

What Women Crave

With 232 million people using Twitter every month and more than 1.3 billion people on Facebook last year, it's safe to say we live in an incredibly "connected" world. Yet with hundreds of friends and loved ones just a click away on social media or a text away on the phone, why do so many women feel isolated and alone? With ladies longing for meaningful connections to help them grow in their faith and find emotional wholeness, now is the perfect time for Pamela Havey Lau's new book, *A Friend in Me: How to Be a Safe Haven for Other Women*.

Women today also crave relational connection with women who are further ahead of them on their journey. So many want mentors, guides and role models to whom they can bring their accomplishments and failures to feel affirmed, mutually respected and understood. In *A Friend in Me*, Lau shows women how to be a safe place for those who are in earlier stages of life than they are, teaching them habits for strengthening bonds such as offering comfort, acting with understanding and relating with compassion.

Q: You say the themes in *A Friend in Me* have been forming in you for your entire adult life. Can you tell us more about that?

When I was in my early 20s, I had an insatiable desire to understand spiritual things but felt trapped by what I read and saw in Christian media and the church. My own family fell apart when I was a teenager, so in many ways my early adult years were a time of healing. I couldn't find examples of women I could identify with. It was tempting to become spiritually independent.

I even used my graduate thesis project to explore this journey by looking at mediated images of women. What opened my heart

and mind fully to the things of God was deeper relationships with key women along the way. Certain women's relationship with me and their ways of being close to me softened my heart toward the kingdom, to the real person of Jesus Christ. This was particularly true in my early adult years as my faith was becoming more of my own.

The ones, however, who made the biggest impact on my faith were women who didn't compartmentalize my vocation or my personal life but related Christ to the whole of who I was. Through these relationships I discovered that coming from a broken home, being single or married, becoming a mother, being a working woman or leaving my career, experiencing painful losses, enjoying successes—none of these things were more powerful than my identity in Christ.

Q: How have social media and technology both helped and hindered intimate friendships?

Overall, it seems social media keeps us connected to people we wouldn't normally reach out to, especially people from our past. Research shows that high use of Facebook can cause depression among women. My friends tell me that Facebook makes them jealous or brings up a fear of missing out faster than anything else. Does that mean social media outlets are evil? No. It just means that's what really is in our hearts. The question becomes are we prepared to do what we need to do to keep our hearts clean when using all kinds of media? It's like we're on fast-forward relationally, and not much else kills intimacy in friendship than comparing, jealousy or feeling left out.

I love Skype and FaceTime because many of my intimate friends are around the nation and the world. Once a week, my friend and I dialogue about NT Wright's latest Bible study via Skype. It's like we are sitting together in my living room. In our case, technology has absolutely helped our friendship as our time together doesn't require traffic jams, long drives or

finding places to meet. Texting is an amazing device to send/receive prayer requests or to just check in with someone.

Texting can be toxic when it's used for solving conflict. Relying solely on texting can create misunderstandings. No amount of emoji can replace human facial expression. As much as I can, I try to meet someone in person, talk on the phone or use Skype. If that's not possible, I move to text or social media.

Q: Tell us what personal tragedy caused you to realize finally how deeply you needed to be in close relationships with other women?

The day before our third wedding anniversary, my brother-in-law and his fiancée were killed in a head-on collision on their way home from visiting family in Oklahoma. I write about it more extensively in the book, but I realized after six months of drowning in grief how much I needed constant support and input as I walked through suffering with my young husband. Even more, I needed to hear how women got to the other side of their suffering. The only way I could ever know stories like that was by truly knowing them, not just hearing about them.

Q: What would you say is the primary factor that holds women back from truly loving other women?

Obviously, each woman is unique in her growing-up years, her make-up and her relational needs. First, I would say it's a spiritual battle; the enemy wants women divided and distanced from one another. If I could identify the primary factor that holds women back from truly loving other women, it would be safety.

When an agenda is introduced into the relationship, hearts begin to shrink. Increasingly, women's relationships are not safe places for other women to find rest, encouragement, motivation, prayer and support. We don't need to be uniformly

like-minded to have another woman's back. Having someone who is for her with no strings attached—that's the sense she wants and needs from other women so she can let her guard down, receive some ministry and hear from God.

For some women, loving other women well has never been modeled for them, and that's a problem as the next generation is watching us to see how beautiful, loving, life-giving relationships are formed.

Q: What are some practical steps women can take to start and form deep friendships?

First of all, **ask** yourself if you sense a need for deeper connections. If you can answer that with an honest affirmation, then the next step is to **pray** and ask God for what you need. While you are praying, learn to **initiate**. Initiating with another woman feels risky because we all know the "Hey, let's get together some time" routine, and it doesn't ever happen. The more women initiate with one another and **follow through**, the greater the chances are of making a lasting a connection. See initiating as planting seeds, and watch your crop grow.

When you finally get together, the two most important steps you can take is to **ask good questions and listen**. Madeleine L'Engle once said something like this: If more of us had a friend whom we could share our deepest selves with, there wouldn't be a need for professional counselors. I'm not suggesting we don't need professional mental health care – we do! Nevertheless, many of our struggles and problems could be ironed out with the care and concern of close friends.

Does that mean friendship exists only to serve as a sounding board? Absolutely not! And that's the art of true friendship – to enjoy one another, have fun, celebrate the good, share life and shopping and insights. And when the suffering times come – which they always do – mourn with those who mourn. Learn to

comfort, to show up at midnight when the phone rings, to pray for your friend.

Q: Many women are wary of being vulnerable with other women because they've been burned in the past. What are ways women can make sure they're safe havens for others?

The more women can become humble in their relationships, the greater the chances are of becoming a safe haven for other women. Two areas women are longing for more vulnerability from other women are in vocation and sexuality. I've discovered it's in these two areas in which we can easily feel miserable because not enough of us are talking about them safely. Once we've determined to put aside any agenda to fix another woman, she can open up to us. As long as we remember her number-one identity is in Christ and not in an image we want her to have, we can lessen the chances of "burning" her. I think that goes both ways.

I devoted an entire chapter to sexuality. After years of working with college students, I saw the damage we can create when we don't talk openly about sex. Christian women across the globe can become safe havens for others as they swallow their wrong attitudes and fears about sex and listen to what other women need to ask or say. No matter our beliefs on homosexuality, pornography or other sexual issues, we must develop a grit and vocabulary to have these conversations. Why would we want the culture to have a stronger voice than the church?

Q: What is your prayer for your readers as they dig into *A Friend in Me*?

I'm praying for a movement around the globe for women to find satisfaction, healing and safety in closer relationships with the women God has placed in their lives. For the believing women who are silently suffering from depression, anger or hard to share emotions, I am praying for them to find a safe

haven so they can be ministered to. From that movement, I'm praying for women who don't know Jesus Christ to look on and say, "I want that! I want the kind of relationships those women are having!" My prayer is that as they examine what other women have, they will see the merciful, forgiving, compassionate, comforting love of God.

*Learn more about **Pamela Havey Lau** and A Friend in Me at ,
on Facebook () or by following her
on Twitter (@pamelahaveylau).*