



Address at Morning Prayers, Memorial Church, Harvard University, 1988.

Citation

Ziolkowski, Jan M. 1988. Address at Morning Prayers, Memorial Church, Harvard University. Presented at Memorial Church, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, May 21, 1988.

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Date: May 21, 1988
Location: Cambridge, MA

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Morning Prayers May 21, 1988

We have reached a time in the year when many members of our community take to the roads, abandoning Cambridge for all points of the compass. For most, the exodus will last only until the end of the summer; but some will never again make their way back to this part of the world.

Because this is the season of bidding farewell, late spring always raises in my mind memories of friends and friendship. Who does not recall the bittersweet experience of parting from friends; and who does not also remember the joys of friends whose attachment remains strong in spite of long separations, or the sorrow of friends whose interest or loyalty proves to be sadly impermanent?

Spring may be the season of goodbyes, but it is also the season of renewed greetings, as alumni and alumnae come together again after years away from their alma mater—and from one another. Just as in the spring the gardener rakes aside leaves still damp from snow and uncovers the shoots that soon burst from vigorous bulbs beneath the soil, so the returning graduates discover that true friendships can be resumed with all their original warmth; for (in the words of Jerome) “a friendship which can cease to be was never a true friendship.”

Under most circumstances, friendship is a hardy growth and thrives. But the person who nurtures a friendship must be alert against threats just as real as the droughts, blights, and pests that can weaken and kill plants.

In the past one of the chief menaces to friendship was the conflicting demands of national duty. This tension was summed up in E. M. Forster’s famous, or infamous, statement: “If I had to choose between betraying my country and betraying my friend I hope I should have the guts to betray my country.”

Forster was not the only one of his generation to perceive this antinomy. Look at the complex intertwining of friendship and treachery in the case of the Englishman Philby, who died in the Soviet Union only a few days ago. But are the principal menaces against friendship in our own generation political? I suspect not. I believe rather that the perils to friendship in the 1980s are deeply personal ones.

First and foremost, there is the hurried pace of our lives. To return to the terms of horticulture, the day-to-day pressures cause the gardener to neglect his plot; and as he tilts the watering can less often, his plants first wither then die.

Compounding the problem of busyness, there are abuses that arise from greed and ambition. In our age people often view others as objects. Although this tendency is most pronounced in sexual relations, it also vitiates friendships. People sometimes seek friends, not in

affection, but in the hope of gaining advantages. Friendship is brokered like any other commodity, bought low and cheap, sold without remorse when the moment for profit-taking has arrived.

If friendship is a thing, it is a thing that grows. it is a garden that deserves tending and that should not be choked by the weeds of self-absorption, greed, and ambition. Like a world without gardens, a life without friendship would lack any spot to which to retreat in peace and joy. To quote one of Cicero's most graceful insights [De amicitia xiii.47], "They seem to take the sun out of the world who take friendship out of life; for we have nothing better from the immortal gods, nothing more pleasant than friendship."