

## Spiritual Friendship

1 I looked for my Soul, but my Soul I could not see.  
I looked for my God, but my God eluded me.  
I looked for a friend and then I found all three.

**William Blake**

2 Cherish the friend who tells you a harsh truth...  
wanting ten-times more to tell you a loving lie. **Robert Brault**

3 With every true friendship, we build more firmly the foundations on which the peace of the whole world rests. **Mahatma Gandhi**

4 When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand. **Henri Nouwen**

5 At times our own Light goes out and it is rekindled by a spark from another being. Each of us has cause to think with deep gratitude of those who have lighted the flame within us. **Albert Schweitzer**

6 A spiritual friend is one to whom we can entrust all the secrets of our heart and before whom we can place all our plans. In other words, a spiritual friend offers a safe place to try things out, to stretch and to grow: we need not fear shaming or ridicule, no matter what we might say. . . . The tradition of the *anamchara* — the soul friend — was well established when Christianity arrived in Ireland and Scotland, and so was easily incorporated into Celtic spirituality. The *anamchara* was a person of wisdom and integrity; in the early days a soul friend might be a woman or a man, lay or ordained, before the work of spiritual guidance became the prerogative of the clergy. Anyone might have a soul friend — St. Brigit among others is reported to have said that a person without a soul friend was like a body without a head.

— **Margaret Guenther**, *Toward Holy Ground*

7 Consider who among your family or friends has the potential of becoming your soul friend. Pray over this, and ask for guidance from God. Then present the idea to the person, saying that you respect his or her wisdom and would like to meet periodically to talk about spiritual matters that are important to you. If the person agrees, set up times to get together, and begin this practice. Remember that the soul friendship does not have to be reciprocal, although it is stronger if it is. What matters is that you seek advice from your soul friend, and let that person decide whether or not you will function as a soul friend for him or her.

— **Tom Cowan**, *The Way of the Saints*

8 What can any of us do in those moments when we can feel ourselves sliding into a situation that we know in our heart of hearts will be a mistake? Aha. This is the job of spiritual bodyguards. Maybe your spiritual bodyguard is a local monk or minister. Maybe it's a best friend . . . Maybe it's a saint — dead or alive.

— **Geri Larkin**, Tap Dancing in Zen

9 Sometimes the easiest way to appreciate ourselves is by looking through the eyes of someone who loves us. A friend told me that when he sees himself through the eyes of his spiritual teacher, he remembers how deeply devoted he is to seeking the truth. One of my clients realizes he is lovable when he remembers how his grandfather used to delight in his boyish curiosity and inventiveness. Sometimes seeing ourselves through the eyes of a close friend can help us to remember our good qualities. Our friend might love our humor and warmth, our passion about saving the environment, our honest willingness to say what's really going on in our lives. We don't have to limit our appreciators to the human world. I once saw a bumper sticker that said: "Lord, help me to see myself the way my dog sees me." We might ask ourselves what makes our dog happy to see us. Even if the answer is that he just wants to get fed or walked, our animal's appreciation of our constancy reflects an aspect of us that is worthy. The practice of looking through the eyes of one who loves us can be a powerful and surprisingly direct way to remember our beauty and goodness.

Through the simple practice of seeing our own goodness, we undo the deeply rooted habits of blame and self-hate that keep us feeling isolated and unworthy.

— **Tara Brach**, Radical Acceptance

10 Oh, the comfort—the inexpressible comfort of feeling safe with a person—having neither to weigh thoughts nor measure words, but pouring them all right out, just as they are, chaff and grain together; certain that a faithful hand will take and sift them, keep what is worth keeping, and then with the breath of kindness blow the rest away. **Dinah Maria Mulock Craik**

11 The *Meghiya Sutta* is my favorite Pali text about friendship. It tells the story of the eager young monk Meghiya, who wanted to practice meditation alone in an especially peaceful and beautiful mango grove. But Meghiya's meditation was anything but peaceful and beautiful. To his shock, he found his mind a snarl of malicious, lustful, and confused thoughts—probably because his practice was too self-involved. When Meghiya rushed back to report his confusing experience, Buddha was not surprised. He took the opportunity to give Meghiya what he must have hoped was a relevant teaching.

"Five things induce release of heart and lasting peace," the Buddha told him. "First, a lovely intimacy with good friends. Second, virtuous conduct. Third, frequent conversation that inspires and encourages practice. Fourth, diligence, energy, and enthusiasm for the good. And fifth, insight into impermanence."

Then, for Meghiya's further benefit, and to cement the point, the Buddha goes through the list again, this time preceding each of the other items with the first: "When there is a lovely intimacy

between friends, then there is virtuous conduct,” et cetera. In other words, friendship is the most important element in the spiritual path. Everything else naturally flows from it.

—**Norman Fischer**, in *Lion’s Roar: Buddhist Wisdom for Our Time*

12 Heavy

That time  
I thought I could not  
go any closer to grief  
without dying

I went closer,  
and I did not die.  
Surely God  
had his hand in this,

as well as friends.  
Still, I was bent,  
and my laughter,  
as the poet said,

was nowhere to be found.  
Then said my friend Daniel,  
(brave even among lions),  
“It’s not the weight you carry

but how you carry it –  
books, bricks, grief –  
it’s all in the way  
you embrace it, balance it, carry it

when you cannot, and would not,  
put it down.”  
So I went practicing.  
Have you noticed?

Have you heard  
the laughter  
that comes, now and again,  
out of my startled mouth?

How I linger  
to admire, admire, admire  
the things of this world  
that are kind, and maybe

also troubled –  
roses in the wind,  
the sea geese on the steep waves,  
a love  
to which there is no reply?

**Mary Oliver**, from her collection, *Thirst*

### **For Reflection and Discussion**

A What does “spiritual friend” mean to you?

B Has spiritual friendship been an important part of your spiritual path?

C What is your history as a spiritual friend—have you been both befriender and befriended? Have the relationships been one on one or in the context of a group? Have you been changed by one or more spiritual friendships?

D Has the All Souls community been a source of spiritual friendships and a place to cultivate and nourish such friendships?

——Mary Beth Hatem, for covenant groups at All Souls, Unitarian