

SUZANNE BRAUN LEVINE



YOU GOTTA HAVE GIRLFRIENDS

**A POST-FIFTY POSSE
IS GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH**



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Author's note:

I interviewed and heard from literally hundreds of women (and some men) as I was writing this book. Some were happy to have their full names used, but others were more comfortable with a pseudonym, so I gave them names that I thought reflected their personalities. I also made up names for those online correspondents who posted comments to my blogs under display names such as C mon and noaxe397 because I didn't see any reason to make a distinction between them and other on-line or in-person voices. When I write about my circle of trust I use their first names. I want to thank them all for helping me understand and describe the very special connection among girlfriends.

CHAPTER 1:

YOU GOTTA HAVE GIRLFRIENDS

Time passes

Life happens. Distance separates

Children grow up

Jobs come and go

Love waxes and wanes

Men don't do what they're supposed to do

Hearts break

Parents die

Colleagues forget favors

Careers end

But . . .

Sisters are there, no matter how much time and how many miles are between you

A girlfriend is never farther away than needing her can reach

—Internet circles

THE BEST THING A MAN can do for his health is to be married to a woman. One of the best things a woman can do for her health is to nurture her relationships with her girlfriends, especially after the age of fifty. The longer we live, the more important our friends become. We call them our “chosen family” and in times of need they are the most likely to be at the door, on the phone, or in the waiting room. In other words, the post-fifty version of “an apple a day” is “nurture your friendships.”

Not only do our girlfriends keep us physically healthy, but their support can also make us well when we are sick. A study of breast cancer patients by researchers at Ohio State University Comprehensive Cancer Center found that those who were in a supervised support group were 5 percent less likely to die than those who were going it alone. In fact, the stress-reducing influence of their company is thought to contribute to women's longer life expectancy than men. “I had two separate conversations with friends today about how they tend to hold things in, sometimes until they experience physical symptoms,” one woman told me. “One has panic attacks, the other had shingles, which she attributes to stress. Both are hesitant to express their emotional pain to their husbands—they just don't seem to understand.” But, she adds, “both reiterated how much they need their girlfriends.”

Friends are just as vital to our psychological and spiritual well-being. They give us courage

confidence, and understanding; we know that no matter what happens as we age, we are not alone. They give us love, patience, acceptance, and a healthy dose of comic relief for the accumulating absurdities of life. And we empower each other to achieve the well-being of accomplishment beyond the years of past generations. All in all, such cherished friends are a blessing; they make life matter when it counts.

Our mothers' generation wouldn't understand this notion of friends helping friends achieve new levels of accomplishment and vitality beyond the sell-by date of menopause; their friendships remained relatively static as their circles aged together. Our own friendships, on the other hand, shift during different life stages. They may not have been as important to us earlier in our lives as they will become now. Back in our thirties and forties, we were frantically balancing the multiple demands of our days, and friends were just one ingredient in a swirling mix. Many of us neglected some meaningful friendships for those that developed out of common interests (parents whose children we befriend with your kids) or shared space (workplace colleagues). In our fifties, we open a new chapter in our lives, and we can't take friends for granted any more. Without a circle of trust, we will have a very hard time turning the page.

We are entering a challenging, promising—and unprecedented—stage of life Gail Sheehy, in her book *Passages*, has called Second Adulthood. The twenty-plus years after fifty are a statistical gift to our generation, bestowed by the good health, accumulated personal authority, and self-awareness of our first adulthood. An open field of dreams lies between adulthood and old age, where we move from a life in which we have fulfilled many roles—child, student, mother, employee, wife—to one where we are able to write our own scripts. For many of us, it is the most exciting, optimistic, and fulfilling stage of our lives.

I often hear from women who are amazed to find that they are happier now than ever before—that despite sagging boobs and drifting memories, this is the best time of their lives. We feel more confident, more open to new experiences, more appreciative of good times, more thoughtful and self-aware. At the same time, things don't get to us the way they used to; we have literally mellowed with time and simply don't sweat the small stuff. Recent studies by Laura Carstenson at Stanford and others have found that people over age fifty are very happy, happier, according to the researchers, than those respondents in their twenties and thirties. That makes sense when you think about it. We are better able to roll with the punches and many of the conflicting demands on us have receded.

To get there, though, we must pass through a period of upheaval as confusing and extended as adolescence. The two have a lot in common: raging hormones, self-doubt, recklessness, tumultuous relationships, and wrestling with the question of what we will do with the rest of our lives. No matter how independent and resourceful we are, meeting this challenge successfully requires teamwork. And courage. “Many think of courage ... as a solitary journey,” write Deborah Collins Stephens, Jack

Speier, Michaelene Cristini Risley, and Jan Yanehiro, the friends and co-authors of *This Is Not the Life I Ordered*. “We believe the journey of courage is best walked with women friends who literally and figuratively ‘en-courage’ us.”

