

# Advance Praise for *The Politics of Lonely*

“A friend-letter (which is like a love-letter, but more complicated) to the ordinary glory of being with others, in all our mess and beauty, *The Politics of Lonely* is an incisive call to build worlds in which friendship is more and more accessible, for everyone.”

—ALEXIS SHOTWELL, author of *Against Purity: Living Ethically in Compromised Times*

“There are few things as mundane in our lives as friendship, but also, few things as important that are also as unprobed. What makes a friend? What do we need from others? How do our relationships buoy our happiness or exacerbate our loneliness? Lee Arden has given us a lot to think about in this radical examination of one of society's most important social bonds.”

—NORA LORETO, author of *The Social Safety Net*

“*The Politics of Lonely* made me feel less lonely. Yes, this is a book that invokes the radical potential of queer friendship—all the dreams and aspirations—without neglecting to address the personal, intimate, and structural failures. Drawing from a wide variety of voices in literature, critical thinking—and, yes, friendship—this book moves us toward everyday intimacy, collaboration, mutual aid, protest, communal living, and an expansion of care networks to provide a safety net for everyone.”

—MATTILDA BERNSTEIN SYCAMORE, author of *Terry Dactyl*

“Lee Arden offers a thoughtful meditation on what austerity has done to our friendships, with a pragmatic and radically grounded pathway to transform and rebuild a social safety net in the spaces between us. Shorter: Lee Arden offers an intimate, queer meditation on the radical potential of friendship as resistance to the loneliness of neoliberalism.”

—**ARDATH WHYNACHT**, author of *Insurgent Love*

“Arden’s exploration of friendship as “the highest ideal of love” is essential medicine for these dehumanizing times. It is neither bitter pill nor sugarcoated remedy for what ails our ability to make friendship live up to our aspirations. Instead, it is dreamily homeopathic, mixing up a tonic to strengthen our broken hearts. It is at once vulnerable and brave, messily honest and truly beautiful, deeply personal and systemically political, reminding us that friendship is “worth the struggle,” as part and parcel of social transformation.”

—**CINDY BARUKH MILSTEIN**, editor of *Constellations of Care: Anarcha-Feminism in Practice*

# **THE POLITICS OF LONELY**

*WHY IS FRIENDSHIP SO HARD?*



**LEE ARDEN**



Fernwood Publishing  
Halifax and Winnipeg

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Development editing: Fazeela Jiwa  
Copyediting: Brenda Conroy  
Cover design: Rebecca Poulin  
Text design: Lauren Jeanneau  
Printed and bound in Canada

Published by Fernwood Publishing  
Halifax and Winnipeg  
2970 Oxford Street, Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3L 2W4  
[fernwoodpublishing.ca/roseway](http://fernwoodpublishing.ca/roseway)

Fernwood Publishing Company Limited gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Canada Council for the Arts..

Canada



Canada Council    Conseil des arts  
for the Arts        du Canada

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication  
Title: The politics of lonely : why is friendship so hard? / Lee Arden.

Names: Arden, Lee, author.

Description: Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana 20260169463 | ISBN 9781773638263 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Friendship. | LCSH: Friendship—Sociological aspects. |

LCSH: Loneliness—Social aspects. | LCSH: Interpersonal relations.

Classification: LCC BF575.F66 A73 2026 | DDC 302.34—dc23

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Marsha panhandled for spare change, and she would say, "Spare change for a starving queen?" Most of that money, she didn't keep. She gave it to other girls who were struggling. If you were walking down the street, and she saw that you were hungry, and she had two slices of pizza, she might not give you one slice, she might give you both of them.

—RENEE IMPERATO, remembering Marsha P. Johnson

*This book is dedicated to everyone who aspires  
to be this good a friend but hasn't made it there yet.*

# Friendship Is Worth the Struggle

I wrote this book not because I think I'm great at friendship but because it matters a lot to me. I think about it so much, and I still profoundly struggle to be the kind of friend I want to be and to have the kinds of friendships I want to have. I am far from alone in this. Articles with titles like "The Scheduling Woes of Adult Friendship," "How to Make, and Keep, Friends in Adulthood," and "Why Does Growing Up and Settling Down Mean Losing a Certain Closeness with Your Friends?" point to widespread struggles with making and maintaining friendships.<sup>1</sup> There's even a *Making Friends as an Adult for Dummies* book. It's hard to make or have friends after thirty, people agree, or once you have kids. But why? It's a common issue but surely there's nothing inherent to adulthood that means you can't have friends anymore.

