

UNITED WISDOM

Unequal closeness: when friendship means different things

Relationships and Intimacy

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Epigraph

No, not too private—for you.

Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, New York Edition (1909), Book I, chapter II, web 332: Strether's answer to Waymarsh. The first sentence of a character's reply, rather than a requirement to disclose personal matters to every friend.

What this article is about

Imagine a fictional scene. Ilya considers Sergey his closest friend: he tells him news first, invites him on holiday, and assumes a difficult conversation can begin on any evening. Sergey sincerely enjoys their meetings, but sees Ilya primarily as a hiking companion. When the holiday invitation is declined, Ilya hears more than refusal of a trip: as though every previous weekend had been pretence. Sergey is surprised, because he never promised the place in his life that he has already occupied in someone else's understanding. Both call the connection friendship, but the word does not yet establish an identical meaning.

This article concerns unequal closeness in voluntary adult friendship. We will examine differences in significance, expectations, and accepted participation, without assigning weakness to the more involved person or coldness to the less involved one. It is not a question of arranging meetings more often, nor necessarily a story of fading connection. The mismatch may have existed from the start. A literary scene, historical philosophy, and selected research context help clarify the subject; they do not determine readers' hidden motives. All everyday examples are fictional. The article offers no test of true friendship, compulsory openness, or guaranteed way to obtain equal intimacy.

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I. One name does not establish an identical place

For Ilya, friendship means being able to turn to Sergey first on almost any important occasion. For Sergey, it means shared routes, interesting conversation, and several meetings a year. These meanings need not exclude each other. Yet a matching name can conceal different expectations. If both say they are friends, it is still unknown whether they have accepted constant availability, a shared holiday, or the right to discuss any personal topic. A relationship's meaning develops through actual actions, what was said, and what has not yet been discussed, as well as through one word. The name can be warm and sincere for both while retaining a substantial difference in scope.

A closer place in one's own life cannot be established for another through a unilateral acknowledgment. Ilya can say Sergey is particularly dear to him. That is important information about his attitude, rather than Sergey's already received response. He need not prohibit his own affection to retain accuracy. He only needs to avoid turning his feeling into a role the other has accepted unnoticed. Otherwise, an invitation begins to sound like a summons to service, and refusal like a breach of an obligation the participants never established. This distinction does not remove hurt, but reveals which answer was unexpected and what the expectation rested on.

There is also responsibility for words in the other direction. If Sergey himself promised evening availability or agreed to the trip, he cannot remove that promise by generally explaining that he understands friendship differently. Different meanings of the connection do not cancel what was specifically accepted. At the same time, fulfilling one promise does not establish consent to every subsequent request. We can attend to a known commitment and retain the limits of everything else. Participants need not choose between complete agreement and total inability to trust. Sometimes they need to distinguish several subjects within one upsetting conversation before deciding whether the present arrangement suits each.

II. An assumption of reciprocity is not its verification

Almaatouq and colleagues' study separately considers a survey of eighty-four participants in a university course. They rated acquaintance and closeness and predicted others' ratings. In the authors' constructed network, fifty-three percent of seven hundred and seventy-five directed friendship nominations were reciprocal. This is a result from a selected survey with a defined threshold, rather than the proportion of true friends any reader has. The selected main section, abstract, and discussion were read; the supplementary file and raw data were not analysed. A scale rating does not reveal a particular friendship's entire history or prove anyone's deception.

The editorial inference is more modest than a dramatic exposure: one's own definition of a connection does not necessarily match another's. A research percentage need not become grounds to suspect every acquaintance or secretly rate everyone. Ilya can notice he considered a holiday a natural shared plan, although Sergey had not yet accepted it. That distinction is available without network analysis. Sergey's silence, however, does not definitively determine his inner feeling either. Considering a known response to a specific proposal, while leaving the unknown unknown, is more reliable than declaring the whole connection measured by one refusal and someone else's quantitative result.

