



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Anam Cara: Soul Friend

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I'd like to begin by reading from a letter written by Fra Giovanni Giocondo to his friend, Countess Allagia Aldobrandeschi on Christmas Eve, 1513. "I salute you. I am your friend, and my love for you goes deep." The letter continues and is full of great spiritual wisdom, but I'd like to focus on these few simple words. They contain such a wealth of feeling and meaning, that I believe they convey the very essence of friendship. When was the last time you received a message from a close friend? And did you let their affectionate words sink into your heart like these words can? I salute you. I am your friend, and my love for you goes deep.

The term *anam cara* comes from the Gaelic words for soul and friend. I'll be using John O'Donahue's writing about *anam cara*, from his book on Celtic wisdom. O'Donahue was an Irish poet, author, philosopher, and a former priest; he passed away in 2008. His writing is poetic and describes a spirituality that is both transcendent and luminous, and deeply immanent in the natural beauty of this world, and especially the beauty of the physical landscape of his home in western Ireland. I first came across O'Donahue because of a book of blessings he wrote. He includes a blessing for friendship, which led me to his other work, *Anam Cara*.

O'Donahue, writes that the original *anam cara* was an idea of the early Celtic Christian church, a person who acted as a teacher, companion or spiritual guide. He writes, "With the *anam cara* you could share your innermost self, your mind and your heart. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an *anam cara*, your friendship cut across all convention, morality and category. You were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the 'friend of your soul.'

The Celtic understanding did not set limitations of space or time on the soul. There is no cage for the soul. The soul is a divine light that flows into you and into your [friend]. This art of belonging awakened and fostered a deep and special companionship" (13-14).

When I was in fifth grade, I had two very close friends, Lauren and Heather. Together, the three of us formed S.O.T., which stood for the Sleepover Trio. As evidenced by the name, the purpose of our Trio was to sleep over at each other's houses, and to have fun. We designed a logo, and even made our own newsletter, which we proudly delivered to a group of our parents. As I remember, we devoted one newsletter to the important issue of recycling.

For the past couple of years I have had two other very close friends, who I met while studying abroad in Japan. Now, my friends from the Sleepover Trio all lived in the same town and we went to the same elementary school. Among my two close friends from today, we all attended different colleges, currently live in different areas of the country and have three different professions – chaplain and minister in training, lawyer, and English PhD candidate. Rather than sleep over at each other's houses, we communicate using Skype conference calls. Now our friendship has grown and developed to a cross-country support system, in which we share our struggles and our celebrations in navigating life as young adults.

I imagine that each of you can recall friendships from your life, and the ways in which those friendships have changed depending on factors such as location, career, life choices and transitions, and new technology. In thinking about what my two sets of friendships hold in common, I realize that: while we know that many friendships start off with some shared interest or other commonality, underneath that shared surface interest must be a mutual appreciation and recognition of our inner selves. This is what grows acquaintances into intimate friends.

The methods and technologies we use for friendships are vehicles for a deeper discipline, which requires the full engagement of our hearts and minds. And when we engage our hearts and minds, and we allow the

other person to come close and even enter our heart, then the possibility for transformation happens. These are the roots of spiritual change.

Actually, I sometimes envy those ancient Celtic monks and their *anam caras*. Their beliefs contrast sharply with what I feel is a modern struggle to preserve the intimacy of friendship, at a time in our history when we are often distant from one another. We move frequently, change jobs, change schools, change churches. Although we may throw around the terms “bff,” rare is the person who has had the same best friend for their whole life. Perhaps you are one of those lucky ones, and that person is your spouse, or partner, or friend from elementary school who you never lost touch with.

But, I think that many of us can relate to having scattered networks of friends, having times in our lives when we are especially close to one or more friends, and then something changes and our circle widens or shrinks. With technology and our modern lives, there are many venues for finding friends, and for staying in touch. However, I fear that there are many challenges to staying in touch on the soul level an *anam cara* requires.

Plenty of people have written about the rise of social media, either praising it for its ability to connect people from all over, or decrying it for leading somehow to the collapse of community, privacy, and intimacy. I prefer not to take a vote or state my position, I’m sure that people in this church range from the most proficient at social networking, to those who refuse to have anything to do with it. However, I did find a part in one internet columnist’s essay to be particularly poignant. In *Faux Friendship*, William Deresiewicz, writes quite passionately about the decline of friendship, and against Facebook in particular.

And here is a point that I think aligns itself with O’Donahue very nicely. Deresiewicz comments on the internet meme known as “25 Random Things About Me,” in which people post on their profiles facts about themselves. He criticizes the idea that our identities, and therefore any relationships based on those identities, can be reduced to information found in tiny bullet points. He writes,

“So information replaces experience, as it has throughout our culture. But when I think about my friends, what makes them who they are, and why I love them, it is not the names of their siblings that come to mind, or their fear of spiders. It is their qualities of character. This one’s emotional generosity, that one’s moral seriousness, the dark humor of a third. Yet even those are just descriptions, and no more specify the individuals uniquely than to say that one has red hair, another is tall. To understand what they really look like, you would have to see a picture. And to understand who they really are, you would have to hear about the things they’ve done. Character, revealed through action: the two eternal elements of narrative. In order to know people, you have to listen to their stories.”

He goes on to say that listening to one another’s stories, cannot, in his opinion be accomplished in brief emails or within tiny text character limits. He uses this analogy, I must warn you for a bit of racy language. “Posting information is like pornography, a slick, impersonal exhibition. Exchanging stories is like making love: probing, questing, questioning, caressing. It is mutual. It is intimate. It takes patience, devotion, sensitivity, subtlety, skill—and it teaches them all, too.”

