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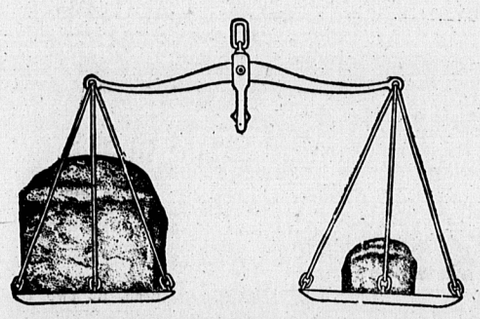

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THE GUARDIAN'S WEEK END SERMON

The Rev Caleb S. S. Dutton, Minister of the Second Unitarian Church, Brooklyn, N. Y, preached the following sermon, recently, "The Capacity for Friendship." The text was from Ecclesiastes, vi:16: "A faithful friend is the medicine of life." Mr Dutton said·

The friendships we form and keep remain for all of us one of the outstanding features in our life history. Our friends are a kind of certificate of character. The quality of an age or a civilization might be measured by its capacity for friendship. If it could be said truthfully of our time that we were producing nothing better in this line than acquaintance, that the cash nexus, as Carlysle called it, had taken the place of such devotion as that which impels Sir Thomas Browne to say, "I have loved my friends as I do virtue, my soul, My God," this, indeed, would be enough to prove our degeneracy. There are symptoms in that direction which we need to take note of. And for our individual selves it may be wholesome to turn an eye for a moment upon our conduct and fortunes in this department of life, and on the ideals we have been pursuing.

The best friendships, as a rule, are those that begin young. Life's iron is then fire-hot, and we weld easily. And the special happiness here is that properly managed, these unions are often for all the years. In the college common room you stumble upon a brother soul which vibrates responsive to your own, and then after three or four decades, and when you are almost at the end of the journey, the music is still going on. Your careers have been wide apart, your fortunes different, your meetings perhaps infrequent, and yet the mere sense that your friend is yonder, thinking his thoughts and doing his work, is a strength and a companionship to you. How much so you will know when he has gone. A soulful intimacy of this kind acquires an ever better flavor with the years. Cannot many a man point to some long friendship, a continuous source of interest and ease of mind, which went on without much reflection, till one day he woke up to find himself another man—remade by another's personality, in the ordinary round of life, in work and play and talk, in talk of books and business, of neighbors and old memories? Slowly one has reached the other's point of view; his life has been learned piecemeal as he tells of its crises, and how he felt at this great moment and that; how he was disappointed at first, but soon came to another mind; how after that he found a great joy and lived on it for years; and then how it was taken away, but nothing could keep him from living on it still. Stage by stage, by unconscious and freely given sympathy, one has lived the other man's life; one has seen things and felt them as he saw and felt them one has slipped unawares into his language, and by degrees into his thoughts. There's the joy of friendship— "we live each other's lives".

And here it is that a mere self-seeking ambition defeats itself in the search for the prizes of life. In the rush for worldly advancement, the pusher, eager for more brilliant alliances, drops his old friends—or, what is worse, adopts toward them an attitude of condescension. What he has gained in the process we will not inquire. We know what he has lost. Such a man has no friends. To apply this title to his new entourage would be too cynical. And the friendless man, to whatever height he has climbed, is surely a being to be pitied. In every respect, a purely self-regarding being is necessarily a solitary being his hand is with no man, and he can expect no man's hand to be with him. If he be wise, there may be those that use his counsel; if he be the possessor of genius, there may be those that like to see it shine; if he be rich, there will be those that court his favor; if he be the leader of a party, there will be numbers in his train; but one who is unlearned and poor and private, and yet rich in the endowments of the conscience and the heart, rich in the spirit of friendliness, will exert a divine and vaster energy.

No one is fit to attempt the solution of any human problem who has not the capacity for friendship. That is why so many reforms fail, why so many settlements are unprofitable and so many churches useless—either they put their trust in mere data or lose themselves in dilettante socialism, or give themselves up to what Carlyle called "sentiment and snuffle," and never realize that the consecration of the heart, the magnetic power of Christ-like friendliness, is the essential condition of true usefulness.