The paper also examines influence and behavioural change in a special experimental arrangement. Our question differs: what are people freely willing to regard as shared participation? It offers no calculation of whom to use to obtain a friend's desired answer more easily. A scientific account of possible influence does not authorise using someone's affection as a lever. Accuracy retains both the empirical limit and the article's ethical subject. We can acknowledge mismatched understandings without presenting them as a diagnosis, judgment, or ready instruction for organising pressure. The following practice was not tested by this study and receives no promise of effectiveness from it.

III. Intensity of feeling does not determine the extent of another's obligation

Ilya may find the situation painful because the answer diverges from an important expectation, rather than because he feels incorrectly. He need not immediately smile and call the refusal trivial. Yet the intensity of his experience does not itself determine precisely what Sergey must do. If the trip was not promised, upset does not make it compulsory. If it was promised, the breach remains significant regardless of how calmly Ilya can speak. Feeling and an accepted action rest on different grounds. Both merit attention, but one cannot be used as the sole measure of the other or to cancel its significance.

Sergey may also feel awkward on learning how much the relationship matters to Ilya. This does not require promising greater intimacy out of sympathy. Reassurance that does not match intention can leave expectation in place of clarity. At the same time, an honest answer requires no humiliation. One can name one's participation without describing the other as an excessively needy person. Stronger affection is not itself a lack of dignity. Less willingness to holiday together is not itself a moral deficiency. Evaluating the manner of treatment requires information about what was said and done, rather than merely a comparison of feeling's intensity.

In an imagined conversation, Ilya can name what he hoped to receive: time together, acknowledgment of a special place, or the opportunity to discuss difficult matters. Sergey can

answer one subject differently from the rest. The holiday may not fit, while a conversation on a chosen day is wanted; or he may be willing to hike but not discuss a personal topic. Such an answer need not satisfy Ilya. However, it differs from a complete rejection of his human significance. Accuracy helps us hear the actual extent without forcing acceptance of any remnant of contact or requiring the other urgently to provide the entire desired set of intimacies.

IV. A historical question about different grounds provides no ready ranking

In Book VIII, section 13 of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle connects certain complaints between friends with differences in grounds and expectations of receiving. The argument belongs to historical ethics of virtue, utility, and pleasure; it also includes judgments of superiority. We use the question of the terms on which participation was accepted, rather than transferring the whole system into present friendship. A holiday disagreement cannot establish that one friend is superior, or make every disappointment proof of self-interest. The historical distinction needs qualification rather than conversion into a convenient ready label.

Ilya helped Sergey prepare for the previous hike and hoped they would now definitely spend a holiday together. Sergey may have understood the help as participation in that hike. If no condition was named, the past action should not silently be translated into a purchased future. Yet this does not mean every expectation of the helper is absurd. A hope, disappointment, and actual manner of exchange can be noticed. The participants may want to discuss large tasks more clearly. Ilya may no longer be willing to help to the previous extent. That is his present choice, rather than Sergey's automatic debt to pay for every unnamed earlier meaning through help of identical value.

The editors do not establish the legal validity of a loan, service, or contract. Where a separate material agreement exists, it has its own subject, which a general conversation about friendship cannot replace. Here we consider ethical confusion between a voluntary gesture and an unspoken expectation of greater intimacy. It can be acknowledged without accounting for human worth. Reciprocity need not involve identical actions, but actual participation should not continually be called equal where one does not understand it that way. The distinction between tradition and present scene remains: the historical text poses a question rather than making our current decision for us.

V. A personal conversation does not mean access to everything

In Book I, chapter II of Henry James's *The Ambassadors*, Strether and Waymarsh meet after a long interval. Their conversation includes personal subjects that remain closed and a different explanation Strether is willing to give his friend later. The narration is connected to a character's perception, rather than establishing a universal law of intimacy. For our topic, the limited question matters: can a significant relationship contain different areas of conversation and different times for them? The fictional scene determines neither how much a reader must disclose nor what a friend is entitled to receive today.

Ilya might encounter a similar but separate difficulty. Sergey once described difficult work, and Ilya now assumes all personal topics are open. One account does not grant permission for every next one. An invitation to conversation has a subject and moment. Declining another question does not automatically make earlier openness pretence. However, if a friend expects continual attention himself without noticing that it is unavailable to others, that can be discussed as a specific arrangement of participation. Privacy does not prohibit considering reciprocity; reciprocity does not cancel privacy or require the same depth in every message.

