

THE CRESSSET

A review of literature, the arts, and public affairs

Lent 2007

Friendship and Its Language

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Friendship is in bad shape. Last year the *American Sociological Review* published a study demonstrating that between 1985 and 2004, the number of Americans admitting they have no one with whom to discuss important matters nearly tripled. But lacking a confidant is only part of the crisis. Americans seem to have lost their ability to maintain even basic neighborliness. One of the study's authors observed how starkly Hurricane Katrina revealed the problem: "That image of people on roofs after Katrina resonates with me, because those people did not know someone with a car," said Lynn Smith-Lovin, a Duke University sociologist who helped conduct the study. "There really is less of a safety net of close friends and confidants." Similarly, the *New York Times* recently ran an article documenting the anxiety twenty- and thirty-something New York men feel when they spend time with one another doing things other than watching sports or cruising for women. The "man date," where two or more men enjoy conversation over dinner and wine, is considered "too gay" for most men, it seems.

Americans, even when not stranded on their rooftops, seem to have lost the art of friendship. They seem to be unsure just what to do with a friend. They know how to unite their bodies but not their souls. They seem to have forgotten a rich heritage in Western thinking on the meaning of friendship. The ancient Greeks thought that friendship at its best involved conversing about the noble and the good. Thus Xenophon reports Socrates proclaiming:

Just as others are pleased by a good horse or dog or bird, I myself am pleased to an even higher degree by good friends... and the treasures of the wise men of old which they left behind by writing them in books, I unfold and go through them together with my friends, and if we see

THE CRESSET

something good, we pick it out and regard it as a great gain if we thus become useful to one another. (Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, I, vi, 14)

The Greek philosophers spoke frequently about friendship, which for them culminated in conversation about the good and noble.

The Bible mentions friendship less, but its intermittent references are critical. For instance, as Liz Carmichael observes in her exhaustive *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love*, notable Christian thinkers have been drawn to John 15:15 as a central text on Christian love. There, Jesus proclaims his disciples will no longer be disciples, but friends.

Friendship also plays a strong role in the relationship of Adam and Eve. In Genesis chapter two, that enigmatic “second creation story,” we hear in greater detail than chapter one what kind of world humans are to enjoy. God gave Adam enormous freedom in naming all his sustainers or counterparts. We share in this freedom, and awesome responsibility, when we name our children (or when children name their pets). But to name entire species! Adam’s ability to name presupposes that he had an understanding of natural kinds—the difference, say, between a dog and a cat—allowing him to name species. It is for this reason Walter Benjamin called Adam the first philosopher. Whereas we had to learn the names of animal species from our parents, Adam would have known the stark difference between a world that is intelligible and significant and one that is not.

Yet, the joy of learning natural kinds left Adam incomplete. He acknowledges this incompleteness in his first recorded speech, which happens to be a poem (in Robert Alter’s translation):

This one at last, bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh,
This one shall be called Woman,
For from man this one was taken. (Gen. 2:23)

In recent years, this passage has been read as a patriarchal assertion of female bodily dependence on male form. This passage and its subsequent narrative, with its emphasis on the unity of flesh, frequently gets recited at weddings (although marriage frequently has been taken by numerous Christians as the height of friendship).

However, the text leads us to conclude that readings emphasizing gender inequality and marriage do not preclude us from viewing it as a statement of Adam’s noetic participation in friendship. Adam has been naming, and therefore contemplating, natural kinds. In cocreating with God, in making a world of signifiers for humans, he has

THE CRESSET

been exercising reason, his highest faculty. Yet, this world of signifiers is not fully significant. Adam needs a conversation partner. In Alter's literal and musical translation, we hear Adam's first words (which, as his first words, ineluctably draw the reader into the conversation): "This one at last." Adam has been searching for his own kind with whom not only to "go forth and multiply" in the bodily sense, but also in its noetic sense of praising and understanding creation. Even though he is lord of creation, Adam finds creation incomplete without someone with whom to communicate its glory. Since Adam speaks in verse that begins and ends with the feminine indicative pronoun, *z'ot*, "this one," we are also given to understand that Adam understands his own kind (human) but also the feminine that completes his maleness. That he speaks in verse suggests the importance of poetry, in the sense of music and of stories that engage both body and soul, in the conversation among human beings, including friends. Perhaps this is why, in his Vulgate, Jerome translates Paul's *politeuma* in heaven (Phil. 3:20) as *conversatio*, a term meaning not only conversation but also conversion and dwelling with. "Citizenship," as translated by the King James, seems too cramped.

