



Men, friendship and intimacy

Jac Brown looks at the risks of real connection.

THE pursuer/distancer pattern is one that is all too familiar to most of us with both friends and lovers. It seems to be a part of the human condition: trying to get just the right amount of closeness and distance in our personal relationships but never quite managing to reach that goal. We think we want to get close to another and often just when the situation is right for a greater level of intimacy, we do things to create a greater distance and the pattern of yearning for that illusive intimacy recommences.

The men's festival often seems to fit this pattern as well. I am surprised by the intensity that I experience at the festival each year and then the limited contact that I have with the men I felt so close to during that week of magic. When we are so close at that stage, what happens to make the distance for the other fifty one weeks so acceptable? Where are all of these men who were available to each other? The men who told me I was special, the men who communicated their acceptance by throwing their arms around me in wonderful hugs of validation, and in gentle touches of caring. What are the barriers to more closeness between men that melt at a men's festival and are so easily erected again when the festival is over? It was pointed out to me that the festival and the intensity of the contact between us may be maintained because we know that it need only happen to us for one brief week. As long as a situation is defined in such a finite manner, it is relatively easy to become intensely involved for that period of time.

A lesson learnt

YET is it possible for men to get close to each other and to maintain this closeness?

I told my analyst that I needed close relationships where I could talk to men on a deep level. To which he replied, "Then why did you come to Australia?" He then asked me why I need close relationships, inferring that there was something wrong

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with even wanting this sort of connection with men. In spite of his questions and comments about my aberrations of wanting closer contact with men, the feelings have continued. Some time ago, I was talking to a close friend of many years. Our relationship was fine until he got married a few years ago. He tried hard to maintain our relationship at its previous intensity, but it was simply not possible, particularly when children arrived. He had very little time to devote to relationships outside the family. I noticed that our relationship was developing an unhealthy distance that would lead to a termination of the friendship if my past experiences were any indicator. I thought about past connections and how they had terminated—even the most intimate of relationships. To prevent this from happening, and to prevent a repetition of my previous pattern with close friends, I sat down and wrote him a letter (as we do not live in the same city) reviewing the nature of our relationship. I wrote

of the high points in our friendship, of the times that we felt close, and also of the

points of tension. I then stated that if he valued this relationship he would need to inject some energy into it as I was unprepared to keep the relationship going without his help. For me this was an important step, as in the past I had always assumed that the other person had not wanted the rela-

tionship to continue, without ever checking it out. I was pleasantly surprised by a new basis for the relationship emerging, as a letter arrived expressing his continued interest in maintaining our connection.

When I next visited him, there was a new level of contact, facilitated by our letters. Over the course of our conversations, I learnt that he was very frightened to express feelings to me in spite of our ten year relationship. At the time, I was surprised because he is a very sensitive, understanding man who was able to hug me and tell me how important I was to him. Yet when it came to initiating discussion of issues to significance between us, he became reluctant to do so. I had simply interpreted this as a lack of interest on his part.

Shortly after this revelation, I returned to his home an hour late. It was my last night in the city and we had planned to have our last talk that evening. He was speaking on the telephone making an insignificant call



that continued for thirty minutes after I arrived. It was getting late and time was running out, fast making our last talk impossible. I became very angry with him. When he finally finished his call, he began a casual conversation with me even though I had gone off to bed. After plucking up the courage, I told him how angry I was with his behaviour. He began to justify himself a way that made me feel unheard, increasing my anger. He felt unable to handle my anger, wanting to do something to compensate. I simply told him that I wanted him to listen rather than do anything. When he began to listen, my anger dissipated. He then shared his anger with me, relating a comment that I had made earlier in the day. I felt the need to justify, but remembered my insistence that he simply listen to my anger, and consequently as I listened, his anger also dissipated. We were finally at the point of being real with each other while at the same time being true to ourselves. The ensuing conversation was a very deep and important one for both of us.

A sense of self

I COMMONLY find that intimacy is some thing that I crave from other people and

rarely find. On the occasions where I have found it, it has often been only for short periods of time. An intimate relationship is one where I am able to grow because of a mutual experience of self disclosure and validation. Mutual self disclosure does not always simply involve the exchange of warm fuzzies where I tell another how

could become extremely superficial and trite. With my friend that I mentioned above, our real contact began once we risked being angry with each other. This is often less of a risk in reality than it is in our minds, which brings me to the second important aspect of intimate relationships: self validation.

