LONELINESS AND FRIENDSHIP

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We do not need to be told too much about the personal experience of loneliness. Few people have not known some terrible moments of radical isolation. Few people have been able to pursue their life's journey without on occasion encountering the macerating experiences of a profound disconnectedness. "I dream of journeys repeatedly," say Theodore Roetke, in an utterance of quiet anguish that articulates the sensibility of one who feels entrapped and alone in a technological world that seems to be going nowhere, --

> I dream of journeys repeatedly:
> Of flying like a bat deep into a narrowing tunnel,
> Of driving alone, withoutluggage, out a lonely penninsula,
> The road lined with snow-laden second growth,
> a fine dry snow ticking the windshield,
> Alternate snow and sleet, no oncoming traffice,
> And no light behind, in the slurred side-mirror,
> The road chaning from glazed-tarface to a rubble of stone,
> Ending at last in a hopeless sandrut,
> Where the car stalls,
> Churning in a snowdrift
> Until the headlights darken.

I suppose that the calm dread that this poem expresses is as powerful as it is for me because it calls to mind the memory of a college boy I once knew who drove half the night one torrid August evening, from Syracuse, New York, to the end of Cape Cod, in order to hear his beloved say farewell to him and he to her, only to find himself stranded, alone, miles short of his fateful destination, near some dunes, weeping in a car that had choked to a fitful stop on a desolate back road he knew not where. Strangely, perhaps, when that college boy grew older and the pains of that youthful trauma had subsided, he continued, now and again, to experience the same kind of wrenching loneliness he had known in the long empty hours in that stalled automobile on that strange road. Only now those moments of

heartfelt isolation often seemed to him to have no fixed relation to any specific trauma or any concrete configurations of circumstances. They often seemed, in his ensuing years, to flood on his consciousness, as if from nowhere.

We need to talk about such experiences, if not dwell on them, since by their very nature they tend themselves to isolate us. They tend to close us in on ourselves, without the knowledge, indeed, however grim a comfort it may be, that others also feel radically alone from time to time. One widely reported national survey in 1978 indicated that one fourth of all Americans had felt "very lonely or remote from other people" during the previous week. A year earlier, a local study had discovered that one fourth of Wellesley College students described themselves as lonely, and that many Wellesley faculty indicated that they also felt isolated and estranged, from students and from each other. Whether the remaining seventy-five per cent of the American populus at large or the Wellesley student body in general did not identify themselves as lonely because they were not ever overcome by such feelings or because they did not want to reveal them, even to themselves, is a question about which we might want to speculate.

It is worth noting, in any case, that loneliness is no idiosyncratic experience of a few alienated or pathological individuals. The experience is probably as near to most of us as we are to ourselves. It would be suprising if it were not, at least to some degree, since powerful symbolic and social factors in the modern West have consistently pushed many individuals to the brink of radical isolation.

At the dawning of the modern age René Descartes articulated what was to become the vital center of existence for many people, down to our own day: the reality of the individual ego. This was part of the significance of his famous cogito. The only reality Descartes could take with utmost

seriousness was the reality of his own soul. Everything else, for him, was secondary. Everything else could be doubted. Everything else was subject to the threat of non-being.

If we skip over several centuries now we can see a socio-economic scenario which has taken over that Cartesian motif with a vengeance. The massive technological systems that now dominate our world tend to overwhelm the mediating communal structures -- the neighborhood, for example -- that have traditionally sustained human interconnectedness, thus tend to bequeath a world of atomistic individuals who stand alone before impersonal those immense powers that so determine their own consciousness and their relationships with each other. People become numbers -- a commonplace observation in our time, but fraught with significance for that very reason, -- in huge social machines. Sociologists have discussed these trends since the nineteenth century. In recent years these trends have been identified perhaps most vividly in this country by David Riesmann in his 1950 study, The Lonely Crowd, and by Philip Slater in his 1970 essay, The Pursuit of Loneliness.