So let me return to John O’Donahue, because I think that he would agree that a real friendship takes patience, devotion, sensitivity, subtlety and skill. It is not based on superficial social niceties or even those traits we like or find interesting about ourselves. It is built through careful listening to the stories of others, and to slowly revealing our character, our whole self to another. An *anam cara* relationship is fed by love and deep understanding. O’Donahue writes, “Where you are understood, you are at home. Understanding nourishes belonging. When you really feel understood, you feel free to release yourself into the trust and shelter of the other person’s soul (14).”

Deresiewicz is correct that it can be a challenge to feel confident and trusting enough to release ourselves into the shelter of another’s soul just through the use of technology. And simply knowing information about

another person, is not equal to understanding a person and belonging to a person. But, I am not as pessimistic as Deresiewicz. I hope that it is not impossible for us modern people, that we have not lost the capability to listen, to understand, to nourish one another.

Interestingly enough, the first step for building an *anam cara* relationship is to love our own soul. O'Donahue writes, "You can never love another person unless you are equally involved in the beautiful but difficult spiritual work of learning to love yourself" (26). When we love ourselves and are connected with our heart-center, we can be in relationship based on genuine intimacy rather than neediness. In other words, it is important to be able to be friends to ourselves, to befriend our own souls, before jumping into trying to get to know someone else's.

But, here's a paradoxical claim, it can also be through our friendships that we come to recognize and appreciate our selves. I recently had a conversation with a patient at the hospital, who had just received several wonderful gifts from her friends. "You have some amazing friends," I told her. "Yes, they are very special," she responded. She continued, "It took me a long time to realize it, but I guess they must see something special in me too."

As O'Donahue phrases it, "There is no mirror in the world where you can catch a glimpse of your soul. You can never be fully visually present to your self. The one you love, your *anam cara*, is the truest mirror to reflect your soul" (26). In other words, we cannot always see ourselves clearly, but often a friend can see something and reflect it back to us so we can hear it and accept it for the first time. In terms of spiritual development, we cannot reach spiritual enlightenment alone. We need other people in order for our souls to reach their full capacity.

The message of *Anam Cara* is that our souls are best awakened through creative, loving and intimate relationship, and through a dedicated recognition to the beauty of our souls and everyone's. So maybe, the single *anam cara* of ancient Celtic Ireland, is a rarity for today's world, but the concept of an *anam cara* friendship, as a spiritual practice, is something which we can build into all of our friendships, and even into our spiritual communities.

Perhaps another gift of the concept of the *anam cara* is to begin to see all of our intimate relationships, friendships, family relationships, romantic relationships, every relationship that contains intimacy and love, as sacred in and of themselves. O'Donahue writes, "Real intimacy is a sacred experience....Real intimacy is of the soul, and the soul is reserved" (17). So if the soul is reserved, we must indeed draw it out with patience and kindness and trust. When we have done this, as we do on a consistent basis with those close to us, and we meet each other with trust and vulnerability, revealing our whole selves, we experience something holy.

The original practitioners of *anam cara*, many of them were Christian monastics and ascetics, were interested in friendship as a spiritual practice, and a pathway toward deeper understanding of God and relationship with Christ. Separating themselves from secular friendship, early Christians focused on friendships with the same spiritual goal. Even friendship itself was an earthly expression of divine relationship. O'Donahue writes, "Friendship is the nature of God. The Christian concept of god as Trinity is the most sublime articulation of otherness and intimacy, an eternal interflow of friendship (15)."

This may seem irrelevant to us as Unitarians, who do not necessarily believe in the Trinity, and who do not agree that movement towards God or Christ is a common spiritual goal. However, even though I do not believe in the Christian Trinity, I find this statement fascinating – Friendship is the nature of God. I think it is not so foreign to us to think that divinity, or what we believe to be the source of holiness in this world, can best be described as interrelationship, as interrelatedness, and that we discover this divinity in *relationships*.

As Unitarian Universalists we resonate with the concept from Desmond Tutu that we become human persons through our recognition of other persons. Human interdependence and relationship are a way of

accessing the holy and of developing our understanding of our selves and others as human and spiritual beings.

So the idea of a soul friend, an *anam cara*, a relationship of recognition on a soul-level, a relationship in which two people belong to one another on a soul-level, can also be a spiritual practice for Unitarian Universalists. What would it mean to have a true friend of your soul? A friend who recognizes and understands you without mask or pretension, and even more, who helps to awaken your soul, your divine inheritance?

Is friendship only a particular relationship between two people, or between a few? Is there such a thing as a circle of friends, or a friendship community? Can this church community, be such a circle, a place where friendship is encouraged and we greet one another as friends? It may be impossible to expect that the next person we meet in coffee hour will be our *anam cara*. Intimacy takes time to build. However, I suggest that it is possible to greet one another each as potential soul friends. I even challenge you to reach out, not just to the friends in this church you already have, but the other – the person you don't know yet, the child or youth or elder, the quiet one, the too loud one, the person whose eyes you don't want to meet. What if that person had the ability to uncover and grow your soul? How would you greet them?

May this congregation be one in which friendships develop and flourish, in which we take the patience, devotion, and sensitivity to know one another's stories. A place where we greet one another with recognition for the beauty of one another's souls, recognition that we are all a little bit stranger and also at home in this world together.

Because I began with the opening of Fra Giovanni's letter, I want to end with the closing of the letter. And as I read both the opening again, and the closing, I wish for you to imagine a friend close to you, or even the *anam cara* you have yet to meet or to develop. May these words sink into your soul, and may you find a friendship as nurturing, sustaining and loving. "I salute you. I am your friend, and my love for you goes deep....And so, at this time, I greet you, not quite as the world sends greetings, but with profound esteem and with the prayer that for you, now and forever, the day breaks and shadows flee away."