



Gen Z 'ers are
changing
relationships more
than ya think. Ya.

TRANSFORMATIONS IN THE MAKING

Vincent E. Gil, PhD, 2022

If you're the parent of a Gen Z (those born after 1996)¹ you will want to read this, despite thinking you know your adulting children more than any article can tell you.

Of course, you already know the world surrounding Gen Z is still going through tumultuous times, such that no recent generation has experienced: Shockwaves, coming from culture, technology, economics, politics, a pandemic, isolations, all in their short years of existence.

Gen Z'ers have gone through turbulent years of teenhood while also wrestling to understand their future—if they even would have one—as grandparents succumbed to COVID; as isolation morphed into depressions; and as their schools experienced unimaginable violence. It is no wonder that Gen Z reports more enduring and extreme stress than the previous two generations combined (Millenials and Gen X).²

The Stressed Out Generation is Transforming

You may not see the stress. Gen Z 'ers have become quite adept at hiding feelings. After all, they learned to hate a class yet be 'present' and appear engaged via a blacked-out picture on Zoom. They learned to talk about cool people, particularly in posts and internet chats as a way of deviating attention from their awkward selves and loneliness. And, they found new experiences on the internet via gaming, postings, Instagram, TikTok, etc. to while away their time in solitude. When the air was clear enough of pandemic virions, Gen Z'ers came out in droves, to parties, concerts, movies; to trails; to anywhere outdoors. A way out of the stressed life, they realized, was to become active,

¹ Pew Research Center, *The Generations Defined*, Report on Generational Differences in the U.S. (2020) Data from the Center show Gen Z'ers are (in 2022) between 16 and 26 years old, and at the beginning of their adulthood.

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putting yourself out there to see if you could gain friends, post all the crazy stuff you could (once again) do, and get social capital in the process.

However, between all the commotion of getting out there, one imperative rule emerged: You'd better not be a *phony*. You'd better not just be *unique*; you need to be *authentic*. Authenticity has garnered a new merit among Gen Z'ers, raising a high bar on what surrounds them.³

To Millennial or Gen X parents, this generation may seem a tad aimless, disinterested, disconnected, especially to the world of politics and political noise. But nothing could be further from truth: They've listened while in isolation; when they've returned to "live with Mom and Dad for a while," hearing all that talk; going through the political rubble, the double-talk, the fake news; and emerged not relying on titles or positions to warrant their respect. Respect comes from being *authentic*. And *authentic* means being true to yourself, your identity; recognizing the truth of others while making room for coexistence.

Not so paradoxical, Gen Z has emerged as the generation that wants people to speak their truth, however distinct it is. Advocating for what you believe, and in concert, what others believe—side by side and *authentically*—is part of the emergent difference here. Some (perhaps not your children, but some) have moved the needle further by involving themselves with movements they felt needed advocacy, a voice. This is the generation that just two years ago involved itself deeply with racial and gender justice outcries: They've picked up the rainbow flag and marched. They've marched for lives that matter. They've held protests for women's rights outside the Supreme Court...

And a parenthesis for parents here: Your Gen Z kids, now adulting, want from you more than ever the recognition that they will make it in life; that you understand them [try hard here], and that you believe in them. OK, so they haven't been perfect, and in your world of striving, they may have not reached any pinnacle—in fact, they seem to be on a plateau, permanently chasing what you've called unrealistic goals. To you, it's rather adolescent. But don't give up! Yes, this generation is taking longer to reach the maturity level you aspire for them; but that doesn't make their future less achievable. They want it *authentic*. Do note, however, that what they become will be different from what you became, because what they value is so different from what has been a norm to your generation.

Rekindling Friendships, Remaking Friends: BFFs, Bromances, and Besties

When reruns of the sitcom "*Friends*" were first aired in 2018, Millennials were the first to gripe about the story lines being out of date, even calling some episodes homophobic and sexist. By the time Netflix picked it up and started streaming it a

³ "Authenticity and Gen Z: Beyond the Buzzword." *StudentBeans*, October 19, 2021.

year later, *Friends* was an instant hit among the Gen Z group.⁴ Why didn't these reject the show for the same reasons their parents did?