The journey takes us through change and doubt, and the destination is not clear. It is easy to get stuck and hard to forge ahead. That is where our encouraging friends come in. As Ellen Goodman and Patricia O’Brien point out in their book, *I Know Just What You Mean*: “There are times when a friend provides more than the warm soup of empathy. She becomes a catalyst for change. Over a long life full of disruptions, stops, and start-ups, friends can be the collaborators, the instigators who make change possible. They are often the ones who urge us to take a leap, who jump with us or help us scramble back up the other side.” When it gets good, *Second Adulthood* is about taking leaps, so a loving nudge is essential—especially since the men we know are often heading in the opposite direction, looking to scale back and settle in.

“By the time we reach fifty,” Eileen Williams, founder of the website *The Feisty Side of Fifty*, points out, “we know a thing or two about the changes that life can bring. We’ve lost loved ones to death and gone through the breaking up of relationships. We’ve endured injured pride, damaged self-esteem, rejections, and crushing disappointments. And we have gone through menopause.” Surviving hard times has also taught us a thing or two about what makes the difference between triumph and defeat. I haven’t interviewed a single woman about the ups and downs of her recent life who hasn’t at some point told me a story that ended with a grateful “I couldn’t have gotten through it without my girlfriends.”

So, the next time people say (or you say to yourself), “why are you wasting your time having coffee with your girlfriends when you have so many more important things to do?” tell them they couldn’t be more wrong! Beyond the fun of it all, and the infusion of energy and optimism, those seemingly meaningless get-togethers are crucial to aging well. Without the kind of human contact and intellectual stimulation we take for granted earlier in our lives, we are likely to literally fade away physically, psychologically, and socially. The failure to maintain quality relationships with others, according to Dr. David Spiegel, a Stanford professor of psychiatry, is as dangerous to our physical health as smoking.

Your Circle of Trust: Who Makes the Cut?

In your gut, you know who your friends are. They are the people you choose over all others to spend your fiftieth birthday with. They root for you and they put up with you. They stand up for you and they stand by you. They patiently teach you how to use your smart phone (and can be trusted not to tell your kids you couldn’t figure it out yourself). They listen sympathetically when you need to vent. They know when you are hurt or angry and how to patch things up. And they make you laugh.

I have recently taken stock of the women I call friends and singled out those who I trusted most and who made me feel the best. The list made me smile. These are the women I want on my team as I sort out the rest of my life. What surprised me as I looked over the list was how seamlessly they worked together the chapters of my life so far. It is as if collectively they have been at my side all along, helping me grow up.

Ruthie and I were grade school friends and have now reconnected after a long gap when we probably didn't think of each other at all. We started out in the same place and have ended up with the kind of bond we might have achieved if we had been in constant touch through all that time.

Patricia and I go back almost as far. We went to the same college; she was the one I told about my abortion senior year. The only accommodation to growing up has been that we have gone from calling each other "Patty" and "Susie" to "Patricia" and "Suzanne." While her life has become very different from mine, our understanding of each other is timeless.

I also met Maddy in college; she is my no-nonsense, curmudgeon friend whose reading recommendations are unfailingly rewarding. Because she is "difficult" she gets into tight situations, but I love her for her ability to articulate what emotions and circumstances are at play and her gut-willingness to face the consequences. She tells it like it is. If I act like Cleopatra, Queen of Denial, Maddy keeps me grounded.

Susie came into my life around the time I got married. In fact, she was at my wedding—enormously pregnant—on the groom's side. Her support and admiration never waver. She is wise about all things family related and has a warm and generous family to prove it. She is incredibly smart and talented, and very funny, too.

My other BFF is actually a posse: five former colleagues who have been having dinner once a month since 1989. We like to try new places, which is a good thing, since I am not sure we would be welcome back to any restaurant after a visit. We generally sit there for three or four hours, order nothing but appetizers, laugh uproariously, and then pay with five credit cards. Collectively, we are more than the sum of our parts. Each one of us brings her own kind of support, encouragement, empathy, and humor to the table. We are in sync and can pretty well predict how any one of us will respond to a situation, even what she will order to eat. (I wonder if our monthly meals have become the postmenopausal equivalent to the synchronized periods that female roommates often have.) As the years go by, we marvel at how many more of us it takes to remember the name of a movie star.

There was one more name on the list, but after due consideration, I crossed her off. I realized that although the deep understanding is there, the commitment is not. We took a course together a few years ago and had lunch after each class. During that time we got down to the real stuff and established a warm and trusting intimacy. As soon as the class was over, so was our regular communion. Now we get together once or twice a year, usually at my instigation. The intimacy clicks in as we catch each other up, but if I don't call her, she never thinks to touch base or give me a

interesting piece of information. I am off her radar screen between one encounter and the next. I will call her my out-of-sight-out-of-mind friend but not admit her to my circle of trust.

Nurturing Friends over Time

While the bottom line of friendship is trust, acceptance, and constancy, everyone has her own friendship style, and often a different style with different friends. It is almost as important to be aware of your style as it is to be aware of your true friends. Not only to make sure that you are contributing all the nurturing you can to the relationship, but because as our lives change, so will our needs, and our friendships will have to adapt in order to remain healthy.