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wonderful he is and he tells me how fabulous I am. While this may be pleasant for a short time, it becomes extremely superficial in the long run, negating even the possibility of a deep connection as the expectations of mutual adoration escalate over time. Maybe that is why the intensity at the men's festival often occurs only for one week. In the long run, that level of conversation, while initially pleasant,

Self validation really relates not only to feeling positively about ourselves, but also our ability to express this verbally and in the way we live. A test of self validation is how non-reactive we are to other people's views of us. When we are non-reactive, others are allowed to have their opinions and feelings, both positive and negative, and we do not necessarily feel responsible for changing something in ourselves so that their views of us will become more positive. By relying on ourselves rather than others for self worth, we take responsibility for ourselves in a new way. This position allows us to be more direct with other people and take greater risks in saying things that ➤



➤ might not be popular as we not are reliant on their validation for our sense of who we are. From the other person's point of view, if someone is self validating, it is easier for us to comfort them in a way that is congruent with our real feelings. We know that they are responsible enough for themselves that they do not want us to protect them by expressing only the positive sentiments. This position allows conflict to be resolved as it is not viewed as a personal attack. An obvious question here is: What if I am self validating and my friends are not? In that case, either they will learn very quickly to become self validating and the relationship will deepen, the relationship will terminate as the quality of it is changed so substantially that it is too uncomfortable to continue or both people will continue or move to a safer, more superficial relationship.

Many ideas on intimacy have emphasised mainly self disclosure. If we limit understanding of intimacy to self disclosure, then the concept of being non-judgmental becomes very important. I was judgmental when I told my friend that I was angry with him. Somehow we have elevated the importance of being non-judgmental in our intimate relationships and it has created a sense of safety where there is little risk taking at the expense of

boring and superficial sentiment. When we also accept the importance of self validation, we are able to be more authentic by "telling it like it is" and giving the other person the dignity of not protecting them from the truth. This creates a path for real intimacy.

One of the most difficult aspects of intimacy is the self disclosure that involves honestly reflecting on the nature of a relationship. This is the level that we as men

tion where we have lost our sense of self. The tendency is to regain control as soon as possible by pulling away from the other person. Yet, such a perceived loss of self may be a precursor for personal growth, resulting in a changed sense of self similar to the adolescent formation of identity. Again however, we do not readily go back to that period that is often marked with chaos in our lives. It is clear in this situation that relying upon oneself rather than

another for validation is a way of maintaining a strong sense of who we are as a way of dealing with tendencies towards diffusion in a close relationship, minimising this phenomenon and paving the way for real connection.

We can also look at fear of intimacy as the creation of a sense of personal responsibility for the

intensity that has developed. We may often feel that we have taken the relationship to a level that has created uninvited and unwelcome dependence and attachment. We may feel responsible for the feelings that the other person is experiencing and thus panic because of the deep attachment of the other. This type of dependency becomes another out-of-control experience, as we feel that we are responsible for placing a friend or acquaintance in this situation. When the friend's emotionally out of control there is no telling where it will lead and to what extent we will be blamed for this situation. There is a clear lack of any boundary in that one feels responsible for the emotions of another. Standing on one's own feet by accepting only responsibility for personal feelings and self disclosure that communicates this to the other person may be an important step in creating an authentic closeness, as this also gives others the dignity of being responsible for their own feelings.

Fear of intimacy also often arises at a moment of closeness that implies an ongoing mutual commitment between two people, coupled with a sense of responsibility about the commitment. Often my present moment of intimacy or closeness with a friend is not seen as a complete experience within itself, but as a precursor to future similar experiences. Consequently, an intimate moment may lose the potential of being enjoyed for itself, as it becomes a search for assurance of subsequent experiences. It is little wonder that an intimate exchange is frightening when we cannot enjoy it for what it is, but feel that the

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often find particularly difficult and frightening. In my experience, discussions at this level rapidly increase the closeness (and also the fear of this closeness) between two people, at least in the short term. If in fact this level of intimacy creates closeness and facilitates the intensity and meaningfulness of relationships, why is it so feared not only between men, but in all our relationships? What are the barriers to intimacy between men? While many feel that homophobia is a major barrier, I suspect that this is not the case. Heterosexual men often have this difficulty with women as do gay men when meeting other gay men. Women of course also have difficulties with intimacy.

The fear itself

FEAR of intimacy has been a widely accepted phenomenon to the extent that there is a discourse that has provided a level of inevitability and a set of reasons that maintain the fear itself and inhibit change. In reflecting upon this, it seems to me that this fear needs to be interpreted in terms of intimacy as it is defined through the concepts of self validation and self disclosure. Fear of intimacy is usually understood in a number of ways.