One could write many chapters on the ethics of friendship. A first class maxim is that we should offer our friends always of our best and never of our worst. We owe to them that we should show "our lighted side." If a man's heart of charity and hand of friendship find out his fellow men with no intervention, he has traveled far on the road of religion. He is not far from the kingdom, "He who loveth not his brother whom he hath seen cannot love God whom he hath not seen."

And now a word about the making of friendships. The ideal friendships come from the knitting in each other of our nobler parts. Fellowship in great enterprises, a common aspiration concerning life's deepest things are their truest foundation. This it is which makes a genuine religious communion so uniquely beautiful a thing. It is worth while to recall that Jesus prayed all the night before he chose his disciple-friends. "Thine they were and Thou gavest them to me," he said later. When men can find a real spiritual leader, the union of souls between him and them is heaven's own marriage. There is nothing in the sphere of feeling so exquisite.

Let us pause with this and try to see what Jesus' capacity for friendship meant to his followers. "I have called you friends," he said. Do you appreciate the import of that? Do you realize that the greatest change the world has seen was brought about by an intimacy and a biography resulting therefrom? "He goeth up into a mountain, and calleth unto Him whom He would: and they came unto Him. And He ordained twelve, that they should be with Him." So runs the oldest account of it in Mark's gospel. Under the necessity of compression for the sake of working in more material, Matthew and Luke abridge this, and the needless phrase, "that they should be with Him," is cut away. A quite needless phrase, like many more in Mark, which are also omitted in the other gospels, and yet how essential! The thing is implied by the other writers, but are not the quiet and unobtrusive words worth remembering? Do they not contain the gist of the whole matter. In epitome what else would the history of Christianity be—of Christianity, that is, so far as it is a real thing, a force and a factor, and not a logomacy or a label?

One thing is worth noting at once. The writers of the first three gospels—probably all three, certainly two of them—had little or no first-hand intercourse with Jesus. They are using other men's reminiscences. This makes it more remarkable how little of the adjective there is in their works—no compliment, no eulogy, no great passages of encomium or commendation. "Why callest thou me good?" So it is recorded that Jesus asked a man once; and it looks as if the mood had passed over into His intimates. They did not "call Him good"; they had no adjective for Him any more than a man has adjectives for his father or his mother or his wife or his child when they mean most to him. The lips may tighten, and say more so than an adjective could achieve. The men who were with Jesus were to full of Him for the facile relief of praise. How had it come about?

These men consorted with Him in a life of wandering and often of weariness. One vivid incident survives of a day's travel. Once after a day's march—and that no ordinary one, for it was full of a marked tension, His face was "set"—He and His friends came to a village where they expected to rest. But the messengers whom they had sent on ahead met them with no pleasant news—they would not be received. No one who has not known what it is to be refused bread when hungry and weary will quite guess what it meant. Now, it is such moments that show the man, for then he is off his guard. There was nothing to be done but to tramp on; so on they tramped. There were angry looks and hot words—all futile; old stories came back—if one had Elijah's power now, and could call fire from heaven. "But He turned and rebuked them, and said: Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of. For the Son ofMan is not come to destroy men's lives, but to save them." After this the evangelist says simply: "And they went to another village"—a quiet ending, but full of significance. So they lived. "The Son of Man had not where to lay His head." It is such a life, stripped of all padding, that shows the real man.

But many another day's ending is lost to us. What was the talk, as they sat at the night's meal? Was it always intense? Did He never (in our rather foolish phrase) "unbend"? Was he gay or bright—if men can be so earnest, which some seem to doubt, but not I for one? As they broke bread among themselves, when there were no crowds, on what did their talk run? Had He what we call "little ways?" "I know you by the waggling of your head," says some one in Shakespeare. "You could never do him so ill-well, unless you were the very man. Here's his dry hand up and down: You are he, you are he!" One thing of this kind survives in the narratives—the fixed gaze and the pause which came when he was going to speak with effect. There are also one or two special words which are quoted as his. There must have been much else as familiar. They must have known him through and through—the inflexions of his voice, his characteristic movements, his step in the darkness, the hang of his clothes, and all such things. Did he speak quickly of slowly? Parables, aphorisms—how dull the set terms sound, when they are labels tied to his words! What proportion have we of all he spoke? And how and when and where did he speak this or that? Was it in a long talk, or suddenly, ashed out with gaze and pause as elude?