The first thing I wrote about friendship was a zine called *PALS: The Radical Possibilities of Friendship*, which I put out in 2013. I was about to leave my last straight relationship, quit a terrible job, and transition. I was about to lose a lot and gain the entire shape of my life to come. But it wasn't there yet, and I had no idea it was coming. I just knew that my current life was

completely untenable and that I was right at the end of my ability to continue living it. I wasn't eating or sleeping much, and I was having panic attacks every day, mean and scared and shaking and miserable. I was looking at checking myself in someplace, but I am glad something inside me knew that what I needed was to quit something, and then quit something else, and keep quitting things until the pressure started to release.

In that moment the only thing I felt sure of was friendship. I was struggling in my romantic, familial, and professional relationships, but in my friendships I still felt borne up. My friends were the only people I felt able to be around while I was in freefall, with everything in my life crumbling underneath me and no idea where I was going to land. My friends showed me care and kindness, and our relationships were spacious enough that I did not feel like I was failing them by being messy and sad and unsure of everything.

As I emerged from that period of my life into queer and trans communities, it seemed like everyone around me also held friendship up as their priority and the highest ideal of love. We spoke of chosen families where we would be loved just as we were, unlike the rejections many of us experienced in our families of origin. We daydreamed together about expansive friendships that could transcend the scripts we'd grown up with that centred romantic love and the nuclear family. It didn't need to be like that! We could remake everything in our own queer image. In this spirit, I wrote in *PALS* about some aspects of friendship that I thought differentiated it in important ways from other types of relationships:

- Friendship is, or can be, a meeting among equals.
- Friendship has more flexibility built into it, because our ideas of what a friendship can look like are less determinate and more varied than our ideas about relationships like parenthood or monogamous romance.
- Investing in friendship and taking it as the model for how we relate to other people can point us toward a practice of mutual aid, where we expand our sense of who we must care for and who we may accept care from, beyond the couple or nuclear family.
- Friendship, similar to and in combination with romantic nonmonogamy, can orient us away from thinking of our relationships in terms of scarcity.

In many ways the book you're reading now intends to both build on and question these ideas about friendship based on the experiences I've had in the years since writing the zine. Because of *PALS*, I've had so many conversations with my own friends and with strangers and new acquaintances about what friendship means to them. I have heard about so many people's meaningful friendships and have been given opportunities to reflect on and appreciate my own. These conversations have strengthened my belief that friendship is a vital fount of joy and meaning in life, and that it can be a bridge that leads us out of ourselves and into solidarity and engagement with the broader world. Friendship often gets treated as an extracurricular activity: something to be scheduled in amongst all your other obligations, time permitting. But I've come to see it as the very fabric of life itself.

## When Friendship Breaks Your Heart

In spite of, or because of, all the faith and hope and effort I have put into friendship, it has often broken my heart. My experiences of friendship and my views on it have become more complicated and less rosy than they were in 2013, when I wrote *PALS*. In particular, getting top surgery in 2017 was a turning point in my relationship with friendship. The lead-up to that surgery — a few years after putting out *PALS*, a few years into immersion in queer and trans communities — was the high-water mark for my optimism about friendship. My relationship with friendship has been more complex and more guarded since then.

A few years before that, my boyfriend at the time had top surgery. The majority of his care fell to me, I cracked under it, and we broke up soon after. So, when I was planning my own top surgery, I was determined that my then-girlfriend wouldn't have to provide an amount of care that would overtax her or our relationship. I talked to a lot of friends about it and made note of anyone who offered to help. I diligently made a little spreadsheet of what I'd need and when and invited people to sign up for anything they wanted to help with. Community! Chosen family! I was confident that I had it covered. And then almost everyone bailed. So, in the aftermath of my surgery, it was my girlfriend who kept me fed, took me to appointments, ran errands, and soothed me when I was scared and weak and in pain.

