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As told to Christina Lee, 2530 words.

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On how friends can do business together

Authors and podcasters Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman discuss the reality of collaborating with friends, saying what you need, and being motivated by joy and curiosity.

In the year since *Big Friendship* came out, I was curious about what you've made of the reactions to the book so far, especially with the release happening during the pandemic.

Aminatou Sow: It is both remarkable and unremarkable that our book came out in a pandemic. We wrote a book that was in part to challenge the social norms around this kind of platonic relationship. We are asking everybody to reconsider the place that friendship has at the heart of their lives. That said, the last year has rocked all of us to our core. It was a real stark reminder that you can't predict the future, but you can put in the work not to be lonely in those moments. The pandemic was hard for every single human being. I believe that it was probably harder for people who were already feeling lonely before or people who had not considered this question of "What do my friends mean to me, and how do I slot into my community that way?"

We have this chapter called "The Stretch" in our book that is about the different ways that friendship challenges you. What the pandemic was, was a stretch. That is not a conflict between two people. It is just the storms of life. We were grateful that we had done the work of writing this book before we went into this year, because I don't know what our friendship would have looked like if we had not done that.

This isn't the first time that both of you have questioned these social norms. *Shine Theory* in particular continues to bear explanation and clarification, via multiple *[Call Your Girlfriend]* podcast episodes and a chapter in *Big Friendship*.

Ann Friedman: It relates to what Aminatou was saying about the importance of community, especially at times when things are difficult. *Shine Theory* was born of the experience of working hard to establish ourselves as adults in the world—figuring out our values and creative or professional trajectories, and just realizing how much easier that was because we had each other. Capitalism is only getting more and more and more capitalistic. We're watching the kind of forces make it difficult to live your values and establish the life that you grew up thinking you wanted to have. For us, the answer to that has always been found in community to a large degree. That is why *Shine Theory* still remains relevant. The problems that make life difficult are not going away. And so *Shine Theory* and community as a solution are not going away either.

There's this expectation in the media that a staff job is the be-all end-all. Aminatou, you once told *The Cut* that you figure out your job title based on how you made the most money that year. How have both of you come to embrace your autonomy as entrepreneurs? How have you come to establish paths outside the established system?

AS: I left office life so long ago that now it would be shocking to go back to that. Looking back on it, I needed some autonomy, both creatively and truly for health and mental health reasons where it was like, I am not thriving in office capitalism. Removing myself from that system was a choice. It was a scary choice at the time, but it also worked out. You definitely need a degree of risk taking and believing in yourself to do that. But I think that the future of work, because we're seeing it so much, is a hybrid model of people who will be like one foot in the office professional world and one foot out, and dipping in and out continuously.

I forget which technology bro entrepreneur said this, but I believe that it was true, that the worker of

the future will be like multiple SKUs. You need to have a little bit of everything. Your favorite artists are not all making money from making their art. Tech people sometimes dabble in other things. That is important to remember. It's why for us—and this is part of Shine Theory—it's more than transparency around how you make money and how your life is made possible. It's important because we don't have a model for this outside of rich people doing whatever they want and lying to you about it.

We're not trying to be girl bosses. We're not trying to be millionaires or moguls. We just want to live a happy, small life and be able to afford the things that we like. Once you take that pressure away—"I'm trying to be a founder, I'm trying to be a girl boss, or I'm trying to be the No. 1 at the thing that I do"—it opens up a different lane. If the question is "How can I be the happiest doing the work that I want to do?," that's a different calculus altogether. That's attainable for a lot of people.

AF: The two of us are both people who are motivated by learning new things or by our curiosity. That is something that being self-employed allows you to chase. I have a couple of things that I do for money. And I'm going to chase this other creative pursuit and just see what happens; maybe someday that will become part of my financial picture. But it's different from a staff job where it's job description plus salary, where these things are fixed. If you're lucky enough to be doing it in a sustainable way, which is true of both of us, it can feel like, sometimes month to month even, I have a different career or a different job description. The ability for it to change is so I don't get bored. Aminatou is also a brilliant person who gets bored easily. That is a real part of the appeal.

Some people, for various reasons, thrive more with a more stable set of objectives or a more fixed professional identity. That's totally fine as well. The more time we both spend outside the staff job structure, the more clear it is that this is a good fit.

Big Friendship mentions linguist Deborah Tannen and her concept about the "story of sameness"—focusing on what you have in common—and how that's established in the beginnings of friendships. Was there a similar story of sameness when it came to working together, like with how *Call Your Girlfriend* producer Gina Delvac once said that all three of you "were all the people in high school who would do the group project for the whole group"? If there was, was that then complicated by critical differences you may have found in your respective work styles?

AS: Justice for the people who did all the group projects in high school, for real. They don't get enough respect.

AF: Our justice is now working together.

AS: That's being unshackled from high school and college: getting to pick your own collaborators. They should let you pick your own groups in high school. That will make the educational system better.

I don't know if there is a story of sameness. I will say that we're happy to hang out and do nothing, but the hang that involves just doing something together, that's special. We love structured time. We are just nerds who want structured time.

