

II

FRIENDSHIP

Again and again during the last forty years I have been asked the question, Where do you stand? I have usually, at the beginning of any major lecture series, told my audience that I stand within the Christian faith, in order that they should be aware that my prejudices may differ from theirs; but otherwise I have trusted that people who seriously followed a semester, or several semesters of my teaching, would eventually become guests around my table and find out for themselves the way in which I try to proceed. Let me now, at the end of my life, make a little pencil sketch of where I think I have been standing.

I have to point out first of all that changes in the nature of the university, particularly during the last hundred years, have made this institution almost an enemy to the collegial procedure, which I've tried to cultivate. Yes, I have made my living out of the university, soberly milking that sacred cow and making my nest with the hand-outs I've received. I've never accepted a regular university job, but only a semester at a time at different institutions or at one institution — I've now been teaching at the University of Bremen for seven or eight years, and at Penn State for twelve. This has provided my friends and me with the wherewithal for a hospitable table. And a good tax lawyer found a way of making it credible to the IRS that a certain number of cases of ordinary but decent wine are my major teaching tool and can, therefore, be written off from taxes.

I was inspired by the *Symposium* of Plato. Plato's idea of *philia*, of love, as the way into knowledge has been a challenge because, from decade to decade, I have had to interpret it in new ways. But one conviction remained constant: friendship can never mean the same thing to me as it does to Plato. In the Greek city, virtue was understood as fitting behaviour. It was the *ethos*, or ethics, appropriate to a certain *ethnos*, or people. And such virtue was the foundation of friendship, what made it possible. Friendship was the flowering of civic virtue and its crown. It was only as virtuous Athenians that the guests at Plato's *sym-posium* — literally, "drinking party" — could love one another. This has not been my destiny as a wandering Jew and Christian pilgrim. I have not been able to seek friendship as something arising from a place and the practices appropriate to it. Rather the ethics that developed around the circle of my friends arose as a result of our search for friendship, and our practice of it. This is a radical inversion in the meaning of *philia*. For me friendship has been the source, condition, and context for the possible coming about of commitment and like-mindedness. For Plato it could only be the result of practices befitting a citizen.

This dramatic inversion makes it necessary for me to say a few words about the history of friendship. For Plato — and any other classical text would show the same — friendship presupposes an *ethnos*, a given here and now to which I belong by birth. It presumes certain limits within which it can be practised. In Athens, for example, being a free man would have been one such limiting condition. Then comes that major disturber and fool, that historical Jesus of the Gospels, with his story about the Samaritan, the Palestinian who is the only one who acts as a friend towards a beaten-up Jew. Jesus discloses a new unrestricted ability to choose whom I want for a friend, and the same possibility of letting myself be chosen by whoever wants me. This is often forgotten by people who portray modern "friendship" as just a further development of what Plato and Aristotle meant by this term. Jesus disrupted the frame that limited the conditions under which friendship could appear, and this led in the history of the West to the creation within the Church of new voluntary, self-chosen forms of life within which friendship could be practised.

Monasticism was certainly one of the ways, perhaps the main way, through which groups of freely chosen others came together and created conditions in which a spirit of community could flower. Within this lineage, there are many paths to friendship. Two contemporary examples which I have admired are the community of my friend Giuseppe Dozeti in Italy and the Catholic Worker communities established in the United States by Dorothy Day. I have seen it as my task to explore the ways in which the life of the intellect, the disciplined and methodical joint pursuit of clear vision — one could say philosophy in the sense of loving truth — can be so lived that it becomes the occasion for the kindling and growth of *philia*. (Let me use the word *philia*, in order to avoid the funny implications of the word friendship in different modern languages.) I wanted to see if it would be possible to create truly, deeply committed human ties on the occasion and by the means of common investigation. And I also wanted to show how the search for truth can be pursued in a unique way around a dining table or over a glass of wine and not in the lecture hall. If the expression “search for truth” makes people smile and think that I belong to some Old World, then very well, I do.

When I was younger, and was offered access to the lecture hall, the public forum, I grabbed it, but always with the idea of eventually bringing together those who took me seriously in more convivial circumstances. So when people approached after a lecture and asked, “May the three of us come to see you?” I could say, “Yes, but why don’t you come when the other two, whom I would like you to meet, are also there?” And, in that way, the public occasion could be used to bring people together.

In this way one can foster the growth of an open group of people who are moved by fidelity to each other as persons and dare to maintain fidelity even if the other one becomes a heavy burden. But in order to pursue truth within the horizon of a “we” that is truly a plural “I,” a “we” that is arbitrary, that is unique, that slowly emerges, that cannot be put into any class, then it is first necessary to shed a certain number of extremely sticky and persistent university-derived academic etiquettes, like the organization of knowledge into specialized and exclusive disciplines. It has been my experience that many of the

people I meet who want to risk the style of research I've described will already have had considerable socialization, as one says, within a university and an academic milieu. For them disciplinary self-limitation may have already become a way of refusing conversation on what I really know and what really interests me with people outside the discipline, and this prejudice must be abandoned.

Let me say a little bit more about some of these deformations that my friends and I have tried to get beyond during the last forty-five years. The university is oriented towards disciplinary gatherings. People who know something about the history of ideas in one tradition tend to think that they can only advance in their knowledge within the circle of people who have the same training. I have tried to challenge them to put friendship above this prejudice, and to let this friendship motivate them to try to put into ordinary language the breakthroughs and insights that have become possible through their technical knowledge. This challenge goes further than just asking them to teach undergraduates — because undergraduate teaching can be just an introduction to their method — or just asking them to broaden their horizons to include other professionals. It rests on the conviction that things which are finally important must be capable of being shared with others whom I love first and then want to talk to. And this conviction will have a considerable impact on the way in which I assess and express my own insights.

