

# FRIENDSHIP

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*The following is a transcript of a conversation with Beth Roy, whose questions and comments are in italics below.*

I think it's important to talk about friendship in some sort of larger social context and to see it as a changing phenomenon: that friendship in rural, pre-industrial society, and also subject to cultural traditions, is considerably different from what we face, those of us who live in the city, in an advanced industrialized culture. The structures of people's lives really preclude friendship, really are organized to prevent friendship: separate housing with no easy interconnections; people are transported, by and large, in vehicles that prevent contact with other people; in addition, people's lives are sufficiently pressured and stressed so that the time and leisure necessary for developing friendship is extremely difficult to come by. For example, if you live in New York City, by the time you get home after a horrendous subway ride or being stuck in the Holland Tunnel as you return to Hoboken, it's extremely unlikely that you will find the energy to come back to the city to have a leisurely dinner with friends, or that you'll have the energy to take the subway to go back down to the Village and to hang out with friends. Once you're home, that's about all the energy that you've got.

I think it's true in cultures where people are more dependent on automobiles and travel huge distances between the places where they work and the places where they live. The way that life is physically organized, at least in the United States, makes it difficult for people to have easy access to friendship. Friendship is something that takes discipline, pre-planning; spontaneity is something that is practically eliminated in the friendship circles of people's lives.

*Would this be a place to talk a little about competition and individualism, the reflection of this in people's heads?*

I think that's the additional factor, which is that friendship is not a value in this society. What is really a value in this society is making it, getting ahead, being successful, and also just managing the economic and social pressures on people who are members of the working class, the lower middle class, which are so extreme now in the 1980s that friendship is not a value which is highly touted and promoted by the culture. The value that is promoted around people's personal needs is the value of being a couple, being in a nuclear family, and people expend an enormous amount of energy to be coupled, to be in a couple, energy that is in no way matched by efforts to be in a large and secure friendship circle.

So it's important to see friendship as a changing phenomenon and to see the state of affairs now, in the United States especially, as a very particular phenomenon which will continue to change, hopefully. In direct ratio to the decrease in the emphasis on friendship is the increase in the emphasis on the need for being in a primary relationship, being in a couple. And it makes sense that with all of the social and economic pressures of life on people, and with the limited amount of energy and resources, that the one place that their need for intimacy and for emotional connection finds expression is in the modern couple, and the modern nuclear family. It's no longer a nuclear family that has extended members: the aunts and uncles, the cousins, often parents, are thousands of miles away. People are thrown back on the couple in a way that we see in Radical Psychiatry stresses the modern couple beyond endurance.

People turn to the couple for all of their needs: their sexual needs, their emotional needs, their intimacy needs, the feedback they need around their work, support, childcare needs—and the only relief that people find is if they happen to have money, and if they have money then they can buy services. But these services do not extend their communities and their support system; they're simply products. People buy au pair girls or live-in maids or fancy childcare centers, but nothing that extends the community of the child or of the real support system of the parents.

*Let's talk about the lack of other structural or organizational connections, churches and so forth in our community.*

In the old days, when the community was easier for people to create, there were a number of forms that this community took. People belonged to churches. They might not have been deeply religious, but churches provided a focal point for a sense of extended community. People belonged to cultural organizations: the Basque Club or the Czechoslovakian Club, the Irish Club, the Italian Club, etc., etc. They belonged to social organizations: the Elks, the Shriners, or the Lions. And there are still many places in America where those social forms are active, more or less. Historically, American black people have had enormous comfort and solace in their churches, which have been a focal point not only for their social life but also political and social expression and advancement.

But this kind of disintegration of the social points of the community, again, seems to us to be a result of the intense stress people experience in an industrial, urban and suburban culture. Moreover, in our community of artists, intellectuals, people on the left, people are critical of the culture and are alienated from what institutions do exist, so this phenomenon is even more intense. The ideology of churches and social clubs is often quite reactionary.

It seems to us that the resurgence of spirituality that is sweeping the Growth Movement and the left is a desperate cry for connection and for a universal vision of what the world should be.

## **DEFINING FRIENDSHIP**

Defining friendship would be a ludicrous thing in some other cultures, like Japan for example, where people know who they are, what their social place is, and have very specific expectations about what a friend is. In the United States, we need to start again to define what a friend is because of the fragmenting of any shared social definitions.

