CHAPTER 10

Social Relationships

Writing about "Why I Love America," the late British journalist Henry Fairlie recounted this memory:

> One spring day, shortly after my arrival [in the United States], I was walking down the long, broad street of a suburb, with its sweeping front lawns (all that space), its tall trees (all that sky), and its clumps of azaleas (all that color). The only other person on the street was a small boy on a tricycle. As I passed him, he said "Hi!" just like that. No four-year-old boy had ever addressed me without an introduction before. Yet here was this one, with his cheerful "Hi!" Recovering from the culture shock, I tried to look down stonily at his flaxen head, but instead, involuntarily, I found myself saying in return: "Well—hi!" He pedaled off, apparently satisfied. He had begun my Americanization.

The word *Hi!* Fairlie goes on to say,

> is a democracy. (I come from a country where one can tell someone's class by how they say "Hallo!" or "Hello!" or "Hullo," or whether they say it at all.) But [in America] anyone can say "Hi!" Anyone does. (1983, 12)

Like many people from other countries, Fairlie was struck, even stunned, by the degree of informality and egalitarianism that prevails among Americans. Anyone can say "Hi!" to anyone. First names are used almost immediately. People (most of them) seem warm and friendly from the very start. Fairlie remembers his first meetings with the Suffragan Bishop of Washington and with President Lyndon B. Johnson. Both greeted him with "Hi, Henry!" In most countries, such a thing simply would not happen.

There is a difference, however, between friendliness and friendship. While Americans may seem relatively warm and approachable upon first encounter, they may later seem remote and unreachable. *Superficial* is the word many longer-term international visitors use to describe Americans' relationships with other people. Some of them believe that it is only with foreigners that Americans tend to make friends slowly, if they make them at all. More observant visitors notice that Americans tend to be remote and unreachable even among themselves. They are very private, keeping their personal thoughts and feelings to themselves. They are difficult to get to know on a deeper level.

So far we have been generalizing about Americans' behavior toward people they have just met and about some aspects of their behavior in social interactions. The points made so far are the ones international visitors most commonly make when they discuss their experiences with Americans. What follows is more information and ideas about meeting new people, friendship, relationships prescribed by roles, courtesy, schedules, and gifts. The chapter closes with suggestions for foreign visitors who want to meet and develop relationships with Americans.

MEETING NEW PEOPLE

Fairlie indicated that in his native country, one person does not usually talk to another until the two have been introduced to each other by a mutual friend or colleague. So it is in many countries, but not in the United States. Of course, such acquaintanceships may well begin when people are introduced to each other, but they may also begin when one person simply starts a conversation with another. There is no need, Americans will say, to "stand on formality."

Why do people pursue relationships with others in the first place? Cultural differences in this respect can lead to misunderstanding and disappointment. When I was working at a binational cultural center in Peru, some of the people I met through my work showed an interest in spending more time with me. They stayed after a class or meeting to talk with me. They invited me to accompany them here or there. Sooner or later, they would get around to asking me if I could help them get a scholarship to study in the United States.

Americans who have lived in China report similar experiences. Some Chinese would go out of their way to be friendly or helpful, and a personal relationship seemed to be developing. Sooner or later, though, came a request for an intercession to get admitted to a university in the United States, for a letter of recommendation, for help providing a document about financial support, or for some other type of assistance.

In personal relationships, Americans tend to feel they are being taken advantage of when they believe someone is being friendly to them just because they have (or are perceived to have) connections or abilities that can help the other person. Americans have not been raised to see other people as potential links to still other people whose favorable attention they might sometime wish to gain. Their motivation in pursuing social relationships is generally not to make connections that might be helpful in other aspects of life, but to find companionship based on shared personal interests.

In the business world, of course, the idea of pursuing acquaintanceship on the basis of connections—or "networking"—is widely accepted. People who are building their careers are advised to "develop a network" of people who might be able to help them. Some 65 million business and professional people now use a multilingual website called "LinkedIn" for just this purpose. Employees might even be evaluated in part on the basis of their "networking skills." Notice, though, that such relationships are not considered friendships, in which people develop close, personal ties. They are explicitly for potential benefit in a career or business enterprise, and all parties involved have that same idea in mind.

