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Dear Colleague:

Thoreau seems to have a most ethereal view of friendship. He seems to say that the potentiality of friendship can be a substitute for actual friendship, that absence can be a more intense form of presence, and that aspiration is as good as performance. "When they say farewell then indeed we begin to keep them company... For just as I always assign to him a nobler employment in my absence than I ever find him engaged in, so I value and trust those who love and praise my aspiration rather than my performance."

The young American novelist David Plante also has an ethereal view of friendship. For him, it rests on a willingness to float above truth. "I remember when, in my freshman year, I first took Charlie to visit my parents in our house, remember my worry, as I opened the door into the entry, that our lives were nowhere near the level of his and his family. But Charlie being Charlie, said to my parents, 'What a nice house you have.' And, being me, I said, 'Come on, I'll show you around.' With each grim little room I showed him, he said, 'This is pretty,' and I'll say, 'Isn't it?' We both knew what we were doing, and knew that this made us friends. With Henry...I would have had to say, The rooms are grim, and he would have, of course, agreed. This truthfulness, in a way, precluded our understanding one another and becoming friends." One can cast a positive light on this curiosity by saying that truth is not the issue. "This is pretty" is not addressed to architecture; its real meaning is, "I am fond of you." A computer understandably has a hard time learning such devious human language.

Friendship is at best a spare-time hobby to Americans. But this was true also of Englishmen at the turn of the century. "He was thinking of the irony of friendship--so strong it is, and so fragile. We fly together, like straws in an eddy, to part in the open stream. Nature has no use for us; she has cut her stuff differently. Dutiful sons, loving husbands, responsible fathers--these are what she wants, and if we are friends it must be in our spare time. Abram and Sarai were sorrowful, yet their seed became as sand of the sea, and distracts the politics of Europe at this moment. But a few verses of poetry is all that survives of David and Jonathan" (E.M. Forster, *The Longest Journey*, 1907).

Best wishes,

*J. J.*