We think that choosing a friend is not unlike choosing a lover. There are several things to consider. One is the level of attraction. How attracted are you to this person? Does she touch your heart, engage your brain, aesthetically please you in some way? These are almost the same criteria you would use to pick a lover.

In addition, it's important to determine mutuality: whether this person is in the market for a friend. Does she need a friend? Does she have more friends currently than she can handle? In other words, you need to find somebody who will share the responsibility and the commitment to the principle of having friends.

There's a good deal of confusion in our culture between a friend and an acquaintance. Most people in the world have many friendly, sweet acquaintances, people who you genuinely like, who you care about, and about whom you'd be extremely upset if something bad happened to them. However, I want to make the distinction between that kind of kindly, sweet feeling about a number of people, and a friendship — a serious, long-term, committed friendship.

A friend is somebody from whom you have no secrets. A friend is somebody who you can call in the middle of the night if you need somebody to take you to the hospital. A friend is somebody who you can count on, who is part of your extended family, part of the network of your social grouping. It's crucial, if you define friendship in this manner, that people approach it with some seriousness. It's not a casual commitment.

## **WOMEN, MEN AND FRIENDSHIP**

It's interesting how the dissolution of friendship has been experienced in America differently by men and women. It seems to me that in more patriarchal cultures, men have more intimacy, that there's great connection and camaraderie between men. It's fascinating that in an industrial society, with the equality of women, that the friendship bonding of men has been virtually destroyed. It looks as if men have suffered the most, in some ways, from advanced monopoly

capitalism, that their personal lives have been more decimated. Women in Western culture seem to have been able to maintain the knack of friendship, and even at that it's sorely lacking.

The Women's Movement gave a shot-in-the-arm to friendship between women. For the first time, competition between women was addressed: competition for men, and competition around work and moving up the socio-economic ladder. It was at least named and addressed as a problem.

But men have been isolated in the extreme. They are more dependent than ever before on their mates, on their wives, for intimate friendships. There are a number of men who have strong friendships with other men, but the expression of friendship is usually around some activity — fishing, going to a baseball game, playing golf. Given that men are not trained or encouraged to be emotionally literate, or terribly interested in emotional connection, it's not surprising that with their friends they don't spend a lot of time talking intimately. It's not the expression of men's being in the society, and therefore it's also not expressed in friendship. It would be really surprising if men who are emotionally illiterate suddenly started talking about their feelings with men friends.

It's ironic. I remember in the '50s women saying, "I don't know why, I just like men better. I can't stand other women." I remember feeling incredibly offended by it, but it had to do with bright, ambitious women feeling they didn't have enough comradeship with other women. The complaint of the '60s, the '70s and '80s is from men, who say, "I don't know why, I really don't like other men." I think in some terrible way the tables are turned — not uniformly; obviously there are a number of exceptions. But I think there is a way that men are more oppressed now by the system than ever before.

## **FRIENDS AND COUPLES**

The result of the isolation of men from other men, and the difficulty women have of maintaining their friendships when they are in relationships with lovers, impacts the couple, and the nuclear family in America, in ways that are extreme and pernicious. Most couples in the Radical Psychiatry extended community experience problems around time and energy. Couples live in isolated homes and apartments. In addition to all the stresses we mentioned before, of life in the twentieth century, there is the additional work of maintaining a healthy, moving, growing relationship — particularly with the new values of working on relationships. It's a very big deal to have A Good Relationship, whereas in the old days people were satisfied not to have such a good relationship and get on with their lives. It's a healthy turn of events that people are committed to working on good relationships, but it does pose some new problems.

In addition, if a couple has children, they have small people to raise, school, house, feed, clothe and generally supervise. So here we have couples scurrying back and forth to their work, living in isolation, holding down jobs, working on a high quality relationship, and trying to raise their children in the best possible way. Given that agenda, it is miraculous if people have time for friendship. It is extremely difficult. All the centrifugal force of this kind of life draws off people's energy.

So here we have this struggling couple, working on their relationship in this milieu. It is excruciatingly difficult. People need much more than what a lover can provide, even the most attentive lover. They need intellectual input, they need advice, they need support when they're upset, they need childcare, they need new ideas around childrearing, they need a myriad of things. It's been our experience around couples that one of the most important things a couple can do is for each person to have friends. Almost nothing is as important as that for the success of the couple. It means that trusted people can be turned to in hard times; it means practical help; it means some sort of emotional sustenance that is essential for the good working of the couple.

