

## Chapter 32: Friends

Only solitary men know the full joys of friendship. Others have their family; but to a solitary and an exile his friends are everything.

Willa Cather, *Shadows on the Rock* (1931)

Life is partly what we make it, and partly what it is made by the friends we choose.

Tehyi Hsieh, *Chinese Epigrams Inside Out, and Proverbs* (1948)<sup>1</sup>

In planning this book I have gone back and forth about how to handle the chapter on friends. I made a list of the friends who have been really important to me at different stages of my life, and there are dozens of them. There have been lots of friends in every period since childhood. My friendships matter a lot to me, individually of course and also in aggregate, and any account of my life that did not mention these friendships would be seriously incomplete.

On the other hand, listing these people and discussing them individually presents serious problems. The most difficult problem is that instead of writing just about myself, which I can do with reasonable freedom, I would be writing about other people. This immediately limits my spontaneity, because I would have to consider what these people (and perhaps others) will think about what I say about them. I would have to describe and characterize my friends and my friendships, in a document which they and my other friends will all read (or at least have the *opportunity* to read). The very thought makes me acutely uncomfortable. It limits my freedom to say whatever I please and give as fully rounded warts-and-all picture as I can – it is OK to do that about myself, but to do it about other people can be wounding.<sup>2</sup>

Even when I am speaking only praise, there is the possibility of hurting people – if I say A is incisive and witty, but say B is blunt and forthright, am I saying B is not incisive or witty? If I write a long paragraph about how much C meant to me, and then a shorter paragraph later on about D, will D think I love him/her less than C when really I don't? Or even worse, suppose I *do*? What about E, whom I am leaving out completely? Is E not my friend because s/he doesn't make it into my autobiography? Do I then have two classes of friends? There is no way to make this work.

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<sup>1</sup> Often misattributed to Tennessee Williams.

<sup>2</sup> Writing only nice things about people doesn't work either. As Philip Roth says in his memoir *The Facts* (1988), "in an autobiography chivalry is an evasion and a lie."

I can tell all sorts of stories about myself, some not entirely creditable, and leave some out if I want, because this is *my* story of what I remember about *my* life. But I don't feel so free to tell stories about other people – they have not agreed to have their stories told. I know some very intimate things about a lot of my friends. I have no business telling all I know – in fact I have no business telling even *part* of what I know. And what if I misunderstand what I think I know? And what about friends who have also been lovers?

No, it is best that I don't get into this. Friends, don't feel slighted! I'm not leaving you out of my autobiography because I don't love you, but because I *do*. There is no solution to this problem that works perfectly – I have to sacrifice something whatever I choose. So as usual I am erring on the side of caution. In some places I have mentioned my friends in the text as part of the narrative. This seems safer than writing about them in a separate chapter.

Looking over the list of names I am not publishing, I am brought back to my childhood and adolescence and the hours I spent then with my friends of the time. I remember the deep bonds I formed and the explorations of so many topics which helped me figure out the world. The same with those at Columbia and Penn, when we would talk through the night (flying on my endless supply of amphetamines, see Chapter 17.D). And the same at every stage of my life since then. How could I have got through my LSD period, or library school, or Taiwan, or Cape Cod, without my friends? Indeed, how could I get through *this very week* without them? Of course I include both my brothers among my very closest friends.

Looking at the list, I note that many of my closest friends have been my friends for decades. Christopher taught me that your friends are not really your friends if you never talk to them, so I have been careful to keep in touch, by letter, by phone, and now by e-mail. (I will include a selection of letters and e-mails as a Supplement, to go up to Yale at a future time and be sealed until everyone is safely dead.) A woman once told me that women call each other on the phone just to chat, but men don't usually do this. I do, though. I notice that through the years as many of my most intimate friends have been women as men.

I have grown accustomed to thinking of myself as a solitary man, a kind of hermit, because have never been married and spend so much of my time by myself. And this is true, in a way, and I enjoy the solitary life. But writing this chapter, abbreviated as it is, reminds me that that is only part of the story. When I was in the hospital in 2005 (where my friends were so supportive), I made a number of resolutions, and one of them was to make sure I made time to spend with them. I have always done this, since the earliest days I can remember, but it was worth resolving to keep on doing it deliberately. There is no use of my time that is more valuable. It is great to read books, and I have read a lot of them; it is great to meditate on the secrets of life, and I have done my share of that too. But my friendships, my *Sangha*, are as important to me as all those things.



Tailpiece: Two of Cups, from the Rider Tarot Deck  
By Pamela Colman Smith (1909)