How do Americans get to know the people who might possibly become their friends? They meet each other at school, in offices, in religious and volunteer organizations, at sports facilities, through mutual acquaintances, in bars, over the Internet, and, as Fairlie learned, on the sidewalk. Anyone

can say "Hi!" to anyone and can stop to ask a question. (Asking a question is a more common way of opening a conversation than is making a statement.) A tone of friendly informality is nearly always appropriate. Those people who do not wish to be engaged in a conversation with someone to whom they have not been introduced will make that fact clear by their response.

The small talk topics discussed in chapter 2 are common among Americans and are appropriate for interactions with new people. Foreigners meeting Americans will want to keep in mind the other aspects of communicative style addressed in chapter 2—the favorite mode of interaction, the depth of involvement sought, and so on. Remember that Americans, like everyone else, prefer to employ their accustomed communicative style. In their country, their style prevails.

More ideas about initiating interactions with Americans appear in the final section of this chapter.

THE AMERICAN CONCEPT OF FRIENDSHIP

International visitors sometimes feel betrayed by Americans whom they meet and who seem so kind and interested at first but who later fail to allow new acquaintances to really get to know them as individuals. That initial friendly "Hi!" may come to seem dishonest or misleading as the small talk continues and Americans' ideas about important topics remain hidden. "They seem cold, not really human," one Brazilian woman said. "Americans just can't let themselves go."

The Nature of Friendship

Many Americans seem unavailable for the close friendships that many foreigners have had (and taken for granted) at home and assume they will find in the United States. Sometimes people simply lack the time required to get to know another person well. Many have moved from one place to another in the past, assume they will do so again, and thus may prefer not to establish intimate friendships that will be painful to leave. Americans have also been taught, as was discussed in chapter 1, to become independent,

self-reliant individuals. Although such individuals may have a large circle of friends, they are likely to avoid becoming too dependent on other people or allowing others to become dependent on them. With the exception of their immediate families, they often remain apart from others, because they most likely have not learned to do otherwise.

This is not to say that Americans never have close friendships. They do. Such relationships are relatively rare, however, and can take years to develop. Moreover, the close friendships Americans form often differ from those to which many foreigners are accustomed. Because Americans are so busy with school, their careers, and other activities, it is not uncommon for them to go weeks, months, or even longer without seeing their close friends, especially if they live in different cities. They might or might not be in regular contact with their friends by telephone, e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, a blog, or even, in ever fewer instances, a letter written on paper and sent through the mail. The most important characteristics of a close friendship, for many Americans, are the freedom to discuss private, personal matters as well as the persistence of the relationship over time and distance.

It is important to remember that there are exceptions to these generalizations. Some Americans are indeed willing to devote the time that is necessary to get to know new acquaintances well and to develop close friendships with them. They will talk openly about personal thoughts and feelings that other Americans rarely reveal.

Compartmentalized Friendships

Americans typically assume that when people gather to socialize, they will undertake some activity together. They may go to a restaurant for lunch or dinner, go to a movie, play cards, engage in or watch sports, or "have a few drinks." Americans do not usually assume that it can be pleasant or rewarding to sit and talk with other people for extended periods. (Americans would probably say "just sit" and "just talk.") Their discomfort with such a lack of structured activity is often evident if they are forced to sit and interact with people they do not know fairly well.

In some ways teenagers are an exception to what has just been said. They often "hang out" (or just "hang") with other teens—at a mall, in someone's

car, or at one of their homes. Even so, the sense they often convey is not that they are enjoying each other's idle company but that they are looking for something to do or waiting for something to happen.

When they are apart from their peers, many teenagers—and not only teenagers, as things are evolving—use electronic social networks or other electronic means to "keep in touch" with their "friends" or "followers" and possibly arrange to get together in person.

Perhaps because of their emphasis on "doing things" with friends, Americans typically develop what have been called *compartmentalized friendships*. That is, they tend to have different friends with whom they engage in different activities. For example, Americans might have friends with whom they study, others with whom they go to the gym, and still others with whom they go shopping or dancing on Saturday nights. Likewise, coworkers who eat lunch together every day and occasionally go out for drinks after work may never set foot in one another's homes or meet members of one another's families.

