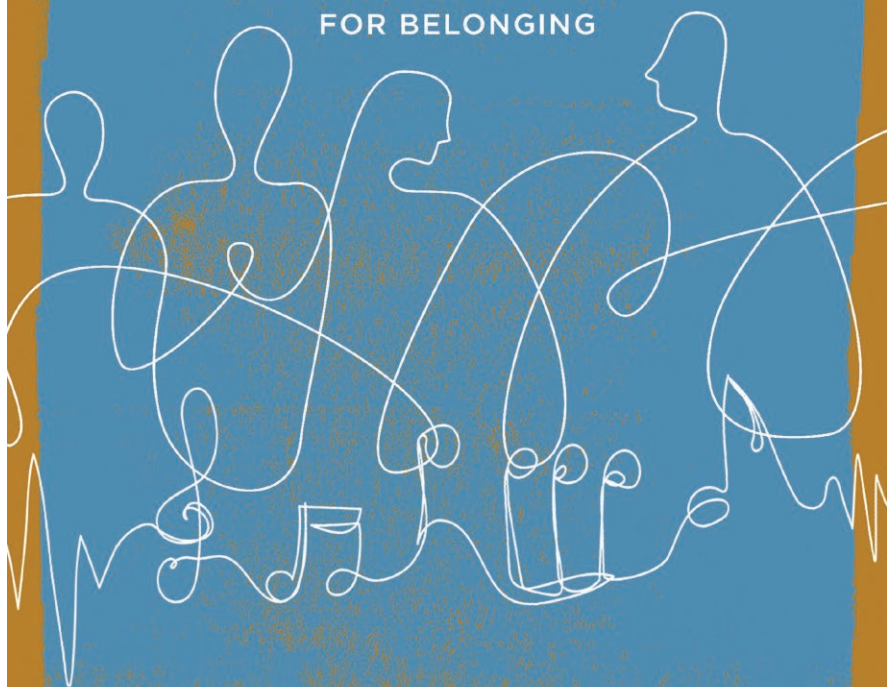


The Way of
BEFRIENDING

TRANSFORMING RELATIONSHIPS
AND ORGANIZATIONS
FOR BELONGING



PARFAIT BASSALÉ



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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION: A Fractured World	1
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PART 1: THE HARMS OF OTHERING

1 A Vision of Belonging	7
2 The Man Standing at the Door	17
3 The Anatomy of Othering	30

PART 2: A FRAMEWORK FOR BEFRIENDING

4 Befriending as the Antidote to Othering	49
5 The Three Commitments to Befriending	67
6 The Courage to Confront	86
7 The Curiosity to Ask, Learn, and Understand	97
8 The Compassion to Act and Walk Alongside	113

PART 3: PRACTICES OF BEFRIENDING

9 Systemic Befriending	125
10 Four Ingredients of Befriending	136
11 Befriending: The Five Steps	152

EPILOGUE	165
----------	-----

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	169
-----------------	-----

APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A: Tools for Navigating Conflict	173
---	-----

APPENDIX B: Tools for Organizational Befriending	196
--	-----

NOTES	211
-------	-----



A VISION OF BELONGING



IT IS SEPTEMBER 11, 2001.

I am an international student at Portland State University and still can't believe that I am here living in the American empire. It's too good to be true. I moved to Portland, Oregon, from the Republic of Senegal just a year prior. I do not call the United States home yet. Instead, I live in a space of contradiction. At times awestruck by the technological, architectural, and infrastructural advancements. Other times, I am irritated by the ignorance I encounter daily as people ask me things like, "How did you get here?" "Did you live near wildlife in Africa?" "*Parfait?* Like the yogurt?"

As a starving international student, I'm only allowed to work twenty hours a week on campus at minimum wage, all while being charged four times the in-state tuition rate. I work eighty. I pull graveyard shifts just to make ends meet. Life is hard. I repeatedly face the ethical decision of whether to abuse my bank overdraft policy one more time, just to get a meal before my debit card is blocked. I miss my parents. I miss my friends. I miss the food and the weather. I miss home.

Though I am grateful for the privilege of living the American struggle, I am growing frustrated with US Americans. The arrogance. The disconnect. The way they speak of international politics or the struggles of others, without understanding or empathy, wears on me.