In the selected chapter, Strether separates willingness to explain from the time of explaining. This distinction is also possible in the present fictional scene, but a promise of a later conversation should match intention. A person should not promise to answer someday when he does not want the topic at all. Nor should every postponement be treated as a hidden final refusal without grounds. The recipient can name how much indefinite waiting fits him. Neither must fully guess the other. The literary observation preserves different questions rather than permitting pursuit of acknowledgment by repeating a request when a limit is already clear and discussion unwanted.

VI. A special place need not be exclusive

Ilya learns that Sergey is going on holiday with another group. The refusal now seems like a comparison of people. A choice sometimes does affect an already accepted agreement; that agreement then needs consideration. But without a promised holiday, a new trip does not automatically establish that every meeting with Ilya was false. Sergey may have other connections, wishes, and circumstances. We do not guess them from one message. Ilya may feel the difference, but it gives him no right to exclusivity that no one accepted. Someone's special significance in one's own life does not determine another's whole network of relationships or make it a subject of compulsory reporting.

The question of comparison can return to an available subject. Ilya lacks shared days rather than necessarily the title of sole friend. Perhaps he wants to know the meeting is wanted rather than endured. These requests differ. Sergey can clearly name what he chooses without

promising everyone an identical place. Nor need a ranked list of friends be presented as the only honest answer. Human significance does not always have a position number. A conversation about specific participation can be precise without disclosing other relationships or demanding a definitive place among all close people. For example, wanting to walk one route together can be named directly. Its answer does not determine who comes first in another's life, but communicates about that route. If the title itself matters to Ilya, he should acknowledge that wish's separateness rather than try to obtain it unnoticed through agreement to a trip. A request becomes more honest when its actual aim remains visible to the requester himself.

If only a friendship with high mutual involvement suits Ilya, he may acknowledge this. He need not declare a less intense arrangement exemplary freedom to appear adult. But his condition of participation should be named as his own, rather than the sole correct definition of friendship. Others may welcome occasional meetings. Both answers retain dignity even when no shared arrangement exists. Unequal closeness becomes particularly difficult if participants do not recognise a real difference and each keeps expecting the other to change silently. Acknowledgment does not promise a painless outcome; it simply avoids presenting one answer as already achieved reciprocity.

VII. Greater participation cannot be bought through a hidden test

Ilya decides to stop writing and see whether Sergey notices. He may genuinely want to initiate less; that is a permissible limit on his own participation. A secret test, however, adds another subject: his friend must guess a new condition and prove feeling through the required behaviour. If Sergey does not write, the reason is still unknown. Silence does not become a reliable measure of all intimacy merely because the tester selected that criterion beforehand. Participation can be reduced without a hidden examination. More meetings can also be proposed directly if discussion is wanted, leaving room for refusal without requiring the answer to match hope.

The less involved participant can create a reverse examination: if Ilya is a true friend, he must accept any occasional contact without questions. This too is a unilateral criterion. Sergey may not want greater intimacy; Ilya may not want the current arrangement. Neither should obtain the right to his own limit at the cost of the other surrendering his. Hearing a difference does not make demands compatible. Disagreeing with an arrangement, however, is not necessarily demanding that someone change. A person can choose less of his own participation without instructing the other to become more open or organising punishment for an unaccepted offer.

Help, a gift, or a confidential account should likewise not serve as a hidden stake on increasing access. Ilya can freely give a present and hope Sergey enjoys it. Yet a gift does not establish agreement to a trip or pay for personal information. If giving without an expected exchange is

currently difficult, a smaller gesture or no gesture can be chosen. This is more honest than subsequently presenting an obligation unknown to the recipient. The article does not prohibit hopes or demand perfect selflessness. It distinguishes an internal expectation, a named proposal, and an actually accepted response so that they need not be discovered only after disappointment.

