

On Friendship Between Men and Women

(An Exercise in the Old Style)

Page Smith has written an amusing essay on the subject of the possibility of platonic relationships between men and women (Smith, Page, "Head Over Heels in Friendship", in *Coming of Age*, San Francisco Chronicle, "This Week", Sunday, early Sept., 1989). His point of departure is the claim made in the movie, *When Harry Met Sally*, that such relationships are impossible because sooner or later they become suffused with sexual desire.

Smith's argument is that, on the contrary, they *are* possible, that he has had some 104 of them, that the mere fact that the question is raised is a sign of how far we have fallen in these liberated times.

Smith writes like the comfortably-retired, happily-married, 72-year-old academic he is. However, this subject is too important to be left to happily-married professors. It demands the deeper and broader scrutiny which only years in the front lines can bring, especially since the subject of relationships between the sexes (which, of course, includes, friendship) is much larger and more complex than it used to be, as evidenced, a few years ago, by the Berkeley commune which each week required its members to place on a bulletin board, next to their names, a code indicating their sexual preference for that week. The options included: celibate, masturbatory only, long-term monogamous, short-term (or serial) monogamous, polygynous, polyandrous, heterosexual, homosexual, group sexual, with the last broken down into the sub-categories of two-somes, three-somes, four-somes, etc., and then, within each of these, the desired mix of genders. But even this does not exhaust the possibilities, since, as most students of the subject know, within each sexual preference, there exists a continuum of psychological genders, e.g., strongly masculine heterosexual, 70-30 masculine/feminine heterosexual, etc.

But a beginning must be made, so let us begin by dividing the subject into: (1) Friendship within a sexual relationship; (2) Friendship outside a sexual relationship.

Friendship Within a Sexual Relationship

A brief digression: Smith says he cannot tolerate the phrase "making love" as a synonym for sexual intercourse, because, first of all, "you can't 'make' love; it comes unbidden. And love has no necessary connection with sexual intercourse." (I assume the reader has no further doubts about the importance of not leaving these important subjects to academics.) The truth is that, for a male at least, what comes unbidden is sexual desire, occasionally accompanied by what used to be called, "the softer emotions". The whole thing is well summed-up by a line in the movie, *Sex, Lies, and Video Tape*: "Men grow to love women they are sexually attracted to; women become sexually attracted to men they love."

Smith's pedantic reason for rejecting the term "making love" also betrays a lack of acquaintance with some of the liberated women of our time, more than one of whom has told me that "sexual intercourse" is entirely too mechanical a term for such an important activity, that the term should only be used in newspaper articles about adulterers and axe murderers. Therefore I will continue to use "making love" when referring to the "S" word in a romantic context. End of digression.

One of the few good things that can be said about this age is that the importance and value of friendship within a sexual relationship is widely recognized. "But are you *friends*?" is a question often asked by acquaintances of one or both members of a couple who announce their intention of pledging eternal, or at least one- or two-year, fealty to each other.

The best tribute to this kind of friendship that I know of is Yeats' "John Kinsella's Lament for Mrs. Mary Moore":

On Friendship Between Men and Women

“A bloody and a sudden end,
 Gunshot or a noose,
For Death which takes what man would keep,
 Leaves what man would lose.
He might have had my sister,
 My cousins by the score,
But nothing satisfied the fool
 But my dear Mary Moore,
None other knows what pleasures man
 At table or in bed.
What shall I do for pretty girls
 Now my old bawd is dead?

Though stiff to strike a bargain
 Like an old Jew man,
Her bargain struck we laughed and talked
 And emptied many a can;
And O! but she had stories,
 Though not for the priest’s ear,
To keep the soul of man alive,
 Banish age and care,
And being old she put a skin
 On everything she said.
What shall I do for pretty girls
 Now my old bawd is dead?

The priests have got a book that says
 But for Adam’s sin
Eden’s Garden would be there
 And I there within.
No expectation fails there,
 No pleasing habit ends,
No man grows old, no girl grows cold,
 But friends walk by friends.
Who quarrels over halfpennies
 That plucks the trees for bread?
What shall I do for pretty girls
 Now my old bawd is dead?”

A beautiful example of friendship within a sexual relationship (albeit a fragmented one) is that between the divorced couple in Bergman’s *Scenes from a Marriage*.

