

*Dear Darling,*

*I have a friend who feels like a stranger now. We still eat lunch together, talk, and smile at each other, but it doesn't feel like there's anything left of substance. We're part of a friend group of four, and she's definitely close to the other two than I am. This leads to everyone taking her side in arguments, which makes me feel like I'm always in the wrong. I apologize to these people when they all agree I'm in the wrong, but sometimes I feel like I shouldn't be apologizing. I also try to change so that we don't fight again, but seems like I can never change enough. Me and this person have been friends for a long time, but it feels like our friendship is a tiny cucumber that got put in a jar, and then it grew, and grew, and now the jar is about to break. Others have told me that I should stop being friends with this person, but if I stop being friends with her, I'll lose my two other friends, and I'm scared of being alone. What should I do to try and fix our friendship?*

*Sincerely,*

*Cucumber Stuck in a Jar*

*Dearest Cucumber,*

*Wow, this sounds like a real pickle you've found yourself in, I'd be feeling salty if I was in your shoes. I'm hearing a few different things in here that I'd like to name, and then maybe we can parse each of them out. It sounds like one piece of this is that you are maybe grieving the friendship you used to have with this person? And another is that you're feeling fear around what might happen to the rest of your relational ecosystem if you make any drastic changes to this specific relationship? And in the middle of it all, it sounds like you're doing a lot of really intense fermentation to try and adapt yourself to these changing dynamics, and maybe not seeing any kind of reciprocity? When you put all that together, I can see why you might feel like this is a really big dill! Anyways, let's tackle each of these points in reverse order.*

*First of all, I honestly think that if you're changing yourself for others, that's a pretty big red flag. My dear, I understand the desire to shapeshift from cucumber to pickle, the depth and complexity of flavor is unbeatable. However, I really must stress that when undergoing such a delicious*

transformation, it is of the utmost importance that you are doing it for YOURSELF first and foremost. So, I would encourage you to check in with yourself – are the changes you're making truly because YOU want to be this person you're becoming in the process, or is it so that this person (or someone else) will like you more? The reason this is so important is that, as much as we would like to have forever friends, Octavia Butler reminds us that "the only constant is change," and our communities, relationships, networks do change organically. If you put all of this effort into changing yourself for others, when those dynamics do inevitably shift, you're going to be the one living with the changes you've made. It's one thing if you've had a conversation with this other person and you've both agreed to examine your behaviors within your relationship and you're both putting in the work to shift things to a healthier place (more on this later), but even in this situation, I think it's vitally important to be crystal clear on your goals and motivations for change. Don't let others choose your jar. Better yet, smash all the jars and free all the pickles. You are infinite, my dear.

Second, and I think this ties into my last point, you can absolutely have relationships with your other friends that are independent of this individual in question. Our social networks are like the vines of an overgrown cucumber plant, we are all deeply interwoven and connected (even those of us who sometimes feel really isolated!). Like a mess of trellised and tangled vines, if one vine is broken, the rest of the plants can remain intact and continue to grow. It may seem really intimidating, but I would suggest softly approaching each of your other friends about how things have felt when you hang out as individuals and as a group. It's possible that they have no idea you feel this way, and they may be willing to shift their positions within the friend group to make more space for your opinions and feelings. They may even be appreciative of your vulnerable sharing, and this may even strengthen your bonds with them. On the other hand, they may double down and choose to back your other friend instead of you. If this happens, though, that may be valuable information as to whether or not this friend group is really the one for you. You deserve to be in a community that respects your

feelings and needs (as long as those feelings or needs don't come at the expense of others' wellbeing). Remember, a pickle is only as good as the brine it's soaking in. If you're not getting the respect you deserve in this group, it may be time to cut your losses and find yourself a new brine.

Finally, maybe you're grieving the loss of this initial person's friendship as it once was. (I mean, maybe not too, I'm a columnist, not a telepath.) Regardless of what specific emotions you are or aren't holding towards this person, you might want to think about talking to them openly and directly about it. It doesn't have to be accusatory or escalatory, it can just be a little friend check-in, something along the lines of, "Hey, I relish our friendship, and lately I feel like our dynamic has changed a bit. I'd like for us to talk about why that might be and what we can do together to preserve our relationship and steer it in a direction that feels better for me and for us." Just like with your other friends, this could go a few different ways, but either way, the information you'll gain from this exchange can make a huge impact on what your next moves may be. I sincerely hope that you and your friend will be able to recognize your mutual responsibility to feeding the relationship, and I hope that, with trust, care, and reciprocity, you can bring back some of that effervescence to your friendship crock. If that ends up not being the case, I would encourage you to really tend to your grief – put energy into honoring the times that you had with this friend before you felt the dynamic change, and lean into accepting, and even welcoming, that change is a natural and necessary part of growth. Sometimes, that's the real beauty of pickling – finding out what surprising flavors await you on the other side of your transformation.

The last little bit of advice I'll offer you is to try to not be too salty. I can tell you from personal experience that adding too much salt to the brine will absolutely spoil your ferment – it's easier to add salt as needed later in the ferment than it is to take the salt out once it's added. This is actually just as true in home pickling as it is in building strong relationships.

Happy bubbling!

Darling Tonia