Notice in this respect: in our own tiny world, in this place that we like to think of as a community, notice how many people struggle so fervently for, or otherwise dream of, the day when they can finally obtain a single room. Are these some of the very people who experience themselves as being lonely at Wellesly? It may be. It seems true, in any case, that American society at large is composed of countless individuals who pursue a room of their own, for various reasons, some of them known, some of them unknown, only to find themselves more lonely and more estranged than ever before. "We seek a private house," Slater explains, "a private means of transportation, a private garden, a private laundry, self-service stores, and do-it- yourself skills of every kind. An enormous technology seems to have set itself the task of making it unnecessary for one human being ever to ask anything of the other in the course of going about [their]

daily business. Even within the family Americans are unique in their feeling that each member should have a separate room, and even a separate telephone, television, and car, when economically possible. We seek more and more privacy, and feel more and more alienated and lonely when we get it."

It seems, then, that Wellesley College is atleast in ~~some~~ this respect as American as cherry pie. ~~We are~~ Ours is a nation of people seeking privacy. We are a college of people seeking privacy. ~~Even more.~~ Indeed, it might be the case that Wellesley College is more American than cherry pie, that the national ~~drive~~ thrust toward individual isolation is accented ~~exacerbated~~ here. This is what the counseling study of 1977 concluded. "The observations of transfer students, visiting and new faculty," it said, "tend to indicate that the culture of Wellesley College exacerbates the stress of students. The Wellesley College culture seems to reflect and intensify societal values such as individualism, achievement, competetion, and evaluation. At the same time, the College norms of privacy and politeness ~~make~~ the stress experienced by students individualized, without perspective, and often based on misinformation. Little sharing or discussion of common concerns occurs on other than a superficial level. Instead, there is almost ritualistic griping and cynicism." If ~~such an~~ this kind of analysis is correct, we can well understand why there might be a ritualistic kind of griping and cynicism everywhere at Wellesley? What else is left for the totally isolated self?

Actually, there are a number of options. Business-as-usual is clearly one option, although I sometimes wonder how people deal with all the pain of being alone when they chose that option. Another option is an aggressive pursuit of self-gratification. For pleasure seems to fill, not heal the dull, void of loneliness. ~~And this~~ is an increasingly popular choice for people today, it seems. "The Me Generation" is ~~indeed~~ upon us, ~~surely~~, as the popular press has been reminding us lately. People whose parents

managed to cope with their loneliness by living for the pleasure of the weekends now find themselves searching for the weekend gratification every day, if not in every moment of every day. But I do not wish to dwell on these alternatives, since in my judgment they are impoverishments of our potential as human beings. I want to make a radical proposal, however venerable and dusty it might sound to people who have read Francis Bacon and Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, to mention a few of the essayists who have devoted attention to the ideas. I want to make the radical proposal that friendship can be an alternative world for us, a new metaphysical possibility as ancient as the species itself.

But before I begin to explore this prospect, I want to take one last look at loneliness and its claims upon us. It might be -- and I have no proof for this either way, no convincing demonstration, other than the testimony of my own experience and the experience of others -- it might be, if I may put it this way, that loneliness is true. It might be that what is really real in this world is the isolated human self. "The whole conviction of my life," Thomas Wolfe wrote memorably in 1941, "now rests upon the belief that loneliness, far from being a rare and curious phenomenon, peculiar to myself and to a few other solitary men, is the central and inevitable fact of human existence.... All this hideous doubt, despair, and dark confusion of the soul of a lonely man must know, for he is united to no image save that which he creates himself, he is bolstered by no other knowledge save that which he can gather for himself with the vision of his own eyes and brain. He is sustained and cheered and aided by no party, he is give comfort by no creeed, he has no faith in him except his own. And often that faith deserts him, leaving him shaken and filled with impotence. And then it seems to him that his life has come to nothing, that he is ruined, lost, and broken past redemption, and that morning -- bright, shining morning, with its promise of new

beginnings -- will never come upon the earth again as it did once."

