

BUDDY

Understanding Male Friendships

SYSTEM



GEOFFREY L. GREIF

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS
2009

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UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press, Inc., publishes works that further Oxford University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education.

Oxford New York

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Mexico City Nairobi New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

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Copyright © 2009 Oxford University Press, Inc.

Published by Oxford University Press, Inc., 198 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10016

www.oup.com

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Greif, Geoffrey L.

Buddy system : understanding male friendships / Geoffrey L. Greif.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-532642-0

1. Male friendship. I. Title.

BF575.F66G735 2008

158.2'5—dc22

2008004182

9 8 7 6 5 4

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

Buddy System

Acknowledgments

I received enormous encouragement from so many people I talked to about the book. Everyone has a story to tell about his own friendships. Recently, a 48-year-old reporter told me about his closest friends, all of whom he met in first grade. They have a set of rules under which they operate to maintain their friendship. One of them is that any time three of them are together, they must call the fourth friend so everyone stays included. Sandra Bullock (everything I read about movie stars is true, right?) apparently has a rule with her friends that they incur a fine if they go for more than 48 hours without touching base with each other. These are all strategies to stay connected with friends at a time when friendships are being put to the test by competing demands on our time. I wish to thank all those who have spoken to me both informally and formally about their friendships.

Many students at the University of Maryland School of Social Work assisted with conducting and analyzing interviews. Beginning with the first group of students in a research class in 2002, when I started the semester with a lecture on Aristotle, each subsequent group of students built on the work of the previous group. Their input was highly encouraging and invaluable to my thinking about the meanings of the interviews. The book could not and would not have been done without them. They are: Jean Spence, Maggie Hume, Dawn Swoyer, Rosie Behr, Amanda Bordwine, Derricka Brasfield, Carol Bryant, Tsiona Cohen, Vanessa Dean, Michael Durdock, John DeCosta, Leonard Ellentuck, Stacey Fabian, Jesse Fask, Kristy French, Faith Gofney, Janna Henesch, Carolyn Hoffman, Anne Ingham, Kara Kalbaugh, Jennifer Leib, Monica Lester, Renee Liebnow, Stanley

Linthicum, Tamika Lopez-Ryan, Mende Martinez, Deborah Matos, Zina Miller, Bonnie Milner, Corene Myers, Deborah Paradise, Loraine Pasquantonio, Regina Patente, Bridgette Phoebus, Jeffrey Plankeel, Tiffany Rexrode, Tineka Robinson, Matthew Rosenfield, Laurie Sapperstein, Greg Scharer, Karima Selehdar, Tamara Simmons, Cheri Stanley, Helen Stovicek, Gretchen Strunk, Leslie Styron, Amanda Tabb, Krista Vishio, Sondra Williams Jones, Christine Wiratunga, Cynthia Woodham, Evonne Gershon, and Melisa Poole. And, Roy Furchgott helped with the writing early on.

Most recently, my 2007–2008 Research Assistant was Brett Lebowitz, who helped with the editing and citation research for the book. Chris Davis did an excellent job with ministering to the book and helping it along. My wife, Maureen, was unfailingly patient in listening to me talk about this book for the past five years. A formative dinner at the Shapiros with two other couples a few years back was great encouragement. The anonymous readers from Oxford's stable of reviewers helped put me back on track when I had driven the book into the wilderness. Finally, Maura Roessner, my editor at Oxford, displayed uncommon support from the beginning of the project. She was a fabulous resource throughout the writing. Every author should have such a great editor.

I dedicate the book to those male friends with whom I have played poker, sports, and music.

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Buddy System

Introduction

I was being interviewed about parenting by a local news anchor in his 30s and, during a commercial break, he asked about the topic of my next book. When I told him men's friendships, the first thing out of his mouth was "Men don't have friends."

I met a woman at a cocktail party. We were chatting, and I told her about the topic for this book. "That'll be a short book. Men don't have friends," she said.

Wait a minute. I have friends—Don't I?

The knee-jerk refrain "Men don't have friends" often left me wondering. Why do so many people say that men don't have friends? Does it come down to how one defines "friends," or is it something more?