Given two people with a ribald sense of humor and a love of word-play, such friendships can be a source of fun unequalled by any other, since both inevitably develop the habit of seeing a sexual double meaning in virtually every phrase and idiom in the language, so that there is never a dull conversation between them. This is but one of many reasons why Byron was dead wrong

when he said, “A man and a woman make far better friendships than can exist between two of the same sex; but with this condition, that they never have made, or are to make, love with each other.” Needless to say, Smith agrees with this foolishness.

But such friendships are amply dealt with in our literature, so I will spend no more time on them. Let us therefore now turn our attention to the far more intriguing subject of ...

Friendship Outside of a Sexual Relationship

...which we must break down into a number of sub-categories, beginning with...

Friendship Between an Asexual or Homosexual Man and a Heterosexual Woman

These certainly occur — the friendship between Henry James and Edith Wharton, which Page describes as “a feast of intellect and wit”, belongs in this category —, and, indeed, I have heard some women say that their most intimate friendships have been with gay men because gay men are so much more in touch with their feelings than heterosexual men. (If there is a single complaint that modern women seem to make about men as friends, it is that the average man is all but ignorant of his own feelings. A therapist once told me that after a particularly emotional interchange in a group therapy meeting, she asked an engineer who had not been a participant in the interchange, what he was feeling now? He replied, in perfect candor, “What do you mean, ‘What am I feeling?’”. Further probing revealed that the poor guy simply did not know how one *went about* finding out what one was feeling.)

Friendship Between a Heterosexual Man and an Asexual or Homosexual Woman

These seem to be less successful than their converses, mainly, I suppose, because for a woman, intimacy in no way requires sexual activity, whereas for a sexually active man, sexual activity is a necessary condition for intimacy.

Friendship Between a Heterosexual Man and a Heterosexual Woman

Now we can get down to business. But again, the complexity of the subject requires that we break it into sub-subcategories. However, first, let me state my case:

In such friendships, there is *always* a sexual undercurrent except when the age difference is extreme. But even when this sexual undercurrent does not lead to sexual activity, the friendship can be stimulating and long-lived. In fact, it is the simultaneous recognition of this undercurrent, and the not acting on it, which gives these friendships their unique excitement.

I therefore find Smith’s remark incredible: “Raised as I was, it had never occurred to me to regard women as potential sexual conquests. Since marriage was the only respectable option, those women who were not marriage prospects or who were already married or engaged were prospective friends.”

And now to the first sub-subcategory.

Friendship Between a Heterosexual Man and a Heterosexual Woman When One of Them is Sexually Frustrated But the Other Is Not

This is the most unpleasant instance of this type of friendship. Such friendships often begin as

follows: a very attractive, cultured woman with greater than average sexual needs, is unable to find a male with whom she can have a complete relationship, and so settles for a purely sexual relationship with a male (possibly married) to whom she is physically, but not otherwise, attracted; the arrangement is often that they meet for a few hours once or twice a week, and apart from that, have no contact. After a time, she begins to cast about for “someone to talk to” and finds a highly intelligent, well-read male who, though he is sexually attracted to her, settles for a mere friendship for the time being, hoping eventually to seduce her away from her weekly lover. In his eagerness to win her, he encourages her to talk freely about any subject at all, which sooner or later leads her to talk quite uninhibitedly about her own sexual experiences. This, needless to say, drives him to distraction, yet he continues to appear to be a willing listener in hopes this will soften her toward him. She, however, while treasuring the friendship, does not find her sexual attraction to him sufficient to warrant giving up the sure thing she has every week. Gradually, the relationship deteriorates into one of repeated entreaties and lame attempts at seduction on his part, and repeated assurances on hers about how much she values his conversation, until he bitterly withdraws, vowing never again to be a cultural fix for any woman.

A particularly repellant version of this type of friendship occurs when the frustrated male attempts to deny his frustration, both to himself and to others, using various idealistic or religious arguments that a friendship between man and woman can exist without sexual desire. One immediately detects the stink of loving what one hates in these protestations. The best example I know of is the friendship between a well-known female folk singer of the ‘60’s and a male member of the peace movement. A collection of their letters has been published, and his heroic efforts to convince her, and himself, that he is above desiring what he obviously desires all too much, are almost too embarrassing to read.

Friendship Between a Heterosexual Man and a Heterosexual Woman When Neither is Sexually Frustrated

We begin with what is usually the mildest form of this type of relationship, when it occurs at all, namely...

