

Binding Ourselves Together in Caring

by Sandra Shields

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She was the first neighbour we met when we moved into the run-down apartment building in the middle of Vancouver. David found her clearing weeds along the fence, an older woman with wild red hair who talked in a rush and wore sexy clothes.

We had just arrived in the city and didn't know anyone. When I walked around our new neighbourhood, the smile on my face was met with blank stares. When I said 'Hello,' most people ignored me.

We had spent the previous year in Africa where the street was a vibrant commons. People had met my eyes as they approached, nodded and sometimes stopped to talk. There was a joyfulness in those greetings, an acknowledgement of shared humanity. It had been a pleasure to give free reign to the impulse to connect, to remember that human beings are social animals. Aristotle figured this out long ago, but it is a fact often forgotten when everyone is busy, competition is fierce and people who say hello on the street usually want spare change.

In our new neighbourhood, my openness was suspect, something people either feared or scorned, and with each unresponsive encounter, I drew inward.

On Easter Sunday, we went for a walk and left both sets of keys in the apartment, locking ourselves out. We had no car, no cell phone and no money, and were sitting on the steps with a growing sense of despair when the woman with wild hair appeared. She was a welcome sight. We followed her into a living room full of quirky antiques where she talked non-stop while we waited for the landlord.

Our little crisis had built a bridge, and she rushed over it as eagerly as we did. Her name was Deirdre. The next evening she knocked on the door, then stayed for supper. She confessed to being lonely, too. The first flush of friendship warmed us; the ache of being unacknowledged vanished. Conversation moved easily until late in the evening, when the story Deirdre was telling grew too big to be believed. We questioned her and she insisted it was true, making the tale even more outlandish. We became tongue-tied and felt suddenly trapped in this new relationship.

Over time, we learned Deirdre was struggling with the consequences of brain injury. She was smart but easily flustered. When she got flustered, she lost the coordinates of reality, and her stories took strange turns. The next evening, when she appeared at our door, David and I were cautious, but the ready affinity we shared with her won out, and over the ensuing months, we learned how to respond when she lost her mental balance.

The injury had also affected her self-control, making it difficult for her to repress the impulse to reach out to others. Everyone in the building knew her knock on their door. She loved to help people. "I make things happen," she said. She introduced us to the woman upstairs, and arranged for us to get furniture from the guy on the second floor when he moved out. When the gay couple moved in, she made sure we met them, too.

She celebrated her 60th birthday with a dozen neighbours half her age. Her large collection of household goods was loaned around: a kitchen table in one suite, rugs in another. People sometimes took advantage of her generosity, so there were occasions when a loaned item was suddenly retracted in fear. Her trust, spontaneously extended, would be pulled away, only to be extended again after a reassuring conversation. Extending trust, then reconsidering, is the pattern for establishing any relationship; with Deirdre the process was faster and more dramatic.

Over the space of a year, she facilitated a shift in the dynamics of our building that changed strangers into neighbours who borrowed sugar and eggs, attended one another's parties, piled on the bed for Friday night TV, and met one another's friends, who usually said they wished their apartment buildings were so friendly. What they envied was the *philia*, the neighbourly love that made our shabby hallways a great place to be. We shared our problems with one another, helped if we could, had arguments and learned how to patch things up again, practising the old-fashioned virtue of forgiveness.

We were concerned for one another. We grew trust and companionship. Instead of living as isolated individuals, we were an engaged community, each of us enjoying the benefits of Deirdre's inability to control the impulse that makes us social animals.

This same impulse is at work on the outskirts of Langley, an hour from my apartment, where Michael Simpson is at the heart of another experiment in *philia*. Tonight, we've gathered to celebrate Michael's 39th birthday. Recent knee surgery has left Michael unable to leave the house. I ask Michael how he is feeling. "Excellent today," he says. His knee is still swollen and has to be kept

elevated. He's been sitting in his reclining chair for weeks now and, as he tells me, "watching too much TV."

Michael's mother Nell turned 77 this year and is worried about how Michael will manage when she's gone. He doesn't have any family in the city, and she is afraid he'll be lonely, that someone may take advantage of him, that he'll be unhappy. The philia growing between Michael and each of his friends gives Nell some comfort. For the past year, I've been one of these friends, participating in the halting process by which human beings bind ourselves together in caring.

There are 10 of us in the small living room, drinking punch and eating cookies. With the exception of Michael, his mother and her closest friend, we lack the advantage of seeing one another every day. We each know Michael from different places: some of us are old neighbours, some go to his church. A few of us are meeting for the first time.

Ruth knows all of us. She helped Michael with the party invitations, and tonight she's brought a guitar. We're chatting politely when she suggests we sing instead of "just sitting around talking." Ruth has a lovely voice and leads off. A few of us join self-consciously on the chorus. Someone suggests "You are My Sunshine," and it turns out Michael knows every word. As he sings, everyone sheds their reluctance and joins in.

Singing is exhilarating, making us more like my neighbour Deirdre, full of enthusiasm we can't quite contain. When we break for birthday cake, the conversation is animated and we're more open with one another. The candles are blown out and we're into the carrot cake when Nell begins to reminisce about the English pub songs of her youth. We all collapse in laughter over the one that goes, "Nellie, Nellie, show me your belly." We sing scraps of song for the better part of an hour, laughing ourselves breathless. Everyone's eyes are sparkling, and there is a bond between each of us that wasn't there before.

It is almost 10 o'clock before people pull on coats and start to say good byes. Even then we linger, caught in the conversation, still singing the odd snatch of song, held here by the warmth we've created together.

Sandra Shields is a writer who, with her husband, photographer David Campion, has contributed many stories to Philia. Sandra and David's new book, **The Company of Others: Stories of Belonging**, was produced with **PLAN Institute**. It will be available in November 2005