Some friends talk or email every day; others get together once or twice a year but stay in touch in other ways. Some do things together—like travel or go to movies or power-walk every morning. Others touch base regularly but not often. I am in that last group, but I never doubt that the tie is there. Every once in a while, I get a call from one dear friend asking if I am “waving or drowning.” That line (from a Stevie Smith poem about watching someone drown thinking they were waving, not signaling for help) is our code for “just checking in; I thought of you and wanted to make sure there was nothing I needed to know.” It’s shorthand that enables us to check in without having to “catch up,” a process I must admit I would rather be spared. Headlines about events and honesty about feelings are what I am looking for. My emails are probably the least newsy that anyone I know receives.

Given my telegraphic style, I will have to watch out in the years to come so that I don’t miss important concerns and events behind the headlines I ask for. Perhaps I should begin asking more probing questions, even learn to play catch up.

Some friendships form a literal “circle of trust,” like my dinner pals. Many reading groups have coalesced into intimate and loyal sororities. Susan created one with some former colleagues when she retired from teaching. They’ve been together for twelve years, though they rarely get together outside their regular meetings. “We are really devoted to one another in terms of this book group, which we adore and which we protect with our lives,” she says. “We are very, very careful about anybody coming into the group that we don’t think would fit in.”

The time may come when they need to break out of their happy bubble. If, say, one of the women stops showing up, will the rest accept the excuse that she got too busy? And the time may come when a new person would bring a healthy breath of fresh air to the group.

Other women are turned off by the group model. “I have noticed among certain women a tremendous need to bond, which in itself is not a bad thing of course,” says Jane, a textile artist. But she is suspicious. “The bad side of bonding is the subtle pressure to conform to the group. I have found that some gossip, or passing on what was said, is really a subtle coercion to conform.” Patsy Wynn Brown, creator of one-woman shows she calls “hair theater,” also finds collective intimacy

“uncomfortable. Being together in gangs of girls makes me anxious. I much prefer one-on-one chats or small groups where we can talk.” Eileen favors “taking a long walk with one friend and then going to lunch afterwards. There’s something about being outdoors in nature, exercising together and then sharing a meal, that elicits feelings of closeness.”

Carrie, an executive with a not-for-profit foundation, is a one-to-oneer also. But when she needed major surgery, she realized that she would have to mobilize the individual units of her “circle of trust” into a caregiving team. She assigned one friend to take her to the hospital, another to pick her up, a third to organize a meal delivery system. Inevitably they crossed paths and developed an acquaintance with each other. When Carrie was safely recovered, the team did not stay in touch. She didn’t encourage it. “I think it is because of the intensity I require from a friendship that I can’t bear our relationship being diluted in deference to another,” she says. “My friendships are not about doing things together, which is often more fun in a group, but about relating—unique woman to unique woman.” Furthermore, she goes on, “if I introduced two friends I would be in high anxiety about whether they liked each other or whether one said something that I knew—but she couldn’t possibly—would hurt the other. And what if they didn’t like each other? How would I deal with that?” Still, she knows how to adapt her friendshipping style to a crisis.

A Sister/Friend

We have come to call the tight bond among women “sisterhood,” but in truth the bond between sisters is both more intense and less easy than that among friends. Still, sisters can serve as witnesses to your life in a way no one else can. It may not be the most accurate account, colored as it is by sibling craziness, but, as Suzanne Gerber puts it on the website Next Avenue, “she remembers every important thing that has ever happened to you.”

The part our biological sisters will play in our future well-being is unique, regardless of how the relationships started out. “My sister and I were not close growing up,” says Pat. “We literally and physically fought; for years we had to sleep in the same bed. It drove me crazy. She drove me crazy . . . but now that we are adults, she is my go-to girl. My family has been through much tumult, tension and sadness, and my sister and I weather it all together, and we share a dark sense of humor. We still have power struggles but we know enough to put the nonessentials aside.”

Even if “you can’t be open about a lot of stuff,” says Alice, one of four sisters, “you’re stuck with each other.” For better or for worse. “My sister and I are going through a bad phase right now,” Suzanne told me. “When that happens we revert to childhood roles. But we know we will get back in sync.”

Being connected to a family tree has other benefits for the new stage. “I have no grandchildren,” Pat says, “and my sister has three. She lets me share them, and her daughter is especially kind and

considerate to me, and I try to be loyal and true and helpful to her. I love having my niece in such a close relationship to me. I love her children as I would love my own grandchildren, and I think that brings some special love to their family.”

Most of all, when it comes to coping with failing parents and making peace with them when they are gone, no friend can share that experience as deeply as a sister. “On that heart-wrenching day when you bury a parent,” writes Suzanne, “she’s the one squeezing your hand, and of the almost 7 billion people you share a planet with, she’s the only one thinking the same thing you are: ‘Bye-bye Daddy.’”

A Husband/Friend

As I talked to women about their best friends, several insisted on adding the men in their lives to the list. They find the same intimacy, encouragement, and laughter with them that they do with a friend-for-life. Yet most acknowledge a different flavor in the relationship.