There's a phase in early friendship where you're trying to figure out what's the optimal way to be together. For me and Ann, it was like, oh, amazing, we can do something together. It was easy. I'm a deeply curious person. And Ann is someone that, even before I knew her, I appreciated her writing. I love her brain.

AF: What we have in common is topical interests. We both like to have the same kinds of conversations or spend time together in these structured ways. But, at this point, we own a business together with our third podcast collaborator. Honestly, working on this book was its own business endeavor, too. It's a different and much more intense kind of collaboration than the podcast. Part of that involves learning about the ways that each of us do our best work, and that's different for both of us. I'm a morning brain and Aminatou's an afternoon brain. We both have different needs and desires around how to schedule, plan, structure things, or communicate professionally with someone who's jointly disappointing us.

There's a whole bunch of things that go into collaborating that aren't just like the actual creative work product. Those are the areas where I feel grateful that we work together as friends, because we come to that part of our collaboration with a lot of knowledge, love and respect for each other in the way that you often don't have with a co-worker who is just a colleague. So when I say, "I'm freaking out because there's not a spreadsheet about this yet," Aminatou understands a whole story about my personality and my needs and whatever that are feeding this logistics request in our collaboration. It doesn't exactly map on to the story of sameness and acknowledging a different story that we tell about our friendship, but it does show up in our professional collaboration too.

This is great because conventional wisdom suggests that you shouldn't mix friendship and business. For friends who may have just fell into working together, how do these conversations about needs and desires come about?

AS: The advice is not "Don't work with your friends." It's "Don't work with people you're not compatible with." You can work with strangers at work. And trust me, that is miserable too if you don't complement each other. I've always found that conventional wisdom to be lazy and annoying, honestly. It's hard to remove friendship from the work equation. A lot of this—and it's infuriating—is all about communication. Everything in life, you have to talk about it and you have to feel your way through it.

Our story is a little different in that we were doing all of this structured unpaid work for a long time before. We professionalized something before it occurred to us that we could make money from it. Our collaboration being financially viable was a surprise to both of us, because that's not why we got into it. If the question had been "Hey, do you want to start a business with me?" I don't know that we would be collaborators, because that was not interesting to me at the time. That definitely colors that a little bit in that we were showing up every week to do something that was not work, but we were doing it in a professional way. You learn a lot from someone doing that: OK, I know your work ethic. Ann's work ethic is legendary. I know her style. Physically, I know what a manifestation of her tiredness is. I know when you need to bust out the bag of gummies. I know when we need to take a break. I know when, oh, maybe we should start work a little bit earlier.

The other thing about working with your friends is that there is a grace there that I don't know is possible with strangers all the time. When someone is sick, you understand, or when someone has something else going on, you can pick up the ball. I have been like such a recipient of that grace, both from Ann and Gina, in a different way than asking a boss for PTO. That's something that you feel your way through and talk about.

A place where I see a lot of friends stumble is that nobody actually says what they want and need. Everyone is just like "OK, I'm trying to not rock the boat. I'm just along for the ride." No, no. Everyone should say what they need: What times do you like to work? What's the thing that frustrates you? When do you need a break? When are you the happiest? Do we need to be in the same room, or do we not? How do you like to email? Do you like to text?

All of these things that you need to know about people you work with, I see a lot of friends not discuss them with friends because they assume that it's just going to be fine. It's not fine if you don't talk about it.

AF: If you enter any relationship expecting that there will never be any problems, and if there is a problem, you'll think that means the relationship is fatally flawed and you have to walk away from it. The issue is not "How do you make it so that there are absolutely no conflicts or misunderstandings?" The question is "How do you have habits and rhythms and ways of communicating that help you deal with them when they inevitably arise?"

As friends, you like structured time and making stuff together. Is there ever a concerted effort to make time for you two to just be friends and turn off work mode?

AS: You're talking to two people who had to go to therapy to repair their friendship. We make a concerted effort to turn the work brain off. But I will confess that it's not always easy. We don't live in the same city, so any reunion can be overtaken by every single thing that we care about. It's definitely making a choice, having to balance when we talk about work and when we do not.

The other good thing for us is that the work that we do together is not the only work that we do, which I also think is important. But yeah, we struggle with that a lot and have to remind each other a lot. It's like, "Hey, I'm going to call you this weekend just to catch up on life." That means there's no work catch-up. It truly is my favorite text message to receive from Ann.

AF: I just have to point out that we did the podcast together, so we've technically worked together for years. That balance was different than when we were in like the absolute thick of writing this book and promoting this book, which is all consuming for anyone who does it. One of the reasons I'm happy to have this book out in paperback is it represents the end of this intense collaboration between the two of us. It frees up, just practically speaking, more waking hours where we can just be friends. It feels amazing to kind of be like, oh yeah, I love this thing that we did together, and the work overlap we have is decreasing significantly, imminently.

Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman Recommend:

Frog & Toading, aka dressing in tandem

snacks: popcorn, flavor-dusted nuts, Haribo of all sorts

The stellar editing skills of Carrie Frye

Taking breaks to just lie on the floor for a while

The *John Wick* movies

Name

Aminatou Sow and Ann Friedman


Vocation

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Fact

Milan Zrnica

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