

The 'Friend Zone': A world away from boyfriend-dom

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Introduction

Male/female relationships are by their very nature complicated. The innate desires of sexuality automatically bring forth considerations of attraction and desire. Both men and women have a tendency to size-up and categorize a person almost immediately based on their own rules of attraction, often without realization. Old adages about the importance of first impressions abound and in the world of relationships (big 'R' or small 'r') these are ever important. Assessments are made and labels applied. In contemporary American society this emphasis on first impressions and compatibility has played out in the ever-popular business of speed-dating. In this burgeoning multi-million dollar business, people actually pay to spend a kwality¹ 2-5 minutes with a person before pushing off and moving on to the next potential match. All of this in the name of love!

In this author's opinion such frivolity abounds in the world of relationships and yet such efforts point to the overwhelming desire, and simultaneous frustration in coupling up. The richest, smartest, most attractive and most powerful people often fail in these endeavors, so ¿how can we, as the millions of twenty-something's in American society hope to fare any better? Especially, when we have much less time, money and other resources at our disposal.

If I had the answer, I wouldn't be sitting here, writing in a windowless, cinderblock laboratory, avoiding the work before me. Instead I would be enjoying the company of someone wonderful, all the while telling the world what I knew in the hope that more people could find that which is most often described as true love².

Interestingly enough, even without *the answer*, the topic of relationships has abounded in recent weeks. Either in jest or in earnest I have been asked to provide my opinion on such matters. Single for almost a year now, I have had to introspectively draw on my own dating experience. In the course of such discussions and old nemesis of mine has resurfaced that has truly been a point of confusion throughout my dating life. This nemesis is what is often referred to as the 'Friend Zone' and many a 'nice guy'³ owns property there. Therefore, I dedicate the remainder of this tract to the Friend Zone in the hopes of generating a springboard for healthy discussion for any and all to whom this may pass.

The Friend Zone

¿What is the Friend Zone? To be sure a multiplicity of answers exist and yet to begin a poignant discussion a formalized definition is necessary. The Friend Zone is a female construct to which all males deemed unworthy are exiled. In other words it is a relationship purgatory from which almost all male souls who enter are forever banished. Now I know, right now, some women are thinking, "*What is this son-of-a-bitch saying???* I am not like that?" I can say this in earnest, because I have already received one angered phone call, from a friend of several years, and she was less than happy with

¹ A purposeful misspelling of this term in my attempt to poke fun at this ludicrous phenomenon.

² Hey, I am a hopeless romantic and I do believe that this exists! I would even say that I have transiently experienced it.

³ Some women would argue that they have also *done time* here, however, as a man I will be arguing the male perspective for a problem which I think is quite gender-biased.

web links I had provided on the subject of male/female relationships and one males attempt at using a ladder allegory. It is for this reason that I decided to sit and write down my own thoughts on the subject, hopefully succinct, without being over-simplified or inflammatory as much of the postings out there are. Additionally, I truly hope that many will respond to what I put forth either in agreement or disagreement. The goal here is ultimately discussion, understanding, and a bit of humor.

The Friend Zone is a frustrating place. No one ends up there on purpose. Although the very name seems innocent enough it always comes off pursed lips in an inflection that most aptly can be described as disdain. No man likes to think that they have reached a point in a relationship with *any* woman where they have been regarded as purely platonic. Such an admission is to recognize a symbolic castration, whereby they have been separated from the flock of potential suitors and deemed undesirable. Men who are in the Friend Zone, knowingly or not, come to realize that they are treated as eunuchs.

The confusion and frustration arising from the realization that one has been banished to the Friend Zone comes from the fact that men have no such Friend Zone for women. To better understand this fundamental difference between the sexes I will adapt Dallas Barabasz-Lynn's Laddery Theory.⁴

The Ladder Theory

Men

Lynn argues that male/female relationships, as perceived by the male, reside on a linear scale; one single ladder on which various positions/rungs exist in ascending order from least to greatest. The metric Lynn uses is the strength of the desire to "fuck" as he ceremoniously puts it, the female. Although some women would argue otherwise, I believe this to be a bit extreme, but the point is well made. Men categorize all women on a single, fluid scale, based on their relative level of attraction, both sexual and asexual. Mitigating factors such as alcohol and the traditional economic arguments of supply and demand can move one up or down the scale. There is no penalty box, no purgatory, no Friend Zone! *All* women are *always* in a play on a man's social ladder.⁵

Women

Women, or at least most American women are another story.⁶ The ladder allegory for female/male relationships, from the female perspective, makes use of two ladders. One is the relationship ladder, akin to the ladder of male's, and the other is the friend's ladder, which itself is Lynn's version of the Friend Zone. Interestingly enough, the two ladders are side-by-side, just far enough apart to make jumping across from the friend's ladder to the relationship ladder a near impossibility. Most attempts are met with severe rejection and bewilderment on the part of the female. Statements like the following abound:

"I don't want to risk our friendship..."