“The friendships I developed in college and grad school were mostly dysfunctional and wise-cracked,” say Lauren as she surveys her past relationships. “Post-college friends have come and gone as we moved, married, had kids, changed jobs. I am in touch with one friend from high school via occasional Facebook exchanges and once-a-year ten-page letters. I wish I had more friends in my current life, but since I don’t, I feel all the more grateful for my husband (who is a great husband, but not a BFF in that best-girlfriend sense).”

Pat begs to differ. “My best friend is my husband,” she says. “We have been together since I was fourteen and he was fifteen. We will be married forty years this March.” She has close women friends, too, but “my easiest, loveliest, and most affirming relationship is with my husband. I have the most fun with him and I am most myself with him.” Which is not to say, she quickly adds, they are joined at the hip. “He enjoys his nights out and trips with the boys much more even than I enjoy mine with the girls.” Pat, on the other hand, enjoys being alone. “Maybe it is the case that the woman I love being with most is me.”

“I enjoy my women friends a lot and they mean a great deal to me,” she goes on. “But I don’t find they understand me more than Steve, or to be more loyal, or to be my top priority. When I would watch *Sex and the City* I would marvel at the relationship among the four of them—that it was their priority over the men and children in their lives.”

One reason Pat’s marriage is becoming more intimate with age may be that she and Steve are becoming more compatible. Many heterosexual relationships become increasingly friendly as the pressures of everyday life lift and—interestingly—hormones shift. We all know that women’s estrogen goes down in menopause; as a result the testosterone that is always there plays a bigger role and may account, in part, for what anthropologist Margaret Mead has called “postmenopausal zest.” At the same time, the levels of testosterone go down for men. This can cause occasional performance

problems, but it also seems to make men more emotional and responsive to domesticity and intimacy. That rapprochement could, as Claude Rains famously says in *Casablanca*, be the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

“Maybe a circle of best girlfriends is in the future for me,” Pat wonders. “Who knows? I am open to it. I am open to life and love and anyone who can stand by me in loss. And I welcome all come when it is time to laugh!”

So what makes a health-protecting friendship-for-life? Novelist Marilyn French answered the question as well as anyone I have encountered, when she wrote about her own circle of trust. “Over the years, we became intimate friends—not in the sense that we spoke every day and knew every detail of the others’ lives, but as friends who knew each other’s qualities and had a sense of each other’s fears and longings, the grooves and velvet folds we were trapped in, our efforts to pull ourselves free; and we were ardent about one another’s well-being.”

CHAPTER 2:

THOSE HEALTHY HORMONES. WHO KNEW?

What do we live for, if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?

—George Eliot

WHEN SHE HAD A WORRY or a secret, my grandmother wouldn't dream of discussing it with anyone outside the family. When a family member was in need, home was where they had to take you in. Today, even if we wanted to, we can't always take refuge in family. We are often living—and aging—far from our biological families, and sometimes we feel less connected to them than to our friends. That turns out to be a very healthy turn of events. New clinical research proves that we can literally change one another's chemistry for the better. What scientists have discovered about girlfriends explains some of the mysteries of our bonds.

Why is it that I can leave for a date with friends, while grumbling that I really don't have the time and I'm not in the mood, yet later when we hug each other goodbye I feel all warm and fuzzy and ready to meet the day?

Studies show that when we are doing whatever girlfriends do together, our bodies produce oxytocin, also known as the “cuddle hormone” (because it is released in nursing mothers). Unlike husbands and kids, who are often the cause of anxiety, our friends consistently elicit that warm glow, which feels good and soothes anxiety. In fact, while everyone else drives you crazy at one time or another, your friendships may keep you sane. A Swedish study even found that people with broad networks of friends were the lowest risk group for dementia.

Studies of female primates show the same phenomenon: Hanging out with a small but trusted group of other females reduces damaging spikes in stress hormones, reports *New York Times* science writer Natalie Angier. A circle of trust can, as *she* puts it, “mop up the cortisol spills that can weaken the immune system,” which in turn can support additional years of good health.

Why is it that when something goes wrong and I start to panic, my friends can talk me through it?

Again, it is the group hug. Women respond to danger by gathering in a mutually supportive group, while men show a “fight or flight” surge of adrenaline. It used to be thought that all humans exhibit “fight or flight” responses, but recent work (by a team of women scientists at UCLA led by Shelley Taylor) found that women are wired somewhat differently, so that our reaction to a crisis is more likely to be a more diplomatic, “tend and befriend” approach, which again reduces tension.

That conciliatory response may also make women more creative and calm in a crisis, because the “fight or flight” response is produced in the primitive (“reptilian”) part of the brain, which shuts down most rational resources in order to concentrate on physical strength and agility.

When I have a problem to solve, why is it that my husband’s immediate reaction—“let’s step back and analyze this thing so we can find the right answer”—just makes me more crazy, while huddling with friends who ask questions (basic ones like “what do you want to do?”) and laying out various possible approaches (along with the effect of each on the people involved) makes everything seem do-able?

Swedish researchers set up just such a situation, as recounted by gender scientist Dr. Marianne Legato in her book *Eve’s Rib*. Women preparing to speak in public (an especially high-stress activity for us) reported that the presence of even a well-meaning male partner made them more anxious while the presence of a woman friend gave them confidence.