I personally want to cast my lot on the side of Pascal, with a wager that the Divine friendship which I experience, and the friendship with others of God's creatures which I also experience, is indeed real. More than real, actually: transforming, enlivening, and exilerating. That is my personal wager. But I make these claims, as I have indicated, with no sure and certain proof: with no demonstrable logic that friendship, not loneliness is true, only with the testimony of my heart and the support of my friends.

I will speak personally now, even more so than when I was discussing loneliness, because it must be so: friendship is personal. One can no more talk about friendship in the abstract -- although people have tried to do that on occasion -- than one can jump out of one's own skin. For me this means that I can only ~~xxxx~~ speak, if my testimony is to have any authenticity at all, from ~~the~~ within the world of the Christian symbols, -- the traditions, the rituals, the writings, and the visionary experiences -- that so shapes my life, both consciously and, I think, unconsciously. Those who do not share this symbolic world with me may find it difficult to relate my thoughts to their own experience. But I hope that my testimony will at least ~~xxx~~ raise questions which will send these friends back to their own traditions and into the wellsprings of their own ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ religious symbols to see what resources might be found in those places, ~~most of which are personally unknown to me now~~.

No sooner, then, do I ~~xxx~~ claim to be speaking from within the symbol system of my own tradition than I begin with a disavoval. I think that much of the Christian tradition has carried within it an overly narrow focus ~~on~~ as far as the fundamental unit of human experience is concerned. Often the family or the husband and the wife -- reflecting the accounts of Adam and Eve in the garden ~~xxxxxxx~~ -- has been looked on as the fundamental unit of human experience. Karl Barth has presented this view with a new kind of power in his interpretation of Genesis throughout volume three of his Church Dogmatics. For Barth, the image of God is the relationship between male and female. I ~~take~~ repeat this ~~that~~ as a venerable and viable theological theme, but ~~one which~~ in my judgment it is neither fully expressive of the ~~biblical perspective~~ faith of the Bible nor fully adequate to the needs of our own time. I prefer not this kind of retropsective ~~xxx~~ metaphyics that builds on the idea of an isolated friendship, seen especially in the figures of Adam and Even, but the prospective metaphyics of a

community of friends. Note that Jesus preached the coming not of a world of new couples, ~~Adams and Eves~~, but the coming of the Kingdom of God: an image which is adumbrated in II Peter as a new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. From Jesus to II Peter, and also the Book of Revelation, with its own vision of the coming New Jerusaelm in the renewad world of the whole creation, the accent of New Testament thinking is profoundly communitarian, rather than ~~dialogical~~ narrowly binitarian. It focuses with a dynamic ~~profound~~ catholicity on the great community of human life with God in the cosmos, and on the hope for universal renewal, rather than with narrow specificity on the relationship between a solitary I and a solitary Thou. This motif is further exemplified in both the Gospels of Luke and John where Jesus' call ~~to people is not a call~~ to those who would follow him not to a solitary communion between two people, but ~~the call~~ to become members of his community of friends. "No longer do I call you servants," Jesus tells the disciples in the Gospel of John, "for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you."(15:15) Again, ~~forcefully, it is~~ vividly when Jesus ~~joins~~ converses with the two depressed men on the road to Emmaeus, after his crucifixion, ~~that he is~~ & opens them for table fellowship - or as we might better say then for table friendship, and is then made known to them in the breaking of bread; and they discover each other as members of his ~~body~~ community, his body of friends. ~~[~~ St. Paul takes up the same motif in his letter to the Galatians, where he propounds ~~this~~ a vast vision of the unity of all humanity in the body of Christ, ~~where he~~ confessed that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. Paul's catholic vision far transcends some of our more usual images of friendship as merely two people, sometimes ~~three or four perhaps~~ three or more, but basically two people depending on each other alone for sustenance: ~~whether members of~~ the same ethnic group, ~~whether~~ or participants in the traditional arrangement of male and female, ~~whether the ancient~~ or dependent on alliances founded on social class. If I may say it this way, I would like to propose a prospective or future-oriented

catholic metaphysics of friendship: a communitarian vision of friendship rather than an isolated, ~~ideological form~~ narrow, communitarian images. I want to say that friendship is true, in other words. But even more so I want to maintain that the community of friendship is true.

