

# Spiritually, We

The Art of Relating and  
Connecting from the Heart

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# Introduction

The idea for this book—or, at least, the idea that it was necessary—first started bubbling up for me during the Pandemic. Does that seem too obvious, darling? A book about how critical friendship and community are not just to our physical and mental well-being but also (most importantly) to our spiritual vitality, made clear by the very absence of those things? Yeah, that was sort of how it went, but also? Not really.

I feel a little guilty writing this, but for me, those early days of uncertainty, social distancing, and quarantining brought into sharp relief how damn lucky I am. During the initial storm of the Pandemic, my friendships were shelter, the ultimate safe haven, as my friends and I formed our little bubbles and tried to navigate what the hell was happening to life as we had known it. Confined to close quarters and really faced with the quality of my connections, I could see more clearly than ever just how supportive, healing, nonjudgmental, and full of wild joy my friendships were, how sacred. How they held space for the ongoing work-of-art-in-process that each of us is. And definitely, that might not have come into quite such sharp focus otherwise.

But what was stranger to adjust to was my new *online* reality. For me, the Pandemic meant I had to very suddenly stop traveling. For years, my work—both professionally, as a teacher, and personally, as a student—had been taking me on a near nonstop crisscrossing of the country and the globe, with little rest in between. Now that I was stuck in one place, I had to find new ways of working and connecting with my teachers

and students. For the first time, I got deeply into social media and “creating content” (lord, I hate that phrase!). Don’t get me wrong. Before the Pandemic, I was in constant contact with other people—but it was largely IRL. I never had a ton of free time, and the last thing I wanted to do was spend what little I did have on my phone. Now here I was, filming myself dancing, making memes, DMing, double tapping, and Instagram stalking (I kid, I kid).

I would be lying if I said that at first I didn’t enjoy my new life as a very-online person. It was beyond cool reaching so many people I wouldn’t have otherwise, but . . . it was also fucking weird. Over a few months, I started to get more of a bird’s-eye view of pop-culture wellness and spirituality, and it wasn’t pretty. Okay, it *looked* sort of pretty, and at first I was seduced (I’m always gonna be that bitch, what can I say?): empowerment was the name of the game, and people were up here posting about their villain era, their rock-solid boundaries, the bridges they weren’t just burning but blowing up, and all the toxic people in their lives they were done with.

At the same time, I was getting a lot of DMs from folks saying they wished they had friends like me or that they wished I was their best friend. To be clear, they weren’t just saying they wished they had a queer, Brown, and fabulously sassy friend (who wouldn’t?) or even that they wished they had a close friend or more friends. No. These messages were pretty explicit about how they were on the spiritual path, or at least a therapeutic path, and now their friends just didn’t get them. They were so far “beyond” or “above” their hopelessly unenlightened friends, it was a megabummer.

It was about then that I started seriously contemplating writing this book. I applaud the work of getting right with yourself and seeking out other like-minded journeyers. But so many of these videos I was seeing and messages I was getting were operating in a binary world where people are either good or bad, worthy or unworthy, and anyone who fails to meet a standard of moral perfection—a standard that is an illusion—deserves to be tossed away. They had missed the part of personal growth and spirituality where we learn from others,

where we exhibit compassion, where you can't "do the work" if you're not working from a place of radical love, both for yourself and others. Healing and freedom aren't about suppressing pain, avoiding difficult people, and shutting out discomfort. And they definitely can't happen all by yourself. But so many people I encounter, online and IRL, seek out only information and relationships that affirm and uphold their personal values and belief systems, even though those systems often go unexamined and even if they are unbalanced or broken. They willingly forfeit relationships with others because it's easier than facing their own blind spots or stepping out of their comfort zones. They build fortresses around themselves that are just as hard to escape as they are to penetrate.