Our friends’ ability to “make things better”—or at least *feel* better—may make a crucial difference in our outlook. When Dr. George E. Vaillant evaluated studies of a group of individuals throughout their lives, he found that “objective good physical health was less important to successful aging than subjective good health. By this I mean,” he explained in his book *Aging Well*, “that it is a right to be ill as long as you do not feel sick.”

How can it be that no matter how bad something is, and no matter how intense the conversation with girlfriend, we eventually find something to laugh about?

Laughter may be our most precious gift to each other; it is a powerful elixir (in fact, the act of laughing releases endorphins, those feel-good brain chemicals). It is very rare to spend more than a few minutes with a girlfriend when there isn’t a burst of laughter, no matter whatever else is going on. Gestalt therapist Ilana Rubenfeld calls humor “a martial art” because it cuts a frightening situation down to size. In addition, the physical exercise of a hearty laugh, not unlike orgasm, is a good endorphin-releasing workout. Laughing, Rubenfeld concludes, “improves blood circulation, increases the oxygenation of the blood, enhances digestion, reduces pain ... and best of all strengthens the immune system.” An Indian doctor, Madan Kataria, has taken this therapy one step further by developing a practice he calls “laughter yoga.” Groups of people get together, do some deep breathing and begin to emit fake laughs. Soon the laughs become real, and after fifteen or twenty minutes everyone feels great.

Laughter works, no matter how “inappropriate” it may seem. A psychiatrist I talked to is convinced that so-called “black humor” is a uniquely human survival technique. Dr. Andrew Weil put it nicely in his book *Healthy Aging*. Laughter, he writes, “is a way of seeing the ridiculous side of life—the incongruities and absurdities that can make you laugh even in the midst of misfortune, especial

in the midst of misfortune.”

How is it that girlfriends know how to make life a little bit easier for each other? (For example, my dinner group has decided to exchange gifts in January so that coming up with those gifts is not one more item on our stressful pre-holiday to-do lists?) How is it, in other words, that other women just “get it”?

The phrase “tend and befriend” describes this intuitive understanding nicely. The UCLA scientists who identified it as a distinctly female response first observed the gender-specific behaviors in their own lab. When something went wrong, the men would storm into their offices and slam the doors, while the women would come out of their offices and make coffee. We don’t need scientists to tell us that an old-fashioned coffee klatch with the girls is one of the many ways we tend and befriend each other, but it is nice to know that along with our lattes, we are getting a biochemical boost.

We even get a little dessert with our latte. Natalie Angier, writing about how women interact, reports on an experiment in which women were invited to play a game; they had to choose either a cooperative or competitive strategy. Brain imaging showed that the brains lit up most brightly among the women who chose cooperation and increased as cooperation continued. The areas of the brain that lit up were those that, according to Angier, also respond to “chocolate, pretty faces, money, cocaine, and a range of licit and illicit delights.”

If all that isn’t enough, listen to the prestigious Mayo Clinic; doctors there are so committed to promoting health through friendship that they have developed a list of pointers for building and maintaining a successful relationship. Their tips include:

Go easy. Respect your friends’ boundaries.

Don’t compete.

Adopt a healthy, realistic self-image. Vanity and constant self-criticism can be turnoffs to potential friends.

Listen up. Ask what’s going on in your friends’ lives. Avoid talking about your own problems all the time. Try to only give advice when your friends ask for it.

Don’t judge. Give friends space to change, grow, and make mistakes.

In the “you are not wasting your time” department, I’d add one more practical suggestion: **Make time for your friends.** You may have a built-in reminder—a class you take together or a project you are working on during the weekend—but if not, we are all so busy that it is important to make a time

commitment as solid as the emotional commitment. We in my five-woman posse, for example, pull out our calendars at the same time as we pull out our credit cards at the end of each meal, to make sure we schedule the next get-together.

CHAPTER 3:

BEFRIENDING OURSELVES

The only reward of aging is a sense of some honest friendship with yourself, where you get to know yourself—you make peace with the things you are and you aren't.

—Pepper Schwartz, sociologist

AS IMPORTANT AS HAVING FRIENDS is to our well-being, there is a level of understanding and respect that we can only reach for ourselves, and only by becoming as good a friend to our selves as we are to our friends. It is a circle of trust. It may take a little work to get that relationship into shape.

Authenticity. When I talk to women about their objectives for their reinvention, that word comes up all the time. Achieving it is, as psychologist James Hillman suggests, a process of liberating *character* (what you do when you are alone and presumably being true to yourself) from *personality* (the traits you have developed to navigate society and please other people).

Chipping away at personality in order to reveal character involves unloading some of the baggage from the past, and making peace with the rest. Which “me” did that? Do I want to keep doing it? Why didn't I do that? Do I have the courage to do it now? Which relationships are supportive of the “re-invented me”? What souvenirs from my life are worth keeping and which need to get tossed? How do I put my life in authentic perspective while looking forward—and looking back?

