview with the Financial Times at the Elysée during the deadly first wave of the pandemic last year, he



referred to the implacable "beast of events" such as terrorism and disease but also explained with some foresight what needed to be done next, including the creation of the EU's now established economic recovery fund, the supply of vaccines to developing countries and a new round of debt relief for Africa.

"There is lots of uncertainty and that should make us very humble," he told the FT in the Salon Doré, the golden room first used as the French president's office by de Gaulle himself. Looking back, I find that he used the word "humility" nine times in the interview. Eight months later, he was taken ill with Covid-19.

As for the hate, Macron is philosophical. Asked on Bastille Day last year by a television interviewer why people hated him so much, he admitted that he had been unable to unite a divided nation, but he understood the hate "because we are a country that has that in its history, in its guts".

After Trump, Brexit and Angela Merkel's forthcoming retirement in Germany, that points to an intriguing conclusion for France and the west: Macron, who vowed to destroy the old politics (his 2016 book was called simply *Revolution*), has a chance to make history as the candidate of democratic continuity.

Macronism – that elusive middle way to modernise and liberalise France without compromising its economic sovereignty or the protective role of the state – is not dead. But it is in abeyance, blocked first by the shock of the *gilets jaunes* uprising and then by the need for 18 months of crisis management during the continuing pandemic. Both events triggered rare moments of downheartedness in Macron himself, but he soon bounced back. The question now is whether he will have the political skill – and the luck – to do it again and win a second term.

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