But between our creation and our salvation, how on earth are we supposed to conduct friendly conversation in that fulsome sense? Three recent books go some way to uncovering the reasons for friendship's current crisis, as well as offering some remedies.

Joseph Epstein's *Friendship: An Exposé*, is a chatty reflection on the contemporary state of friendship. He thinks people today (himself especially) either have too many friends or they are lonely, which ends up being two effects of the same cause. He observes that modern life is so fluid that our friends are like our wardrobe: just as we wear a piece of clothing for a while and then remove it, so too we interact with our friends (actually acquaintances) for a few hours, but we fail to know the whole person. Unlike Adam, who in sizing up Eve, had a pretty good understanding of who and what she was, we have "differentiated friendships" that take in a fragment of our friends but not the whole person. Unlike Adam who gained self-knowledge in "at last" finding Eve, our superficial encounters deprive us of self-knowledge. As a result, Epstein observes that we try to compensate by seeking even more friends, which ends up undermining our sense of friendship with any one of them. Our friendships end up feeling like burdensome obligations. While friendships do carry their obligations (friendship includes justice, according to Aristotle and Aquinas), they do not necessarily *feel* like obligations. Friendship implies reciprocity, but friends do not keep score-cards. No one proclaims "at last" when they meet their obligations.

Epstein is critical of some of the modes of interaction we moderns frequently mistake for the essence of friendship, including intimacy, compassion, and confession. He also regards marriage as its rival. Epstein provides a thumbnail definition of friendship as affection, shared interests, past, values, enemies, and delight in one another's com-

THE CRESSET

pany (21). But intelligent conversation is his focus, and telling stories about friendship is more important to understanding it than philosophical theories. Citing political philosopher Michael Oakeshott, Epstein finds friendship “dramatic,” meaning our experience of it is inescapably participatory (45). He does not think friends need to share belief in God (20), by which he seems to reject a central definition of friendship (of Cicero, and shared with Augustine) as “agreement on things human and divine combined with goodwill and love.” However, Epstein insists that friendship depends on having in common “certain unspoken assumptions about what is and what isn’t important” (38). The ability of friends not to have to worry about debating the fundamentals of their common worlds places friendship “beyond intimacy,” which enables them never to “run out of things to talk about or run out of good feelings for each other” (115). If friendship begins with respecting another’s dignity, getting “beyond intimacy” entails reaching their (vaguely defined) “central fire,” which ensures community (163). Friendship involves speech, but it is beyond speech. Epstein’s understanding of friendship is closer to that of Cicero and Augustine than he lets on.

Epstein tries to be countercultural in criticizing our democratic demand that friends be equal. Quoting Francis Bacon, equality produces rivalry about which unequal friends need not worry: Achilles and Patroclus, Johnson and Boswell, Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, and so forth. One could add Socrates and his friends, and recall that while Jesus preferred friend to disciple, only He is the Son of God. Epstein prizes his own friendship with the sociologist, the late Edward Shils, who was older and whom Epstein regards his intellectual superior. Epstein became Shils’s friend after Shils and his equal, novelist Saul Bellow, broke off their friendship. Even so, the way Epstein describes his relationship suggests Shils regarded Epstein—despite inequalities in age, learning, and experience—his equal in having “a nearly complete understanding of his motives and his reasoning and, finally, the meaning of his life” (31). *At last*, Shils may have proclaimed in sizing up Epstein, he has found *this one*.

Stephen Miller’s *Conversation: A History of a Declining Art* provides a history of conversation and shows the philosophical and cultural sources of the contemporary crisis in friendship. He identifies two broad enemies of conversation, and therefore of friendship: (1) the active life, which explains why the American founders were not good conversationalists (they were too busy founding their republic), and the obstacles commercial life places on it (too busy forging utilitarian relations); and (2) various forms of enthusiasm, which historically took the form of the Holy Spirit in Christianity and its parallel in the Romantic cult of authenticity, according to which nonverbal gestures convey one’s essential humanity more adequately than verbal gestures. Examples of authenticity include Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s symbol of natural man, which was inspired in part by his contempt for the conversationalists of French court life, Ernest

THE CRESSET

Hemingway's laconic heroes, the nihilism of 1960s counterculture and its belief that authentic humanity comes through LSD and sex, the proclivity of rock stars and rappers who rely exclusively on vulgarities to express their sincerity about whatever it is they are sincere about, and, finally, the cult of individualism, whose devotion to expressing one's "unique point of view" diminishes conversation into a series of "intersecting monologues."

