

SHORTCUTS TO INTIMACY

Have you ever had the experience of an elderly lady you had never met spilling out her life story to you at a bus stop? In the process, you learn that she has been widowed, and her children do not visit as often as she would like. You realise that the old lady is lonely, and that the conversation filled some kind of void. You sigh, and feel pity that she had to bare her soul in order to receive a few moments of human companionship.

But perhaps some of us have had similar experiences. I remember one holiday, when another couple and my wife were drawn together because we were the only ones there of similar age and background. There was little to do, so conversations started, and quickly became quite personal.

By the end of the weekend, we knew about each other's roots, family foibles, children's names, ages, milestones, and problems. We learned about each other's occupations, bosses, breakfast foods, food allergies, wine preferences, sleeping problems and tension managements.

At the end of the weekend, we exchanged addresses, and decided that we must "keep in touch". That was the last contact with them. We did not feel like ringing them, and the feeling was obviously reciprocated.

Another example: You get on well with a couple you meet at a party. This time it does go further, as you invite them to your home, and they come. You really click. In no time you find that each member of the foursome shares his or her life history, complete with information about each other's mothers and what bitches they were, and how they mishandled their children, with what awful consequences. Later you whisper about your own children; even your therapists.

This time surely, with so much seemingly in common, a relationship will develop. You meet again, but you go over the same ground. You decide to meet again, but like with the weekend couple, nothing further happens.

Why? Why is it that all these shared intimacies lead nowhere, and certainly to no close friendships?

It is like rapid sexual encounters. Ultimate intimacy should lead somewhere, but it does not. Why?

In other situations the opposite happens. You hear of fire fighters, police, rescuers, who put their lives on the line. Eternal friendships may develop from such encounters. Soldiers, previously unknown to each other, are thrown together. They may even dislike each other at first, but after training and shared encounters, they become comrades. They say they have become like brothers, a love others would not understand.

A man once told me about his 'family' – over a hundred 'boys', as he called them, who were deported from England into a particular orphanage. Scattered over the country, they maintained close bonds, visited each other, reminisced, and helped each other.

Yet one does not need shared war, traumas and adversities as melting pots for friendships. Bonds can develop among people from the same place sharing foreign environments. Children who shared the throes of adolescence grow up as long term friends. Couples who shared adventures, yearnings and joys become bonded for life.

So what is the difference between shared intimacies that develop into lasting friendships, and those that do not?

First, enduring intimacy has nothing to do with being deservedness. The old lady and the desperate sex provider both deserved friends.

It has to do with the amount people put in for others. If a fire fighter puts his life on the line for another, the magnitude of the gift and reciprocal gratitude establish a strong immediate bond. Soldiers at close quarters also give intensely to each other. The same happens in smaller intensities that aggregate over time in other situations where friendships develop.

On the other hand, the lady with the lonely tale, the casual sex provider, the couples who share their smouldering rage for their mothers- they all masquerade as givers, but ultimately they desperately want solutions and comforting for themselves.

Spontaneous generosity, with the other as the focus of one's concern, is the key to the beginnings of real friendships, and love that is tested in experience leads to mutual bonds. This goes beyond empathy, and sharing private stories. It involves giving oneself for the other.

There are no shortcuts to intimacy or friendships. The forging of bonds requires an empathic and altruistic interchange between vulnerable souls.