VIII. Different scope does not justify dismissive treatment

Sergey can decline the holiday without mocking Ilya in front of the group. A free decision about intimacy and the manner of treatment remain different questions. Public disclosure of private matters or devaluing a friend's experience does not become the necessary price of lesser involvement. A particular action can be named without first demanding acknowledgment of identical affection. Equal human significance does not mean equal desire for every meeting. Yet it retains grounds for avoiding turning another's vulnerability into entertainment or using one's special place to obtain convenient action while denying the other the possibility of asking a question.

The more involved friend likewise gains no permission to pressure another. He can be upset, speak about his own need, and decline unsuitable participation. The strength of affection cannot establish the necessity of another's consent. If threats or coercion arise, a joint practice is not assigned as proof of good friendship. Suitable separate support depends on the situation; the article provides no local legal or clinical protocol. Calm conversation does not guarantee safety. Ethical consideration attends to the present manner of action without automatically assigning blame according to who needs the connection more or who can step away from it more easily.

There are also discourteous but different cases: a short reply after work, a forgotten question, repeated disregard for an agreement. Their scale requires specific information. One unfortunate sentence is insufficient for a friend's complete diagnosis; repetition should not be erased with a general reference to his freedom. Accepted time can be queried separately, or a person can say such participation does not fit. No one must endure uncertainty indefinitely to prove absence of control. No one must provide immediate openness to prove absence of coldness. Both can name a limit while retaining the difference between its content and how it is communicated.

IX. A connection can be chosen without a promise of hidden remaking

Suppose Sergey is willing to hike and sometimes talk, but not continually plan together. Ilya can accept this arrangement only when his agreement concerns the arrangement itself rather than a hope of gradually changing Sergey. Hope for change is possible as an experience, but not as an agreement's secret content. Ilya may wish to seek other close connections without making Sergey the sole fulfiller of his need. This is an editorial possibility rather than a compulsory strategy or empirically proven way to stop suffering. New acquaintances should not become a demonstrative competition intended to provoke jealousy and obtain more attention from the existing friend.

Accepting a smaller arrangement also does not mean prohibiting oneself from noticing dissatisfaction. After several meetings, Ilya may realise he finds it difficult. This is new knowledge about his own participation rather than necessarily a breach of a promise never to want more. If he changes plans, a specifically accepted action deserves separate attention. Freedom to reconsider does not make yesterday's agreement nonexistent. However, a completed agreement does not secure one form forever. Such distinctions give a relationship time: what is available can be named now and reconsidered later without declaring every new answer a definitive exposure of the entire previous history.

If no suitable arrangement exists, limiting contact requires no humiliating explanation of why the friend was insufficiently good. Ilya can acknowledge the hikes' value and his own desire for a different arrangement. Sergey can acknowledge Ilya's pain and retain his answer. Acknowledgment does not guarantee preservation of friendship or remove loss. However, it adds no invented proof that one is incapable of affection while the other always exploited him. Actual facts of harm need not be cancelled for attractive symmetry either. Unequal wishes and unequal responsibility for specific actions are different questions that may require separate conclusions.

X. Return to the invitation, retaining its actual scale

In the opening scene, declining a holiday became an answer to the connection's entire meaning. Now it can be considered more precisely. Sergey does not accept the trip; Ilya hoped for greater participation. If there was no promise, the question is not how to collect missing intimacy. It concerns what each actually offers and what the other is willing to choose. If a promise existed, its fate needs separate discussion. The same conversation may contain disappointment, a clear limit, and an unfinished practical task. They need not receive one general judgment before people can understand the next available step.

A possible fictional outcome: Ilya decides not to propose a shared holiday for now, but joins a suitable hike. Sergey attends more carefully to already accepted dates without promising to become the closest friend. This is not a compulsory happy ending. Ilya may still lack something; Sergey may discover the changed arrangement is inconvenient for him too. A small choice already made remains real without becoming a forecast of the whole friendship. People can learn more about their own wishes. They need not guarantee each other an absence of changes in advance, nor present the lack of that guarantee as permission to ignore the consequences of what was said.