Gender Roles and Friendship

In many countries, a friend must be a person of one's own gender. Most Americans, though, believe it is possible to have friends of the opposite sex, and they do not generally assume that a male and female will participate in sexual activity if they are alone together. This is not to say that Americans see no sexual component in a male-female friendship; they believe the people involved are capable of showing the restraint and maturity necessary to avoid sexual interaction if it is inappropriate for the situation. Thus, male and female business colleagues might travel to a conference together without anyone's assuming their relationship entails sexual contact.[*]

Staying in Touch with Friends

How people stay in contact with their friends is influenced by technology and age. I remember an almost-stereotypical scene at an outdoor café on a

[*] Chapter 12, "Male-Female Relationships," explores the issue of male-female relationships more fully.

Greek island. As I had expected, there was the bright sunshine, the white buildings and blue tile, a patio for the diners, and, at the table adjacent to mine, four young men with their drinks and their cigarettes. They were talking animatedly. But they were not talking to each other. Each had a cell phone and was talking to someone somewhere else.

So it is with younger Americans, among whom cell phone ownership is more and more common. Talking on a cell phone, though, is becoming less common than using one to send and receive text messages.

Older Americans are more likely to talk than text on their cell phones, if they own one. U.S. Americans in the "senior citizen" category are less likely to own cell phones than are younger people, and they rarely use them for texting.

Letters are also fading in popularity. With the continuing advances in communications technology and the increasing preference among young people for "instant gratification," ever fewer people write letters on paper and mail them to their friends.

RELATIONSHIPS PRESCRIBED BY ROLES

The anthropologist Edward T. Hall, in a famous book called *The Silent Language* (1959), has described the United States as a "low-context culture." In such a culture, the meaning in a message is conveyed mainly by the words in the message itself. The "sender" of the message is expected to make meanings explicit and clear. In a "high-context culture," by contrast, meanings may be conveyed more by the context. A "receiver" is expected to understand a sender's indirect message. Japan, China, and Saudi Arabia are examples of high-context cultures. Some argue that U.S. American females among themselves are more high-context in their behavior than are their male counterparts.

In a high-context culture, rules—normally unspoken, but still known to all who share the culture—are built into many situations. For example, a proper young Latin American woman does not allow herself to be in the company of a man unless some responsible third party is present. That is the

rule, and everyone knows it. In Japan, rules govern who sits where in a meeting, who speaks first, and which specific words are to be voiced in specific circumstances. Cathy Davidson, writing about her experience as a visiting professor in Japan, recounts an instructive incident that took place when she and her husband were eating in an elegant restaurant. Seated near them was a Japanese couple who would soon be traveling to the United States. The couple was intensely watching Professor Davidson and her husband, studying their table manners. Eventually, the Japanese woman asked them the correct angle for tipping one's soup bowl when one is taking the last spoonful of soup from the bowl (Davidson, 2006, 25–27). Americans have no rule for such a detail as this, and would typically be stunned by the idea that anyone else would have a rule about it.

In a high-context culture such as Japan's there are rules for countless situations. There are even rules governing when usual rules can be broken! (Davidson, 2006, 148).

In the United States, however, there are far fewer situations in which people's behavior is governed by widely agreed-upon rules. Still, some roles generally entail certain expected behaviors. Such roles include customer, tenant, neighbor, and coworker. While it is possible to observe regional and institutional variations in the behaviors described here, a few generalizations seem warranted.

Customer. When shopping, dining out, or otherwise using the services of clerks, servers, or other service people, Americans tend to show their respect for the ideals of equality and individual dignity. They treat clerks and others as more or less equal to themselves, not as people they consider inferior. Treating a service person rudely or dismissively is highly frowned upon.

Tenant. A tenant's responsibilities are normally made explicit in the lease, or rental contract, the tenant signs. These responsibilities—paying a specified amount of rent by a specified date and properly caring for whatever appliances and furnishings the landlord provides—are the only ones that the tenant owes the landlord. In effect, the landlord-tenant relationship is governed by the rule of law that is discussed in chapter 5. The law in this case is the lease.