Much of that baggage accumulates during our earliest experiments with relationships. Childhood friends can help sort out our recollections. After all, they know who we were before we became who we are. Indeed, we learned what friendship was about from them. All the drama of those love/hate relationships with classmates was an education in making friends. “No one can teach you what a great friend is, what a fair-weather friend is, what a treacherous and betraying friend is, except to have a great friend, a fair-weather friend, or a treacherous friend,” observes psychologist Michael Thompson.

Those first friends are in a unique position. Certainly more objective than family members, they are able to comment on the narrative of our childhood that we have carved in emotional stone. Maybe that humiliating classroom presentation has been forgotten by everyone but you. Maybe everyone thought you were really smart, even though you didn't. Maybe your friend remembers your parents being home more than you do, or remembers your parents being as cold toward you as you hardly dared to think. Maybe she recalls a secret that you have forgotten or never knew that could explain a lot. A need to find witnesses to our lives may explain why we type names from the distant past into a Facebook search and why many women who avoided ten- and twenty-year high school reunions are now signing up for them now.

We can also measure how we have grown up in the context of those relationships. Eileen had retained two childhood friends on and off throughout her adult life. They are still teaching her about friendship—and herself. “We reconnected about fifteen years ago and started planning regular get-togethers as a threesome. Back in school, I was much closer to each of them than they were with one another; they both considered me their best friend.” But this time around the configuration shifted. “The two of them are actually more like one another than either of them is like me,” she realized. “They both tend to be quieter, more internally focused, and share many of the same interests: gardening, cooking, creative pursuits that don’t really interest me.”

When she found out that the others had arranged activities together that didn’t include her, Eileen was struck by a totally new response. “In the old days, I would have been jealous!” But a lot had changed. “Thank goodness that life perspective, menopause, and a needed dose of self-esteem and self-awareness have helped me realize that I don’t have to drive myself crazy trying to be everyone’s favorite friend.” Nowadays, she understands that “relationships change, people evolve, and life can be good just the way it is,” without measuring the bestness of friends.

Which is not to say there aren’t moments when we revert to the days of cliques and constantly shifting best friends. “I struggle with how to deal with friends who disappoint us when they cancel dates, don’t include us in their plans, take too long to return phone calls, forget to send birthday cards, or make friends with other women we introduce them to,” Ellyn Cohen, a retired publicist, admits. “What surprises me is that, despite our age, we still react the way we did in junior high school.”

It was mutual interests that brought my grade-school friend Ruthie back into my life, and it is our mutual history that has made the relationship uniquely meaningful now. We had twin families, with thought back then: European fathers; upbeat, somewhat flirty mothers (who, unlike other parents, took piano lessons); and pesky little brothers. We even lived in similar houses in the same neighborhood. We spent a lot of time together in one or the other of those houses.

After high school, though, we went our separate ways. She married, had three children, and lived in the Midwest; I went across the country to start my career. Thirty years later, I was beginning to write about women over fifty. A former classmate told me that Ruthie had become a therapist and was leading groups for women called “‘Retirement’—or What Next?” that dealt with the same issues of transition, turmoil, and self-doubt that I was writing about. We made a date to visit, and it was as if we had played our favorite card game on the floor of her sun-porch the day before, not decades ago. We talked and talked and seamlessly reentered one another’s lives.

Soon after that, both our mothers, who were still living in those houses we grew up in, began to fail. Our sympathy wasn’t abstract; we could each picture both mothers in both kitchens where we gathered after school, and could bear witness to the experience of being their daughters. No one else in my life today could go there with me.

Shedding Shame

Deep down in that burdensome baggage, are packed the secrets we never told anyone, because we were mortified by what we did or how we felt. It is time to let them go. With every risk we take, we grow stronger and braver, so that what seemed inconceivable earlier is a dare worth accepting now. Even though we know that speaking “the truth will set you free,” doing so is one of the hardest challenges we need to face in order to move on. Recently, I saw it happen in a workshop called “Dancing at the Shame Prom.” The workshop grew out of a collection of confessional essays by a wide range of women on the subject of shame. After the book was published, the editors, Amy Ferris and Holly Dexter, heard from women needing to get stories off their chests; as Ferris puts it, they needed to express “feeling not good enough, smart enough, creative enough.” They felt they could finally unburden themselves, they wrote, because reading the anthology reassured them they were not, as they had imagined all those years, alone. In response, Ferris and Dexter have developed a workshop, which they described to me, in which women can share their “stories filled with great sorrow and sadness, stories filled with anger and resentment about past mistakes.” The experience, says Ferris, enables the teller “to breathe, to exhale, to share, be intimate.” And shed tears of relief.

Another kind of tears—tears of laughter—are an antidote to another kind of shame, brought on by the indignities and creeping decrepitude we all have to live with. The trials and tribulations of menopause, and what Eileen calls the “floppin’ and droppin’,” going on around her provide endless material. Many times I have seen something in the mirror that almost brought me to tears (thinning hair or lips, for example) or been depressed over the newest memory lapse (forgetting whether it is a tablespoonful or a teaspoonful in the time between looking at the recipe and turning toward the mixing bowl) only to find myself overcome with hilarity when I confess it to those who know whereof I speak. As I knew I would.

