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 Arlington Street Church
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Spiritual Friendship

“I would have died if it hadn't been for my friends.” I overheard this single sentence in a conversation as two people passed me on the street. “I would have died if it hadn't been for my friends.” It is the refrain in the soundtrack of my darkest hours, made bearable by friends. Not for the faint-hearted, but an excellent exercise in gratitude. You can try it: *I would have died if it hadn't been for my friends.*

The thirteenth century Persian mystic, Jalal ad-Dīn Muhammad Rumi, wrote
 In this tangled world,
 What is there
 Other than the friend?

My friend and colleague, Susan Moran, was widowed when her daughters were very young. Recently, speaking of the long slog through the days following her husband's sudden death, Susan said, “There was this guy – my neighbor – who came and mowed the lawn every week that summer. He didn't knock on the door when he was done or anything; we didn't talk. He just cut the grass – a little order in all that chaos.”

I want to be that guy. I want to be that friend.

Maybe there's nothing to say. But there's so much to do. We can't do everything, but we can do something. This is the stuff of which friendship is made. A friend shows up, present and accounted for. A friend loves through doing, and by doing nothing but bearing the silence with us ... which is everything.

Marge Piercy's poem, *To Be of Use*, begins,

The people I love the best
 jump into work head first
 without dallying in the shallows
 and swim off with sure strokes almost out of sight....

I love people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
 who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience,
 who strain in the mud and the muck to move things forward,
 who do what has to be done, again and again.

I want to be with people who submerge
 in the task, who go into the fields to harvest
 and work in a row and pass the bags along,
 who stand in the line and haul in their places,
 who are not parlor generals and field deserters
 but move in a common rhythm
 when the food must come in or the fire be put out....

In an interview near the end of his life, Aldous Huxley was asked, “Dr. Huxley, ... you have studied all the great religions and spiritual traditions. Can you summarize for us what you feel you have learned?” Aldous Huxley replied in one sentence, “I think just to be a bit kinder.”¹

Kinder, kindness: kin. To be a friend is to be family – chosen family. And in these days when the *shtetl*, the village, is scattered across the globe, across the world wide web, we would do well to answer the longing to find those friends, to make those friendships, cultivate those friendships, know, in the night, or the dark night of the soul, who is our kin, our tribe, our people.

Kalyanamitra is the Sanskrit word for *spiritual friendship*. Of course the Hindus, Jains, and Buddhists would have a word that means spiritual friendship! Now Unitarian Universalists can have it, too. Your *kalyanamitra* isn't just someone with whom to hang out, go bowling, eat pizza ... although they may be that, too. Your *kalyanamitra* is someone who inspires you on your spiritual path.

Author Susan Piver writes something like this: “There is no question that you have to figure out your spiritual path on your own. No matter how much you want to find ready-made answers, no one can actually tell you [what you should be, or that now is the time. No one,] no book or class or workshop can make [those decisions] for you....

“But there is also no question that you are not alone. ... There are [people who] will come to your aid when you need them, ... people [who] arrive and depart on some

¹ Bo Lozoff, *It's a Meaningful Life: It Just Takes Practice*, p. 106

kind of [mysterious, spiritual] timetable.... They are your spiritual friends, [your] *kalyanamitra*.... Anyone who brings a spiritual lesson home to you is considered *kalyanamitra*.”²

Your spiritual friend may be a teacher, or a guide ... or someone who really irritates you and compels you to pay attention and live a wide-awake life. Love and joy as well as illness and death can all be *kalyanamitra*. If we allow them to shake us out of our sleep and push us along a spiritual path, each is, in its own way, a spiritual friend. In speaking of the Chinese government, His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, says, “My friends, the enemy.” He means “My spiritual friends – my *kalyanamitra*.”

In a spiritual community in France led by G.I Gurdjieff, the students were driven to distraction by an old man who was hot-tempered, slovenly, and unwilling to help in any way. One day, after yet another blow-up, the man stormed off and drove away. The students celebrated.

Gurdjieff, however, took off for Paris in hot pursuit, hell-bent on convincing the man to return. But he had made up his mind, he said; he was finished. After long negotiations, Gurdjieff offered to pay him a very large monthly stipend to take up residence again. How could he refuse?

