

On Befriending and Educating

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A few years ago Mary Belenky, Lynne Bond, and Jacqueline Weinstock published a book entitled *A Tradition that Has No Name*. What they had found and studied was a longstanding tradition of black women's leadership with ancient roots in African tribal societies, "organized around democratic/consensus-building processes," "dedicated to drawing out the voices of the silenced," and "always working to lift up the whole community."¹ First introduced to this "notion of a tradition that has no name" by Barbara Omolade, an African American educator and writer, the authors discovered that other informants agreed with Omolade; there was this tradition and it had no other name in everyday usage. Describing their research, the authors write: "Because this tradition has no name it is difficult to realize that it is actually quite common. Once we begin thinking of [it]...we found ourselves spotting new examples with surprising frequency."²

I had a similar experience reading Susan Laird's essay on "A Concept of Befriending Girls." I found myself "spotting new examples" of befriending girls "with surprising frequency." Laird directs our attention to another set of deliberate, dedicated practices which also appear to have no name. She tells us: "Although those who have made a habit of this practice with educative intent are likely to have done so thoughtfully, I have yet to find a name for it." Laird, therefore, bestows the name "befriending girls" and then embarks "upon theorizing it" from the avowed perspective of an advocate.

I appreciate Laird's call to acknowledge and value the practice of befriending girls. In fact, now that Laird's naming and describing have made it visible, I realize how much I myself have benefited as a recipient. What I want to inquire into here has to do with how to understand the conjunction between befriending and educating.

One key point which makes Laird's thesis generative, thought-provoking, and also controversial, is her explicit conjunction of befriending and educating. Laird says befriending girls is to be an "educational life-practice." One engages in this befriending "with educative intent." Laird achieves this conjunction partly through a number of conceptual moves. One move is to stipulate from the outset that her concept of education is a broad one which encompasses a wide range of educational agencies and activities outside the confines of institutional schooling. Laird is neither romantic nor naive about the potential for miseducative experiences within these more informal settings and relationships. Indeed, she outlines a close to exhaustive list of the miseducative variations that can occur. Another key move comes in her choice of the term "befriend" to mark this practice. For Laird, "befriending" is not only compatible with "educative intent," it may even be crucial to its success.

Laird's alliance between befriending and educating runs counter to one prevalent strand of beliefs about teaching which considers friendship and education to be

separate, incompatible domains. For example, the twentieth-century British philosopher of education, R.S. Peters was a consistent spokesman for this view. Here is one of his summaries:

What seems to me distinctive of a personal relationship is that a response is made to another individual just as a human being—not as an occupant of a role, not as a sharer in a common quest, including that of learning....Not even as another moral being....if [personal relationships] are entered into by the teacher because he sees them as facilitating learning they surely cease to be proper personal relationships.³

In other words, for Peters, either friendship trumps educative intent or else educative intent trumps friendship. We cannot have it both ways.

With friends, we expect no overriding intention beyond the friendship itself. With education, however, we believe a teacher ought to have an educative intent, as Laird herself says. Can we defy the dichotomy articulated by Peters and have it both ways? But, before we leap to unwarranted conclusions or attempt to jettison purported dichotomies, let us recall that Laird herself does not advocate friendship. She does *not* say “to be a friend.” She deliberately chooses a new term: “to befriend.” The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines “befriend” as “to act as a friend, to help, to favor, and further.” This definition seems compatible with most conceptions of education.

Doubts might still arise, however, from an insistent pesky question: Can we, in one and the same relation, both “act as a friend” and also “have educative intent?” Why do these two endeavors feel in tension, if not in conflict, with each other? I suggest that the sense of tension reflects different presuppositions about the presence or absence of evaluative judgments. In education, one expects to make evaluative judgments. An educator attends to the direction an experience seems to be taking and assesses the likelihood of educative or miseducative outcomes. In contrast, to make evaluative judgments about one’s friend seems antithetical to friendship. Marilyn Friedman summarizes this point along lines similar to R.S. Peters when she writes:

One’s behavior toward the friend takes its appropriateness, at least in part, from her goals and aspirations, her needs, her character—all of which one feels *prima facie* invited to acknowledge as worthwhile just because they are hers. None of these responses (necessarily) accords with one’s moral rules, values, or principles....Affection need not involve any judgmental or evaluative component.⁴

Although Laird’s essay does not discuss this particular question, she does address closely related issues. For instance, Laird says that while we cannot be indifferent to the “educational achievement” of girls whom we befriend, we can “still fail.” This risk of failure persists in part because “there can be no befriending girls educatively without girls’ freedom to pick their own friends, make mistakes, and learn from them.” On one reading, this passage seems to imply that in order to maintain Laird’s practice of befriending girls, the befriender must occasionally suspend educative intent. This would make befriending primary and educating secondary on those occasions when they appear headed for a collision course.

Another alternative would be to revisit our conceptions of what it means both to be a good teacher and to be a true friend. Let us look at one more set of descriptions,

this time from A.H. Almaas. When he discusses the same point we encountered earlier in Peters and Friedman, Almaas says:

The friend is someone you can trust. And why do you trust the friend? You trust the friend because the friend has no opinions about you, has no prejudices about you, has no judgments or criticisms about you. The friend sees you the way you are, all the good and the bad, and only loves you, regardless of how you are.⁵

Almaas does not end there, however; he continues:

When you're screwing up, the friend becomes firm...doesn't judge you for it, and will just tell you you're being a screwball. He [or she] waits for the time when you will listen. He [or she] waits for the right moment for you to see...what's required—strength, support, clarity, or kindness and love, and helps you see those parts of yourself that you need in the situation...Friendship has to do with understanding and truth.⁶

Almaas then asserts the antithesis to our earlier citation from R.S. Peters:

A real teacher is a true friend....We think a teacher sits there and tells us how things are, what we should do. But that is not what a real teacher does and not what a true friend does....A friend guides you so that you yourself can see how things are. That is a real teacher.⁷

Almaas's conceptual alignment between "real teachers and real friends" seems to resemble Laird's conjunction between befriending and educative intent. Both ask us to separate our insights about a situation from the propensity to judge or criticize the persons involved, while maintaining our commitment and concern to support their flourishing.

In closing, I return to *The Shorter Oxford*. As a corollary to its definition for "befriend" it sends us to subsection number two under the prefix "Be-," where we read: "with sense of thoroughly, soundly, conspicuously, to excess, ridiculously." In keeping with the spirit and largess of these adverbs, I believe Laird does indeed want befriending girls to become conspicuous, to be undertaken as a thorough and sound practice, done to excess, and even ridiculously, if this can help girls "learn to love, survive, and thrive despite their difficulties."

1. Mary Field Belenky, Lynne A. Bond, and Jacqueline S. Weinstock, *A Tradition that Has No Name* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 11-13.

2. *Ibid.*, 12-15.

3. R.S. Peters, *Psychology and Ethical Development* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1974), 223.

4. Marilyn Friedman, *What Are Friends For?* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 191-93.

5. A.H. Almaas, *Diamond Heart Book Two: The Freedom To Be* (Berkeley: Diamond Books, 1987), 183.

6. *Ibid.*, 183-84.

7. *Ibid.*, 184.