

How To Stop Sexualizing Everything

Our society needs a phileo resurgence so we can express ourselves with the nonsexual passion and love we really feel.

“Bye, I love you!” I said as I hung up the phone. My 15-year-old daughter was in the car at the time and asked who I was talking to. “My friend, Leslie, from Texas.”

“A woman?” she said. “That’s just weird, mom.”

I laughed. “No it’s not. She’s my friend and I do love her very much. Why shouldn’t I tell her that?”

My daughter just shook her head and said, “It’s kinda gay, don’t you think?”

“No, it’s not gay. I have friends I kiss, too—on the lips! And I hug them and I get excited when I see them. I adore them, and I’m devoted to them. I have friends who captivate me with their beauty and intelligence. I tell them so. I tell them I think they’re beautiful and amazing. It’s nothing sexual. It’s phileo.”

“What’s phileo?” she asked.

“It’s friendship love,” I explained. “It’s passionate, but not like erotic love. It’s wonderful and stimulating. It’s probably the best kind of love when you really experience it, but so few of us do.”

She shook her head again. “Mom, you’re weird.”

I guess I am kind of weird. I confess: I’m very passionate about my friends. But am I the abnormal one, or is there something wrong with our society? My daughter isn’t unusual, and her response was pretty typical. Many people have that reaction to women who are passionate about their friends—and even more so for men!

‘Bromance’ Needs to Go So Friendship Can Survive

Just this morning I was watching Fox NFL Sunday, and Terry Bradshaw was talking about how he was excited by Howie Long the first time he saw him play. The eruption of

uncomfortable laughter was expected. But he kept on, saying how Long “took his breath away”—which incited even more snickers.

While I grinned, having seen this same scenario played out over and over again, I was also saddened, because I saw it as just one more knock on a kind of love we desperately need in our lives—passionate, nonsexual love. But we’re so uncomfortable with the expression of intimate, familiar feelings among men that we’ve given it its own name—bromance. David and Jonathan. Lewis and Clark. Clooney and Pitt. Bromances. Not friendships.

I wish “bromance” would disappear from the American lexicon forever. That’s because it represents everything that’s wrong with our culture when it comes to friendship.

Instead of friendship being noble, nonromantic, and normal, it has become the exception, romanticized to the point that we’re uncomfortable describing it and experiencing it for what it is. Even as we try to distinguish it from homosexuality, we are corrupting real friendship by placing it in the context of romance.

In his famous book, “The Four Loves,” published in 1960, C.S. Lewis talked about this very thing. Friendship is a love that is rationally and freely chosen as you gravitate toward people who share the same interests and passions as you. It’s not a relationship that arises out of organic connections, such as mutual affection in families and communities, or the driving need of erotic love that sweeps you away by the impulses of nature. It’s a choice made between people who have shared interests that lead to common bonds and deep love. It’s a powerful love that enriches people’s lives and forms the foundation of a stable society.

How Romanticism and Puritanism Corrupts Friendship

The problem with our modern culture is friendship has been corrupted. Lewis says it began with the age of sentimentality and romanticism. Friendship love, with its blend of individuality and community, rationality and freedom of choice, as well as its deep intimacy, raises us “to the level of gods or angels.” But then came romanticism with its return to nature and exaltation of sentiment, instinct, and the “dark gods in the blood.”

Instead of friendship being noble, nonromantic, and normal, it has become the exception, romanticized to the point that we’re uncomfortable describing and experiencing it.

This tight control on feelings seeped into our culture, worsened by Victorian aloofness.

“Under this new dispensation,” Lewis writes, “all that had once commended this love [friendship] now began to work against it.” A culture riding the wave of passion abandoned phileo for eros, and the effects on society have been devastating in ways people don’t begin to understand.

While Lewis puts the blame of phileo’s decline at the feet of romanticism, I think there is another culprit. Puritanism and Victorian sensibilities have also played a role in friendship’s decline. Puritanism put a damper on passions as if they are the seat of evil within the soul. Passionate friendships between opposite sexes weren’t allowed as women were shuffled into the kitchen while the men discussed business among themselves in the study. Showing feeling—especially in a physical way—even in same-sex friendships was discouraged, and while the Puritans were hardly stoic, they guarded against passion outside of marriage and the expression of too much “worldly” feeling.

This tight control on feelings seeped into our culture, worsened by Victorian aloofness. We became a society that shook hands instead of kissed. Posture, decorum, and propriety put space even in the most intimate associations. The picture of the separate beds was typical in the 1950s with Ward and June Cleaver, Rob and Laura Petrie, and Jim and Margaret Anderson. It wasn’t until 1969 with the Bradys did we see TV couples snuggling up to one another in the marriage bed.