This is serious business, of course. We have been unrelentingly critical of our bodies, even, as one of my friends puts it, when you had to be on LSD to see the flaws. Even when we should have been proud of what we saw in the mirror. Who hasn’t come upon a photo of herself back when she was reluctant to put on a bathing suit and been stunned to find that she looked pretty good? Now that we are becoming increasingly less perfect on the outside, we owe it to each other to appreciate and enhance the strength and wellness within.

Visiting the Road Not Taken

As we look long and hard at whom we have become, the mind wanders toward whom we might have become—and might still aim to be. We can get a glimpse in the lives of friends who took different routes. One major crossroad is parenting or not. Where are those who had children and had to make some hard choices about the rest of their lives? And where are those who chose different

commitments and lifestyles?

Rachel, who is a traveling saleswoman, knew she could always count on her friends in a crisis, but she hadn't seen much of them—especially those with families—because she was on the road so much, and they were focusing on home. The stock-taking milestone of her fiftieth birthday made her think about rebuilding her circle of trust. That was not so easy, she found. “Part of it was getting back to good friends and having to deal with some of their annoyance that I was gone.” Ultimately, though, she was able to cycle back into those lapsed friendships and found, among other things, that connecting to her friends' children, who were growing up while she was out of the picture, was an unexpected reward, “for five hours, maximum,” she adds. As another woman put it, if you are lucky when you circle back on a friendship, you find that “you haven't dropped a stitch; you just put the knitting down.”

Another connection between diverging lives has been membership in an enduring working group. These groups used to be quilting bees; then came consciousness-raising groups; in our time, it has been book groups. Many have lasted for years, and the conversations have created a timeline across the women's lives. Katrina Kenison, author of *The Gift of an Ordinary Day*, took one path, but has not been able to follow the road not taken through the women in her book club. During the decade they have been meeting, “there have been two divorces and both women are dating again,” she wrote me. “The conversation around this is always so interesting—those of us in long marriages envy the datee the spontaneity, the romance, the independence, the second chances. We want to hear all the juicy details. And yet I know my dear friends also envy us in a way, for our old, solid, unmysterious relationships.” She goes on, “These two women, ages sixty-one and fifty, both look fantastic, but then I realize they are working really hard to look so good, in a way that us solid-married aren't, because we don't have to. The grass is always greener, I guess. But I can tell you this: the seven married women are definitely living vicariously through our two bold and beautiful friends who are out there risking all in new relationships.”

For their part, though, those single women need a little more than green grass. As one woman (not in that group) admitted to me, “one of the difficult things for me is the fact that although I have a wonderful loving caring circle of friends, they are all married. At my age it is difficult to find women who are single and who are on the irreverent edge of life. There is so much to go and do ... and laugh about ... and have a ‘fuck it’ attitude one day, yet be able to walk the traditional path the next day.”

The paths of some friends have diverged *after* the family phase. Ann Voorhees Baker, a successful businesswoman, shared the letter she received from her friend Jackie on the eve of a weekend of workshops that Ann had organized for professional women in transition. Jackie traced their friendship back to the “little band of wives and mothers who gathered for countless play dates, dinner parties and holidays during our young mother years.” They had so much in common then, but now, when she compares herself to the women attending Ann's workshops, she wonders what she has

to offer. Those women “will have had such interesting lives,” she wrote, “and mine was/is so no. That’s how I’ve always felt, like who would want to hear my story? (Least of all, my children.) But I get older, I wonder. We need to tell our story.” And she adds, “I still don’t know what I want to do when I grow up, my dear.”

That’s what friends do as we age: Listen to each other’s stories and help each other grow up. No matter what choices we make, it’s possible for friends to grow separately without growing apart if we have achieved a relationship in which, as British social psychologist Terri Apter puts it, “understanding meant caring about (the other’s) experience, rather than sharing it.”

Maturing Within Our Friendships

“We have been the peace keepers, the mediators, the selfless workers behind the scenes who have striven to please our parents, our spouses, our friends, our children, our bosses—and for the most part have been quite successful,” a woman named Toni points out. But things are changing; she is in shedding mode. “Nowadays I don’t have time for all of that. I continually ask myself, what is important for *me*? With the limited amount of time I have left, I want to allow less important things to drop away and focus on the people who matter most.”

“I find that my tolerance for ‘fluff’ or gossip has almost vanished,” another woman told me. “I don’t care so much what my coworkers make or what vehicles they drive. I’ve come to think more about the larger picture. And I look for that in my friends, too.”

Yet another has discovered that the big picture includes acceptance. “We are so critical and judgmental of ourselves,” she explains. “When you are kind to someone else, you learn how to turn that toward yourself. It can be very healing.”

Mary, a woman I met not long ago, gave me a list of the qualities in a friend that have become important to her now. They include “the other woman being on a journey and conscious of that” and “common value base (ethics, politics – small p).” And there is one more, a self-protective requirement: “Being psychologically reasonably intact.” “I have found it too draining to have to support people if they won’t seek professional support when they need it,” she explains and then adds, “selfish, perhaps, but honest.” Ah, honesty—and that much-maligned expression of self-worth, “selfishness.”