Gen Z found the show's characters *relatable*, because what they saw were *authentic friendships*, an element that was sorely missing during Gen Z's early years growing up, them being tied to after-school games and events with kids not even from own neighborhoods. All this activity was followed by the isolationism of the pandemic. Virtual friends were one thing; but *Friends* showed them how the *real deal* actually worked. And they fell in love.

Now no-one can say for sure *Friends* was the catalyst to the wave of friendship-seeking seen since 2019, and I do believe the need for friendships in all generations has deeper reasons than a motivational sitcom.⁵ But the show did crystallize and give examples of how friendships ought to work. Despite all their social media friends—pre-pandemic, during the pandemic, and after relaxation of pandemic curfews—Gen Z'ers have consistently stated they are *lonely*.⁶ Live friends, they realized, was the antidote.

We have a new study on friendships: *The Friendship Report*, funded by Snap (of Snapchat fame) and undertaken by Protein, an independent multinational research agency.⁷ This is a global report by generational groupings, which allows for intergenerational comparisons. The Report found Gen Z is swinging the pendulum toward seeking live friends vs the thousands of 'friends' online. Gen Z'ers on the whole are also much quicker to engage another, try to 'read' a person to see whether they will fit the friend/ship category when qualities of similitude and openness, *authenticity* and *honesty* come across in the interaction. The study also concluded,

We learned that Gen Z is adjusting their approach to friendship away from the Millennial desire for widespread networks and are instead looking for more closeness and intimacy within a smaller group. "Love" plays a stronger role in platonic relationships than we ever knew before. Above all, we came away with a powerful image of what friendship looks like today, and an understanding of just how and why it's more important and valued than ever.⁸

What, exactly, does that friendship look like? I'll try to picture this with statements and concentrate here on *male friendships*, given the change reports coming in: Younger males are redefining friendships in very noticeable ways compared to prior generations—from wanting intimacy, to touching more, to open expressions of love.

⁴ Gillette, Katie. "Why TV show 'Friends' is Extremely Popular among Generation Z." N-Arts and Culture, February 7, 2019. www.thenationalnews.com/arts.

⁵ Most psychologists will tell us more or less the same facts: Humans are wired for connections; these raise our oxytocin (the feel good hormone) levels; men and women both need emotional outlets beyond significant partners; and emotional connectivity is life-prolonging and ego satisfying.

⁶ Cox, Daniel. "Growing Up Lonely: Generation Z." *Institute for Family Studies*, April 6, 2022. See also data from Survey Center for American Life (cited below).

⁷ Snap Inc. and Protein Agency LLC, *The Friendship Report*, 2019-2020.

⁸ *The Friendship Report*, p.5.

Male Bonding. Both sociologists and psychologists have long told us men bond over *activities* more than any other behavior (women bond over *conversation* more than any other behavior.)⁹ In bonding, men tend to stress similarities in likes, in attitudes, abilities, all of which accentuate alikeness. Alike qualities have thus been the male glue used to *like*, then *affirm*, a friendship.

That said, one of the shifts the study reported is that men are becoming more aware of, and comfortable with their need for social connection and intimacy within their male friendships, not just rapport during activities, or having similarities. Men want emotional connections.¹⁰ This shift includes *talking* about their *feelings* and *sharing* their problems, and not thinking this is *weird*. (Gen X, and to a large degree Millennial males have kept alive the idea that intimate talk is a strange thing for men to do: “*That’s what women do, not men.*”¹¹)

The Bromance. It's also increasingly common now for younger men to seek out not only emotional but physical closeness in their platonic friendships—especially with their *bestie bud*, aka the *bromance*.