I live in student housing, about ten minutes from campus. I hurry to class. As I pass another campus building with a TV in the lobby, I notice through the large glass windows that students are gathered around the screen. They are in shock—their hands cover their mouths or clutch their heads. Tears fall down cheeks. Utter dismay is on display. Some are sobbing. Others are hugging.

I move closer and see the footage: planes crashing into the Twin Towers. Early reports begin to frame the events as terrorist attacks.

And I exclaim. “Finally!” I say. “They’ll now know what it feels like to export wars offshore.”

I know. This is horrible.

Yes. This is *othering*.

But before you judge me, would you pause for a moment? Consider the people groups whose deaths you’ve been indifferent to. You may not have cheered, but has your silence, your apathy, or your justifications for their suffering echoed just as loudly? Whose pain or heartache have you dismissed as unfortunate but necessary? Whose humanity have you unconsciously bargained away?

In my case, the hurt, frustration, and daily pressures of survival had hardened my heart. My caricature of US Americans formed by my own experiences and surface-level connections had stripped them of their humanity. They had become an abstraction. A *them*. I had dehumanized them, focusing solely on the lesson I thought they needed to learn. And though I could rationalize then why I felt the way I did, in the process, I lost something essential: my own humanity.

It was only after I saw the footage of real people caught in the rubble and accounts of first responders, and imagined how horrendous it must have been for passengers on those planes or workers in those buildings, that I regained my humanity—abstraction subsided, and compassion took hold of my heart again. And I wept.

Sadly, not one of us escapes the wreckage of othering. Because that is what othering does. It strips us of our humanity—both the otherer and the othered. We stand firm on arguments, entrenched in our



positions, while we slowly sink in the disfiguring waters of indifference, resentment, fear, or judgment.

Plagued with guilt, mortified by the reckoning of my own vulnerability, and often reminded of our shared human struggle against these tendencies, I have prayerfully asked: *How do we transcend the gravitational pull of these disfiguring and dehumanizing waters of apathy, retribution, and contempt?*

A VISION OF FRIENDSHIP

One night as I lay in bed at three in the morning wrestling with this question, a vision unfolded before me. I saw a circle with the words “Be a Friend” inscribed at the center, the letter A blinking, fading in and out. These words were then surrounded by a doughnut chart divided into three sections, each inscribed with a single word: *courage*, *curiosity*, and *compassion*. Arrows pointed from one slice to the next, forming a continuous cycle.



Figure 1.1. Be a Friend

The message was clear: The path forward—our calling, our work, our sacred task—is to befriend the Other, whoever they may be. Courage to confront our fears and biases. Curiosity to initiate, ask, listen, and learn. Compassion to walk alongside and care deeply.

Three individuals dear to me appeared in the vision, each with the title of “Saint,” communicating the embodiment of this calling. Among them was Karima, my wife, whose life’s work has been befriending society’s outcasts: the houseless, those in alcohol or drug recovery, and refugees.¹ She embodies this vision, seeking out those on the margins and offering them dignity, love, and connection.

I awoke with a profound sense of purpose. This was more than a fleeting image. It was a call to action. To befriend the Other and to be a friend is a sacred and transformative undertaking. It transforms those who accept the call into agents of change, saints in the making.

This book was born of that vision. It is an invitation to step into the sacred work of befriending. In a world rife with division, it calls us to move through the barriers of race, religion, nationality, ideology, and economic status, and to see the Other not as an enemy or a subhuman but as a potential friend. Better yet, as a critical player in our own healing and journey toward belonging.

A UNITER WORTH LEARNING FROM

Before we go any further, I want to pause and point to someone whose life and leadership continue to shape my own: Jesus of Nazareth.

For some, a mention of Jesus may immediately spark reverence. For others, it may stir skepticism—or even pain. I understand that. The name of Jesus has been used in ways that have brought healing and also in ways that have caused harm. But what I invite you to consider here is not the institution of religion nor the politicization of faith, but the man himself. The historical figure. The rabbi. The healer. The uniter.

By any historical account, this first-century Jewish rabbi—born in obscurity, executed by empire—sparked a movement that changed the world. His teachings have influenced global ethics and civil rights movements, and inspired moral giants like Martin Luther King Jr., Desmond Tutu, Mother Teresa, Nelson Mandela, and others who have drawn deeply from his words and way. But what draws me to Jesus—especially in the context of this book—is not only his spiritual wisdom or moral authority; it's his relational leadership.