This navel-gazing "me-me-me" approach to healing is some twisted shit, honey. It's *in community* that we actualize the deepest parts of our healing. We all need people. The path to liberation—freedom from our conditioning, freedom from the delusion that we are separate, and freedom to rest in the present with a fresh mind and open heart—*must* be walked hand in hand. Doing the work between you and yourself—that is, your body, your mind, and your heart—is only half of the liberation equation. That's the journey we all know so well: we excavate the depths of our past, we identify and heal our traumas, we feel better. And that's where most of us stop, thinking the work is done. But it's not. The other half of the liberation equation requires doing the work between you and your people and between you and all people—that is, you and your relationships, you and your community, you and every stranger you encounter.

When we stop at the first half of the liberation equation—when we leave behind other people—we leave behind a lot. Growth cannot occur in a vacuum, honey! It's all about our stuff rubbing up against each other and learning from each other. We've got to share ourselves and engage with others because it's only through relationship that the path to full liberation is cultivated. Leaving the work we've done in our heads to benefit only ourselves is a distorted and self-centered expression of the spiritual path, reducing it to a tool for disguised narcissism. The goal

isn't just to better your life; it's to better the world. Spirituality should be expansive—it should always be moving from *me* to *we*.

We're in a tough spot. We are all products of and living in a culture rooted in individualism and selfishness, one that denies our personal responsibility to each other and the world. And as my Pandemic-spurred online magical mystery tour showed me—and any quick trip through your socials will show you—even most of the “wellness” and “personal growth” and “spirituality” content circulating through the body of our culture is really about feeling good, “keeping your peace,” and avoiding discomfort. Shutting out the world and shutting out other people. The irony is, so much of what we long for in life—whether that longing is for personal well-being, romantic love, fulfilling friendships, meaningful work, or healthier family relationships—is rooted in connecting authentically with other people.

There's a well known story in Buddhism about Ananda, the Buddha's disciple. The story goes that Ananda had a profound insight regarding the importance of friendship in the pursuit of liberation, and was excited to share it with the Buddha. “Teacher, could it be true that half the spiritual path is friendship?” he asked, probably expecting some amount of praise for this radical reflection. It's said that the Buddha responded immediately, “No.” Yeah, you read that correctly. No. “Friendship isn't half of the spiritual path. Having good friends is the whole of a spiritual life,” the Buddha gently corrected Ananda.

That's what *Spiritually, We* is all about—restoring connection to spirituality and spirituality to connection. It's about the potential for liberation in each of us and how we can realize it through friendships that are sacred: friendships that always reach toward freedom, that remind us of our own constant destiny toward full awakening, that celebrate the miracle of impermanence, and that recognize that we are all artists and that our lives are ongoing, collaborative works of art.

There's no linear path here, my love—this isn't a how-to book—but over the next seven chapters, we'll journey together, exploring the loops and spirals and switchbacks of the liberation equation, figuring out as we go, first, in chapter 1, how we got here, what's at stake, and

how we can start making ourselves available for sacred friendship. In chapters 2 and 3, we'll delve deeply into sacred friendship—what it is *not*, as well as what it *is*, so we can avoid the same old friendship patterns we've been trained to think are normal. Knowing what sacred friendship looks and feels like is one thing, but sustaining it is another if we're always checking out or building barricades when things get uncomfy, so in chapter 4, we'll get into why we need to stop avoiding conflict. We'll explore how triggers can be a good thing as well as the difference between healthy boundaries and barbed-wire fences. In chapter 5, we'll get into what lies on the other side of conflict and how to get there with communication strategies for real connection. You can take down your walls, but you still need to get out of your own way for sacred friendship to bloom: in chapter 6, we'll explore one of the biggest obstacles to allowing ourselves to truly connect—shame, and how to move through it. Finally, in chapter 7, with the foundation of all that hard work you've been doing in place, we'll check in with our karma, learning that it takes only a handful of us to commit to becoming sacred friends to heal the entire world. Throughout, we'll explore simple ways that you can be a magnet for friendship and connection in everyday life.

The wisdom and practices that I share in this book are born of my own experience learning to relate to everyone, from my own siblings to strangers on the street and people with whom I've had a difficult history, and are an ongoing part of my own spiritual practice. They come from my heart to yours and will shift your inner state to help you enter the world feeling more “Spiritually, We.” Use them as you read the book, and come back to them anytime you have to relate, engage, speak, serve. . . . These are the practices that will help you drop in, fortify, and strengthen or soften yourself before you relate with others. Master these practices, and when you go into the world, you'll strut in with full confidence that you belong in the community. You'll know you showed up in your full power, as your best.