Actually, honesty and a healthy respect for our own needs (formerly known as “selfishness”) are signs of that authenticity we are after. In the safety of our circle of trust, we can dare to be ourselves without being judged; we can vent unworthy gripes without feeling guilty; we can admit failures and boast about successes (no false modesty here); even accept as much advice as we give. Quite simply, we can say what we really think.

For many women, speaking up and speaking their minds is a totally new experience. One of the

hallmarks of this empowering period of self-discovery is the realization that hits each of us at some point: “You know what? I don’t care what people think any more!” (I’ve called that liberating experience “the fuck-you fifties.”) Nothing is more exhilarating than hearing yourself utter a resounding “no” to a statement or request you had been acquiescing to all your life. We practice the strong voice on our long-time friends. And we offer that empowered, no-bullshit self to new ones.

Making Peace with Weakness, Celebrating Our Strength

There is no escaping the fact that sooner or later, a circle of trust will be called upon to try to restore a friend’s emotional, physical, or financial health, especially since it is statistically likely that most of us will be living alone at some point in the future. The five of us who gather for a life-enhancing dinner every month may well find ourselves called upon to mobilize a different kind of lifesaving team.

Author Marilyn French was a member of just such a group—they called themselves the “covenant.” When she was stricken with lung cancer, they moved into action; they met with her doctors and evaluated treatments along with her children; they also invoked mystical forces and kept each other informed. When she went into a coma, they organized themselves into a round-the-clock spiritual circle. When doctors believed she was dying, they didn’t think so and encouraged their sleeping friend to keep going. When she miraculously emerged from the coma, they got her home and tended to her needs in shifts.

As she got physically stronger, Marilyn discovered a totally new kind of psychological strength has emerged. “When I got home, someone stayed with me every night,” she wrote in *A Season in Hell*, a memoir of those days. “They did this because I asked them to; it was a measure of my desperation that I did so. It was incredibly hard for me to ask anyone to do something for me, but during that period I did.” She may not have realized it, but I am sure that her friends were grateful to know what Marilyn needed and wanted, so they could do it, rather than helplessly asking, “is there anything I can do?”

Women of our generation have a very hard time asking for and even accepting help. We pride ourselves on being able to cope with anything, and we are deeply invested in our hard-won independence. By the time we get into our fifties, we have learned a lot about caregiving and rising to the occasion, but know much less about being cared for, what I call “care-getting.” Dr. Sara Auchincloss, a psychiatrist, sees this dynamic all the time. It is, she says, “a challenge for the woman to accept what she needs from someone.” We are so used to caregiving, she explains, that we can barely “tolerate it when people give care back to you.”

If we are going to address the challenges of aging, some of the trust and honesty that have bound us together will need to shape authentic responses to our circumstances—accepting weakness

ourselves and each other. It is time for a new Golden Rule, Gloria Steinem says: “Do unto yourself as you have been doing unto others.” Or to put it another way: “Do unto yourself as you would do unto your friends.”

CHAPTER 4:

UNFRIENDING FOR BETTER HEALTH

I've lost friends, some by death ... others through sheer inability to cross the street

—Virginia Woolf

A HEALTHY HUMAN BODY assimilates good nutrition and eliminates toxins at the same time. In the same way we have to shed stale or negative relationships, even as we nurture the high-protein ones. Like much of the “stuff” we discard in this house-cleaning period, many friends have simply been outgrown. But disengaging from friendships that are benign but no longer life-enhancing is a delicate business. Vivian, who moved to the United States from Israel after her divorce, is somber when she describes her decision. “The choices I am making now are much more personal and quiet and involve fewer people,” she says. “And that makes it hard in terms of friendships that have kind of traveled with you. Perhaps the wave that carries them is nostalgia.”

Then there are those we called friends who are now and always were unhealthy—belittling our achievements, dismissing our concerns, being disloyal—but somehow became embedded in our lives. They drag us down, hold us back, or just don’t understand (or don’t care to understand) what is going on. They must go. “I have one friend who I like very much but she always belittles my success,” says Jane, the artist. “If I ever told her what she was doing, she would be shocked,” she adds, “but I am beginning to think that she is not good for me.”

“I recently ‘broke up’ with one of my best friends,” says Candida in a comment on a blog I wrote about unfriending. “It was quite hurtful for me, but I just realized that—in that ‘he’s not that into you’ kind of way—despite how much we care for each other, how close we were, for a long time ...” It wasn’t working any more. In terms of what Candida needs now, “it is not enough to be called friend. There is something missing, some sort of trust.”

“Honesty and trust are important,” observes one woman succinctly. “Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me and unfriend you.”

Unfriending

The word “unfriending” (some say “defriending”) is one of the newest dictionary-worthy terms that, thanks to Facebook, indicates a brutal and final cutoff. In real life, though, you can’t just click a friend away. You can have a heart-to-heart; you can have a disagreement and not make up; you can try a white lie such as “I’ve got to devote my time to my grandchildren/my school work/my job.” But any way you look at it, paring down your inner circle can be hurtful, guilt-making, and very hard

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