Two days after September 11, 2001, I found myself in a room at the International Center in Michigan State University with twenty-one international teaching assistants and twenty-one American undergraduates. We were attending the orientation for MSU’s Buddy Program, and there were three group leaders, including myself. Each international teaching assistant (ITA) was paired with an undergraduate and they were to be buddies for a period of eight weeks. Each group leader had seven pairs of buddies in his/her group, and all the students in the room were placed in one of three groups. With my head still reeling from the shock of 9/11, I found it amazing to be surrounded by so many friendly international and American faces smiling and chattering away to their hearts content. In a world where everyone seemed intent upon blowing each other up, the Buddy Program was a salve that reached across the globe to heal this strife-ridden planet.

For eight weeks of the Fall semester, 2001, the buddies in my group met and got to know each other as they participated in various activities exchanging life stories, learning about residential life on campus, visiting students workplaces, discussing how students make academic decisions, participating in students activities outside class, talking about the various methods students use to study, witnessing interaction between students and teachers in a classroom situation, and deciding on a topic of mutual choice for their last activity. Each weekly meeting lasted for two hours or more, and as the buddies discussed--or participated in--the various activities, bonds were forged that sometimes lasted well beyond the eight weeks assigned by the program.

The ITAs had various reasons for joining the program: they wanted to improve their spoken English by communicating with an American student; they wished to learn all they could about MSU, the campus, and the American educational system; they wished to know more about American students and their life in order to have a better understanding of their own students; and finally, they wanted to learn more about American culture in general. The undergraduates had their reasons too for being part of the program: some had participated in the ITA Orientation held in August and felt it would be interesting to get to know an international student on a one-on-one level; some had gone to other countries to study abroad and were interested in learning more about other countries and cultures; others wanted to help students who were new to this country and make them feel more comfortable on campus; and finally, they all felt that this was a unique opportunity for intercultural exchange and communication.

My job as a group leader was to meet the undergraduates once a week for an hour and hear a report of their activities. I also met the ITAs once every two weeks for an hour and heard their side of the report. Each week I sent a report of the meetings to the coordinator of the program. At the end of the eight weeks I was to send my final report on the group with notes and comments on each buddy pair and my overall impression of the program. The job seemed easy, straightforward, and predictable.
However, as the weeks rolled on and the program began to unfold, I found that there were many surprises in store for all of us. At first we (ITAs, undergraduates, and I) had the impression that the ITAs would benefit by learning from the undergraduates, the undergraduates would help the ITAs learn, and I would report. But soon we found that everyone was learning the undergraduates learned as much from the ITAs as the ITAs learned from the undergraduates, and I learned from both and they learned from me. Next we found that we had all kinds of stereotypes that were being challenged. The ITAs had stereotypes about Americans (mostly inspired by Hollywood and the media), and the Americans had stereotypes about the ITAs. In their interactions with each other and our discussions at the group meetings with me, these stereotypes were often shattered. There were comments like the following: an ITA would say, _I thought all Americans were . . . but my buddy is not at all like that_; an undergraduate would say, _I thought people from . . . were supposed to be very serious, but my buddy is a fun person._ Listening to them, I found that I was learning not only about various countries and their cultures but also getting to know American undergraduates, whom I had never met outside the classroom.

The richness of the interactions between the buddies, and the fun and laughter of our group meetings, were reflected in my weekly reports which kept getting longer and longer because there was so much to share. Sometimes I’d sit through my meetings and observe how the program was making its mark on the participants by enriching their lives in a way that cannot be duplicated in the classroom, in spite of the best professors and the most brilliant readings. No matter how many books one may have read about America, it is different to know an American; and no matter how great a specialist one is on foreign affairs or political relations, it is different to know a person from abroad.

Soon the barriers began to fall: language barriers (I thought my buddy would have problems speaking English, but he is just fine); barriers we construct between ourselves and the Other (My buddy and I have become such good friends. I talk to her the way I talk to all my friends); family barriers (some ITAs were invited to UG homes for such specifically family occasions as Thanksgiving); nationality barriers (I would never have had a chance to be friends with an American if I hadn’t joined the Buddy Program). Oh yes, there were many delightful surprises for all of us indeed, too many to recount as the program unraveled and we learned about each other and ourselves.

Of course, the buddies were special brilliant, talented, humorous, curious, enthusiastic, open minded, eager to learn, talkative, sincere, responsible, and hard working. They participated enthusiastically in all the prescribed activities, but their meetings were not confined to what was assigned by the program. Their discussions had a wide range; they started with the assigned topic but then went on to discuss religion, cultural customs, politics, history, economics, literature, food habits, provincial differences, dating and marriage, sports, festivals, etc. Working with them was a humbling experience. I had thought of myself as a baton waving conductor orchestrating the meetings but found myself to be just a humble learner, learning from both the ITAs and the undergraduates.
The weeks flew past and too soon it had all ended. One could see the regret on almost every face. At the last meeting when we all discussed what we had learned from participating in the program, the emotions were visible as each buddy spoke. It was at that moment that we all realized how much we had grown in those eight weeks and how immensely valuable the program had been to all of us. There were Americans reading English translations of world poetry and cooking international dishes, and there were ITAs who felt confident about interacting with their students in the classroom now that they were close friends with American undergraduates. Nor was all this knowledge confined to our meetings or the activities; everyone who has ever participated in the Buddy Program cannot stop talking about it. So the buddies told their friends and roommates and soon we had innumerable people who all wanted to participate in the next program. At a group meeting, it was not uncommon to hear something like this: I and my buddy, and my roommate and her buddy, and my buddy’s roommate and her buddy, all went out to dinner last night. That was how the good word spread, and often at the orientations it seemed as though everyone knew everybody.

At the end of the eight weeks, we wrapped up the program with a sumptuous potluck dinner at which everyone brought some wonderful dish from some wonderful part of the world, and we all ate, chatted, and were merry. I wish I had been able to record the noise level at this dinner because I am sure we broke a record or two that evening. Looking at the scene of joy and laughter, it was hard to believe that we lived in a world where fine wavy map lines divided the globe into territories, into us and them, into mine and yours. In this room there were no divisive lines because we were all buddies; that made this experience both meaningful and worthwhile to me, and inspired me to continue being a group leader to other groups in 2002.