Friendship Between Members of a Divorced Couple

Children are the main motivation for such a friendship, whose beginning depends heavily on the degree of self-control which both persons demonstrate during the most painful days of the divorce, and on the determination of each to make the long period of sharing the raising of the children, as least unpleasant as possible. Given that, the two can be of significant help to each other; apart from sharing their wisdom (such as it is) concerning the raising of the children, they may also share financial and business advice, the man may ask the woman for advice about decorating his house, and even, in some cases, about his relationships with other women.

Friendship Between a Mature Heterosexual Man and a Teenage, or Younger, Girl

In this age when the long-suppressed prevalence of incest and child-abuse is just beginning to emerge, and when the story of Lolita is now a part of Western culture, such friendships tend to be regarded with suspicion. Yet they can be one of the most beautiful of all male-female relation-

ships, especially in the case when the girl's parents are divorced, so that the man becomes a kind of second father to her. These relationships can also help the modern heterosexual man to understand the high value which the ancient Greeks placed on the love of an older man for a boy or youth — a love which was not primarily carnal, as it would be in our own time. In the case of the best older man-young girl relationships, the man is unquestionably aware of the girl's beauty and of his desire for her, but he voluntarily suppresses any form of expressing this desire in exchange for the pleasure of her trust, her looking up to him, the opportunity to guide her (when she asks for such guidance). Such friendships become particularly close if she shows obvious artistic or intellectual talent in subjects in which he has some mastery.

If the girl is a pre- or early- teenager, vivacious, a little spoiled, seductive, full of energy and with a very short tolerance for adult pomposity, and he is one of those fortunate men who enjoys being with children, such relationships can be one of the great delights of life as well as a continual challenge to him, since he must remain constantly on his toes to field her challenges and her sudden changes of temperament without destroying the bond between them.

The most famous example of this type of relationship is, of course, that between Lewis Carroll and the young girls who were his only real friends through most of his adult life.

"[Carroll] was so shy that he could sit for hours at a social gathering and contribute nothing to the conversation, but his shyness and stammering 'softly and suddenly vanished away' when he was alone with a child." — Gardner, Martin, Introduction to his *The Annotated Alice*, New American Library, N.Y., 1960, p. 10.

But everything depends on the man's refraining from any sexual expression of his love and affection for the girl. Any man in these circumstances who is inclined to let his lust do his thinking for him — "How can it hurt her when she is obviously so sexually mature already, and when it is clear how much I love her?" — should attend a few meetings of a 12-Step Program, and hear the life stories of women who have been victims of males who gave in to such thinking.

Friendship Between a Heterosexual Man and a Heterosexual Woman, Both of Whom Are Working on a Project in Industry Together

For some men, it is extremely stimulating sexually to work with a woman on a project, e.g., in business. I don't know why this is, perhaps because the situation mirrors that of the family — man and woman in an activity that will bring new life into the world. The degree of stimulation depends in part on the correspondence between the psychological gender of each participant and the degree of power each holds in the project relationship. Thus, e.g., men with a strongly masculine psychological gender, are most stimulated by the dominant relationship exemplified by the old-fashioned boss-secretary relationship; yet others of similar psychological gender, who are contemptuous of such easy kills, prefer work relationships in which the man exercises only slightly more control than the woman. Others, of course, prefer the woman to be in control.

Friendship Between a Boy and a Girl, Both Pre-Teenage

Here again we have a type of friendship whose beauty, in these sex-ravaged times, usually goes unnoticed. There is an inchoate sexual component in the friendship, but if the boy were asked why he likes her, he would reply that she is good at the games (non-sexual) he likes to play, that she "understands" how to build things (huts, forts in the woods, vast constructions out of Lincoln Logs and blocks on living room floors). The mood of such important play is admirably

expressed in Ravel's *Mother Goose Suite*. Again we notice the peculiar excitement in some males over working on projects with a member of the opposite sex.

Friendship Between a Heterosexual Man and a Heterosexual Woman Who Simply Enjoy Each Other's Company

Such friendships — but with the qualification above — allow, as Smith says, “for the free and uninhibited play of different kinds of sensibility. They remind men of the unique feminine anima, psyche, call it what you will. They make men more civilized and women more imaginative. They lighten the heart and elevate the soul. In short, they improve the quality of social life and, I suspect, improve the digestion.” And, as Smith says, “they put sex in its proper place”, but, of course, not in the sense he means it.