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A Talk With a Wayfarer

Leo Tolstoy

1910

I have come out early. My soul feels light and joyful. It is a wonderful morning. The sun is only just appearing from behind the trees. The dew glitters on them and on the grass. Everything is lovely; everyone is lovable. It is so beautiful that, as the saying has it, “One does not want to die.” And, really, I do not want to die. I would willingly live a little longer in this world with such beauty around me and such joy in my heart. That, however, is not my affair, but the Master’s...

I approach the village. Before the first house I see a man standing, motionless, sideways to me. He is evidently waiting for somebody or something, and waiting as only working people know how to wait, without impatience or vexation. I draw nearer: he is a bearded, strong, healthy peasant, with shaggy, slightly gray hair, and a simple, worker’s face. He is smoking not a “cigar” twisted out of paper, but a short pipe. We greet one another.

“Where does old Alexéy live?” I ask.

“I don’t know, friend; we are strangers here.”

Not “*I* am a stranger,” but “*we* are strangers.” A Russian is hardly ever alone. If he is doing something wrong, he may perhaps say

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Original text from RevoltLib.com, 2021.

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“I”; otherwise it is always “we” the family, “we” the *artél*, “we” the Commune.

“Strangers? Where do you come from?”

“We are from Kalouga.”

I point to his pipe. “And how much do you spend a year on smoking? Three or more rubles, I daresay!”

“Three? That would hardly be enough.”

“Why not give it up?”

“How can one give it up when one’s accustomed to it?”

“I also used to smoke, but have given it up ... and I feel so well—so free!”

“Well of course ... but it’s dull without it.”

“Give it up, and the dullness will go! Smoking is no good, you know!”

“No good at all.”

“If it’s no good, you should not do it. Seeing you smoke, others will do the same ... especially the young folk. They’ll say, ‘If the old folk smoke, God himself bids us do it!’”

“That’s true enough.”

“And your son, seeing you smoke, will do it too.”

“Of course, my son too...”

“Well then, give it up!”

“I would, only it’s so dull without it... It’s chiefly from dullness. When one feels dull, one has a smoke. That’s where the mischief lies... It’s dull! At times it’s so dull ... so dull ... so dull!” drawled he.

“The best remedy for that is to think of one’s soul.”

He threw a glance at me, and at once the expression of his face quite changed: instead of his former kindly, humorous, lively and talkative expression, he became attentive and serious.

“‘Think of the soul ... of the soul,’ you say?” he asked, gazing questioningly into my eyes.

“Yes! When you think of the soul, you give up all foolish things.”

His face lit up affectionately.

“You are right, daddy! You say truly. To think of the soul is the great thing. The soul’s the chief thing...” He paused. “Thank you, daddy, it is quite true”; and he pointed to his pipe. “What is it?... Good-for-nothing rubbish! The soul’s the chief thing!” repeated he. “What you say is true,” and his face grew still kinder and more serious.

I wished to continue the conversation, but a lump rose in my throat (I have grown very weak in the matter of tears), and I could not speak. With a joyful, tender feeling I took leave of him, swallowing my tears, and I went away.

Yes, how can one help being joyful, living amid such people? How can one help expecting from such people all that is most excellent?