Friendship in Midlife
WITH REFERENCE TO THE THERAPIST AND HIS WORK

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It is astonishing how little has been written in the psychoanalytic literature on this perhaps most frequent of all human relations [friendship]. The references which do exist are generally glancing, scanty, and en passant. There is, to my knowledge, scarcely a psychoanalytic study centered on this subject in depth. (Rangell, 1963, p. 3)

That statement, made over two decades ago, is still essentially true. The reasons are undoubtedly many. Among them are the relative youth of psychoanalysis as a science, an early preoccupation with psychopathology, and a later focus on development in childhood. Increasingly, in recent years the scope of interest and research has broadened to include the study of normality in the adult. In this chapter, we explore the developmental forces that shape normal midlife friendships and consider the effect of the therapist’s work on his or her own friendships, particularly those with colleagues and students.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Freud’s references to friendship are few, and his thoughts on the topic are highly insightful, but they are essentially undeveloped. Friendship, said Freud (1921), is a form of love, an expression of libido, stemming from the same source as sexual love that has sexual union as its aim.

We do not separate from this—what in any case has its share in the name “love”—on the one hand, self love, and on the other, love of parents and
children, friendship and love for humanity in general, and also devotion to concrete objects and to abstract ideas. (p. 90)

In the relationship between the sexes, the impulses "force their way toward sexual union, but in other circumstances they are diverted from this aim or are prevented from reaching it [italics added] though always preserving enough of their original nature to keep their identity recognizable" (pp. 90-91).

So a critical distinction between love and friendship is the aim-inhibited expression of the impulses in friendship. However, these inhibited instincts

always preserve some few of their original sexual aims; even an affectionate devotee, even a friend or an admirer, desires the physical proximity and the right to the person who is now loved only in the "Pauline" sense. (1921, pp. 138-139)

Thus, "the inhibited instincts are capable of any degree of admixture with the uninhibited; they can be transformed back into them, just as they arose out of them" (p. 139). It is our impression that the aim-inhibited nature of the impulses—and the possibility of reversal to direct expression—defines the nature of friendship more than any other characteristic.

But human relationships, including friendships, are not based on "love" alone.

Men are not gentle creatures who want to be loved, and who at the most can defend themselves if they are attacked; they are, on the contrary creatures among whose instinctual endowments is to be reckoned a powerful share of aggressiveness. As a result, their neighbor is for them not only a potential helper or sexual object, but also someone who tempts them to satisfy their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him. (Freud, 1930, p. 111)

As with all other human interactions, friendships are also based on aggression. The character of friendship is determined by the aim-inhibited expression of the aggression, not by the absence of it.

Little has been done to elaborate Freud's seminal ideas. As previously mentioned, Rangell's article (1963) "On Friendship" looms as the one significant exception. Using the developmental and ego psychological ideas available at the time, Rangell described what might be called a developmental line (A. Freud, 1963) of friendship during the childhood years. The gratified infant first experiences friendly feeling toward his