In the course of my own journey (one that is still ongoing) to living my whole wild truth, I have read countless books and attended many

workshops, trainings, and meditation retreats, all in an effort to heighten my practice and understanding of myself. I've turned inward, working on my individual healing, focusing on my individual self. And even though that work did bring me to a place where I felt more at peace with myself than I ever had before, it was when I turned my practice outward that I experienced the most radical shifts in my own consciousness.

In my friendships, family, and relationships, I am supported and supportive. With my people, I am celebrated for all my freaky, sassy, wondrous glory. And I welcome everyone in their truth as well. To the people who remain unable to accept me as I am, I send blessings, but I can see that those are not "my people." Not yet, at least. Being able to discern between who belongs in my life and who is just "passing through" is another happy byproduct of my healing journey. I no longer waste my time or energy worrying about impressing people or convincing them to like me. I just show up in my full power and trust that the right people for me will respond.

There is a saying, which is commonly attributed to the Dalai Lama, that "we can live without religion and meditation, but we cannot survive without human affection." If you take one thing away from this book, my intention is that you know you aren't alone, that you aren't meant to be alone, and that it is side by side with others that wisdom flourishes.



## Chapter 1

# We Need Each Other

**F**irst things first. Don't get it twisted, honey: this is not a book about how to make friends. Wait . . . what? Isn't this chapter called "We Need Each Other"? Isn't this book called *Spiritually, WE*? Yes and yes. Look, my darling, making friends is a totally fine subject, sure—especially for a personal development kind of book. But this is not that book. We're not in the realm of "wellness," or even just "growth." No. We are on the high-stakes path of spiritual liberation—and *your freedom is only ever truly actualized in context with the other*. That's the guiding principle of this book.

Okay, I know I just got a little intense. That was fierce af, even for me. But this is serious shit. It's beautiful and joyful, yes, but it's also a wake-up call. I'm sounding the alarm: you can't get free alone. There's no freedom without meaningful connection with other people. We need each other.

The problem is, so many of us have forgotten that. We are living in the midst of a loneliness epidemic, one that is making us sick in our bodies and our souls. Our culture treats "need" like it's a disease when it's really the other way around: our cult of individualism is making us ill and imprisoning us in a world of delusions. Once we can start acknowledging just how much we need each other? Baby, then we're on the road to freedom, on the path to building *sacred* friendships—friendships founded on the fundamental truth of our inherent goodness—that

empower us to live bold lives filled with radical love, for ourselves, for each other, and for the whole damn world.

But just diving into sacred friendship when we have been conditioned for so long by a culture that's all about *me, me, me*, a culture that is ill-equipped to support such a radical shift, is a tall order. After all, how do we get well in a sick society where more people than ever live alone, where connecting virtually is the new normal, and where we have fewer and fewer chances to share our authentic selves with another person? As Jiddu Krishnamurti, one of the twentieth century's greatest thinkers on the subject of our shared humanity, reportedly said, "It is no measure of health to be well-adjusted to a profoundly sick society."

We start by unadjusting. And we do *that* by beginning where we are, in the present moment, with ourselves—through confronting our loneliness, practicing radical friendliness, learning to see in the dark, embracing paradox, and accepting the flow of karma (the fate we inherit and the destiny we make as a result of our actions) through our lives. Only then can we make ourselves available for sacred friendship.

Are you ready, my darling? Take my hand. Let's go—together.

## The Loneliness Epidemic

It's time to talk about the L-word—loneliness. The emotion that holds so much shame. Why? Because, my darling, didn't you get the memo? You're supposed to know how to self-soothe; you should be able to take care of yourself; you should be okay on your own. Asking for help or using the four-letter word *need* is an admission of failure. I can't even count how many times I've heard someone declare, while talking about their partner, "I want them, but I don't need them," as if this were a badge of honor. "I need help," "I need you," "I need someone." Eew. What are you, insecure? Codependent?