In a society rigidly structured by class, ethnicity, religious hierarchy, and gender expectations, out of all the titles Jesus could have chosen—Master, Lord, Rabbi—he looked his followers in the eye and said I no longer call you servants . . . I call you friends (John 15:15).

Friends.



That matters to me. Because this book is about befriending, not as sentiment but as a social force. Not just between people who already agree, but across the hardest divides. And Jesus knew something about that.

And perhaps most fascinating is who he chose to walk most closely with. His inner circle of the twelve disciples and Mary of Magdala was not a homogeneous group. They were a walking mosaic of different pasts, political conflicts, social class differences, personality clashes, and competing priorities.

Consider just a few of his followers:

- *Simon the Zealot* was part of a movement committed to the violent overthrow of Roman rule.
- *Matthew the tax collector* worked for that very empire, collecting revenue from his own people—someone the zealots would have seen as a traitor.
- *Peter* was hotheaded and bold, often speaking before thinking.
- *Thomas* was cautious, analytical, skeptical—a questioner by nature.
- *James* and *John*, known as the “Sons of Thunder,” had fiery tempers and even once asked Jesus to call down fire on a village.
- *Mary of Magdala* may have been marginalized and judged because of her past. She was not one of the Twelve but was likely a wealthy patron who traveled with Jesus and the disciples and provided resources needed for their travels.
- *Judas Iscariot*, whose motivations remain complex, would ultimately betray him.

These were not individuals who naturally saw the world the same way. Some would have grown up with disdain for each other’s families, professions, or politics. And yet, Jesus invited *them*. Not just to follow him individually, but to walk together.



He seated them at the same table. Broke bread with them. Called them friends. And entrusted them as flag bearers and ambassadors of his message of sacrificial love and insisted that the effectiveness of their mission hinged on their ability to love one another (John 13:35).

I can't help but see the parallel with the people I meet at trainings and conferences across the country, modern-day tribes whose values and wounds often place them at odds:

- *Aaliyah*, the exhausted Black woman, tired of being the bridge and the buffer—always expected to assimilate, to educate, to absorb, to endure.
- *Mike*, the unapologetic traditionalist, fiercely loyal to country and faith, wary of what he sees as a moral decline and cultural erasure.
- *Jordan*, the queer professional who no longer feels safe around churches, disillusioned by faith communities that once promised belonging but delivered harm.
- *Tara*, the anxious mom, caught between her desire to raise Christian children and her fear of losing control in a changing world.
- *Luis*, a political refugee whose life is stitched together with resilience and loss; once full of hope, now disillusioned, feeling abandoned by the very community he once thought welcoming as policies threaten his safety and keep his family out of reach.
- And many more—Asians, Native Americans, undocumented immigrants, people of faith, staunch atheists, law enforcement professionals, Black Lives Matter activists, liberals and conservatives, to name a few.

On paper, these individuals should not get along. Their stories pull in opposite directions. Their pain, their priorities, their politics don't naturally align.

And yet . . . what if they could sit at the same table?



What if the story of Jesus and his followers has something to teach us about our own fractured world?

It makes me wonder what Jesus knew about community that we've forgotten. How did he make space for that kind of difference—without denying truth, but also without demanding uniformity? What kind of love holds political enemies and personal opposites in the same circle—and calls them friends?

The Sermon on the Mount offers a clue. In it, Jesus lays out not just a set of beliefs, but a posture—a way of being with others:

Blessed are the poor in spirit . . .

Blessed are the merciful . . .

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. (Matthew 5:3-9)

Peacemakers. Not peacekeepers. Not avoiders. Not silencers of conflict. But those willing to move toward tension with courage, curiosity, and compassion. This is the heart of befriending.

To choose proximity when distance feels safer.

To listen before defending or critiquing.

To dignify even when we disagree.

To believe—even when the world says otherwise—that it is still possible to build something together.

What might happen if we tried to replicate what Jesus did? What if, like him, we made friendship, not agreement, the organizing principle of our communities?

IN THE SKIN OF THE OTHER

I often say, “The Other is just another us with a different story.” When I am asked why I am so passionate about helping people build relational bridges, I return to the story that has shaped me—the story of being an immigrant, repeatedly finding myself cast in the role of “the Other” during my most formative years. So as we embark on this



journey together, I invite you to step into my story, one shaped by movement, displacement, and the relentless pursuit of belonging.