Particular tenants and landlords sometimes develop more personal relationships, of course.

Neighbor. A general rule among neighbors is to "mind your own business"—that is, don't intrude in one another's lives. Some neighborhoods are more friendly than others, meaning that more people in the neighborhood know each other and that the neighbors socialize with each other.

In a 2010 study of "Neighbors Online," the Pew Research center found that 19 percent of respondents "said that they knew the names of all of their neighbors," while 24 percent knew most of them. Twenty-eight percent didn't know any of their neighbors by name (2010a).

Residents of friendlier neighborhoods may have neighborhood "block parties," where neighbors get together for food, drink, and conversation. However friendly the neighborhood, there is generally an expectation among Americans that neighbors will assist each other in times of emergency or very pressing need. For example, they may take food to the home of a neighbor just home from a hospital stay or in grief over the loss of a family member. It is considered reasonable to ask a neighbor to "keep an eye" on a house or an apartment that will be vacant temporarily, as during a vacation. Newcomers to a neighborhood may take the initiative in inviting neighbors for coffee, a pastry, and a get-acquainted conversation. Or they may themselves be invited by neighbors for such a visit. In contrast, neighbors in an apartment building may have virtually no interaction with each other.

Coworker. In general, coworkers treat each other politely and with respect, regardless of their status in relationship to the others. The boss says "Good morning" in a pleasant voice to the receptionist and the file clerk; the latter smile and say "Good morning" back. Coworkers help each other with job-related matters, and they try to avoid open expressions of displeasure or other negative feelings toward each other. Although coworkers do not feel obligated to develop close relationships, they generally do feel they should contribute to keeping the emotional tone of the workplace pleasant for all who spend the day (or night) there. Many Americans believe that the workplace should have a kind of family atmosphere, even while this

general atmosphere of polite friendliness can mask what might be a very hierarchical method of operating.

COURTESY, SCHEDULES, GIFTS

Courtesy

Among Americans, being courteous has a number of elements:

- Acknowledging another person's presence or arrival, either verbally (if not with "hi!" then with "hello," "good morning," or some such greeting) or nonverbally, with a direct look, a nod, or a brief smile (By contrast, someone's departure from a group or gathering does not necessarily require explicit acknowledgement—as does a German's departure from a group of Germans, for example—except that a guest leaving a social event is expected to say thank-you and goodbye to the host.)
- Participating in at least a bit of small talk with people when one expects to be in their presence for more than a few minutes
- Using vocabulary, tone of voice, and vocal volume no less respectful than those used with peers; never "talking down" to others, issuing commands in an officious way, or in any way treating others as though they were inferior
- Saying "please" when making requests and "thank you" when requests are granted by anyone, including service people such as servers, taxi drivers, and hotel desk clerks and maids
- Saying "you're welcome" in response to a "thank you"
- Taking a place at the end of the line (what people in much of the world call a *queue*) and waiting patiently when a group of people have lined up for service or attention

Schedules

Considerate people will be mindful of other people's domestic schedules and will not telephone too early, too late, or during mealtimes. Most Americans

take breakfast between 7:00 and 9:00 A.M., lunch at noon or shortly thereafter, and an evening meal (called *dinner* in some parts of the country and *supper* in others) between 6:00 and 7:00 P.M. On Sundays, all meals may be taken somewhat later.

It is generally a good idea to make telephone calls to a person's home between the hours of 9:00 A.M. and 9:00 P.M. (except at mealtimes), unless there is reason to believe that everyone in the family will be awake before or after those hours.

Gifts

Comparatively speaking, Americans give gifts on a relatively small number of occasions and to a relatively small circle of people. Since offering gifts to people who do not expect them can be mutually embarrassing and can even lead to the suspicion that the gift-giver is seeking to influence the recipient inappropriately, international visitors will want to be mindful of Americans' practices concerning gifts.

