

## In Person

# Can't Buy Us Love

## Reflections on purchasing intimacy

By Molly Stranahan

When I saw the provocative title of a new book, *The Purchase of Intimacy*, I was reminded of an ashtray in my aunt's family room inscribed, "Money isn't everything, but it sure keeps the children in touch."

Perhaps because I am an inheritor, I am disturbed by the jaded view of family relationships reflected in the sentiment. I believe my cousins stay in touch with my aunt out of love and filial responsibility—not to make sure they remain in her will, or to ensure gifts or loans. But my aunt must have some doubts about their motives, because she is amused enough by the ashtray to display it. We usually don't think such things are funny unless we believe there is at least a wee bit of truth to them.

The thought on the ashtray is one answer to the question at the heart of *The Purchase of Intimacy*, by sociologist Viviana Zelizer: What is the impact of money and motives on intimate relationships?

Another answer is my husband's belief that I give gifts to buy love and end up getting used. He suggests that my stepdaughter (his daughter) encourages me to continue my generosity by dressing her children in the clothes I give them—

at least when she brings her children to see us. What *he* sees as manipulation for gain, however, *I* see as gratitude and a gift to me. I enjoy seeing that the children look as adorable as I imagined when I bought the outfits. Sure, it inspires me to buy more clothes for them. But I choose not to turn that into an assumption that my stepdaughter values me only for my generosity. I also don't give them gifts every time they visit, so that none of us forget why they come.

us to retreat into gated communities—literally or the ones we build in our minds—trusting only those with similar incomes or assets. Others try to conceal their relative wealth, always dividing the check evenly and pretending they have no more than those around them.

I find both choices limiting. But I must also be a realist and accept that some people's interest in me might be motivated more by my inherited good fortune than the kind of person I am. I very much

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A different aunt, dearly beloved and now departed, once told me, "Having money is like being a beautiful woman. You never know why people want to be with you." It's easy for those of us who have more money than our partner or friends to wonder if we are loved for ourselves and our personalities—or for the gifts and status that a friendship with us might provide. The suspicion of others' motives that results leads some of

want to believe that people choose to be with me because they admire and respect who I am, that they love me, not my money. I don't want to be a J. Howard Marshall to an Anna Nicole Smith. However, we can't see other people's motives; we can only guess, infer, and ask.

### Family friends and fears

Concerns about the motives of a spouse or friend have arisen in my family. During divorces after relatively short marriages, two of my siblings were sued for half of everything, which leads to an assumption that the spouse was in it for the money.

A different concern is raised by my father's habit of investing in the dreams and schemes of his friends and acquaintances. Some in my family question the friendship between my father and a buddy I'll call Rudy. Dad and Rudy have partnered in a number of expensive financial ventures over the →

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years, including a high-tech beef ranch, for which Dad provides the money. A couple of my brothers are convinced Rudy is more moocher than friend. They see that he's benefited financially over the years from his business ventures with our father, while Dad has lost money. So is my father investing money in exchange for time and attention from his business partner? Is he buying Rudy's friendship to protect himself from his loneliness?

As I look beyond the money, I see evidence of more than a trade of friendship for an income. Rudy and his wife introduced Dad and my stepmother to each

ing bond may form. But however genuine the ensuing affection may be, the reality is that the relationship is based on a financial transaction—something done for the exchange of money.

I've learned that many invitations come my way because people hope to get or keep my business, or perhaps to get a charitable contribution. If I have fun at something paid for by someone's entertainment expense account, I may begin to confuse this with a need to include them in my circle of friends. I think of all the times I have met business associates at people's weddings and won-

der if they are there out of obligation, or whether they are truly friends. The quickest way to discover motives, of course, is to stop the flow of money.

About sixteen years ago I hired a woman as my interior designer. The relationship involved sharing my needs, preferences, and taste. We traveled together on buying trips, spending days together and sharing a hotel room. We've gone out for dinner with our husbands, and when Phyllis had surgery, I brought her flowers and books. Now that we have finished decorating the house, and I no longer pay her for her time, we see each other less often; but I still think of her as one of my dearest friends. We make a point of having lunch together on a regular basis. We started a book group together and continue to phone and email each other to share our struggles and our successes. I know that our friendship is real and lasting, not just the temporary by-product of a business relationship.

