

The Friend

Peter Pesic*

Once there was a man who loved butterflies. He treasured their brilliant colors and admired their graceful, erratic flight. He was particularly touched by the emergence of the newly-metamorphosed butterfly from its cocoon. He suffered as he watched its agonizing struggle to cut an opening and force its way out. Then he had an idea. He took a delicate surgical scalpel and made a small incision just at the point of emergence so that the butterfly would not have to struggle so terribly. It worked. The butterfly emerged easily, without pain, unscathed. There was just one problem: it could not fly. When it did not have to struggle, its wings also did not develop the needed strength.

You are here to receive the laurel berries of victory, the "bacca laureata," in recognition of your struggle to learn. As you re-emerge into the world I dimly sense the dimensions of your further struggles. According to the scriptures, the world is dark. Here "world" does not mean the ordered wholeness of nature as much as what the French call *le monde*, the world of people. The Redeemer said "My kingdom is not of this world" (John 18:36) and asked "What shall it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36) There is in the human world something that tempts people to betray themselves. I do not think this is a matter of a theological tradition or outworn suspicion. At the end of this, perhaps the most terrible century of history, no further demonstration is required of the darkness of the world. To those who are fortunate enough to have been spared, the world can seem friendly and congenial. Sensitive scrutiny reveals how often the world is superficial, uncaring, ignorant, and malicious. What is worse, if I look deeper I see these terrible flaws in myself also. The human world around us is a dark mirror in which we cannot escape our own distorted image.

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The heart is a deep, dark forest. The path through its darkness requires trial and purification. James says "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials"; he knows that these trials can forge in us a good temper. When iron is tempered it is heated red-hot, then plunged into icy water to quench the heat. This ordeal of extremes must be repeated many times to turn an indifferent lump of ore into a servicable blade that will not bend or break at the crucial moment. You have felt the fire and ice of the great works, their ardent emotion and cool objectivity. Now you are to be plunged into the world, where you will be tested in word and in deed. But it is not as if you have lived apart from deeds. We have strived together to make our words have the force of deeds. Through words, deeds struggle into being.

For James the inwardness of faith finds its true fulfillment in deeds. He represents deeds as encounters with "the perfect law, the law of liberty." These encounters spur us to find our true image in something enduring and complete; he says that mere hearing without doing is a fleeting glimpse into a mirror. We walk away and immediately forget what we saw. We even forget our own face. How, then, do we truly find ourselves?

There is an essential clue in Jesus's prayer on the Mount of Olives just before his decisive struggle with the world. Among all the books in the world the Gospel of John is uniquely inspired by friendship. Jesus sends his friends into the world, and acknowledges that "the world has hated them because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world." This does not make their engagement with the world less intense, but more. He specifies that "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one." The friends of God find their peculiar glory in wrestling with the world, a glory that is not the vanity of fame but the inwardness of blessing. Teresa of Ávila was once travelling in an oxcart on remote Spanish roads. The weather was awful; in torrential rain the cart lurched crazily. Finally the cart hit a rut and tossed her out. Teresa landed face down in the mud and heard a voice: "Teresa, this is how I treat all my friends." Rising to God's peculiar sense of humor, she responded: "Alas, Lord, that is why you have so few of them!"

Like Jacob, these friends will not stop wrestling until they have found a blessing. Immediately after Jacob wrestles with the angel and receives the blessing of his new name, Israel, we read that he lifts up his eyes and sees his

brother Esau coming. Now their relationship had been troubled, to say the least; after all, Jacob had stolen from Esau their father's blessing. Nonetheless, as Jacob bows before his brother he says "truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, with such favor have you received me." (Genesis 33:10) Perhaps this is a moment of true friendship between them, not possible before Jacob wrestled with a divine messenger. Plato also says that friends recognize each other as if they were encountering a god (Phaedrus 251a).

Jesus prays "that they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us ..." This is the crux: to recognize the other as one with oneself. We are invited to consider that everything that we see, particularly everything that stirs us, is an aspect of ourselves. Jesus balances this at-one-ment with the mystery of apartness. To be *one* with another is not simply to *be* the other; Jesus addresses a Father who is both apart from him but also one with him.

This connection is the essence of friendship. Montaigne says about his friend: "Because it was he, because it was I" (I: 28). The souls of friends "mingle and blend with each other so completely that they efface the seam that joined them, and cannot find it again." Friends are like music, like tones that sing in their mutual relationship, that *are* relationships, not really separate beings. Even the quantum "particles" that comprise our bodies are not separate and distinct individuals; the universe depends upon a deep merging that leads individual identity beyond itself.

Among the ninety-nine most beautiful names of God Muslims include *Friend*. It is in the friend that I truly encounter myself. I also begin to feel what it really means to say *we*. Armed with that inner awareness *we* can face tribulation and loneliness with the sense that *my* aloneness is no longer lonely. Whatever our struggles, there is now among us one who shares them. This friend sustains us as we struggle with the darkness of the world. And this friend gives us everliving joy.

Where is your friend? Look for yourself and rejoice.