The fear is often explained as a reaction to the diffusion of boundaries between two people involved in an intimate interchange. There is a sense of losing one's self in another person. Part of this understanding involves losing control of oneself as two people meet at a level that functionally creates a new organism. We don't easily operate in an out-of-control situa-

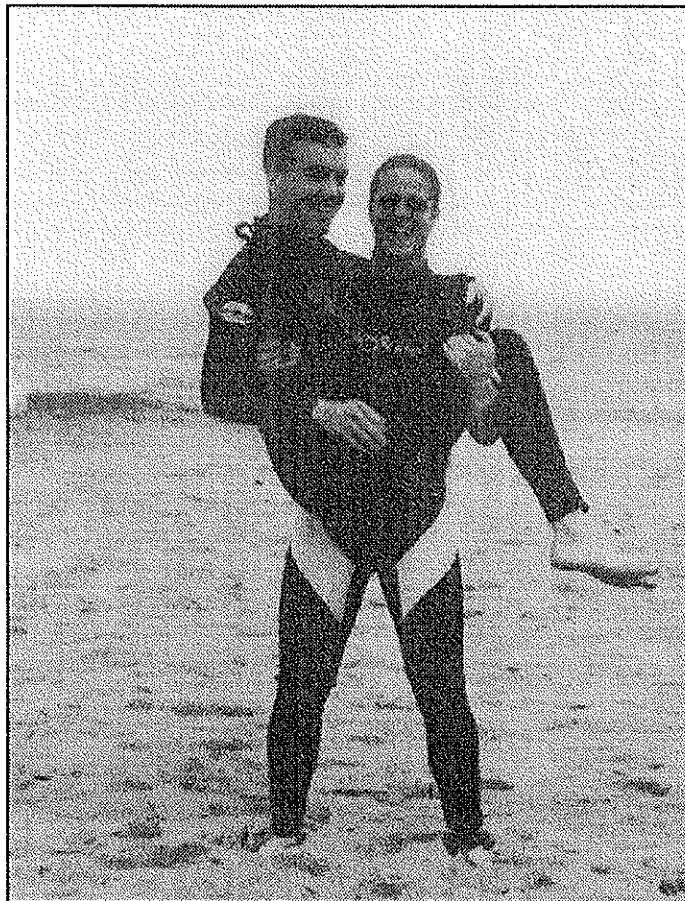
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moment can only be preserved by ensuring that it happens again and again. This of course kills the moment and makes the potential future moments impotent as they become occasions for living in the future. Here again, simply standing on one's own two feet and accepting responsibility for personal feelings rather than the feelings of the other person can allow one to savour the intimate moment, the sacrament of the moment, which may or may not occur again.

A further way of explaining fear of intimacy is to see it as a fear of change. It implies change to both people and we are rarely ready for such significant change. Meeting another person on a deep level often changes us, in spite of our attempts to remain the same by keeping our world comfortable and safe. Of course essentially, we cannot be the same person after any experience we have had. When there is a shared intensity, the potential for change is presented and that is frightening. This intensity is facilitated through authentic self disclosure, which ultimately relies on the ability to self validate. As we develop in our ability to self validate, change becomes a less important issue, increasing the potential for intimacy.

Finally, we can see fear of intimacy as a fear of rejection. We don't like to be

rejected and all of us have many experiences from the past where this has happened, whether it was a conscious rejection or through other means such as death. Rejection by a person we do not know very well has little impact on us.

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However, when we have been close to a friend, their rejection can have a big impact on our lives. Again, our ability to self validate minimises the impact of rejection. Rejection has the greatest impact when we rely on other people for validation. Self validation may thus be a way of allowing a greater level of intimacy as the risk of rejection becomes less important. Ultimately in any close relationship there will be the eventual separation by death even if there are no other reasons. Because it is a finite experience, intimacy will always have its pain and pleasure.

When we are afraid of getting close to another person or feel anxious about the closeness that has already occurred, we tend to take steps to alleviate our discom-

fort. We often compensate by behaving in the opposite way that originally seemed to create the closeness. We often do this by pulling away from the bewildered friend to try to be less reliant on them for our own sense of self, to feel more in control and to give the message that we need more space. Withdrawing can also be a way of protecting ourselves from the rejection that we feel might take place if we get too close. If we reject our friend first, then the impact of the rejection is less intense. The intimacy with which we are comfortable and all too easily embrace, creates a context where the above fears are validated and accepted as one of the things in life that cannot be changed. The fears are often realistic as the self disclosure that we settle for lacks authenticity in that we tend to protect the other person from our real feelings by filtering out the negative ones. In the same vein, we rely on others to validate us and provide us with a sense of who we are rather than taking responsibility for our own validation.

The message is simple yet profound. As we rely more on ourselves to tell us who we are, to validate ourselves and to take responsibility only for our own feelings instead of the feelings of others, we develop a greater sense of maturity. With that maturity, we are able to engage in authentic self disclosure that creates real connection with another. The paradox resulting from taking this position and acting on it is that as we become more separate, we become more available for real intimacy. The other side is that as we develop greater depth and intimacy, we risk pain and

loss. We can choose how much intimacy we want, but in choosing the delights of intimacy, we also get the pain of loss as it is a package deal. The risks are high, but so are the rewards—a challenge for each of us as men. ●

GIVE A MAN A GIFT

**WHY NOT GIVE GREAT
WRITING ON MEN TO YOUR
MATE, YOUR BROTHER, YOUR
SON, YOUR DAD? GIVE HIM A
GIFT SUBSCRIPTION TO XY.**