Let me narrate, now, some of the dynamics of this community of friendship. I take my cue here from the letter to the Ephesians which calls those who want to be members of the body of Christ to be imitators of God. "Therefore," we read, "be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."(5:1-3) In the Christian tradition one discovers what friendship can be for oneself and for others by attending to movements of God's friendship, especially as they are dramatized and realized in the person of Jesus, who is called the Christ.

With the overarching reality of the Divine friendship in view, therefore, I think we can identify the following moments as some of the constituents of authentic friendship.

I begin with the image of solitary fidelity. God is the Good Shepherd, eternally. Jesus is the Good Shepherd, who by grace alone, by mercy alone, flowing from an unchanging faithfulness or fidelity to all things and all persons created, goes forth in time to seek the lost, to establish the bonds of friendship.

This solitary fidelity entails risk, naturally, another quality, it seems to me, of authentic friendship. The Shepherd may have to give his or her whole self for the sake of establishing the friendship. Short of that kind of self-sacrifice, the one who out of fidelity goes forth to establish a friendship may have to endure hostility from the powerful, as Jesus did when he ate with the publicans and the prostitutes. As persons who, ~~out of~~ on the basis of friendship to others we become vulnerable,

with his Corinthian friends, "For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom..."I Cor 2-4) The idea of risk, which I am highlighting here, naturally is completed, as we have already seen, by the idea of self-giving and self-sacrifice. We do not simply risk establishing friendships for the sake of risking, (mother words.) we risk establishing friendships for the sake of self-giving. So Jesus teaches his disciples: "Which of you who has a friend will go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves; for a friend of mine has arrived on a journey, and I have nothing to set before him'; and he will answer from within, 'Do not bother me; the door is now shut, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything'? I tell you,... he will rise and give him whatever he needs."(Lk. 10:5-8) So, in a similar manner, in a living parable, Jesus insists on washing the disciples feet at the Last Supper. He insists on becoming lowly, weak, and vulnerable. He insists on living the risk of self-giving.

So far, perhaps, we have encountered no surprises. So far, most of this discourse is probably familiar enough, however inaccessible it practice may seem to us at times. But hear now another, less familiar moment of the Divine friendship -- withdrawal. Having taken pains to initiate the relationship of friendship, Jesus withdraws. He leaves the other, the new friend, the time and the space to respond on his or her own. ~~This is what~~ I take to be some of the significance of that otherwise puzzling statement in the Gospel of John, already cited, that Jesus has called us to be friends, not slaves. He has called us not to be unduly dependent on him, but to come into our own in our relationship with him. So he says toward the very end of the Gospel of John, much to the consternation of the disciples at that time, "it is to your advantage that I and of many Christians subsequently:

go away." Jesus's self-giving friendship is the gift of freedom, ~~the~~ in other words, The gift of mutuality, not the establishment of domination or servile dependency. This quality of Jesus's friendship is no where more vividly displayed than in the story of his encounter with the Canaanite woman. He does not dominate her. He does not treat her as some mindless, faceless subservient other. He encounters her, but then he withdraws. He allows her the time and space to affirm herself, to engage him in a challenging discourse, to stand up for her own rights, to make her own case, not as a slave to a master, but as one friend to another. In a quite different story we see the same quality: Jesus welcomes Mary into the circle of his friends, scandalizing most of them, it seems, since they were men and they knew that women's place was in the kitchen with Martha. But he taught them, and he teaches us, that Mary had chosen the better portion.