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other. Dad and Rudy appear to truly enjoy each other's company. When my father had health problems and needed treatment from a distant doctor, he was relieved when Rudy offered to drive him. I interpret Dad's comfort with Rudy at a time when he was in pain to be a sign of genuine affection and trust. It seems to me that despite the one-way movement of cash, their relationship is a two-way movement of affection.

### Business boundaries

So far, I've been talking about relationships where money becomes a factor. However, relationships that originate with financial transactions can also provide challenges. We frequently buy intimacy, whether the physical intimacy of a massage therapist's healing touch or the emotional intimacy of sharing our deepest secrets with a psychotherapist or counselor. Hairdressers often provide a little of each of these. We're aware that commerce is the primary purpose of these relationships. The person selling a service may have motives beyond earning a living, such as the fulfillment that comes from helping others. And a car-



### Walking the line

In the song, "The Millionaire," Dr. Hook sings, "I don't mind if you love me for my money, if you love me for whatever else I've got." The money I inherited is a part of who I am. Many blessings result, but one price is that it affects my relationships. It leads me to question the motives of people. I can't be entirely certain when people choose to be with me because they are hoping to benefit from my good fortune. On the flip side, when some people learn I am an inheritor, they make negative assumptions and judgments about the kind of person I am.

So I have several choices. I can try to camouflage or hide my monetary circumstances entirely, to prevent other's judg-

ments and being taken advantage of. But I have found that I only delude myself, and it takes a lot of effort to deny reality.

I can keep all my relationships that involve financial dealings—from my interior designer to my investment advisors—from becoming friendships out of suspicion that they're merely pretending closeness and affection to get more business. And I can keep my wealth out of my friendships by always splitting bills, conscientiously paying only my share, not investing in friends' business ventures, and not giving gifts bigger than the other person can afford to reciprocate.

Those seem simple solutions, but they make me feel mistrustful and miserly when I want to be loving and

fear of being a fool to keep me from living my deepest values of trust, honesty, openness, respect, and love. ■

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### ASK BEFORE YOU JUDGE

When we observe a relationship in which one person appears to benefit from the other's money, we may assume that some manipulation is going on. Before rushing to judgment on external appearances, however, consider asking yourself these questions:

Can we really measure what either side is getting out of a relationship?

Can we know other people's motives, even if they are close to us?

How much of the relationship is based on business and how much is personal? Does one interfere with the other?

Is it our business in the first place? When does offering a helpful suggestion to someone we love who appears to be trusting another person unwisely cross over into meddling?

—M. L. Stranahan

generous. There is a seesaw to balance. I can spend my life warily assessing other people's motives, or I can trust that they like me for who I am—which includes being a person with wealth—not for what I can give them.

I can also choose to talk about the doubts and questions that occur in relationships when our financial means differ significantly, or when mixing business and friendship. Having that difficult conversation may have one of two outcomes: it can either deepen a friendship we both enjoy, or clarify the limits of what is essentially a business relationship. Talking it out can protect me from confusing the two.

I remind myself none of us is perfectly aware of all our motives. Money can be used to protect us from being alone. We can have fun sharing it. Sometimes it will be part of what attracts others, just as sometimes it will lead to rejection. I don't want to be a fool, but I don't want

### TRANSACTIONS

*Sociologist Viviana Zelizer writes about the role of money in our lives. The following is from her new book, The Purchase of Intimacy, from Princeton University Press.*

Take the special case of money. ... Social critics concede that peasant households, craft workshops, and fishing villages mingled economic activity and intimate relations, but somehow escaped the curse of hostile worlds. Other [critics] reserve their fears for monetized social relations, which they see invading intimate spheres as markets expand across the globe. Surely the quintessential impersonal medium, goes the reasoning, draws people into thin, fragile, calculating relations with others.

However, the idea that money acts as a universalizing, standardizing medium has taken hard blows. Social scientists and ordinary economic actors all recognize ... that food stamps, subway tokens, local currencies, and commercial paper all qualify as varieties of money but circulate within restricted circuits rather than merging into a single medium. ... A related idea dies hard: that money and intimacy represent contradictory principles whose intersection generates conflict, confusion, and corruption.

[This view often fails] to recognize how intimate social transactions do coexist with monetary transactions: parents pay nannies or child-care workers, adoptive parents pay to obtain babies, divorced spouses pay or receive alimony and child support, and parents give their children allowances, subsidize their college educations, help them with their first mortgage, and offer them bequests in their wills. Friends and relatives send money as wedding presents, and friends loan each other money.

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