A Manner of Speaking

When the magazine became too much for Roger and me to accomplish together and we wrestled with the task of hiring staff, my parents cautioned us not to hire friends. Of course, in tribute to old friends, the first few issues of Child Care Information Exchange would never have made it to the post office without our collating, stamp-licking, idea-generating friends whose emotional support and volunteer efforts turned dreams into printed pages. But my parents had a point, working with friends confuses those boundaries between business and personal life. And like most children, we sometimes listened and more often ignored their concerned advice. Sometimes, their advice proved true as friends became employees became people in our past. There were occasions that still cause pain, times when the boundaries were confused and in the resulting muddle our real messages could not be communicated. Sometimes, friends have become business associates and the friendship thrives. And most often of all, acquaintances have become co-workers whose friendship forever enriches our lives.

I was reading Love & Profit: The Art of Caring Leadership by James A. Autry (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1991) today as I worked on the resources section of the magazine, and he made one particular point that has followed me all day: Autry suggests that the workplace is becoming the new neighborhood — that in the frenzy of contemporary living it is the people we work with, rather than the people we live near, who provide the emotional support that sustains us. This is certainly true at Exchange Press, though it is muddled by the fact that most of us are neighbors in the traditional sense as well as colleagues. But in a very real sense we are for each other a major source of support and strength. In the sharing of celebrations and frustrations, in each of us performing the work we do best, committed to a common goal, we are very important in each other’s lives.

In child care, we are already in the business of caring, so it is not a radical extension to see the society of the center — children, families, staff — as a neighborhood, a group of people bonded together by common ground (emotions, time, space, and shared experience and concerns, rather than the physical ground of the traditional neighborhood). Perhaps the greatest boon of the neighborhood has always been the constant flow in and out, the brief encounters, the hasty sharing of trivial as well as weighty information. These comings and goings are very visible in early childhood programs; they create the structure for each day. As we work to facilitate the relationships between parents, the friendships between children, we must also think of ourselves. We must allow ourselves to enjoy our relationships with all the characters in our new neighborhood; we must give ourselves license to let boundaries get muddled now and then. Yes, it makes the partings more painful; but it makes the daily living so much richer, even possible.

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