

FRIENDS NOT FORTUNE

A gale of fresh air blew out of my television and nearly knocked me over. I was busy fending off the desire to scream as I ploughed through my 'In' tray of parking fines, tax returns, and insurance renewal forms when the BBC announced that it had been scientifically proved that money does not make us happy. A large piece of national research has shown that Britons are less happy than in the 1950s despite being three times wealthier as a nation.¹ Apparently, after reaching an average wage of about £10,000 a year, more wealth becomes irrelevant on the happiness stakes. Money can bring us short term pleasure, but it is 'social capital', ie. the sum total of our connections and trust in other people which brings about a lasting sense of well being.

One statistic in the research really surprised me. They asked how many close friends people spoke to on average every week. Despite their assertion that friendship is crucial to happiness, 6 out of 10 people said they spoke to four or less, and 1 in 25 said none at all. Is this isolation linked to our economic system? I think so. We are constantly persuaded to replace human contact with material possessions or bought services, and our need for closeness and connection is the hook which clever salespeople use to get us.

I remember when my daughter was just five or six and 'My Little Pony' was all the craze. She wanted not just one, but several. My rather right-on friends were confused and a bit disapproving of my apparent indulgence in her materialism, as they saw it. But I was aware that it wasn't the ponies she wanted, it was the sense of belonging to the group who were collecting them. They were the currency of friendship at school. Her wheelchair already made her different. The ponies gave her something in common to talk about, play with, exchange or give as welcome presents. I made the same decision about the Trolls and the Trainers. I felt myself trapped by the force of the market upon us families, all buying things we did not need and could not afford in order to try and protect our children from being lonely. Of course, in

¹ Research for a series on BBC2 called 'The Happiness Formula' started May 3rd 2006

the end it does not work, as the polls proved. It does not lead to real friendships, but it would have taken all of us parents and teachers to unite in solidarity to create a different culture within the school – something we are not very good at.

Yet I do not think it is apathy and greed on the part of ordinary people which is the main problem. I suspect it is this deep seated fear of exclusion, planted and fed in our earliest days by corporate greed (another story) which drives us to collude with a system in which few of us believe. This issue strikes me as very serious when the World Health Organisation is predicting that depression (unhappiness) will soon be Europe's number one disabling condition.

As someone who has never been married, or even lived with a partner, friendship has meant everything to me. Friends help me to think, share my life, teach me things, hug me when I need it, laugh and cry with me. Sometimes they give me practical assistance, and sometimes they accept all these things from me. They give me a sense of connection and purpose. My achievements have been in direct proportion to the range and depth of friends in my life.

I think friendship should be an educational goal at school. There should be rituals, anniversaries, national friendship days to celebrate these relationships which often outlive family bonds. Perhaps if we were all much more secure in our connections with each other we would find it easier to say "I have enough", to stop seeking more and better possessions and to start to build a better, happier world.

Micheline Mason

May 2006

(First published in Community Care Magazine)