This trend is confirmed by another study, *Privileging the Bromance*, which reports young men are having “increasingly intimate, emotive, and trusting bromances,”¹² which offer a new social space for emotional disclosure and buddy intimacy within non-traditional heterosexual relationships. This study also reports the majority of men interviewed (mean age range 21-34) placed higher emotional value on their close male friendships—in particular their “bud,” their “true friend” (the *bromance*)—than they did their romantic relationships, in every measure of intimacy short of sex.¹³

The other night I watched a movie with my best friend — we lay together on the floor among pillows. His young kids took the sofa. (Our wives were out on a gal-night.) We ate popcorn from the same bowl and had an eventual popcorn throw-swallow duel. I gave a long hug to my bro, the winner, told him I loved him. Later, I made the observation that our fathers would've *never* had their buddy over to loll about the carpet with them, share a hug, be eye to eye laughing and watching a movie together.¹⁴

⁹ Greif, Jeffrey L. “Buddy System: Understanding Male Friendships.” *British Journal of Sociology*, 2011, 62(2), p.1468.

¹⁰ Let’s be clear here, as well: It’s not that in other generations men *haven’t wanted or needed* emotional connectivity with their male friends. It’s that in past generations the rules of male friendship taught men to avoid the kind of affective rapport that puts them “one down” from their friend (i.e., sharing their emotion makes them vulnerable and pushes their status “down” from the equality plateau). Men have been taught the “one up means one down” in the hierarchy of male relationships. Thus, men have generally *avoided* situations which bring on the discomfort of being in a less-than-equal position with other men—including their friends. For many men, to be sharing emotions is to be vulnerable, and men have historically avoided vulnerabilities.

¹¹ This is from a Millennial: “*As an older millennial (I’m now closer to 40 than 18), when I want to talk about something, I often handle it by scrolling through my contacts list for a few seconds to decide who to reach out to, then locking my phone and going back to the book I’m currently reading.*” Raj Chandler, *Healthline*, March 8, 2019.

¹² Robinson, Stefan, Adam White, and Eric Anderson. “Privileging the Bromance: A Critical Appraisal of Romantic and Bromantic Relationships.” *Men and Masculinities*, 22(5), 2017 (Abstract). <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X17730386>.

¹³ Beaulieu, Marc. “Favouring Bromances Over Romances: The Rise of Platonic Love Between Men.” *CBC Life*, October 24, 2017, p.1.

¹⁴ Beaulieu, “Favouring Bromances,” p.1

Young men are finding in these male-male relationships a deep, abiding sense of love, trust, vulnerability, allowing for shows of emotion and the sharing of secrets or close personal matters they'd never share elsewhere. In these respects, the trend signals a departure from a once well-entrenched homophobic bro culture.

No to Same Sex. But let's be clear here: these studies also confirm there is no sexual crossover reported: Bromances may rival a heterosexual romance with a significant female in their emotional value, but there was no sexual intimacy expressed or implied by these men with their bro buddy.¹⁵ What the studies do reveal is that younger men are opting for a friendship model that has been part of the *female* friendship repertoire for millenia—close, intimate, “touchy” emotional friendship bonds that allow for deep affective satisfaction and trust between friends.

These are new milestones in recent male relationships, not seen since before the turn of the 20th Century. Men are trusting and vesting each other with their affects apart from the traditional “one up, one down” male model of relational hierarchy. They are becoming vulnerable with each other, *authentic with each other*; and all of it signals significant emotional satisfaction.

What Can the Church Learn from All This?

I'd like to think we can always analyze cultural change and ask pertinent questions, such as “*For the Christian, how does this all translate?*” And, “*What can we take away that's good, affirming of God's creation and will?*” I think there's plenty here!

Let's remember, Christianity is foundationally an Eastern religion, which of course means the world of Christ and its cultures were dramatically different than ours—everything from customs to the culinary. Yes, there were hierarchies and sexual/gender differentials there too, many acute and exclusionary. But with the advent of the Savior comes a significant *relational* shift that breaks many cultural customs; that generates inclusion and *personalizes* the relational to even include God as *friend*. What Jesus taught and lived is underscored further in the young *ecclesia* of Acts 1—and from there, in the writings of Paul to the churches.