I should also say that *convivium*, or *symposium*, the sharing of soup, wine, or other liquids, requires that at that table where we join, somebody must preside. And someone can only preside as a host when a threshold separates this table from the outside. The disappearance of thresholds in our world was brought vividly home to me not long ago by a Polish woman who attended my classes in Bremen. This woman was not what you would call an intellectual, but she had been coming regularly to my classes for five years. Once I spoke about the transformation of the idea of thresholds in history and particularly during the last thirty years. I pointed to the way in which walls have become permeable by many kinds of radiation from e-mail and faxes to telephones and television signals, and I suggested that the idea of privacy had been put into question, and the difference marked by a

threshold muddled. "I get what you say, Professor Illich," she said in her heavy Polish accent. "I have lived now in Germany for thirty-five years. Germans are wonderful, lovely people. They never can come to visit you without bringing some gifts. But they don't stop at the threshold so that I may lead them in. Barely have I opened the door when they jump over the threshold, and I'm in my kitchen, finding a vase to put the flowers in. What do you do then?"

So, the table, or the rug on which we sit, must be distinguished from the commons, from the street outside. But this doesn't mean that the *convivium* should be understood as a private activity which stands opposed to a public sphere. Rather it's a personal activity. It's the creation, through sharing, of an inside, distinct from the outside. And this is made more difficult by the fact that the outside barely exists any longer as a true commons, that is to say, a space usable by people in various overlapping ways.

I've conducted this kind of inquiry for many years now with people I picked up at lectures, and I've learned that the presidency, the ability to lead somebody over the threshold, should not be the prerogative of one person only, but should be shared by friends. The possibility of meeting at the home of one of the hosts of Socrates has been weakened in our time; and for this reason the creation of a threshold, and the exercise of the power to bring someone over it, must acquire an entirely new significance. Some people speak about a new monasticism. I reject this, just as I reject the idea that a return to the true spirit of the university is possible. I think I've taken another road — to a place where fools can gather.

On the table, as you have noticed over the years, there is always a candle. Why? Because the text that shaped my understanding was *De Spirituali Amicitia*, a treatise on spiritual friendship by the twelfth-century Scottish abbot Aelred of Rievaulx. His father and his grandfather had been abbots of Rievaulx before him. His marvellous booklet on friendship is in the form of a dialogue with a brother monk, and it begins with the words "Here we are, you and I, and, I hope, also a third who is Christ." If you consider his meaning carefully, you understand that it could be Christ in the form of Brother Michael. In other words, our conversation should always go on with

the certainty that there is somebody else who will knock at the door, and the candle stands for him or her. It is a constant reminder that the community is never closed.

So there must be, first of all, a threshold, and then a recognition that this threshold defines a space which is personal but never exclusive. A third requisite for the cultivation of the atmosphere I've been talking of is a willingness to accept discipline without having formally stated rules. The dishes have to be washed, and if fifteen more people than expected turn up for dinner, someone has to see that the soup stretches. And the question of how this is handled, and by whom, has to be settled without recourse to rules, because the moment you make rules you are already on the way to institutionalization. In the same way, academic conventions, covering, let's say, the form in which a citation is given, should be followed as something trivial but necessary. This was a major difficulty in the early 1970s, after the misunderstood anarchism of 1968. It's not so difficult to practise today.

So, to repeat, my idea was that the search for truth presupposes the growth of *philia*. This *philia* must find an atmosphere in which it can grow, and this atmosphere cannot be taken for granted as an outgrowth of civic virtue. It must be very carefully nonrestrictive. Always a candle ready, a candle lighted. God knows who comes to the door. Recently a guy came to the door and asked for money because he said he needed to call a locksmith. He wanted twenty dollars, and I said, "Let's give it to him." He came back a little later and told us not to worry, that he still hadn't been able to get into his apartment. Then he didn't come back for two days. Finally, he came just as we were sitting down to dinner, and it turned out that he not only had the twenty dollars but also some interesting ideas on the subject we were discussing.

Along this path I've been describing, I've had the luck to pick up friends, with whom conversations have now gone on for five decades. When these people have met each other, intense ties have frequently developed between them, and sometimes they have felt called to a deep revision of their views. Age cohorts, to my great surprise, are not decisive when people are careful in practising what I've been

describing. I have seen friendships between people who could be grandson and grandfather become strong and fruitful. In the university, one would speak, hierarchically, of "my student." Here a truly rooted fidelity and commitment precedes the intellectual substance of the conversation.

It's a funny thing that speaking about one's life in recent times always implies a psycho-analysis, a search for unconscious undercurrents. I would like to speak about myself in my time, on my road, without inviting this impudence. Many people have considered the course of a life as a kind of "walking on foot," as in the Hindu world, or as a pilgrimage, so important still to Moslems. And my road has been one of friendship. A Christian monk of the Middle Ages said that living with others in community is the greatest penance one can undertake, but that is the way I have taken: to try to maintain fidelity and to bear one another's impossible way of being. You can't write the biography of a friendship — it's too deeply personal. Friendships run on separate ways that cross and run parallel and cross again.