Generally, Americans give gifts to relatives and close friends. Frequently they give gifts to hosts or hostesses (flowers, wine, or candy are common). They do not normally give gifts to teachers (except perhaps elementary-school teachers, who sometimes receive gifts from children in their classes), business colleagues, or other people who might be in a position to grant or withhold favorable treatment (such as a good grade in a class or a contract for a sale). In fact, giving gifts to people who are in a position to grant or withhold favors can be construed as an improper attempt to gain favor. Many states have laws strictly limiting the value of gifts that public employees can accept.

Christmas comes close to being a national gift-giving day in the United States. Except for adherents of non-Christian religions, Americans exchange Christmas gifts with relatives, close friends, and sometimes schoolmates and business associates. Other typical gift-giving occasions include birthdays, graduations, weddings, and childbirths. Some people give gifts on Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Valentine's Day. A "housewarming" gift is sometimes given to people who have moved into a new home.

Americans try to select a gift they believe the recipient could use or would enjoy. People are not expected to give expensive gifts unless they can

readily afford them. "It's the thought that counts," Americans say, not the amount of money the gift cost. Increasing numbers of Americans give gift cards or gift certificates, which allow their recipients to choose whatever merchandise or service they prefer.

Internet gift registries take the guesswork out of deciding what gift to buy for the registrant. Such registries are most often used in relation to weddings, where the bride and groom indicate which of a store's items of merchandise they would like to have. Gift-givers then log on to the store's website and select from the items so identified. In some cases the store will send the gift, with a card, to its intended recipient.

Many Americans send Christmas cards to their friends, acquaintances, distant family members, and, in some instances, business colleagues. Those who follow a non-Christian religion may send a holiday card to convey "season's greetings" or some such nonsectarian message. Along with cards, many people send a "Christmas letter" or "holiday letter" that summarizes their family's activities of the past year—normally emphasizing the positive and minimizing the negative. The advent of e-mail and economic hardship has caused many Americans to shorten their list of recipients for Christmas cards. They may send e-mails (which, of course, are free) instead, or simply fall out of touch.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INTERNATIONAL VISITORS

The preceding paragraphs offer a number of specific suggestions for visitors. This chapter closes with some general ideas for those who want or are compelled to become involved in relationships with Americans.

The general advice is simple: take the initiative, but go slowly.

Take the initiative, because most Americans already have their lives organized and their time occupied before you come on the scene. For them it is easier to interact with other people who share their own language and culture than it is to interact with international visitors. Like most people in most countries, Americans will not usually seek out international visitors. Thus, those people here from abroad who want to get to know Americans

will have to take the initiative in meeting people, starting conversations, and setting up opportunities for subsequent interactions. By closely watching how Americans interact with each other in various settings, you can learn how they greet each other, start conversations, keep them going, and end them.

Go slowly, because it takes time, in the United States as anywhere else, to develop interpersonal relationships in which people know and trust each other and feel at ease in each other's company. Some foreign visitors become so lonely and make their need for companionship so plain to the people they meet that Americans are frightened away. "He seemed absolutely desperate for someone to talk to," Americans might say after meeting a lonely foreign visitor. "I was afraid to get involved." Remember that Americans do not value dependent relationships the way many other people do. Rather, they fear them. Go slowly.

Have some conversation topics ready, so as not to be at a loss for something to say. (Remember, even brief lapses in conversation can make Americans uneasy.) Most Americans are interested in topics or questions that have to do with cultural differences and with language. Make note of idiomatic terms or slang you hear and do not understand, and ask Americans what they mean. Keep in mind things you see Americans do that you are not sure you understand, and ask Americans about them. Tell them about amusing or mildly embarrassing experiences you have had in their country. Ask them about themselves, their families, their jobs, their travels, their interests. (But don't ask them questions about money!) If other topics fail, talk about what to talk about. Explain what two people in your current situation would normally talk about if they were in your country, and ask what two Americans would normally talk about here.

Find people or groups who share your interests. Millions of Americans belong to clubs or organizations centered on various hobbies, sports, and other avocational activities.

Finally, be persistent. Patient, but persistent. Not all of your efforts to establish rewarding social relationships with Americans will succeed. You are likely to have to try again and again until you meet a person or a group of people in whose company you find mutual enjoyment. When you do discover such people, you will not only enjoy their companionship but also have the best possible window on American culture.