Have you ever had a friendship suddenly go bad? Recently, a close friend and I stopped speaking to each other. It was hard because from the beginning I had really wanted to be her friend. She seemed smart, in a cool way, and said lots of funny things. She liked to talk about all the books she had read, and she always had a quick, sarcastic comeback whenever anyone made a joke.

Then one day my friend said something mean to me. She made it clear that she didn't think I was anywhere near as smart as she was. I was bothered by it all day and pretty bummed by the time I got home from school. My mom can always tell when something is up, so I ended up telling her about what had happened that day. Instead of saying—like your parents are supposed to—that I am smart—and funny, and caring, and pretty, and all that stuff, she said "Huh, I wonder why she needed to say that to you." Then she said "Also, I wonder why you needed someone else to tell you were smart."
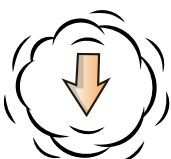
It was the kind of thing I hadn't thought much about. But after that day, I started to ask myself a lot of questions—questions that began with "why?" Why had my friend treated me like that? Maybe she had her own problems going on—maybe it wasn't even about me. Why did she need to feel smarter than everyone else? Maybe she felt like she didn't belong unless she had a special role to play, something she was better at. But the biggest, most important question I asked myself was Why did I care?

The truth is I wanted my friends to think I was smart and funny so that I could feel smart and funny. When I think back to that friendship, the thing I regret most was how much weight I put on another person's ideas about who I was. I thought of my friend as "the cool one" and believed that the only way to be cool myself was to be like her—or for her to think I was like her.

Who has the right definition of cool, though—or even what it means to be smart? Sometimes people try to prove how special they are to others so that they themselves can believe it. I, for instance, had spent so much time trying to be what I thought my friends wanted me to be, trying to guess what they thought was worthwhile in a friend, that I lost my ability to ask those questions for myself. I realized I had no idea who I was—and I wasn't even trying to find out!

It can feel safer, of course, to create categories of "good" and "bad," "cool" and "uncool," and try to see where you fit it—rather than asking more open-ended questions like "Who am I?" and "Who do I want to be?" However, those kinds of questions can help you be more honest and real with yourself. It means taking the risk that you are different from the people you want to hang out with, and then deciding if you want to be friends with people who are different from you.

I can tell you, though, that asking those kinds of questions has lead me to understand and ap-

preciate who I am instead of judging myself against other people. I don't get bothered as easily by labels or by something somebody says when they're in a bad mood or just feeling worried that they don't belong.

My advice is: Be fascinated with yourself—try to figure out exactly who you are—regardless of what your friends think. And remember that you do not have to do anything extraordinary to be valuable and loved. All you have to do is approach yourself—and everyone else—with curiosity and respect. Then take time to celebrate how you're different. Your uniqueness is something to treasure, not something to fear.