Miller's conversationalist defenders of friendship are the "clubbable men" of the English and Scottish Enlightenment: Adam Smith, David Hume, Samuel Johnson, and Jonathan Swift. The pubs, clubs, and coffee shops of London and Glasgow were the seedbeds of liberty and Enlightenment because such men were spirited conversationalists whose discussions covered the breadth of human experience. They surpassed the universities as sources of innovative thought. Their participants were more serious about their conversations than the French courtiers, who, according to English and Scots, were more interested in playing verbal games than in engaging in serious discussion (though Montaigne and La Rochefoucauld earn praise for their insights).

Yet, for all of Miller's criticisms of anti-intellectualism, he admits that reason alone does not make for good conversation. Raillery, which Swift called "the finest part of Conversation," keeps conversations both serious and ongoing. Raillery involves teasing, testing, antagonizing, and even making temporary enemies out of one's conversation partners (5). For Epstein, and likely for Miller, raillery is more characteristic of male conversations (when they bother to converse) than it is of females. Even so, it has a way of cementing attention toward one's friend and to the topic of the conversation.

Miller sees raillery as a key index of how politically stable a country is: "how much its citizens can engage in good-humored disagreement" (308). However, raillery shares with conversation's prominent enemies, the active life and authenticity. Like one committed to action, raillery demands assertiveness and risking that one's plans will come to naught. In conversation, raillery tests the other's manly appetite for defending and asserting one's viewpoints, thereby risking enmity with one's partner. Like authenticity, raillery asserts one's personality.

For the ancient Greeks (whose raillery, especially that of Socrates, Miller overlooks, although he summarizes the more docile parts of their conversational skills), raillery is an expression of *thumos*, the spirited part of the soul. *Thumos* gets aroused when one is compelled to defend oneself and those one loves, as well as one's viewpoints. It enables political life. For Aristotle, it is the source of friendship and enmity (he and Epstein observe that one hates most those one previously has loved). As a result, it needs to be harnessed by reason so those two faculties of soul can perfect each other.

With Epstein and Miller, we find friendship sustained when reason rules the soul but also participates with what is above reason ("beyond intimacy," "central fire") and

THE CRESSET

what is below reason (*thumos*). Liz Carmichael's study of the central place of friendship in Christian love shows how this stretching out reaches its most differentiated expression in the Christian Trinity.

Carmichael laments that Christians have not sufficiently availed themselves of the New Testament friendship teaching. Her book covers the variety of ways Christian thinkers through the centuries have nevertheless drawn from John 15:15. While their neglect has numerous sources (monasticism being a major one), she points to the Lutheran theologian Anders Nygren's study *Agape and Eros*, published in the 1930s, as having a corrosive effect on Christian understandings of friendship in the twentieth-century. For Nygren, friendship is antithetical to Christian love, because it is too self-interested. Carmichael's study of friendship in the Christian tradition disputes that claim in a number of ways, including the equation of *caritas* and friendship in the writings of Aquinas and in modern personalist accounts of the Trinity.

For Aquinas, "in the love of friendship, a man's affection goes out from itself simply" (114–16, referring to *Summa Theologiae* I–II.28). Friendship as *conversatio* mimics the divine *communicatio* of God giving Himself to Himself. In ST I–II.38.2, Aquinas precisely formulates this *communicatio*: "But the Holy Ghost receives his proper name from the fact that He proceeds from Father to Son. Therefore Gift is the proper name of the Holy Ghost." From this, one may infer that naming has something to do with friendship, that is, love and understanding a "who" in addition to a "what." Aquinas develops a set of symbols showing how we can get into that conversation.

Paradoxically, we cannot strictly speaking get into that conversation. Friendship has no starting point in the sense that our affection for a friend precedes our recognizing that affection: "the appetible object [i.e., one's friend] gives the appetite, first, a certain adaptation to itself, which consists in complacency in that object; and from this follows movement toward the appetible object. For the appetitive movement is circular" (ST I–II.26.2). In more familiar language, this means God's love for us enables our love for Him, but it also points to the mystery of friendship according to which we necessarily find ourselves loving our friend before we recognize it. The appearance of our friend impresses his form onto us, which "complacency" (*complacentia*, the pleasure we experience in adapting our love toward the beloved) moves the appetite to desire union, which gets experienced as joy when achieved. Adam would have experienced "complacency" when he beheld Eve "at last."

