

Practicing Friendship - Posted August 19, 2010 on "The Meditative Life," a blog for *Psychology Today*.

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Friendship is a form of love that is freely given and received, and as such it requires attention and practice. We are born into a family and, if our childhood is fortunate, we are cared for by loving parents. We naturally return that love. In adolescence we learn the torments and delights of romantic love, and the forces of sexual attraction come to figure powerfully in our young (and not-so-young) adult lives. The loves found in family and sexual relationship are rooted in human and animal biology, even if they can be transformed and raised so that much more is at work. But the origins of friendship seem to me to be located elsewhere, in the heavens more than in the earth. The pure love of true friendship is precious and too rare. When found, it can lead us beyond ourselves into the heart of another human being, so that we grow into the world one friend at a time.

When in his mid-thirties, the renowned Islamic scholar Jelaluddin Rumi was surrounded by adoring and devoted students. He nonetheless felt profoundly alone. All of Islamic knowledge was his, yet he lacked a true companion. Unknown to Rumi, the older mystic Shamsi Tabriz had journeyed into the desert seeking an answer to his heart's longing as well. After long fasting and prayer it is said that Shams's search for a companion at his own level of attainment was answered by a voice. "What will you give?" "My head," replied Shams. "Jelaluddin of Konya is your Friend," responded the voice. The deep friendship between these two lasted four years, until Shams's mysterious disappearance or death threw Rumi into the dark depths of despair. Music and song, which he had long rejected for a life of scholarship, now became his sole comfort. Wandering through Konya, it is said that Rumi paused and in the midst of loss, began to speak the poetry that we so love today. The words of Rumi's poetry are the ripe fruit of friendship and loss. Through his friendship with Shams, Rumi grew to know the secrets of union through love. Rumi often ended his poems with the words, And these are the words of Shamsi Tabriz.

Why should I seek more?

I am the same as he.

His essence speaks through me.

I have been looking for myself.

Friendships, whatever their origins, require faithfulness and practice. At first we may not see friendship as part of the meditative life, but I would like to suggest that the practice of friendship is one of our most important contemplative exercises. I would go so far as to say that all preceding practices are but a preparation for the practice of friendship. Recall the lines of Rilke, "For one being to love another, that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is a preparation." The love exchanged in true friendship is, I believe, a particularly precious practice field, one through which we approach our true humanity. What are the practices of friendship? We are helped here by the opening lines of Rumi's poem "The Waterwheel."

Stay together, friends

Don't scatter and sleep.

Our friendship is made

of being awake.

In friendship, as elsewhere, we tend to fall asleep. We take our friends for granted, drift apart, and before long, it is too late to recover the lost friend. Our friendships are made, as Rumi reminds us, "of being awake." Meditation is the practice of true wakefulness, and what better place for being awake than to our friends.

The practice is this. Having settled the mind and prepared the inner room for contemplative attention, place the friend before you. Allow all hindrances to fall away; jealousies, arguments, and neglect are not important. Remind yourself of a moment when he or she appeared to you as they truly are, free of pretense and history. Hold that highernature before you; rejoice and support it. May this "pearl of great price" find greater strength and brilliance so that it can shine through and animate the life of the friend.

When together next, recall your practice, and listen deeply for the voice of the person you sensed and supported in your practice. Deep, non-judgmental listening is a gift we too seldom offer each other, and the practice of friendship is weak if it lacks this element. You may well find the tenor and tone of the conversation shift so that you each speak more freely from the heart, and discover truths together that each of you alone could never have brought to light. Such truths can change everything. Born in loving

conversation -- in what Rumi and Shams called sohbet -- and carried out into the world with the support of a friend, such truths can find their way not only into poetry, but they can also shape the future. The many decades of friendship, for example, between Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony brought the vote to women in 1920.

And together with friendship is the experience of joy. In writing of friendship, Christopher Bamford says, "Today, we have mostly forgotten joy - the delight and peace that descends when two become one. Joy is the experience of love. At once the fruit of love and what lies beyond, it is what we experience when we truly love - love's other shore." Practicing friendship is therefore the entryway to joy.