In Christ himself we see a model of friendship that mirrors the intimacy of God with God's creation. John 15:13–15 lays out the “love commandment,” and does so in the context of friendship. “*...that you love one another as I have loved you.*” This is the savior who is a friend unto the end (John 15:13). Before his ultimate sacrifice, we find Jesus befriending children, Samaritan women, fishermen, tax collectors, centurions, the weary and the

¹⁵ Both the *Friendship Report* as well as Beaulieu's work emphasize there is no “sexual crossover” in bromances. Other studies do report some crossover into the sexual, particularly among European younger men, who according to Anderson's earlier work, started being more physically intimate in public with bro friends, in pubs and get-togethers (Anderson, *Inclusive Masculinity*, Routledge, 2009). Then again, one has to remember that for Europeans in general, and some European countries in particular, greeting male friends with a mouth-kiss and being physically close has never been a big deal; in fact, it is the expected greeting among close friends and relatives. Such, of course, would freak out most American men of Gen X and older ages.

wounded. He makes friends and stays true to friends. He weeps with them, embraces them. He lets them lay on his chest. He is kissed by them (and am sure he kisses them back.)

There is no “one up, one down” model here. There is no insinuation of effeminacy because he cares, because he gives, because he touches, kisses, and because he is ready to love unconditionally. *“That you love one another as I have loved you”* reaches deep into human need, helping to rescue our desire for intimacy, to be known, to be loved by another.

From Jesus we learn a different masculinity, one that presages what the love of God can do for camaraderie and bonding. To love another self-same unconditionally, without men fearing their historic homophobia, means to open up to giving and taking without measure. Gen Z males are beginning to learn the value of “without measure,” even if it doesn’t carry the religious meaning and depth I’m pursuing here. Such openness does augur a new vision for masculinity.

For the church in general, the message from this generation is also clear: When you see Christian Gen Z’ers embrace and hold each other; when you see them talk face-to-face, touch each other for more than a second; when you partake in men’s groups that show this new camaraderie, and approve, you are underscoring the Jesus mandate to love unconditionally.

And if all this isn’t enough to convince you that this new generation is onto something almost lost—male intimacy, bonding, loving—let’s take it to Paul himself, who repeats the message of unconditional love over and over, and seals it with a kiss: “Greet each other with a holy kiss! Greet the brothers with a holy kiss!” (Rom 16:16; 1 Thess 5:26; 1 Peter 5:14; 1 Cor 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12).¹⁶

Paul’s intent isn’t to ritualize kissing among Christians, but rather to show affective affinity; and by calling the kiss “holy,” to embrace the long-standing Eastern tradition that a kiss was also a “spiritual exchange,” cementing a spiritual bond.¹⁷ There’s also another function to this type of physical encounter: Anyone kissing another must throw to the wind their differences—differences that often divide. “We are the same at this moment” is central to the exchange of an honest kiss-greeting.¹⁸

¹⁶ Of course we have to contextualize. In the era of a pandemic that doesn’t seem to end any time soon, we have to be judicious about personal intimacies. As a trained epidemiologist, my hope is that the church body would be wise enough to trust the science that has so far produced incredible vaccines, and use these as well as protective measures to insure we do our part in not spreading disease. After more than a million untimely deaths by 2022, we should be wise as snakes and substitute the fist-knock for the kiss—till this is over.

¹⁷ Penn, Michael Phillip. “A Brief History of the Christian Ritual Kiss.” University of Notre Dame: *Church Life Journal*, February 15, 2021, p.1..

¹⁸ Penn also writes, *“In terms of the ritual kiss, a social attraction model of group cohesion shifts focus from the kiss as an expression of personal affection to seeing the kiss as a productive tool for shaping individual and communal identities.”* In: *Kissing Christians: Ritual and Community in the Late Ancient Church*. U of Penn Press, 2005:28. Paul’s goal may have been to help people “fit in” by suggesting opportunities to build cohesiveness.

Yes, Gen Z may not embody a parental vision for their becoming. But becoming they are achieving, even if slower than desired, yet certainly paced within what's been obtainable given the times of their lives. That Gen Z, and particularly Gen Z men have acknowledged their need for self-same companionship, put aside their armor, convinced themselves that being authentic, open, and vulnerable are desirable traits in male relationships, is to change the course of male history in the right direction.

Me thinks Jesus approves...shouldn't you?

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