It's a perfect paradox: the one thing that the couple really needs to survive is friends, and the one thing that is very difficult to do when people are putting their energy into a couple is to maintain friendships. People need either to have an extraordinary amount of physical energy, or to be organizational geniuses.

Or, to live collectively. As an aside, it seems to us that in general it's not been easy or successful for couples to live collectively. The reasons why couples haven't flourished in collective households are interesting, and important to understand; here is a new frontier, especially since there are more and more compelling reasons for people to live with other people, both economic and ideological, and also people really want to be coupled. There is new work to be done.

## **FRIENDSHIPS AND FAMILY-OF-ORIGIN**

One of the things that has happened in American life, because of the size of the United States and the cultural diversity and complexity of the American population, is the phenomenon of moving many miles from one's family of origin. For instance, San Francisco is filled with people from New York, Pennsylvania, Florida, Iowa and so on. People move for better jobs, to escape small towns; they move to the big city, exploring, seeking new adventures. This sort of break from family intensifies a couple's isolation.

Some couples are fortunate to have come from a nuclear family which is supportive and congenial. Then there is an additional problem: with the already existing scarcity of energy and time, the presence of extended family further limits resources available for friendships. It's difficult if you are without a family for help and backup and nurturing but it is also difficult if you *have* a family, because they demand time. Often families that have survived the migration to America and the integration into American life can be extremely possessive and jealous and competitive with friends. There is a deep injunction in American culture that the only people you can really trust is your family.

For example, in Jewish families there is a strong paranoia that nobody outside the family is of significance. This kind of paranoia and isolationism of the family are the result of years of racism and discrimination. The same thing is true in a number of cultural groups. The bottom line is that nobody will come through for you except the family. The problem with this ideology is that many people don't have such families. Families are so fragmented in America; either people have families from which they need distance for the sake of their mental health, or the family has disintegrated — people are divorced, or struggling without many resources, or are three thousand miles away from them. Even when families are available, their resources are not sufficient, there just isn't enough that any single nuclear family can supply to its children. People need more than the family can provide.

## **HOW TO BE A FRIEND**

### **How to Make a Friend: Attraction and Mutuality**

The old wisdom on how to find a friend is that it is connected with finding something in your life that you care deeply about. For example, if you are committed to the Jesse Jackson campaign, the likelihood is that you'll meet people you have something in common with if you work on that campaign. Among those people, there will be some small percentage of folks who will appeal to you, who will "attract" you, or interest you in a more profound way. It's been our experience that the most lasting friendships often, though not always, come about out of some shared work.

The transition from some attraction and interest in another person in a shared context to friendship is a delicate one, and takes some practice. People need to be pursued and carefully checked out. Again, there are two criteria: First, is the attraction mutual? And second, does she have a sufficient amount of time and energy to bring a new friend into her life?

Chemistry between friends is in some ways as elusive as the chemistry between lovers. All of us have had the experience that of the people we were interested in as friends when young people, twenty years later there's a good percentage of them that don't survive. However, everybody has experienced the opposite phenomenon of making a friend in youth who, for some strange reason, survives all the transitions and changes. I don't believe in magic, but I do think there is some combination of luck and "magic" in the choice of friends. In the final analysis, chemistry may

be beyond analysis. We need permission to pursue the people who attract us. To put it in the same category as choosing a lover is the right thing to do; it has the same combination of the concrete and the mysterious that is needed for good relationships.

But the other component — and I think it's the same component that's needed for a good love affair — is desire. People have to take friendship really seriously, and really desire it for it to have a chance. You can't just wish that a good friend will come along. Just as with a lover, fifty percent of success is desire, in the sense of: "I want to be married, I want to be in a couple, I believe in it." The other fifty percent is attraction. The same is true of friendship. You have to say to yourself, "I believe in friends, I want friends in my life, they're absolutely crucial to my mental health, and I'm going to find me some friends." That works in combination with attraction to another person.