When he returned and walked in on what was essentially his *bon voyage* and good riddance party, the other students were appalled. When they learned he would be paid to stay, while they were in fact paying dearly to be there, they were up in arms.

Gurdjieff called together the community, listened carefully to their complaints, and laughed. “This man is like yeast for bread,” he explained. “Without him here, you would never really learn about ... anger, patience, and compassion. That is why you pay me, and why I hire him.”³

Gurdjieff was teaching spiritual friendship.

I don't know anyone who would actually choose this kind of *kalyanamitra*. As a rule, there are enough challenging people in the natural and unnatural course of things that we don't need to seek them out. Here's what Rumi has to say. You know this one: *The Guest House*.

² susanpiver.com/wordpress/2011/07/04/spiritual-bffs/

³ Christina Feldman and Jack Kornfield, eds., *Stories of the Spirit, Stories of the Heart*, p. 56

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.

A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
as an unexpected visitor.

Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they are a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still, treat each guest honorably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.

The dark thought, the shame, the malice.
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.

Be grateful for whatever comes.
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.⁴

And then there are the invited guests, as it were, the friends we make by great good fortune, the kind of *kalyanamitra* we seek and are so blessed to find, the spiritual friends we love with an undefended heart.

I'm thinking of Rumi's spiritual friend, Shams. I've spoken of him before – Shams of Tabriz, the wandering dervish, “who had traveled throughout the Middle East searching and praying for someone who could, [he said,] ‘endure my company.’”⁵

When he met Shams in 1244, Rumi was thirty-seven, Shams about sixty. “Up until then, Rumi had [stood squarely in] a long line of scholars and theologians. Shams literally took Rumi’s books, his intellectual brilliance, and threw them into a well, to show him how he needed to *live* what he’d been reading.

“[Over the next four years,] the two of them went into week-long periods of *sohbet*, mystical conversations and merging....

⁴ *The Guest House*, trans. Coleman Barks

⁵ *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks, p. xvii

“[Then,] on the night of December 5th, 1248, as Rumi and Shams were talking, Shams was called to the back door. He went out, never to be seen again.”⁶ The legend varies, but it appears that jealous followers – possibly even Rumi’s son – murdered Shams. Rumi was devastated.

But in his poems, inspired by the celebration of their meeting and the grief of their parting, we hear the conversation between these beloved spiritual friends continue. Rumi’s *kalyanamitra* becomes his capital-F Friend, one and the same with the divine.

“Gamble everything for love,” he writes.

Gamble everything for love,
if you’re a true human being.

If not, leave
this gathering.

Half-heartedness doesn’t reach
into majesty. You set out
to find G*d....⁷

This is *kalyanamitra* – friendship with the courage of an undefended heart, friendship that is wholehearted. Tibetan Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön speaks of the power of being in community with “people who are committed to taking off their armor.” With your *kalyanamitra*, she writes, “you ... are committed to taking off your armor and you know that [they are,] too.”⁸ Pema Chödrön’s teacher, Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, said, “The everyday [spiritual] practice is simply to develop a complete acceptance and openness to all situations and ... all people, ... experiencing everything totally without reservation....”⁹

We began with Rumi:

In this tangled world,
What is there
Other than the friend?

⁶ John Moyne and Coleman Barks, from the Introduction to *Unseen Rain: Quatrains of Rumi*

⁷ Huston Smith, “Introduction,” *The Essential Rumi*, trans. Coleman Barks, pp. 193-194

⁸ Pema Chödrön, *The Wisdom of No Escape*, p. 71

⁹ *ibid*, p. 73

Let's end with him as well. Rumi says,

Stay together, friends
Don't scatter and sleep

Our friendship is made
of being awake.

Beloved spiritual companions, beloved *kalyanamitra*,

May we be awake.

I would have died if it hadn't been for my friends.

May we remember, and give thanks.

May we be useful friends.

May we be kind.

May we greet the spiritual lessons that knock at our door,
and welcome them in.

May we seek to live with an undefended heart.

May our spiritual friendship be wholehearted.

Bless your hearts.

Amen.