Aquinas says we experience uniting with our friends as "mutual indwelling" (*mutua inhaesio*). We are "in" each other insofar as we have impressed our form on one another's soul—on intellect and on appetitive power. We know we are "in" each other when we delight in one another. We also know we are "in" each other when we "strive to gain an intimate knowledge of everything pertaining to the beloved, so as to pene-

THE CRESSET

trate into his very soul” and where “it seems as though he felt the good or suffered the evil in the person of his friend” (ST I-II.28.2). Aquinas’s insertion of “it seems” indicates that the identity of friends is imperfect, or more precisely, they are both identical and different, and enough of each to allow for meaningful *conversatio*. The desire for complete identity is *in principle* antithetical to the practice of friendship, which, involving people sharing a common story, allows each individual to write his own lines in response to the other.

Friends also suffer ecstasy and zeal toward one another. Ecstasy literally means being taken out of our place. It is what we experience by having our friend’s form impressed upon us, our affection going out of us simply, experienced as delight in him and the desire to provide him his good, for his own sake. Jesus tells us the consummate act of friendship is to lay down our life for them (John 15:13). Zeal expresses what love shares with *thumos*: “the more intensely a power tends to anything, the more vigorously it withstands opposition or resistance” (ST I-II.28.4). We love what helps our friend and hate what harms him, including external harm as well as vice.

Twentieth-century critics distinguished friendship from agape by insisting only the former is self-emptying. However, Carmichael’s analysis of Aquinas shows how they missed the mark because she shows how, for Aquinas, self-emptying and sharing depends on maintaining a sense of self. Implicitly, by seeing friendship as falling short, these critics ask too little of agape.

However, Carmichael believes Aquinas did not go as far as modern thinkers in explicating the friendship of the Trinity. While the modern age invented the isolated individual, it also “thereby opened up a path into a wholly new exploration of human inter-subjectivity” (159). Modern personalism, expressed variously by Kierkegaard, Simone Weil, and others, is more faithful to the Trinity than Aquinas, for whom one still “looks up” and thereby emphasizes God the Father, rather than “looking down” to the Son. For personalists, friendship is expressed through those concrete encounters with individual and particular persons. “Who” takes full precedence over “what,” or in Martin Buber’s terms, our friend is a “Thou” not an “it.” In preserving the Christian obligation to love one’s fellow human being, personalist thinkers have developed a variety of ways to express a fundamental stance with which we face “the Other.”

Kierkegaard distinguishes between “finding the perfect person in order to love him” from the Christian ideal of “being the perfect person who boundlessly loves the person he sees” (159). John Burnaby considers the Good Samaritan as the paradigmatic human encounter, where particular love is governed by the condition of need itself (165); Simone Weil considered that “creative attention” requires us to transcend our need of seeking our good and to experience “a miraculous supernatural transcendence which enables us to ‘wish autonomy to be preserved’ in ourself and the other” (170).

THE CRESSET

Finally, all these thinkers insist on the irreplaceability of persons (175). These personalist accounts seem to share an appreciation that human beings do not choose their friends so much as find them along the paths they take, and that those paths are ineluctably formed by the chance encounters with our friends. This insight recalls Augustine's observation, made in *On Christian Doctrine*, that our neighbor is he who "by chance" is nearby. Our lives and our friendships are formed by the manner in which we respond to our chance encounters, whose meaning only becomes apparent as we live out our lives with those friends.

In some ways Carmichael overstates the novelty of the modern turn toward personalism. It can already be found in Aquinas, as well as in Augustine (as Peter Burnell has recently demonstrated). Moreover, behind the modern language of personhood, one can find Kantian notions of dignity and its assertion of autonomy, which in many ways conflicts with Trinitarian love. What can be gained by examining the modern turn toward personalism, however, is its reflections on the differing modes of encounter that chance brings about, and how those modes express our friend's irreplaceability. Each friendship encounter is experienced as a unique event. Yet, we share a latent though rarely understood humanity that is drawn out in those unique encounters. Some postmodern formulations (which celebrate chance) make friendship nearly impossible because they deny another self for one to love and understand, as well as one loving and understanding. While postmodernism's skepticism toward a stable self in many ways contributes to Miller's observation that contemporary conversations are in fact "intersecting monologues," Epstein's common-sense experience of friendship with Edward Shils, whose life's meaning Epstein divined, shows postmodernism goes too far in its skepticism.