This embellished modesty continued to play a role in American culture even into the new millennium. But something else was also taking place—the sexual revolution, a romanticized reaction to America’s Puritanical attitudes. Everything became about sex, and this sexualization of our culture has become more intense over time. Just look at advertising. Teeth whitening, floor cleaners, automobiles, dolls, food, drinks, make-up, even bubble gum—all associated with sex. Common things that are completely asexual have sexuality attached to it. Everything is about sex. We’re saturated with it.

The effect of these two warring attitudes—Puritanism and sexualization—has had a distorting effect on friendship.

The effect of these two warring attitudes—Puritanism and sexualization—has had a distorting effect on friendship. On the one hand, people don’t feel free to show emotions. On the other, when they do, those feelings are sexualized.

Meet Steve and Paul

Let me illustrate this point with two men—let’s call them Steve and Paul—who are both very expressive in their feelings. This is an important distinction because it’s no accident that the top personality types by a large margin for people who identify as homosexual are “feeling types” —**INFP** and **INFJ** for women, and **ESFJ** and **ENFJ** for men.

They don’t feel comfortable expressing those feelings because the specter of Puritan modesty restrains them.

Steve and Paul—two highly extroverted-feeling men—meet one another and they have an immediate connection and common interests. The effect of a Puritanical attitude still pervasive in our culture says “Don’t show affection, be controlled with your feelings.” But that’s not who they are. They’re passionate. They feel deeply and need to express those feelings. They love their friends; the feelings are all there on the surface. But they don’t feel comfortable

expressing those feelings because the specter of Puritan modesty restrains them.

Maybe, if they lived in times past, when men had places where they could really connect as men, they could express themselves in some way. But that’s not the case in modern culture with fluid interaction between the sexes and lack of “man-only space.” So what do they do with their feelings now? Suppress them or show them?

One would hope they can simply show them, but because of the impact of sexualization, they interpret that expression in a sexual way. As a result, the two men either don’t want to be thought of as gay (because they’re not, not because they necessarily think homosexuality is wrong), and they withdraw. Or, they begin to doubt and wonder, *Am I gay?*

“I get excited when I’m with Paul,” Steve says to himself. “He puts a spring in my step just talking to him. I’m stimulated by his intellect and insight. He makes me feel more alive after talking to him than I did before. Those feelings are so strong they must be sexual. I must be gay.” Paul feels the same. But they’re not gay at all. They don’t want to have sex with each other. They’re simply men who feel and express deep passions and feelings, and they want to connect with someone with common interests.

They don’t want to have sex with each other. They’re simply men who feel and express deep passions and feelings.

When this scenario happens to young people, it can cause a great deal of confusion, especially as society at large (particularly in the schools and pop culture) pushes people toward homosexual relationships. Instead of teaching children what it means to be a friend and modeling real friendships in a healthy way, we are defining everything in sexual terms.

Stimulating Confusion Over Sexuality

The more friendship is misunderstood and ignored, the more people will identify as homosexual and bisexual. The more we condition our perceptions in a sexual way and the more children are exposed to sex even before they develop meaningful friendships, the less likely they will be able to separate healthy nonsexual feelings from sexual ones. Sex will become the defining feature of all their feelings. Eros will have slain phileo.

Many people confuse phileo with eros because either they aren't free to express it or they see it through an overlay of sexualization (or both).

Gallup issued a poll a few years ago that found an increase in homosexuality. More and more people are identifying as gay, and this isn't just because they're coming out of the closet. If that were the case, older people would be identifying as gay at an increasing rate. But this isn't what's happening. The increases are among younger people more affected by a sexualized culture coupled with an acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle.

My point is not to say there are no genuine homosexual relationships. There are. But I do think many people confuse phileo with eros because either they aren't free to express it or they see it through an overlay of sexualization (or both). I think the fact that most people who think they're homosexual and bisexual are high on the "feeling" personality scale by overwhelming margins gives some support to this.

I'm certainly a case in point. I'm an INFP (introverted, intuitive, feeling, perceiving). The number of lesbians with this personality type is much higher than any other (though it's not the only type by any means). I feel passionate about people, my friends in particular. Men or women, I love them in a very intimate way. They make my heart pound, my cheeks flush, and my face glow.

Though I'm an introvert, I need people to fill me up—just in a more quiet way. My best friend, Kate, for example, delights me just by being in her presence. I can talk to her for hours and I leave happier than before I saw her. I love to wrap my arms around her and feel her warmth. I have another friend who is a constant source of joy, and every time I see her name in my email inbox, I smile. Whenever I go to DC where she lives, I get excited at the possibility of seeing her, hearing her voice, and watching her expressive brown eyes light up when she laughs.

