

Making Ripples

The Role of Friendship in Making a Difference

by Amanda Bancroft

Friendship is an awesome power for making ripples. Positive peer pressure can make us plant trees with our friends, while negative peer pressure can make us hate those who are different. While friendship can be a wonderful asset in changing the world, sometimes it's best to just let the love of friendship blossom without tying our friends to our personal choices and opinions. The most influential path around disagreement might be setting a good example rather than judging people.

True, we may absolutely hate it that our friend is a vegan activist or a ravenous carnivore. It may bother us to our toes when someone votes for a different candidate. If a good friend chooses to harm the environment because they value money above clean water, it might really seem like they are evil. They're probably not. Just this morning, they may have saved a cute turtle crossing a road minutes before they tossed their Styrofoam cup out their car window, littering. Humans are complicated, three-dimensional hero-villains.

While it's a fantastic idea not to vilify people who disagree with us, it's also wonderful to not let friendship get in the way of stopping harm when we see it. It is totally ok to respect a friend's inherent worth and dignity, and to gently step in when they make a racist comment or throw trash on the ground. If they refuse to listen and want to continue harmful behavior, there are many alternatives to yelling obscenities at them and burning bridges with fire from the nearest volcano. They may not keep their previous role in your life, but there's no need for revenge.

Sure our best friend might be the president of Ducklings for All, and maybe they rescued many flocks. But if he is abusing that position to keep all the ducklings for himself, and nobody is getting any ducklings, and people are crying "fowl" for years because of duckling abuse they've witnessed, it's ok to say you love your friend and like all the good things he did but agree that the bad things were wrong and someone else needs to be president now. The two of you can still have fun together, just keep him away from any ducklings! Friendship can't be an accountability shield. Consequences and friendships can coexist.

Sometimes just letting friends know we make sustainable choices for our health and environment leads them to follow suit, and no conflict arises at all! It can take decades or even a lifetime to make major changes, and your friendship will probably help them when they're angry that they can't afford solar panels after five years of saving. Or you might come along with a vegetarian recipe just when they thought they couldn't refrain from eating meat any longer. Or you might gently remind them to stop using pejorative terms for minority groups, and then give them a duckling.

Amanda Bancroft is a writer, artist, and naturalist building an off-grid cottage for land conservation on Mt. Kessler. She and her husband Ryan blog about their adventures and offer a solar-hosted online educational center on how to make a difference with everyday choices at: www.RipplesBlog.org.