But it is when we reach the heart of the story that imagination fails. The problem is hard. Here are these men, a commonplace, uneducated and miscellaneous group, dull, as he found, and as He said, at taking in His deepest thoughts, a quiet impossible and impract cable regiment for a crusade. And then, a few years later, what do we find? Something has happened to three; they are magnetic with a new power, and draw strong men and wise about them, and foolish men too, and depraved it may be and hopeless—any creature that is human and capable of conceiving that there may be something that he does not know. Set down in black and white, what they had to say looked odd and doubtful; some saw all a glance that it was folly. But the spoken word was another thing; the man behind the message gave it a life that went beyond anything that could have been guessed. Elders and scribes and high priests, we read—and it is true of a great many more—"took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus."

The problem is to find what made the transformation, and the two passages with the same phrase give the answer clearly enough. They had "been with Him"— and the answer grows stronger the more we realize it. It was not what He said; nor exactly how He said it, nor what He did, but the whole effect of Himself. No one will readily understand this who has not a great intimacy with someone else, with someone of clear mind and kindly heart richly gifted with the aptitudes that go to make experience and character. In a word He was their friend; and because He was that, He saw expressions, heard tones, and received thoughts from these companions which no one else ever saw or heard from them. His capacity for friendship, which was His revealing power, revealed them to themselves. It was this that awakened in them the power of great affection and consecrated their lives.

We love our brother for what he is revealing to us of our God. Such friendship transcends all difference of rank and station. A real spiritual value will, indeed, always and everywhere assert itself as against any exterior one. A man can, by merely being rich enough, get obedience and hat- touching from his footman. But he cannot get his soul that way. Devotion is not a cash product. Wealth in this age it doing its hardest and its brutalist to win everything by supremacy, but the soul, through all, mocks at its endeavors. Still it is true, and always will it be true, that "He that loveth his brother abideth in the light * * * and knoweth God."

Our inner progress could be accurately measured by the range and quality of our friendships, as the quality heightens the range extends. Friendship of this order, fed and inspired from the highest sources, beginning its action in the private circle of those nearest us, spreads and spreads till it encompasses the world If there is one who is an outcast, its heart beats for him. If there are those who wander without the circles of fireside and national affection, its love reaches forth and includes them. If there are warring interests, the measureless friendliness of a life animated by God strives to unite and reconcile them. And it will be the growth of this power, more than the achievements of science or the harnessing of the world's physical forces that will ultimately bring to our race its age of gold—that age when the love of parent and child, the wife and husband and friend shall be but points of light in the great streaming splendor of human fellowship, that perfect fellowship wherein all men shall be the family of one Father, the kingdom of one soverign love.

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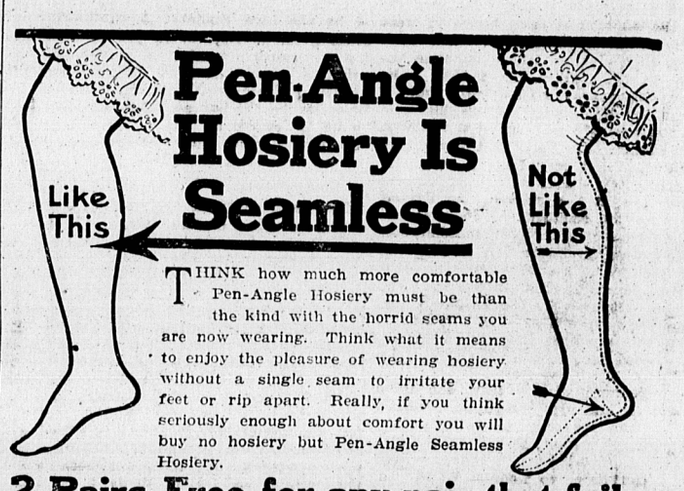

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