There is no me without my parents. My story is a continuation of the stories of my father, Fatogoun Joe Bassalé, and my mother, Kokoé Josephine Kluse. Dad was an engineer by trade, a mathematical genius born during colonialism in the remote village of Dassa-Zoumé in southern Benin Republic.

Mom was born in Lomé, Togo. At just eight years old, she had to leave her parents to be raised by extended family. She had to develop strength and independence early in life. She met Dad in college, and together they raised me and my three siblings, providing a foundation of faith, love, and sacrifice.

Dad's career with an international organization specializing in air traffic safety took our family across West Africa. From Benin to Niger to Senegal, we relocated frequently. Each move brought a blend of excitement and challenge. My parents did everything they could to ensure we had a roof over our heads, food on the table, clothes on our backs, and shoes on our feet. They made tremendous sacrifices so we could attend the best schools wherever we went. For them education, hard work, and faith were key for a flourishing life.

Though my childhood was largely joyful, it was not without its moments of pain and dislocation. Because of our relocations and my status as an immigrant in each country, I never felt a strong attachment to any particular place. At times, I faced dehumanizing experiences—like being called “gnack,” a colloquial term used in Senegal to describe foreigners of African origin who are not Senegalese. Depending on the context and tone, it carries nuanced, often exclusionary, connotations.

These moments, though fleeting, left an imprint. They underscored my longing for a sense of home—a place where I could truly belong, free from the labels and limitations imposed by others.

As I reflect on my life journey, I realize that the only places I could consistently call home outside of my nuclear family were friendships.



And the more the friendships transcended race, religion, nationality, and socioeconomic class, the more I grew in perspective and empathy. These friendships became sanctuaries of belonging, where acceptance and difference coexisted in harmony.

One such friendship was with my elementary school best friend, Aziz. At first glance, Aziz and I could not have been more different. I was a financially poorer, Christian immigrant from Benin living in Senegal, while Aziz was a wealthier, Franco-Senegalese Muslim. He was the younger of two siblings, with an older brother studying in France, which often left him feeling like an only child. Despite our differences, we shared much in common: a love of soccer, a passion for academics, and an innate competitiveness. Whether on the track field or in the classroom, we pushed each other to excel, creating a bond built on mutual respect and admiration.

What I didn't expect, however, was for Aziz—the cool kid everyone admired—to reach out to me. In fifth grade, he invited me for a sleepover during the Christmas holidays. That simple gesture was transformative. For the first time, I felt truly seen, acknowledged, and valued by a peer outside of my nuclear family.

Stepping into Aziz's world gave me a window into the complexity of his life. I learned that his mother was Italian and Catholic, and that he was navigating the interplay of multiple cultural and religious identities. I also got to learn about Islamic faith in ways that helped me understand more substantively the differences from my own Christian faith. I saw how he carried himself with confidence, fully embracing his unique story. His acceptance of who he was inspired me to do the same. I began to grow more confident in my own story.

When I had first arrived in Senegal, I was grieving. I had left behind my friends, my dog, my house—everything that had once grounded my identity. That move uprooted not just my body, but my sense of self. I wanted so badly to fit in—but it was hard with a name like *Parfait* and an accent that marked me as different.



I longed for friendship so deeply that I agreed to complete a hazing process to join a circle of boys. They invented a series of challenges, the final one being to jump off the top of a sixteen-foot-high play structure at school. It was reckless. I could have broken a leg or worse.

I remember Aziz caught wind of it and pulled me aside. He scolded me gently but firmly: “You don’t have to do this to be friends with them. It’s not worth it.”

Aziz’s befriending of me silenced both the inner and external voices telling me I needed to hide, perform, or conform before I could belong. His friendship taught me that true belonging isn’t rooted in sameness. It’s grounded in recognizing the inherent worth that lives in each person—regardless of difference.

Aziz’s invitation into his world carried a quiet but powerful message: *Parfait, though you are different, you are worth knowing.* That was new to me. Until then, the message I’d internalized was: *You’re not like us. You don’t belong.* But here, finally, was a space of acceptance—from which I could begin to flourish, especially at school. Our friendship became the foundation of my healing and sense of belonging in Senegal.

By choosing to befriend the Other, you too can help create those transformative spaces the world so desperately needs. For in every room there is an inescapable elephant: the unspoken longing to belong.



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