Rather, personalism reminds us that friendship reveals itself in its concrete practices and iterations. Their descriptions of how friends connect with one another are vaguer than the delicately paradoxical language Aquinas uses to describe "mutual indwelling." This vagueness may be due to the isolation modern individuals experience, reflecting ambivalence as to how two souls unite. For Aquinas, friends mutually inhere with one another with their affection and with their intellects. With their intellects, we seem noetically to touch on a mysterious inner core or "central fire" (Epstein), but also through the more day-to-day encounters we describe to one another in a more reflective mode. The noetic and the reflective are inseparable.

Epstein rightly alerts us to the importance of stories about friends (35). Stories are the way the reflective part of our intellects participates with our friends. We share stories with our friends while simultaneously writing those stories with them. It always seems that after friends finish performing some action, like backpacking in the Canadian Rockies, they feel the need to talk about it, frequently over drinks. Stories

THE CRESSET

express and are examples of individuals participating with one another in a grander whole. Aristotle alludes to this when he writes: “And elsewhere Odysseus says that this is the best pastime, when human beings are enjoying good cheer and ‘the banqueters seated in order throughout the hall listen to a singer.’” (*Politics* 1338a28–30, quoting *Odyssey*, 9.5–6). Ancient and Christian thinkers like Augustine frequently compared the aspired-to harmony of a city to a story or poem, and some of our best statesmen have been good story-tellers. Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill were great storytellers. Churchill’s ability to tell stories was prodigious (many to Franklin Roosevelt, who frequently lacked the energy, and later the desire, to listen to them all), and he also wrote numerous books chronicling England’s “island story.” Lesser statesmen write only memoirs, but even these begin as stories they tell those around them.

Storytelling seems implied in Aquinas’s evocation of the names of the Trinity because those names are of persons, that is, of relations of entities that are neither species nor particular instances (ST I.20). It seems also the lesson to draw from Adam’s first recorded speech, which was a poem inviting us into the drama of humanity. However, the fluidity of modern life is a profound obstacle to our ability to live these stories with one another. We share chapters, sentences, a few fragmentary clauses, but the story as a whole is elusive.

Because stories seem difficult to share, people, out of lonely desperation, frequently seek a shortcut into the “central fire.” Out of loneliness, the ecstasy and zeal about which Aquinas speaks gets deformed into erotic excitement, as well as the variations of Romantic authenticity Miller discusses. Zeal, unhinged from reason, gets expressed as rage and the sullenness of the lonely individual in the mob. Yet, Epstein points to the noetic vision of his friend Shils at the poignant moment when they both recognized they understood each other. That is the moment when their stories, their personalities, reveal themselves as a whole, an experience similar to witnessing the climax of a play. Many of us have had those moments of recognition (or had experiences we thought were such moments—a mistake frequently causing confusion and heartache).

For the most part, though, we settle for intimations of such wholeness, which usually expresses itself in our desire for our friend’s physical presence. Epstein and Miller speak of the special importance of physical proximity with friends. Gestures, eye contact, and simply sitting nearby not only amplify verbal meanings in conversation but also embody the human world in which speech is made: Adam had to see Eve; Aquinas notes the proper name for the member of the Trinity that was born is “Son.” We frequently think of physical presence as an embodiment or instantiation of something greater (like the body serving as the instrument of the soul). Conversely, physical presence evokes wholeness, shorthand for a complete story. Churchill liked to have face-to-face dealings with foreign leaders, because it afforded each party an opportunity to

THE CRESSET

stake his honor and to demonstrate their understanding of each other. Similarly, Elizabeth Telfer notes that liking someone (the prelude to loving them) is a matter of sizing them up, seeing if, like a painting, they “hang together” well in a unity. But we never fully see their unity because theirs is never fully present even to them and ours is never fully present even to us.

The challenge of friendship then is to find a way to articulate the possibility for mutual indwelling in its appetitive, noetic (experiencing the “central fire”), and reflective modes (stories) in a way that acknowledges the limits of how modern man can remedy his isolation. Nostalgic yearning for a communitarian and rural past is inadequate and even dangerous. Such an attempt needs also to acknowledge that modern man seems to like a good part of his isolation, his unsociable sociability as Kant said, because that preserves his autonomy. Yet, is not the point of friendship to balance autonomy and love for another? Or is the virtue teaching of Aristotle and Aquinas irreducibly different than Kantian ethics? Does autonomy require that we stay well away from our friend’s “central fire” lest we get burned? Kant cited this as one of the reasons he considered friendship a “minor virtue” and why it plays a relatively insignificant role in his moral thinking. The ethical state is governed by rules, not by friendships. Yet friendship is more humanly satisfying than rules and obligations. For this reason friendship will remain a central aspiration, if a problematic one, in our lives. ✦

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THE CRESSET

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