Must, Trust, Rust, and Just Friends

Mulling an authoritative definition of *friends*, I thought about my bi-weekly card game. I have been playing poker with roughly the same group of guys for more than 40 years. It's not the hope of winning the World Series of Poker or the pitifully low table stakes that pulls us back to the game every other week—it's mostly the camaraderie. Does that mean we are friends, or is it just a shared excuse to get out of the house?

I thought about my relationships with these poker buddies. Certainly, we have a fair amount in common. Everyone in the game is or has been married. Almost all of us have children. We are all men, within 10 years of each other in age and educated, successful, professionals. However, despite our many similarities, my relationship with each player differs.

For instance, one player is my brother Steve, who is three years older than I am, a computer programmer, and the game's bookkeeper. Certainly, we

have the most in common and, after my wife, he's the first person whose counsel I seek when I face a tough problem. Does that make us friends or family or something in between?

Then there's Pub, a former publisher, 58 years old, whom I have known since we were assigned to the same first-grade Sunday school class. Now retired, Pub spends his time volunteering on community boards. Although he might not be the first guy I'd call to hash out a personal problem, I know that I can tell him something in confidence, and he would keep it between us. That ought to qualify as a friend in anyone's book.

And Crow? I've known Crow, an antitrust lawyer, since we were eight. We grew up in the same neighborhood, played sports together. We share many touchstones of a childhood lived out side-by-side. Our poker game is the better for his witty asides that keep the play from becoming too contentious. If I ever want to reminisce about old times or know what is happening in politics, he's the one I can call. Wouldn't he be a friend?

What about Mike? I've known him a comparatively short time. Brought into the game by another player just two years ago, he may be the most dedicated of the players. He's the only one of us who goes to Atlantic City to compete in Texas Hold'em tournaments. Accordingly, he keeps his cards close to the chest, literally and figuratively. Although I don't know him very well, I enjoy spending time with him at the games. Shouldn't I count him as a friend?

The simple answer is, of course, Mike is a friend. My brother, Pub, and Crow are friends, too, as are the other players, Charles, Robert, Alan, and Richard. But they are different kinds of friends. Just looking around the poker table tells me that friendships vary in type and intensity. Reasonably, that means there must be different definitions for friendship. Using the card game as a template, I can see four categories of friendship, each with its own definition: *must* friendships, *trust* friendships, *rust* friendships, and *just* friendships.¹

A *must* friend is a best buddy, a member of the inner circle, the closest of relationships. If something happens (birth, death, a hole in one, winning the lottery), these are the men I am most close to and whom I *must* call. These are the men I can count on when the chips—poker and otherwise—are down. If I have a personal crisis, I talk to my wife first, then I call my brother. I can count on Steve to listen well and offer a perspective I haven't considered, which often brings me to a solution I might have missed. No matter how personal the issue, Steve won't gossip about our discussion. Without *must* friends like my brother, life is less fulfilling and, in many ways, less fun.

Trust friends are people who, in their interactions with me, demonstrate a level of integrity that allows me to feel comfortable talking with them, but I would not seek them out as a *must* friend. They will keep a confidence, and they will give me feedback that makes me feel understood when I talk with them. I might not consider them in my closest circle of friends, although I like and enjoy them. I might want to develop a closer friendship with them but have never had the opportunity or time. Although I usually see Pub only at our games, if I do run into him, and the context is right, I trust him enough to feel comfortable talking with him about a personal problem.

Then there are *rust* friends—people (like Crow) I have known for a long, long time. My elementary school friends could be *rust* friends. We know each other because of our history together and, when I see them, I may fall back into old patterns formed when I was 10 years old. A *rust* friend may or may not be especially close (note that many *must* friends are also *rust* friends) but exists because of the length of time I have known him. These friendships are locked like rust to iron over time. A *rust* friend is closer than a *just* friend whom I recently met, but nothing incandescent exists about the relationship except its length (Crow's case is an exception, but I'll get to that). My *rust* friends are unlikely to change into a higher level of friendship—I have known them for years and have already assessed their potential—unless we find some new way of interacting. It is even possible to have a *rust* friend who is not well-liked; the kind of friendship that leads others to ask, "Why hang around with that guy?" The answer, with a shrug, might be, "I've known him a long time."