"I care about you, but not in that way..."

"I just want to be friends..."

⁴ For more information on the ladder theory see www.intellectualwhores.com/masterladder.html

⁵ Hence the argument that all men are pigs.

⁶ Many foreign women do not fit the two-ladder system proposed by Lynn, but instead ascribe to a single ladder system where friendship is a requisite to becoming something more (e.g. boyfriend material). Looks like it's time for me to move out of the U.S.!

Traditionally the friendship dissolves since a glaring attraction disparity has been exposed. Lynn affectionately calls this rejection ‘the kiss of death’ and notes that falls from high positions on the friend’s ladder inflict more pain since more is lost. It seems that even with allegories falling is a terrible thing! In this case Lynn likens it to a fall into an abyss, and therefore never-ending.

Some writers stop here feeling that an explanation of a widely held social construct is a good place to put down the pen. ¿What, after all can be done about the inevitable, the immutable and the constant, but to simply observe it and note it? Cursing, with all its charms, changes nothing about gravity, even after one has been struck in the head with an apple!

The Friend Zone, however, is neither a necessary construct nor a logical one and it is on the latter (not the ladder!) which I focus on in the next section.

The Friend Zone Folly

Many women have argued that a guy that doesn’t declare his interest, or in other words, ‘make a move’ shortly after meeting a woman, is automatically in the Friend Zone. Personally, I wasn’t aware that dating came with its own version of the shot clock! At least in basketball a large display relays how much time you have *before* you are stripped of the ball! Of course, in the dating world you are stripped of both balls and you *never* get another chance to drive the lane, let alone score! Instead it is off to the land of eunuchs and platonic mediocrity for you. Your best bet is to switch to another court (i.e. girl) where there is still a play you *can* make.

All of this is still beside the point: ¿Why should it matter if you actually get to know someone and become friends, before you date? To this author the answer is resoundingly clear: *It shouldn’t!* In fact, I would argue that it is both logically and emotionally more sound to be friends first. To better understand this point let’s consider some seemingly unrelated issues.

Decisions, Decisions, Decisions!

Throughout the human experience we are bombarded with a series of decisions. Many decisions tend to force us to focus and balance commitments of time, money and of ourselves. Especially when the decision is major such as the purchase of a car, or a home, or what to study and where, or what we believe. Most people do not typically make such decisions sporadically or randomly. In fact we tend to research, analyze, introspect and reflect on our decisions. One might say most people do their homework. Why should dating be any different, especially if the end goal is supposed to be “until death do us part?!”

Unfortunately, for us Consumer Reports™ doesn’t have a dating corollary and although we might press those around us for information about potential lovers all of the major leg work is ours to do. ¿How else do you get to know someone if you are not friends with them *first!* The short answer is *you can’t* and ultimately all lasting romantic relationships require that you be friends first and foremost. After all a relationship not built on friendship is like a house without a foundation. And truthfully good friends *can* make *great* lovers.

Conclusion

Many will not be convinced by what I have put forth believing in love-at-first-sight, drunken make-outs or any number of quick-‘love’ schemes which certainly are ‘exciting’, but like a hangover, are often regretful in the morning.

Ladies, if not for yourselves please remember that sometimes the men in your life, the ones right under your nose, do care for you dearly. If you’ve lumped them in the Friend Zone knowing that they have other feelings remember that the FZ is like purgatory, a state of limbo akin to the plight of the fabled Greek god Tantalus.⁷

So be clear, be firm, and in some cases toss them back in the river of life so some other lucky lady can snatch them up, because there is no greater torture than languishing forever with the knowledge that what you so desire is right in front of you, if only you could reach it.

This is the Friend Zone and, unfortunately, many a nice guy owns property here!

⁷ Ever hungry and thirsty Tantalus was bound neck deep in a sparkling clear pool with tree boughs laden with luscious fruit dangling just over head. Anytime he would bow his head the water would recede out of reach and attempts to grasp the fruit would result similarly in the boughs raising just beyond grasp. His torture, therefore, was to forever be languishing with the knowledge that what he so desired was readily available and yet just beyond his grasp.