## **How to Be a Friend: Cooperation and Emotional Literacy**

The contract between friends is identical to the contract that we in Radical Psychiatry believe is necessary between family members and between lovers. It depends on equality, and on not being frightened to cross certain kinds of emotional frontiers. People have to be courageous about giving criticism, talking about competition and jealousy. People have to be willing to risk their pride and make themselves vulnerable to make a friendship work. They have to be open to criticism and willing to give criticism to keep the relationship from being static and dying on its feet.

In addition, people need to act with all the constraints that govern their behavior in the work world: they have to be kind, gentle and honest. Our theories of cooperation (see Chapter 4) and of emotional literacy (see Chapter 8) are helpful guides.

What does equality between friends look like? One of the arts of friendship is to know its limits. For example, I love to dance. My best friend doesn't like to dance particularly. But I get an enormous amount of pleasure out of talking with her about ideas, traveling to new and exotic places together, sharing values around childrearing. It isn't part of my definition of our friendship that she dance when I dance, even though I love dancing and can't imagine its not being a part of my life.

Equality is not a vulgar equality. It is an equality of those things that sustain interest.

When one person is in a couple and the other is not, the friendship may be stressed, but I don't think it's terminal. The person in the couple is under a lot of strain. She must fight against the centrifugal force, to lean out of the couple. It is artful to balance friends and lovers, and, as I've said, it is a necessity. There are certain things that need to be done. For example, the couple needs to be inclusive of the single person on occasions, and those occasions need to be carefully thought out, to be premeditated. There are times when people sometimes need their relationship to be outside the context of the couple; good friends need to be able to see each other and not include the spouse for a relationship to be healthy.

When people have substantially different advantages or disadvantages in society, like interracial friendships, or friendships between a disabled person and an able-bodied one, or a gay and a straight person, or a rich and a poor person, other problems need to be confronted. Some of those are harder than others. The rules of emotional literacy provide the guidance: things must absolutely not be kept secret; no Rescues; people must talk honestly about what their differences are. They need to be defined and constantly on the agenda for discussion. I think some of the most binding and profound friendships happen between people who cross those lines. Those friendships are between people with considerable emotional and personal power. It takes strength, and a kind of self-knowledge and a kind of assurance as a person to be friends with somebody who is different. It's much easier to be friends with people who are similar. When it happens, those friendships can be unusually rich and interesting.

There's a very, very strong admonition against lending money to friends. It's interesting, from a Marxist point of view, that the material issues between people would evoke the most controversy, the most fear. Lending money, buying property jointly, living collectively — all of those things have to do with crossing some border between socially accepted friendships and something more daring and risky. Generally, Radical Psychiatry promotes the view that those frontiers should be crossed, with care and a good deal of forethought and agreements and contracts and strategies for the worst so that people have protection. We have a very hard-headed, pragmatic view of what people need in order to insure equality. For instance, if people live collectively or own property collectively, they should have very detailed and clear agreements about who owns what, what would happen if somebody dies, or if there's a fight.

We promote these same kinds of agreements for couples. The mythology in our society is that, as difficult as it is for friends to do these things, it is just as natural and easy for couples to do them. In fact, both myths are equally untrue.

We have to move from the conception of all relationships — couples, friends, families — from the unconscious to the extremely carefully conscious and premeditated arena. People have to be aware of the meaning of friendship, the shape of friendship, and the need to protect it.

## **Love and Commitment**

There are two kinds of commitments. One is the commitment that comes out of an agreement to take the relationship seriously and to struggle for its maintenance, even in bad times. That's the sort of commitment that's the definition of friendship, which is that people decide that they like each other, have time for each other, and want to take on the commitment of friendship to hang in there. It's the same kind of commitment people make when they get married — to hang in there, not to dismiss it lightly.

Because friends are less obligated to each other — there are less material things that bind them, like children and houses — there is more freedom for people who are friends to make changes in their life which make the friendship more difficult. For example: to move to Atlanta; to suddenly go to England on a scholarship; and so on. One of the most exciting and wonderful things about friendships when they're good ones is that they can sustain great distances and time apart. People often report on having the kind of friend who they haven't seen in years and when they get together, it feels as if they are beginning in mid-sentence. I think it is possible to feel committed, and to act on that commitment even over great distances and over long periods of time. Friendship has got the unique quality of being able to sustain itself if it's really on the mark. It's hard on people who are close friends to be separated, but friendship can definitely survive.