The men in our poker game are naturally closer to some players than others—we are not all *must* or *trust* friends. A few of us have no urge to socialize outside of the poker game, although we all like each other. Our getting along serves the purpose of filling the card table. These friendships I call *just* friends because these people are, in fact, just friends. They are a little closer than acquaintances and are pleasant to be with, but we don't expect to socialize outside of our poker game. Just like guys who get together out of an interest in basketball, golf, or stamp collecting but gather only for sports- or hobby-related contact. I'd count Mike as a *just* friend. Enjoyable company, but I haven't known him long enough for him to be a *rust*, or well enough for him to be a *must* or *trust* friend—although, as the newest acquaintance, he is the most likely to change friendship status over time.

These categories—or Buddy System—aren't strict pigeon holes; plenty of overlap exists. For instance, I cited Crow as a *rust* friend, and he is,

by dint of our long association. But he is also a *must* friend. Not only did we learn to play tennis together as children, we still share that interest and have attended the U.S. Open tennis tournament together annually for more than 35 years. Even more complex is my relationship with my brother. He's a *must* friend, a *trust* friend, and one who can't get more *rust*.

It's even a little more complicated, because a level of friendship with a particular person can differ depending on the social settings. For instance, one player in our game is my accountant. I trust him with my financial matters, so that is a trust relationship when it comes to business, but the social relationship could still be *must* or *rust*.

Another complicating factor in understanding friendships is that people make friends in different ways and within varying timeframes. Some men say that a buddy has to become a *rust* friend (be a friend for a few years) before he can become a *must* friend. Others say they can make a *must* friend in a much shorter period of time. Sometimes friendships are a matter of circumstance. People who move into a new neighborhood at the same time often become *must* friends quickly because they are eager to develop a social circle. Freshmen roommates in college are another example. Soldiers often immediately become *must* or *trust* buddies due to the intensity of the shared experience and because their lives may depend on it. Whether these kinds of friendships survive after someone moves out of the neighborhood, graduates from college, or completes military service remains to be seen. A less dramatic example is my mother, who at my daughter's wedding gravitated to the other 80-plus-year-olds because of their common age. That relationship might only last a short time; still, it could be a *just* friendship for the duration of the reception, but offer the possibility of meeting again at future family events.

But, back at the poker table, after 40-plus years of card games together, one might imagine that there is no topic we can't discuss openly as we deal the hands. Well, not really. We're guys. We don't talk a great deal about feelings, personal relationships, and our vulnerabilities unless it is in a self-deprecating, joking way.

This a principal difference between the way men see friendships and women see friendships. It may be why so many women insist that men don't have friends, because men don't have friendships in the way women define friendships. Guys get together and have shoulder-to-shoulder relationships—we do things together, as compared with women, who are more apt to have face-to-face relationships. At the poker table, personal news is shared, but not with the expectation of a long support session.

Someone might say he didn't get a job he was hoping for, and the response might be something like, "Wow, that's a tough break. Deal you in this hand?" Deeply personal topics are reserved for discussions with *must* friends, not for table talk.

Although assessing my card game helps me clarify my friendships, much more information is needed to help other men clarify theirs. Hearing from other men is one way to do this.

Friendship Study

This book is about friendships between men. It is designed to help men better understand how to function in their friendships and how to think about them in new ways, so that they can be improved if necessary. Many men have close male friends and derive a great deal from those relationships. But another large segment of men do not feel they have enough close friends, cannot easily identify who their close friends are, and believe that friendships between men in particular are rare. I believe that, because of how we are socialized, raised, nurtured (call it what you will), men miss opportunities to understand, appreciate, and build new or existing relationships. Our friendships are sometimes left undeveloped.

What is a great friendship? For me the answer is "Let me sit and watch TV and not talk with my friend about anything other than the game. But, let me also know that if I need to talk to him about something bothering me, I can." Many men believe they do not have these or similar options in their friendships. By providing a road map about friendships in this book, I hope that men will be able to have the friendships they want.

