

Ah.... I thought we were friends

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Seriously. It's my mistake. I thought we were friends, if you know what I mean. I had thought you did. Somehow, though, I detected a little niggle, like a slightly uncomfortable inner tickle; except not really funny. The feeling was kind of light, almost gentle. Looking back it wasn't so much a tickle as that "I know an old man who swallowed a butterfly" sensation.

It didn't start that way; our friendship, or perhaps more accurately our acquaintance-ship. At the start we didn't know each other, obviously. We got to know each other, by looks and small-talk, by misunderstood facial expressions, and by hopeful understanding of each other. There was plenty of generosity, of "believing the best", of hope. There was perhaps even hope that this was a friendship, at least in my heart.

I never said so (I mean I never said "perhaps we are becoming friends"), as is so often the case. New relationships are rarely clearly defined - it's simply too scary - too much would be risked by talking about it. So we just ambled along as we got to know each other. It looked quite promising, from my point of view. I never asked how you saw our relationship.

And then it happened. We had known each other for quite some time. In fact, I would have said we had kind of agreed to be friends, even close-ish friends. Certainly true friends.

When it happened, I didn't initially see it for what it was. Looking back I realise it felt uncomfortable for you, at perhaps a fairly deep level. I realised I had stepped into a place I hadn't been invited into.

It was a bit like when I visited someone's house and felt them give me space to be at home. And then, quite unintentionally, I realised I felt too "at home". I had left my hairbrush and toothbrush in the bathroom.

It was okay ... but not really. They may have thought I was settling in permanently, or just figured that I was starting to get too familiar. They felt uncomfortable. And suddenly I felt embarrassed. They may have felt embarrassed too. Either way, I had misread the situation. I had been too relaxed, felt too free, let the guard down too soon.

So, next time I visited, I kept my hairbrush and other personal effects tucked safely away in my designated room. I tried not to overstep the invitation to "come closer".

And so when I visited, it was just that: me visiting. It was their home, and I was ... well ... visiting. I didn't feel so much at home, but through our mostly wordless interactions around such issues I became clearer that this current state of affairs seemed to be in line with their preferences.

I realise all this is conjecture, or at the very least "reading between the looks". I hope I have understood their preferences. But, it's hard to know ... and discussions about how "at home" to feel in someone else's home are rare and probably too uncomfortable for most people to have.

In any case, enough of how it can be to stay at someone's house. What I was talking about was being friends.

Hopefully you can see some similarities between forming friendships and feeling at home in a new space. I am left with questions:

- How 'at home' is it good to be in new spaces?
- What actions are okay in the new space?
- What activities might be seen as inappropriate?
- What interactions would be better avoided for now?
- What topics should be permanently off-limits in this space?

So many questions; so few discussed. So much guesswork; so few assumptions tested for truth.

Coming back to the nub of my apology, for that is what I am essentially trying to express; I made a mistake. You see, I defined "friendship" in my own way. I thought we saw the word from quite similar perspectives, like how I felt when staying at that person's house, where I thought I knew how we might live well together, albeit temporarily. Again, I made a mistake.

Usually my error is to share too much, to be more interactive, be more at home, speak my mind too freely; in my view to be too close a "friend" too soon. Over the years, the *long* years, I have realised I have essentially taken liberties, walked into rooms I wasn't invited into and in my (usually unspoken) definition of "friend", been too close a friend.

My unusual, and quite indigenously African, upbringing leads me to treat others in a way that leaves them uncomfortable at times. Some people do find these ways of interacting refreshingly absent of some "British" etiquette, but many others prefer some respectful distance. Certainly, all people should be allowed to choose for themselves.

My intention was not to "be in your business" or to "stray from my lane" or to be insensitive to your boundaries, whether specified or not. My assumptions were, sadly and as far as I am aware, wrong. For that I am sorry.

I assumed that you and I shared the same culture, and hence had similar concepts of what it means to be a friend. I was naive, I suppose; simplistic. It's something I am working on: how to live true to my convictions, giving myself freely and without reserve or concern for my "safety" thus throwing caution to the wind; and at the same time allowing others to live as they choose. It's usually a clash of cultures, for me, given that I don't even really share a common culture with the family I grew up in. My culture is an unusual mix, so how would I even expect to meet someone with a culture like mine?

Bizarrely, in my culture, and from my fairly unique perspective, I felt I was paying you a compliment by including you in my sphere of friendships; it's how I treat friends, as opposed to more casual acquaintances. My impression is that you didn't experience it that way. Sadly, of course, I also did not experience you treating me as a friend (using my friend-concept), but such terms seem to me to be culturally defined.

Where does it leave us? From my perspective I figure I treated you as a friend before we were really friends. I figured I was being generous. What I experienced in return was quite a “distant” “friendship” from you, one characterised by comparatively holding back - really an acquaintance-ship, or perhaps more like a casual work colleague. From your perspective I guess you may have desired for us to be respectful and not pushy towards each other, and found me both disrespectful and overly opinionated.

I am growing in my awareness of this cross-cultural challenge in terms of friendship. I am learning, slowly. I am working on still being generous in terms of giving of myself, but not pushy, to be okay with others who may find my behaviour a bit difficult and, whilst knowing that, resisting any urge to live conservatively or shut down.

I want to be friends when given the opportunity. If I treat you as I do my friends, and you would have preferred something different, then please know it's a misunderstanding. Know that when I realise we are not on the same page I will say to myself,

“Ah... I thought we were friends*. My mistake”.

In such cases, I will hope to be a good acquaintance* to you.

*as I currently define the concept