Journey of a Wounded Healer

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13. My Friends

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One of the greatest blessings I have had in life has been my friends. There have always been relatives with whom I saw eye-to-eye, but friends have the advantage that they are chosen rather than inherited.. From my earliest days I have always had at least one close friend, very dear to me. It was only our changing circumstances that came between us, never a rift or argument. My friend of longest standing I have known for almost sixty years, since first grade. I am loyal: I have never abandoned a friend nor failed to provide comfort and aid when it was called for.

Through the years I have had friends of every age, all races, several ethnic backgrounds, varied occupations, diverse sexual orientations, all genders, and many religions and classes. About the only thing they had in common was me. With some friends I shared elements of our backgrounds, but this did not add to or detract from the depth of the friendship. At the base of our mutual attraction lay respect for one another, allowance of differences, compassion, and, of course, love. I have always seen some reflection of myself in my friends. Though some traits are not so beautiful or savory or beneficial, I must acknowledge those too. Carl Jung said, “Knowing your own darkness is the best method for dealing with the darknesses of other people.” There have been sexual attractions to both male and female friends that was often not acknowledged or shared. This did not diminish the reality of my feelings to me. The closer I felt to a friend the more honest and open I could be with him or her. Revealing one’s darkest secrets to another human being requires full trust and opens one up to possible rejection. But if reciprocated, such equal admissions form the deepest and most permanent bonds of friendship.

My four dearest friends at the moment include a Jew, a Moslem, a Christian, and an atheist. They are three men and a woman, two homosexuals and two heterosexuals, two Caucasians, an African, and an Asian. They range in age from forty to seventy-five. They all know of one another, but have never met. It is difficult to see what they have in common except for me. I am the common denominator of a strangely wonderful and beautiful equation.

I have never seen my friends as members of any group other than Brian’s friends. I have never been able to lump people together because the members of any group are often quite different. This attitude has saved me from the worst ethnic and racial phobias. I am free to take people or leave them as they come, with no baggage and no atonement necessary for the sins of my fathers. They are not my sins. It is far easier for me to see what makes each of my friends a unique individual. What could I possibly learn from someone that was a lot like me? To paraphrase Groucho Marx, why would I want to join a club that would have *me* as a member?

Both my mother and father had African co-workers whom they liked a great deal, but they never associated with them outside of work. The only prejudicial remarks I witnessed in the family came from my grandmothers. My father's mother, an immigrant from Ireland a decade before the partition (about 1912) when she was sixteen, hated anyone of Japanese descent. Though she lost no one of her family or acquaintance in the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, she held all Orientals responsible for it. Once, when I visited her in Los Angeles when I was about ten, she sent me to the local bodega for some bananas and other groceries. She questioned me upon my return, looking at me sternly with her lips pursed. "You didn't buy these from those lousy Japs, did you?" she asked. "No, Grandma," I replied. "It was a Korean market."

"Same difference," she snarled and, snatching the paper bag from my hands, she tossed the entire parcel into the garbage can. Even in the privacy of her kitchen, she embarrassed me, and I never told a soul about her outburst until now.

A few years earlier, at about age six, I watched on a hot summer day as an African man, the usual man, with skin so black it seemed almost blue, shoveled coal from a tarpaulin, where it had been heaped by a dump truck, into an enormous wheelbarrow. He carted load after load to the coal chute of our apartment building in Chicago where I grew up. The coal chute was situated too far from the street and the alley so that the dump truck could not connect its conveyor to it. The entire load was dumped on the street, sidewalk, and grassy parkway atop an enormous canvas tarp. The poor African fellow shoveled coal for the rest of the day, winter or summer. I liked him very much and peppered him with an endless stream of questions which he always answered patiently and with humor, often including a joke or a riddle.

On this day, when the beads of sweat stood out like gems on his coal black forehead, I ran into the kitchen and asked my grandmother, my maternal grandmother this time, if I could bring him some water. My grandmother had apparently done this herself on previous occasions and she produced a tall frosted white glass with red polka-dots from the topmost shelf of the kitchen cupboard beside the sink. She let the water run for a while and filled the tumbler three-quarters full.

"Be careful. Don't drop it. And don't drink out of that glass when he's done."

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because Negroes have different germs than us."

The coal shoveler accepted the cold water with a broad smile and drank it down in a single swallow. Sneaking quietly back into the kitchen, I climbed up to the sink and ran a little more water from the tap into the glass. I drank it down and, since I did not sicken and drop dead on the spot, I was pretty sure my grandmother was mistaken or, as my father often put it, "talking through her hat again." It was a simple test, an experiment with loose controls, and it spared me from ever thinking that people were not all the same under the skin. And ever since that day, I decided I was just as qualified as any adult to test any theory I had a question about.

I am grateful that I never wasted a minute on a single racial or ethnic prejudice, though I did not tolerate very well those who did. Whatever else might be said about my Catholic education, the nuns always insisted we were all God's children, none any better than any other except by their merits. When in high school I was overheard making an anti-Semitic remark. The dean of men made sure I accompanied him to a Sabbath service and later to my first Seder. Like the dean, I wore a yarmulke. I enjoyed and learned a great deal from both experiences and regretted making such simple-minded and mean remarks. I am pleased to say that no other such lapse in judgment has entered my head since. And I am grateful to have been taught early on a generosity of spirit by my teachers. That lesson is worth all the geography and history and science I have ever learned, and it has helped me the most to get along in life.