

DYKE PSYCHE:**Friendships as a Model of Nonmonogamous Intimacy**

BY ESTHER ROTHBLUM

Picture the following scenario:

You live on a planet on which Friendship is the most important issue in people's lives. Whereas you are expected to have lots of lovers (and also co-workers, acquaintances, neighbors, etc.), these represent weaker bonds on your planet. Every adult is expected to have one Friend, a person who is her soulmate, intimate partner, and life companion.

Furthermore, your planet is basically "mono-affiliuous" about Friendships. Though you can express "friendliness" in order to find your true Friend, once you have become part of a Friendship, you are expected to remain committed to this Friendship. You and your Friend will have an extravagant Friendship Commitment Ceremony that takes months to plan and to which you will invite all your lovers, co-workers, and other people you know. They will hear you exchange vows about remaining faithful to each other "in sickness and in health" for the rest of your lives.

There are strict rules on your planet about friendliness with anyone who is not your Friend. Friendliness is frowned upon in the workplace or other situations in which you are expected to maintain a professional identity. If you spend too much time with one particular lover, people may wonder whether you are more than "just lovers" and suspect that you are "cheating" on your Friend. You can have fantasies of being friendly with lovers, but you're not supposed to "act on" these feelings without endangering your Friendship.

Ever since you were a child, lots of toys and games focused on themes related to finding a Friend in adulthood. Your story books ended with Friends living "happily ever after." Friendships in adolescence are not expected to last long, because everyone knows that to enter into a serious Friendship you have to have a degree of maturity. Teens are encouraged to experiment in developing friendliness skills. However, adults have a lot of control over which people are appropriate Friends for young people, and in the past you rebelled when family members thought they knew who would make a good potential Friend for you.

Most official documents ask about your Friendship Status—single, in a Friendship, separated, or having ended a Friendship. There are some unkind words to describe people who don't have a Friend. Whether you have a current Friend and how things are going in your Friendship is the first thing that people around you, like lovers or family members, want to know when they see you.

There are other constant reminders about the importance of Friendships. Just about every popular song, television show, and magazine, as well as lots of books, focus on Friendship themes—people getting into and out of Friendships, finding the ideal Friend, losing a Friend through death or infidelity, or having Friendship difficulties. No matter what product you see advertised, it is somehow linked with your ability to get into and remain in your Friendship. In fact, it is hard to feel good about your Friendship because there are so many things you should be buying or doing to improve your friendliness. Scores of how-to books, many of them best-sellers, focus on ways to meet a Friend, to

"work on" your Friendship, to keep your Friend from leaving you for another, or to keep a longterm Friendship from losing its spice. And everyone knows that the older you are when a Friendship ends, the harder it will be to enter into another Friendship because most people your age already have Friends and are thus "taken."

Of course, census data indicate that many people end their Friendships at some point, and others are "nonmono-affiliuous," often in secret. You know this because a sub-theme of most Friendship books, movies, or tv soap operas is about Friendships that are experiencing some difficulty. You are aware that spending too much time at work can interfere with your Friendship, and there were occasions when you told your lovers that you had less time to spend with them when you were entering a new Friendship.

Religious leaders on your planet are very concerned about the increasing rate of Friendships ending. Should you and your Friend decide to seek therapy for Friendship-related problems, you are likely to find a therapist who has been trained to view friendliness as one of the single most important themes underlying both healthy and maladaptive functioning. This is particularly true for followers of Dr. Freud (the German word for "friend"), although the general public finds his views controversial, particularly the idea that even young children can have fantasies of friendliness.

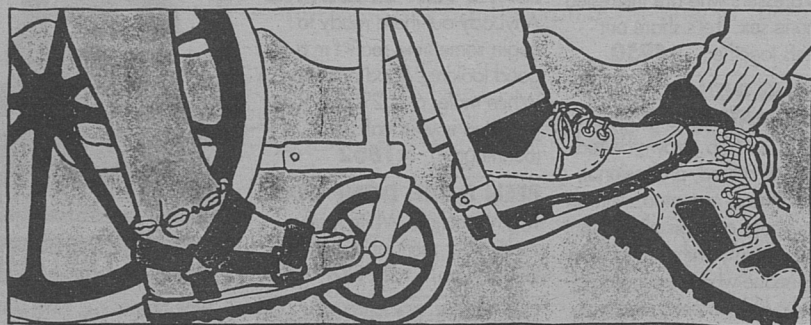
Recently, you were at a work-related conference and you met a woman whom you really liked and acted friendly with. Though you couldn't be certain, you were pretty sure that she was friendly to you, too. Since then, thoughts of her have consumed your day, and you have even confessed this to some of your lovers. But you also have some serious concerns. How would you find time to spend with more than one Friend? What if your current Friend found out and it affected your Friendship with her, which has been comfortable (though not perfect) for so many years? The two of you would need to discuss the ground rules of such a complicated Dual Friendship. Even if you decided to limit the new Friendship to out-of-town trips, wouldn't it affect your ability to be 100% committed to your current Friend?

If only Friendships weren't so complicated! Take your lover relationships, for example. Your lovers aren't jealous of each other and you're not jealous when they have sex with other people. Nobody cares about how many lovers you have. In fact, it's even hard to know who is and isn't a "lover" in your life right now because that term is used so loosely on your planet to describe anyone with whom you have sex. After all, sex is not well-defined and can describe all kinds of thoughts, behaviors, and relationships, so who could even begin to have criteria around lovers the way your planet does around Friendships? If only everyone weren't so obsessed with Friends, Friends, Friends! At times, it's enough to make you feel like an alien.

This scenario has a number of implications for lesbian life on Planet Earth, including how we prioritize sex and romantic relationships. Future columns of DYKE PSYCHE will focus on those issues.

Esther Rothblum is Professor of Psychology at the University of Vermont and Editor of the Journal of Lesbian Studies. DYKE PSYCHE is a monthly column.

This piece was excerpted from the article by Esther Rothblum entitled "Poly-Friendships that will appear in an upcoming thematic issue of the Journal of Lesbian Studies on "Polyamory." For a copy of this article, write to Esther Rothblum, Dept. Psychology, John Dewey Hall, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405, email e_rothbl@dewey.uvm.edu.



Artwork by Alison Bechdel

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