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The Spirituality of Friendship

Of the things which wisdom provides for the blessedness of one’s whole life, by far the greatest is the possession of friendship.

Epicurus

Spirituality is something of a buzz word. As Jeremy Carrette and Richard King argue in Selling Spirituality: the Silent Takeover of Religion, it is a concept that, first, has become highly individualised – it’s about ‘me’ and ‘my’ quality of life – and, second, has been adopted by organisations from car manufacturers to art galleries, with churches laying claim somewhere in between, whose primary aim is commercial – increasing audiences and shifting products.

The spirituality of friendship is similarly something to be rather sceptical about, at least at first. If asked what it might mean probably the most common answer would have to be soul friendship. But the idea of soul friendship is one almost irredeemably ‘taken-over’ by maudlin, marketable associations too. Type ‘soul friends’ (or even worse ‘soulmate’) into an internet search engine and some of the most syrupy aphorisms on friendship will be returned for your edification: ‘A soulmate is someone who has locks that fit our keys’, ‘You are my fire, my titanic ocean’, etc. The search will also throw up hundreds of dating agencies, websites promoting relationships with ‘celebrity soulmates’, and others that proffer advice on things like ‘soulmate health’. Such is the commercial value of the notion that one electronics manufacturer has named its MP3 music player SoulMate.

The trouble with this sentimental haze and commodification is that it cheapens an idea of enormous human and philosophical value: the spirituality of friendship is not something that can simply be ceded to the market. It must be recovered because, as I hope this chapter will
show, it captures the attitude best able to negotiate the ambiguities of friendship we have discussed, and make friendship nothing less than a way of life.

The first thing to do is to expose the spiritual veneer of the friendship of the marketplace. Consider again, the Aristotelian conception of the friend as another self. The very ambivalence of the phrase is indicative of a characteristic that is key to any significant spirituality of friendship. ‘Another self’ captures both the intimacy of close friendship in conveying the idea that this friend is another person like yourself; to discover such a person is to discover someone who at least some of the time mirrors your own thoughts, beliefs and feelings – someone with whom the apparently intractable distance between human beings collapses until it is vanishingly small. And the phrase also includes the vital qualifier that, for all the closeness, soul friends still recognise that they are separate individuals. Each is ‘an other self’ to the other. Unlike Narcissus who looked in the mirror and saw only himself, the source of the delight of soul friends is that they recognise not only themselves but another human being. ‘The essence of friendship lies, I suggest, in the exercise of a capacity to perceive, a willingness to respect, and a desire to understand the differences between persons,’ said the philosopher Richard Wollheim. Friends may share an intensity of feeling for each other, including joys and sorrows (‘I am happy because she is happy’, ‘I am sad when he is sad’), and successes and failures (they bask in each other’s reflected glory, or languish in each other’s mistakes). But they never seek to consume each other or fall into a perpetual embrace.

It is this aspect of difference that the spiritual friendship of the marketplace conveniently overlooks (its sentimentalisation of soul friendship arises by conflating it with the union to which romantic love aspires, a trope which commercially plays much better than advocating difference). The difference is illustrated in the way soul friends behave and lovers are portrayed. For example, soul friends’ qualified need of each other, in the sense of respecting each others’ individuality, means that they do not mind being physically apart for periods of time. Screen lovers, however, spend the whole time that they are apart yearning for the moment when they will be reunited (and when they are together, they are haunted by fears that they may not be together forever). Alternatively, soul friends understand one another to the extent that they trust one another implicitly: when they befriend others, if to a lesser degree, the seeds of jealousy are not sown between them. Screen lovers, though, cannot in general even countenance a wandering eye, detecting betrayal and the promiscuity of desire.