I'm 100 percent straight and so confident in that fact that I can kiss my female friends and tell them I love them.

Does that sound gay? Probably some of you think so. But I'm not gay. I'm 100 percent straight and so confident in that fact that I can kiss my female friends and tell them I love them. I can get excited about male friends without it becoming erotic. But I've had to develop that confidence in the face of a culture that both disapproves of such expressions and defines them in a sexualized context.

Strong Feelings Aren't Always About Sex

I'm afraid young people today don't have such clarity. If they're the type of person who emotes deeply and passionately, either internally or externally, then they might question their sexuality when experiencing phileo. The INFP girl feels intimate with her friend in a way that makes her heart race, and she thinks it must be sexual, even if she doesn't immediately feel erotic toward her friend. The ENFJ man who needs to express his emotions with others and feel deep connections confuses his passion for friends with erotic feelings.

Friendship is the greatest guard against a tyrannical society that wants to divide individuals and control them.

The result of this distortion is either a rejection of phileo—they fail to engage in meaningful friendships, choosing to remain shallow and disconnected—or they sacrifice phileo on the altar of eros, engaging in sexual behavior that really isn't an expression of their true selves. If they're truly gay, that erotic expression would be a relief, but for so many it isn't. It's a time of confusion and struggle (and not simply

because of society's disapproval). That confusion happens because there's a disconnect within them, a disconnect that could be fixed if they had the freedom to enjoy the deep

intimacy of love between friends, fully expressed and fully appreciated in a nonsexual, but stimulating way.

I think one of the greatest dangers of our sexualized culture has nothing to do with typical morality about sex as we understand it. It has to do with the deterioration of true, deep friendships. Friendship is the greatest guard against a tyrannical society that wants to divide individuals and control them. Friendship fosters healthy communities and promotes mutual affection, which brings about the greatest good for a society.

Friendship makes people happy and actually strengthens marriages. The rise of polyamory is one example relating to this final point. One of the biggest arguments for polyamory (many sexual partners in a relationship) is that one person isn't enough. "I need more than just my husband," one polyamorist told me.

I agree! Nothing (besides being completely alone) is more unfulfilling than to have no friends and just be with one person your whole life. That person simply can't meet all your emotional needs (especially if you're a deep-feeling personality). You need more people. But what you need are friends—real, loving friends—not more sexual relationships.

Vive la Difference

Polyamory is a glaring example of how phileo is being lost to eros in our modern age. It's devastating, because eros is not the same as phileo. It's not as stable. It's explosive and full of dark urges and needs. It's a throaty passion that can end badly and lead to tragedy.

Phileo is cooler (though still passionate). It's rational and inclusive. If anyone dies on account of phileo, it's not a tragedy of passion like Romeo and Juliet. It's like Achilles and Patroclus, who took Achilles' place in battle and was struck down by Hector. In grief for his lost friend, Achilles entered the fray and killed so many that their corpses clogged the river. Some have tried to impose homosexual love onto this story, but there's no proof of that, and why should there be? Nonsexual love can be powerful—and beautiful.

The beauty of friendship, as opposed to erotic relationships, is that we can have many as we connect and love without jealousy and suspicion.

Our society needs a phileo resurgence, to discard the sexualized overlay on our relationships and express ourselves with the nonsexual passion and love we really feel. The reward is stability, wholeness, and a deep satisfaction as we connect with other people in an intimate way. The world is filled with amazing people of all different types. The beauty of friendship, as opposed to erotic relationships, is that we can have many as we connect and love without jealousy and suspicion.

C.S. Lewis said, "Friendship is born at that moment when one man says to another: What? You too, I thought no one but myself..." We've put that joy in the context of erotic attraction for far too long. Let's shift it toward phileo and allow ourselves to feel the excitement and passion that follows as we join together in the ideal bonds of friendship, free from the trappings and crazed fervor of sex. The reward will be profound as our hearts are filled, our minds are calmed, and our lives are enriched beyond our imagining.

Denise C. McAllister is a journalist based in Charlotte, North Carolina, and a senior contributor to The Federalist. Follow her on Twitter [@McAllisterDen](#).

Copyright © 2016 The Federalist, a wholly independent division of FDRLST Media, All Rights Reserved.

Related



Dear Gay Community: Your Kids Are Hurting
In "Parenting"



Find Last-Minute Christmas Gifts For The Women In Your Life
In "The Sexes"



John Kasich Is The Liberal Media's Darling
In "2016"
