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SANTAYANA ON FRIENDSHIP

FRIENDSHIP IS ALMOST ALWAYS THE UNION of a part of one mind with a part of another; people are friends in spots. Friendship sometimes rests on sharing early memories as do brothers and schoolfellows, who often, but for that now affectionate familiarity with the same old days, would dislike and irritate one another extremely. Sometimes it hangs on passing pleasures and amusements, or on special pursuits; sometimes on mere convenience and comparative lack of friction in living together. One's friends are that part of the human race with which one can be human. But there are youthful friendships of quite another quality—brief echoes, as it were, of that love of comrades so much celebrated in antiquity. I do not refer to the «friendship of virtue» mentioned by Aristotle, which means, I suppose, community in allegiance or in ideals. It may come to that in the end, considered externally; but community in allegiance or in ideals, if genuine, expresses a common disposition, and its roots are deeper and more physical than itself. The friendship I have in mind is a sense of this initial harmony between two natures, a union of one whole man with another whole man, a sympathy between the centres of their being radiating from those centres on occasion in unanimous thoughts, but not essentially needing to radiate. Trust here is inwardly grounded; likes and dislikes run together without harness, like the steeds of Aurora; you may take agreement for granted without words; affection is generously independent of all tests or external bonds; it can even bear not to be mutual, not to be recognized; and in any case it shrinks from the blatancy of open vows. In such friendships there is a touch of passion and of shyness; an understanding which does not need to become explicit or complete. There is wine in the cup; it is not to be spilled nor gulped down unrelished, but to be sipped slowly, soberly, in the long summer evening, with the window open to the college garden, and the mind full of all that is sweetest to the mind.

Now there is a mystery here—though it need be no mystery which some people find strange and distressing and would like to hush up. This profound physical sympathy may sometimes, for a moment, spread to the senses; that is one of its possible radiations, though fugitive; and there is a fashionable psychology at hand to explain all friendship, for that reason, as an aberration of sex. Human nature is still plastic, especially in the region of emotion, as is proved by the ever-changing forms of religion and art; and it is not a question of right and wrong, nor even, except in extreme cases, of health and disease, but only a question of alternative development, whether the human capacity to love is absorbed in the family cycle, or extends to individual friendships, or to communion with nature or with God.

The love of friends in youth, in the cases where it is love rather than friendship, has a mystical tendency. In character, though seldom in intensity, it resembles the dart which, in ecstatic vision, pierced the heart of Saint Theresa, bursting the normal integument by which the blood is kept coursing through generation after generation, in the closed channel of human existence and human slavery. Love then escapes from that round; it is, in one sense, wasted and sterilized; but in being diverted from its earthly labors it suffuses the whole universe with light; it casts its glowing colors on the sunset, upon the altar, upon the past, upon the truth. The anguished futility of love corrects its own selfishness, its own illusion; gradually the whole world becomes beautiful in its inhuman immensity; our very defeats are transfigured, and we see that it was good for us to have gone up into that mountain.

From «Wisdom», May 1958