Study Group

The intention of this book is to improve male friendships. The book is based on almost 400 interviews with a diverse group of men who were asked about their friendships. To learn about men's friendships with other men, we constructed a questionnaire that had both open- and closed-ended items—meaning it had questions that could be answered at some length with a description or a story, or could be answered briefly with a yes or no. Over the course of two years, 39 graduate social work students interviewed 10 men each, using the questionnaire. They analyzed the responses individually in a lengthy paper and also spent time as a class presenting their

findings and debating the meaning of their interviews. More recently, 12 students interviewed 10 to 11 women each using the same questions, with the terms amended to be applicable to women (the results of these interviews provide an interesting counterpoint in Chapter 6). This approach resulted in 386 useable interviews with men and 122 interviews with women.²

The men who were interviewed are diverse in terms of age, race, religion, occupation, and relationship status. Two-thirds of the men are white, 29% are African-American, and the rest were evenly divided among Latino/Hispanic, Asian, and Arab.³ The men ranged in age from 21 to 85 and had an average age of 38. Most were Christian/Protestant, with the remainder being Jewish, Muslim, or without religious affiliation. Sixty-seven percent were married, and 2% identified themselves as gay, although the actual number might be higher if a respondent concealed his sexual orientation.

Fifteen percent had no more than a high school education, with a few finishing only eighth grade.⁴ Seventeen percent had at least some college education, 34% had completed college, and 34% had at least some or had completed graduate education. As far as employment is concerned, 21% were professionals and 44% worked in sales, business, or other non-professional white-collar jobs. Twenty-two percent were blue-collar workers, and the remaining men were either unemployed, students, or retired. Slightly more than half the sample grew up outside of Maryland and slightly over half said they were raised in an urban environment. The women, described in depth in Part II, are similar to the men in terms of age and race.

The interviewers were also highly diverse. Slightly more than half are white, over one-third are African-American, and the remainder are Latina. Five out of six are female, and the interviewers ranged in age from their 20s to their 50s.

The input from these more than 50 students, both verbally and in writing, has been extraordinarily helpful to me in formulating my thinking on this topic. We debated ideas about the meaning of friendships for hours, and we looked for similarities and differences between and among the men (and women) concerning how race and sexual orientation shape friendships. This process led to the formulation of the *must*, *trust*, *rust*, and *just* categories of friendships—what I came to call the Buddy System.

I have also interviewed other men and women over the years, which brings the total to about 400 formal and informal interviews of men and

more than 130 interviews of women. Some of these interviews have been infused into the chapters. I also specifically sought out men in each of the decades of life for more extensive interviews. These conversations, recounted in separate chapters in Part III of the book, are meant to provide an in-depth look at the nature of male friendships across the lifespan.

Finally, I interviewed a group of men who attend a Saturday morning men's group at a local church. Their pastor had heard me lecture on my research and invited me to talk with this group about the findings. Their stories provide an additional dimension to the project. I also provide in Chapter 16 specific suggestions for men as to how they can improve their friendships. These suggestions are based on the responses from the study as well as my own ideas. Please see Appendix A for more information about the study methodology and Appendix B for questions that can be used informally with groups of men as well as in the classroom setting to guide discussion.

Study Questions

The questions we asked the men, answered in the following pages in their own words, include:

1. What is a friendship—what does a friend mean to you? With this question, we set the scene for the interview. We found a good deal of consistency in what constituted a friendship. Readers can build better friendships by understanding how other men think about them.
2. Are friendships important to you? We did not want to assume that all men necessarily thought friendships were needed. Although the vast majority did think them important, there were some interesting comments from those who did not value them as much.
3. Do you believe you have enough male friends? Most do believe they have enough friends but that belief often depends on their expectations about the number of friends they have time for, given the competing pulls of family and work.
4. How have friends helped you (are they a source of social support)? How have you helped friends? Friendships are thought of differently, from the concrete help men receive from one another to the personal availability a friend may provide. Most often, the way a man was helped was the way he helped others. Here readers can learn more about the steps to making friends and about the expectations friends may have.