The Divine friendship also includes the moment of withdrawal, we can see from reading the New Testament, as the creation of a holy space and time for solitude, for the one who initiates the movement of friendship. Here it is of profound importance to distinguish between solitude and loneliness. Jesus often withdrew to the place by himself to pray. We can imagine that this was ~~both~~ a way of affirming the viability of the disciples' friendship; that is to say, he did not have to be visibly with them all the time, as some hovering parent figure, for them to be the friends he was calling them to be. On the other side, the moment of withdrawal also meant ~~xxx~~ a return on Jesus's part to the Ground of his Being, ~~to~~ ~~xxx~~ an accession to deepen and to broaden the scope of his ~~xxxx~~ communion with his own Parent, with whom he enjoyed such a profound relationship of intimacy. Here we see, then, that ~~xxx~~ authentic friendship is predicated on the life of prayer, on ~~the~~ a contemplative moment, on a ~~the~~ solitary time and space of communion with the One who is the source and sustainer and future promise of our being. Otherwise, as a matter of fact, without a constant return to the source of our lives, we tend

personal relationship rather than (among) the dependent human creatures we actually are. No friendship can be built on the structure of master (and slave) slave. But without the life of prayer, the temptation is always there, especially for the one who initiates the relationship, to play the role of master.

So the risk of self-giving, predicated on fidelity, takes the form of a certain withdrawal on the part of the one who initiates the friendship. One might indeed speak of a rhymthm of engagement and withdrawal here engagement and withdrawal, as being constitutive of the everyday dynamics of friendship. Yet there is more.

The rhythm of engagement and withdrawal, flowing from a solitary fidelity, taking the shape of a vulnerable form of self-giving, never comes to rest in itself. Rather, it comes to rest, insofar as it does, in a time and space of communal fidelity. The Shepherd goes out to seek the lost, surely. But then the shepherd and the lost return to the flock. Those who have been scattered in loneliness by the apparent defeat of the Cross, are called back together to share a new life in common as brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. It was expedient that Jesus should go away, so that the Comforter, the Holy Spirit -- the life-giver, the gift-giver, the inspiring power of every friend, harmonizing and enriching the whole body -- might come upon the gathered people, in order that they might become a community of faith, in unity with each other and living out of the transforming reality of Jesus' friendship. ~~of Jesus.~~ Hence the eucharist, it seems to me, is our most revealing symbol and most energizing reality revealing and constituting our friendship within the Church. ~~For~~ As friends in Christ, we are most ourselves when we commune with each other at his Holy Table, served by ~~our risen Friend~~ Him, empowered inside by his Spirit. Surely

we can ~~and actually~~ be sustained, and actually do experience ourselves sustained, when we are separated from each other, when we are in exile. Surely there the Divine friendship, especially through our solitude with God, can and does sustain us and transform us. But our journey is not ~~like~~ like some bat flying deep into a narrow tunnel, driving alone, without luggage, out a lonely penninsula. Our ~~journey~~ journey is toward a glorious banquet of friendship, of which we have a foretaste in the meal of bread and wine we share together, and which will be fulfilled once and for all when the day of the new heavens and the new earth in which righteousness dwells will dawn, when that glorious morning will come once and for all, and we will participate with great joy in the Messianic banquet promised from ancient days.

In this way the movement of the Divine friendship which begins in solitary fidelity, alone in ~~heaven, as it were~~ eternity, and then calls forth a new kingdom, through the riskful self-giving and the withdrawal of God's chosen representative, thus comes to its fulfilment in a glorious celebration of communal fidelity. In this way also I think we can affirm not only that friendship is true, not only, indeed, that the community of friendship is true, but that God -- as our creator, redeemer, and santified, as the ~~great~~ transcendently mysterious One in Three and Three in One -- is Godself the ultimate reality of friendship, the ultimate community, in whose image all things are created, redeemed, and santified, from the very beginning to the very end.

It remains to say, then, what we should do. That is as simple as a few words and as difficult as a lifetime journey. Consider the Divine friendship, and then go and do likewise: "Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

With God as my witness and with my friends as my support, I tell them

you now, ~~in one word~~, that I believe that friendship, not loneliness, is true, and that ~~this reality~~ God has prepared this table before us in the presence of our loneliness. He anoints our heads with oil and our cups overflow. It is for us ~~only~~ to attend and to celebrate what we already have been given, and so to befriend each other anew.