

Anam Cara: Soul Friend

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They are everywhere. And often you recognize them suddenly, from across a room, or over the counter at a grocery store. They might be sitting next to you at a concert, or in the pew, or on a meditation cushion. You might find one at the soup kitchen, or book store, or on Boston Common, or walking down the street. They might be walking their dog, or fishing from a breakwater. You might run into one in the woods by a pond or a quarry.

How do you recognize a soul friend? It's a little like the flutter in Elizabeth's womb, when John felt the joy of Jesus' presence within Mary. Or it's like Ruth and Naomi, who found mutual strength in their struggle to survive. It could be like David and Jonathan, true friends, bound by honor and love, to encourage each other's search for freedom. It could be like Jesus' friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, who supported his ministry, and recognized him from afar. Or it could be like Francis and Clare, fellow travelers following in Jesus' footsteps, or Augustine and his son Adeodatus, their light and lively dialogues about everything from theology to bird feathers. Or it could be like Martin Luther and Johann Von Staupitz, whose spiritual friendship provided a strong foundation for Luther's emerging religious insights.

Some people seem born to be soul friends. And there's not that much mystery to it. You know you have found a soul friend when you find someone who is willing to walk by your side, listen to you talk about your life, especially your spiritual life, and whose support helps you move into a greater freedom in Christ. That's my definition, anyway. The thing is, soul friendship is mutual – and it has a sacramental quality to it.

Martin Luther speaks of the framework for holy friendship in the *Smalcald Articles*: we experience the power of the Gospel “through the mutual conversation and consolation of brothers and sisters” (SA III:4).¹ Like the I-Thou relationship of Martin Buber, the soul friend doesn't ever use you for his or her own ends, nor does the soul friend seek merely the pleasure of your company. The soul friend celebrates with you something you both experience, deep within: that communion of mutual delight in the things of faith, in the things of God. Bonhoeffer recognized, in *Life Together*, the communion we share in Christ as the ground of all Christian relationships. The soul friend is someone who comes to you through the work of the Holy Spirit, so perhaps there is a great mystery to it after all.

¹ *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), p. 319.

Often the evidence of soul friendship comes down to us through the written word, in preserved letters and dialogues, or testimonies. Poetry, too, is a rich source, for so many poets have written of the joys of friendship. It was a topic of philosophical and theological discussion for centuries. Plato and Aristotle commented on it often, both arguing that true friendship, that is friendship among equals, has its foundation in the mutual freedom of each person. We choose to be friends with one another. No one can force us, no one can demand us. Friendship happens by invitation, through a willingness to receive another human being in the full complexity of their existence.

One of the ways you recognize a soul friend is the sense that you have always been talking with them, always listening with them, that your conversation transcends space and time, and the boundaries of your own particularity. Ah, this person is familiar, I know him or her. You see the spark in each other's eyes. There are many kinds of friendship. The soul friend quite simply is one who cares as much for your soul as he or she does for his or her own. Soul friendship demands fidelity, "creative fidelity," French philosopher Gabriel Marcel calls it: the faithfulness of two persons through time, a flourishing creative communion, out of which something new is born.

In the twelfth century, Aelred of Rievaulx, Cistercian monk, shaped by Celtic Christianity, spoke of the *anam cara* as the spiritual friend. His short work *Spiritual Friendship* is a delightful read, founded upon the model of Cicero's *De amicitia*, for friendship was a common topic among Latin rhetoricians. Aelred was also deeply influenced by Augustine's *Confessions*. If you want to read a beautiful synthesis of theological and personal reflection, this is a book that will satisfy you. If you want to read a marvelous guide to the complexities of spiritual friendship, this book will give you much food for thought. Aelred's first lines on the origin of friendship begin:

*Here we are, you and I, and I hope a third, Christ, is in our midst...
Come now beloved, open your heart, and pour into these friendly
ears whatsoever you will, and let us accept the boon of this place,
time, and leisure. (SP 1:1)*

You and I, and I hope a third, Christ.

Yet, one of my favorite sources for understanding the nature of soul friendship comes from the Muslim poet Rumi, and his long love for his friend Shams Tabriz. Their friendship became the inspiration for much of Rumi's poetry, his love for Shams a bridge to the divine. In his introduction to a recent translation of Rumi, Coleman Barks writes that Rumi's poetry expresses divine inclusivity. Because Rumi's poetry speaks so much of soul friendships, of heart friendships that cross boundaries between individuals, Barks sees Rumi as a bridge figure, one who can help people of different faiths understand each other. Barks writes "if the icons of religion could dissolve, we would be left with the radiance of each other,

the one honoring the other as the same glory. Friendship. Namaste.”² Often the “You” in Rumi’s poems becomes the You of God, and friendship an expression of divine communion. Rumi’s poem “Soul Houses” speaks of this.

*Who is this king
that forms another king out of the ground,
who for the sake of two beggars
makes himself a beggar?*

*Who is this with his hand out
saying, Please give just a little,
so I can give you a kingdom...*

and a few verses later, the “who” becomes clear.

*His greatest alchemy
is how he undoes the binding
that keeps love from breathing deep.
He loosens the chest.*

And again, *Every second he changes cruelty
to loyal friendship.*³

Friendship happens everywhere between families, parents and children, spouses and strangers, neighbors far and near, people of different faiths and cultures. Rumi couches soul friendship in the language of loving, much like the singer in the Song of Solomon. This is the introduction to a poem called “Secret Places”

*Lovers find secret places
inside this violent world
where they make transactions
with beauty.*⁴

A soul friend is a refuge, one who, “inside this violent world” offers an open heart, and the beauty of welcome.

On the night when he was betrayed, our Lord said to the followers gathered at the table with him: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me, but I chose

² “Introduction,” *Rumi: Bridge to the Soul: Journeys into the Music and Silence of the Heart*, ed. Coleman Barks, trans. Coleman Barks, A.J. Arberry and Nevit Ergin (New York: HarperCollins, 2007) 1.

³ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

you.” In Lent, we travel again to Jerusalem with Jesus. On the way, may you find soul friends. Perhaps there will be someone along the journey who will say : “Here we are, you and I and I hope a third, Christ.”

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