I am fortunate to have many close friends, but they're scattered across the continent and the world. Most of them are busy. Most of them are dealing with so much of their own shit

that I'm scared to ask them for help. I'm not sure if it'd be OK to ask them to bring me food, wash my dishes, lift things down from high shelves. And of course, it wasn't that I was a perfect friend who was tragically let down by others. I can't live up to my own lofty ideals either, although I know the point of ideals isn't to consistently, flawlessly meet them — it's to strive messily and continuously toward them and to keep trying and failing and trying. I am as likely as anyone to be selfish or careless or cruel, and when I let someone down or cut them loose or otherwise fail to live up to my own values and aspirations, I feel extra shame for having presumed to lecture people about friendship. I've felt shame when I've failed to live up to my own ideas of how a friendship should be or to a friend's desires about the role they'd like me to play in their life. I've felt shame when, despite putting so much thought and care and work into building and maintaining friendships, I find I can't rely on my friends in ways I'd hoped I could. And I've felt shame when friendship can't take the place of romantic or familial care in the ways I dreamed of. In these moments I hold my optimistic little zine up against a sometimes disappointing reality, and I wonder why I fall short. Friendship is something I've devoted so much time and energy and thought to, and when it doesn't do what I hope it will, I feel curiosity as well as sadness.

I wondered if it was something about me and the way I do friendship or whether there were larger social factors keeping my friendships from rising to the level of my hopes and intentions. I became curious about how other people organize their lives and relationships, and about how we can work within and around the

constraints of a capitalist society even as we also work to dismantle it and build something better.

## **Friendship Is Hard Because Everything Is Hard**

People are lonely and struggling in friendships because of the historical, cultural, economic, and material ways that our lives are set up. These factors are not timeless and inevitable: things can be otherwise. There are people benefiting from our loneliness and seeking to perpetuate it for their own gain. It would really cut into AI chatbots' profit margins if we all had people to talk to; meal delivery apps would suffer if we cooked for each other more; and Mark Zuckerberg and Elon Musk would hate it if we went for a walk with a friend instead of doomscrolling.

Material conditions matter a lot, regardless of our ideals. In Canada, where I live, as well as in many other parts of the world, our social safety net is profoundly degraded, and the cost of housing and other necessities of life have exploded while wages have remained stagnant. My friends are in and out of homelessness, or they're disabled and fighting to get or hold on to meagre state benefits, or they're trans and trying to get healthcare, or they're facing violent racism, or they're scared for family members abroad who are facing genocide or climate crisis or immigration detention, or they're fighting alt-right weirdos in the street, or they are struggling with any combination of the above. Things are rough out there.

Is it any surprise that this affects our ability to show up and care for each other? When my friends are kicked out of their families of origin, have lost access to their cultural ties through

colonization and forced migration, or grew up in situations of abuse, violence, religious trauma, neglect, poverty, and so on, it would be nice if friendship could take the place of everything they've lost, but it's a lot to ask. Friendship alone can't pick up the slack from decades of austerity, unravelled social safety nets, or the crushing combination of bullshit wages and exorbitant rents.

We will try, and we will fail, to make the power of our love for our friends as big and as strong as the destructive power of the state. The answer isn't to stop trying or to be more moderate in our ambitions. We need to keep trying in our personal lives to live up to the ideals we hold dear. We also need to keep fighting for massive changes to the way we live, to break down systems of violence, and to build systems of care. In the meantime, I have found that placing friendship in a broader political context has helped me understand why our friendships work the way they do. When you're barely getting by, it can be a lot harder to show up for your friends. If you have slack, you can share the slack around. If you aren't strapped for cash, you can help friends out when they're stuck. If every room and closet and semi-enclosed nook in your apartment isn't stuffed full of roommates to share the rent, you can host out-of-town pals to keep those friendships strong or put a friend up when they lose their home. If time is abundant, it's easier to babysit or help someone move or just keep each other company.

It is beautiful to have expansive hopes and dreams for our friendships, but when we fail to look at them in context and see all the external pressures placed on them, we'll end up hurting and disappointing each other. We know that people will always share what little they have. Every marginalized community seems to

make that joke about everyone just passing around the same \$20 to whomever needs it most at the moment. And we know that the people with least are often the most generous. But the solution is not to squeeze everyone just to the edge of their breaking point so they'll be more giving. I believe the solution is, first, to become aware of the ways austerity and other forms of structural violence show up in our close relationships and to cut ourselves some slack. Then, clearer-eyed, we can start tearing down the institutions that keep us separate, lonely, and struggling. Throughout this book we'll look at ways that friendship can act as a gateway drug for community and for political action: how it can both fill our hearts and serve as a powerful force for building a better world.

There's a great Lucinda Williams song where she sings in an intimidating growl to presumably some shitty ex, "You took my joy, I want it back." She repeats it over and over like she's driving through the night coming to take back her joy by any means necessary. This is the energy I want us all to bring forward with our friendships. Let's find the fuckers (spoiler: capitalism, neoliberalism, austerity, white supremacy, jobs) who took our joy and get it back.