Is it really so wrong to need others? (Personally, I think our disgust with "need" stems more from a fear of vulnerability than anything else, but hold tight—more on that later.) Maybe you're remembering past relationships—these could be with friends, family, or coworkers, not

only romantic partners—where you or the other person was, in fact, codependent. That is not what I'm talking about. Codependency is a *dysfunctional* form of need in which a person is excessively reliant—psychologically, emotionally, or both—on another person for support. This person enables the other's self-destructive behavior, be it a product of addiction, immaturity, poor mental health, or other challenges. Typically, the enabler neglects their own needs and doesn't enforce healthy boundaries. It's all about needing someone at the expense of your own needs. I want to be clear that this is not the kind of needing I'm talking about here.

When I say “need,” I am referring to a natural dynamic into which we are all born. At birth, we are helpless. We need our caregivers to sustain us. We are born into a family, and from our first moments, we are in relationship—with our primary caregivers, be they our parent or parents or guardian, with our siblings, if we have them, perhaps with extended family and chosen family. That family exists within a community. As we grow, we more actively join that community. We go to school, we join the workforce, perhaps we are part of a church, mosque, synagogue, or other spiritual community. We establish friendships, we seek relationship, companionship, and friendship at every stage of life, not because we are codependent, but because we are driven biologically to be in relationship, to need others as part of our survival as humans. Being in relationship and in community helps us shelter from the storm because it makes us literally healthier, because it's an ongoing practice that teaches us how to get better at it, because connection to each other and thus to something bigger than ourselves not only feels good but also creates good, and because if we ever want to be truly free, we can do so only in its context.

Needing each other is the most natural thing there is. We have got to unlearn the thinking that need equals weakness and reclaim love, affection, and friendship as our birthright. Our lives and our spirits depend on it. But we can't even begin to do so without looking straight at loneliness rather than away from it. There is nothing shameful about loneliness. Think about it as one of your psyche's alarm systems, alerting you that

a critical need is going unmet: your need for connection. The groundbreaking work of neuroscientist Dr. John Cacioppo, who, alongside his colleague Gary Berntson, founded the discipline of social neuroscience, found that loneliness is a cue, like hunger, signaling us to act in service to our survival. Chronic loneliness, Dr. Cacioppo's research demonstrated, weakens our immune system and increases the likelihood of an early death by 20 percent.<sup>1</sup> Research has linked social isolation (infrequent contact with others) and loneliness (the feeling of being alone, regardless of frequency of contact with others) to higher risks of a variety of physical and mental conditions: inflammation, high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, type 2 diabetes, cognitive decline, dementia, Alzheimer's disease, anxiety, depression, and attempted suicide, among others.<sup>2</sup>

We are driven to connect, so when we aren't connecting, we are simply not living in the truth of who we are. It's not surprising then, that in a recent study, people (mostly men) who possessed narcissistic personality traits (antisocial traits that are toxic to relationships) were found to have very high levels of cortisol in their saliva.<sup>3</sup> Overexposure to cortisol and the release of the stress hormones it triggers can disrupt almost all your body's processes. Not only that, but studies also show that chronic high cortisol levels put individuals at greater risk of long-term health problems, particularly cardiovascular events. This is striking to me because it comes back to the heart. Literally, the health of your heart reflects the health of your mind.

Are you starting to map out the thread of loneliness? If we starve ourselves of connection, we suffer. It's that simple.

And yet the bitter truth is, as a society we are lonelier than ever. A 2021 national survey of American adults conducted by the Harvard Graduate School of Education found that 36 percent of all respondents reported feeling "serious loneliness," indicating that in the four weeks prior to the survey, they had felt lonely "frequently" or "almost all of the time"—but that *61 percent of young adults* surveyed reported experiencing serious loneliness.<sup>4</sup> In a 2018 survey of twenty thousand people conducted by the insurance giant Cigna using the widely recognized UCLA Loneliness Scale, two in five people reported that their social