Unequal closeness first needs an honest scale rather than immediate equalisation of feeling. One's own attitude can be acknowledged as significant, another's response as independent, and a specific promise as actual. One can respect another without accepting any arrangement. One can want greater intimacy without declaring it already accepted. One can decline a topic without cancelling all previous trust. These possibilities are not a validated technique for achieving reciprocity. They leave friendship's place to be determined through two people's actual participation rather than merely the force of a name one sincerely uttered and the other sincerely understood differently.

What this means in practice

If you wish, choose one safe expectation of friendly contact. Privately distinguish three things: what the person means to you, what you assume about his attitude, and what participation was actually accepted. You need not assign numerical ratings or prove your feeling correct. One action can be named: a meeting, conversation, trip, or help. If the expectation was not discussed, do not turn that into self-accusation; simply keep it separate from another's promise. You need not write anything, may keep the reflection private, or stop after one distinction.

If conversation is appropriate and wanted by both, name one request concerning a future action. You can explain its significance to you without demanding the same degree of affection in response. Clarify the subject and leave room for refusal, another suggestion, or an unknown answer. Do not request disclosure of every other connection to prove your rank. Do not appoint a gift, silence, or an unexpected difficult topic as a hidden test. If a clear limit has already been named, repeated pressure through acquaintances does not become clarification. A joint step is not prescribed where threats exist.

After the response, distinguish what became known from what remains your wish. A suitable hike does not promise a shared life; declining a holiday does not determine every feeling. If the arrangement does not fit, your own participation can be reconsidered with attention to what was already said. The practice is voluntary and editorial, rather than therapy, diagnosis, or a validated method of equalising intimacy. It guarantees neither a pleasant answer nor

preservation of friendship. Its modest subject is seeing the actual offer and one's own choice, without requiring one person to become everything wanted or declaring one's desires unworthy simply because the answer differed.

Key quotation

> *...the dignity of this reserve...*

Henry James, *The Ambassadors*, New York Edition (1909), I.II, web 299: a fragment of the narrator's sentence about Strether's perception of Waymarsh's silence. A character's literary judgment does not establish that all silence is dignified or equally appropriate.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Question	Difference and limit
Aristotle, VIII.13	On what grounds was participation accepted?	Historical judgments of utility, virtue, and superiority do not become a scale of present friends.
James, I.II	Can intimacy retain a personal topic's limit?	A character's voice and novelistic narration prescribe no compulsory scope of openness.
Almaatouq and colleagues, selected survey	Does one's nomination match the other's response?	A threshold and university sample cannot measure a reader's whole friendship or authorise pressure.
Editorial scene	What next step fits both?	An imagined hike proves neither the practice's effect nor guaranteed reciprocity.

Primary sources

1. Henry James, *The Ambassadors*. New York Edition (1909), Gutenberg432, updated 17 September 2022. The version heading and whole I.II, web 274–386, with returned adjacent context were read, rather than the entire novel. Quotations are a reply and narrative fragment; rights UNKNOWN.

2. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VIII. W. D. Ross; printing year unestablished. Metadata and the whole VIII.13, web 148–161, with returned adjacent sections were read. Historical normative comparison; no direct quotation; rights UNKNOWN.

3. Abdullah Almaatouq, Laura Radaelli, Alex Pentland, Erez Shmueli, *Are You Your Friends' Friend? Poor Perception of Friendship Ties Limits the Ability to Promote Behavioral Change*. *PLOS ONE* 11(3): e0151588, 22 March 2016. Metadata, abstract, the selected main section on directionality, returned experimental context, and discussion were read. Supplement and raw data were not checked; only the limited survey meaning is used. The page explicitly states CC BY; the linked licence is CC BY 4.0. No direct quotations.

Tags

friendship, unequal closeness, significance, reciprocity, expectations, nomination, participation, consent, promise, refusal, privacy, openness, personal topic, time, holiday, hiking, special place, exclusivity, comparison, dignity, gift, hidden test, reconsideration, voluntary participation, safety, boundaries, Henry James, Aristotle, Almaatouq, research limit, literary scene, United Wisdom

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