## **Despite It All, We Come Through for Each Other**

I started writing this book in 2023, six years after my top-surgery friendship failure, while I was preparing for another surgery. I was reflecting a lot on my previous experience, both in pragmatic ways to think about what I would need to do differently and also against my will because I was just deeply triggered about it. I was having nightmares about helplessness and abandonment. My fear

was that I would tumble through another false floor and have another realization that a baseline of care that I had thought I could rely on was not there.

This time everything went really well. I don't know if it's just that I was older and my friends were also older: more aware of our responsibilities to each other, more experienced in providing care, in some cases more resourced, and with more experience with sickness and disability. The care I received buoyed me up as I began to write this book and gave me enough optimism and curiosity to keep looking at friendship rather than simply writing it off. If and when I do friendship and care well it is because I have been lucky beyond reason or measure in the friendship and care I've been shown. In spite of how difficult friendship is in our current world, it is a source of both tremendous joy and vital material support in my life.

In tribute to my friends and to the many wise people I interviewed about friendship while writing this book, I have woven their voices into the book. Between the chapters, which detail my experiences and beliefs around friendship, you'll also find interludes with several different people's answers to questions I posed about friendship. My hope is that you will take these interludes as an opportunity to pause and reflect on your own answers.

## WHAT ARE SOME WAYS YOU'VE CARED FOR YOUR FRIENDS?

I have driven people to appointments and vacations when they're unable to do so. I like driving and I don't mind doing a lot of it, so I tend to offer it as an act of service. I show tenderness in my words and in my touch. I affirm and reaffirm my love for people. I offer my perspective when it's desired and help problem solve or else provide space/an open ear. I'm proud of my keen attention to others' needs and my willingness to support people.

—MARLAINA

Small acts, constantly! I try and make sure that my friends know I think about them, remember and value things they have told me or their preferences that I've noticed. Bringing little gifts that reminded me of them, unprompted, or sharing things that connect to their interests in some way. I aspire to have my friends be sure that I care for them, and I think this is the case already. I personally have some issues with accepting that my friends think of me as highly as I do of them, so I perhaps say reassurances more often and knowingly, since that is what I want in response as well.

—ERIN

I think, underneath everything I do, I just want to be someone safe. I was a lonely kid and felt like nobody really wanted me around; worse than that I felt like nobody wanted to learn enough about me to have a *reason* not to want me around. I don't want other people to experience that, ever. So, I just do my best to notice. I pay attention to my friends. I think, if I was this person, what would be meaningful to me? What would make my life noticeably better? And then I try to make it happen, whatever it is.

—CARA



# **PART ONE**

## **WHAT IS FRIENDSHIP?**

Friendship is a pretty ambiguous concept. While that ambiguity can be both beautiful and useful, it can also contribute to our struggles to get what we need and want from our friendships. Throughout Part 1 of this book, I look at what friendship even is, examining my own received conceptions of friendship to see how they hold up in real life.

In Chapter 1, “Do We Even Know What Friendship Is?,” I write about how, in the white, middle-class, North American social world I grew up in, I’ve experienced friendship as a relationship that is nebulous and flexible: it is more easily defined by what it isn’t (romance, family) than what it is, and it is often held to less clear and demanding standards than those other categories of relationship. How does this flexibility benefit our friendships, and how would we be better off if our friends held us to more rigorous standards?

Chapter 2, “Casual Sex, Serious Friendships, and Life Outside the Couple,” describes how, in a heteronormative world, although

friendship encompasses a broad range of relationships, we still believe it can and should be firmly distinguished from romance and treated as secondary to romantic and familial relationships. What happens in the grey areas where friendship, love, sex, and commitment are combined in less normative ways?

Chapter 3, “Weaving Networks of Friendship,” begins by looking at dictionary definitions that characterize friendship as a non-exclusive relationship between two people; that is, we’re allowed to have lots of friends. I examine what happens when we take this non-exclusivity further and weave our friendships together instead of treating them as distinct one-on-one relationships.

In Chapter 4, “The Families We Choose,” I look at the concept of “chosen family,” an idea that shapes the concepts of friendships I see in the queer and trans spaces I am in. We tend to hope that chosen families can be a way to avoid all the bad or hard things we’ve experienced in our families of origin. Where did the concept of friends as chosen family come from, and what can we learn from its origins?

Let’s prod at these ideas of friendship, look at where they come from, and think about which ones we’d rather do differently.