**Allowing Teenage Boys to Love Their Friends**

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IT is occasionally true that the spark that ignites one’s grand, all-consuming work is struck early in life — even by happenstance.

Niobe Way was a teenager when her younger brother Lucan had a terrible falling out with his best friend. John lived just across the street; the two boys were inseparable. One day her mother caught the boys cutting up a treasured childhood rag doll. She read both of them the riot act and then some. John slunk off.

Seven, eight times after, Lucan would knock on John’s door. But he would always be told that John was not home or did not want to see him. The boys’ rupture shook Lucan deeply. Even as a happily married adult, he does not like to talk about, as Dr. Way recounts, “the boy who broke his heart.”

Recently, [Dr. Way](http://steinhardt.nyu.edu/faculty_bios/view/Niobe_Way), now 47 and a professor at New York University, where she is an expert in developmental adolescent psychology focusing on male friendships, reflected on her brother’s experience those many years ago: “That’s when I first saw the significance of friendships for boys, in both my brother’s love and his sense of loss.”

New York City has been, in part, her laboratory. Her new book, “Deep Secrets: Boys’ Friendships and the Crisis of Connection” (Harvard University Press), is already being taught at the Little Red School House and Elisabeth Irwin High School, a private school in Manhattan, and is required reading for faculty at the Haverford School, a boys’ school near Philadelphia.

Dr. Way is also a Greenwich Village soccer mom of a son, 11, and daughter, 8, and says she views her son’s friendships with pride and poignancy: “I love watching how the boys relate to each other on and off the field. But I’m so aware that this will go away. He’s aware of the expectation that eventually, a boy has to choose between a boy friend and a girlfriend.”

Her book, compiled from 20 years of interviews in the United States and Nanjing, China, discusses how, for boys, the perception of a betrayal by a buddy is absolute because they feel “their intense vulnerability” has been exposed. “And they have no way to talk about it, to work it through. For boys, that’s terrifying.”

Also potentially dangerous: around ages 15 and 16, she noted, the suicide rate for American boys becomes about four times that of girls.

Dr. Way, a tall, impassioned talker who looks something like a hippie Ann-Margret, grew up in Paris; Oberlin, Ohio; and Palo Alto, Calif., and graduated from Berkeley and Harvard. She speaks of her findings as an outcry for boys.  Dr. Way, whose father is a classics scholar, is named for an ancient Queen of Thebes whose pride in her 14 children prompted the gods to slaughter them. In Niobe’s profound mourning, she turned to stone, a symbol of a mother forever stricken with grief.

Yet Dr. Way intends her work not to be a hand-wringer, but a call to action.

Despite stereotypes of teenage boys as grunting, emotionally tone-deaf creatures who bond over sports talk and risk-taking, she said, their need for intimate friendship is as potent as it is for girls. Boys in early adolescence would speak candidly about those friendships to Dr. Way and her researchers, acknowledging the importance of having a best friend who was both repository and guard for their most private feelings.

But as the boys grew older, the intensity of those relationships faded. Boys feared being seen as “too girly” or even gay for expressing attachments to one another, even just for feeling them.

She leaned forward with evident urgency: “This is not some academic read I’m doing. The boys are aware of the power of their relationships. They are overtly saying, ‘I want him, I need him, I miss him — no homo!’ And then they grow up and become depressed.”

She added: “Parents reinforce those stereotypes. They’ll tell me, ‘My son is supersensitive *but* he plays sports!’ ”

Celine Kagan teaches at the Little Red School House and Elisabeth Irwin. One day, a teenager complained of malaise. Ms. Kagan asked about friendships. “He said, ‘I’m feeling more distant from them. I want to talk to them about stuff but I’m afraid they’ll be bored,’ ” Ms. Kagan recalled. She gave him the first chapter of Dr. Way’s book.

“Two days later he could not stop talking about it!” she continued. “He talked about how grateful he was, how he understood so much more clearly what was happening to him and even to his dad.”

Indeed, the shutting down of those relationships is part of what turns boys into taciturn, emotionally disconnected men, Dr. Way said. She herself has four best friends — three women and one man.

Recently, she separated from her husband of 18 years. “He was struggling to find guys to be close with,” she said, “and I thought, ‘whatever.’ I didn’t take friendships seriously then either. In couples’ therapy, the solution is ‘date night.’ But to help your marriage, go out with your best friend! Spend quality time away from each other! How can you get everything you need from just one person?”

She also dismisses movies and television shows that tout “bromances”: “It’s just code for hanging out and puking together,” she said.

Needing to stretch her long legs, she walked to Washington Square Park, where she often observes boys and girls interacting. This year on 9/11, she sat on a bench there. She counted seven men scattered throughout, alone, each in their late 30s, well dressed.

“It was 8:30 a.m.,” she said. The time to commemorate the first plane’s attack was approaching. “It was so quiet. No one was on their phone. They were each sitting there, all alone with their grief, not with a friend. I could sense a deep hunger for real connection.”

Will boys continue to be compelled to ignore that hunger? she wonders.

“Finally, one guy came up to me, a complete stranger,” she said. “He just wanted to talk about that day. And then he left. ”

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