Chapter Eight

The Shrinking Ties That Bind

"Two guys I used to play cards with can't do it anymore," complains an eighty-two-year-old man. "One of them had a bad heart for a long time, but it's so bad now, he can't hardly move around. The other one, he's lost it," he exclaims, pointing to his head, "you know, his mind, I mean. Soon there won't be anybody left."

Despite the fact that people of all ages generally rank friends up there with kin as the most important relationships in their lives, friendships are often hard to hold together, at least partly because there are no social rules, no reciprocal set of rights and obligations to bind people together, no public ceremony to honor the forming of a friendship, no constraints to ending it, not even a language that distinguishes the closest from the most distant.

A recent study funded by the National Science Foundation presents a sobering picture of friendship in an increasingly fragmented America. Intimate social ties, once an integral part of daily life and known to be associated with a host of psychological benefits, which translate into physical well-being, are shrinking or nonexistent.[1] One-quarter of Americans say they have

no one with whom they can discuss personal problems, more than double the number who were similarly isolated in 1985. And compared with that earlier time, nearly 50 percent more now say their spouse is the only person they can confide in. Although the researchers don't distinguish among age groups or deal with gender differences, it's a pretty good bet that the old are high on the list of those who report dwindling social networks, and that men, who were never very good at intimate friendships, far outnumber women in this respect.[2]

Not surprisingly, friendships in old age are even more complicated and more fragile than at earlier periods in our lives, except, of course, in our teenage years. Then our problems came from being too young, too immature, too insecure, and too slavishly devoted to peer group norms. Now our friendships suffer from the irony that, at the very time we need them most, we too often can't count on them being there: circumstances change, health declines, death calls.

"My best friend for thirty years just moved away because her kids insisted," explains a seventy-nine-year-old woman, shaking her head sadly. "I understand. She's not doing so well, you know, she gets sick and needs help, and the kids have a life. They can't just keep dropping everything and running back here to take care of her. She didn't want to go, kept waiting, saying she was okay, but finally she didn't have a choice. They don't have the money for a nursing home. Not, God forbid, that she'd want to go there. So she's gone. We always said we'd do old age together; now I have to do it alone. I miss her, I mean *really* miss her," she says, wiping the tears from her eyes.

And then there are the friends who die, sometimes in a long and painful death, other times suddenly, with no warning, leaving us acutely aware of our own vulnerability.

"It sure makes you sit up and take notice when someone dies like that," says a seventy-nine-year-old man whose friend died in

his sleep a few weeks earlier. "It's really a jolt, you know, a kick in the ass just in case you forgot how unpredictable the whole thing is. You just never know, do you," he concludes, shaking his head in wonder.

When I look back on my own friendships over the years, I see a parade of people who have come and gone. Some left because we'd grown apart and we both knew it, others because one of us moved and there wasn't enough glue to hold us together across the miles, still others left for no discernible reason, except that it's the way of many relationships that pass through our lives. Two people come together for a while, need or want something from each other, get it or not, then drift apart. No words, no explanations, the relationship just eases away almost unnoticed, until one day you wake up and realize you haven't seen each other in over a year. You don't do anything about it, and neither does the other. It seems right to let it go.

Some of my friendships languished because of painful rifts that wouldn't mend, and some, the ones I still mourn deeply, were ended abruptly by... Why am I having so much trouble saying they ended when death called? It surely isn't because I fear dying, or that I prefer to speak in the ridiculously ambiguous terms we use for those parts of life we prefer to deny: "passed" instead of "died," "senior" instead of "old." I'm not sure what stopped me just then; I just know it tears at a wound that still bleeds when I'm reminded of the loss. Then there are those friends who came and stayed for decades. They are the women and men who have been an intimate presence in my life, a vital force in my personal and professional development, and who have made my life infinitely richer than it would have been without them. They are the friends with whom I've shared all the pleasures and pains of living—and with whom I've grown old.

But friendships change at this stage of life, sometimes for good, sometimes not.

On the positive side, there's often a renewed appreciation of friends because, in many ways, we need them more than ever before. Sometimes it's because of widowhood: "Since my husband died my friends have become even more important," says an eighty-year-old woman. "At first I was so lonely, I thought I'd die, too, but little by little I began to see some friends again, and that makes it a lot easier. If I didn't have them, I'd just be sitting home alone all the time, and I *would* die."

For others, old friends become more precious with time because they're the ones who share our history, who knew us *when*.

"I've had lots of friends in my life, and I still do. But Rita is my special friend, no one knows me like she does," explains a seventy-six-year-old woman. "It's hard to believe I've known her for fifty-two years. Imagine, *fifty-two years*; we were just kids. We got married pretty close to the same time, and we raised our children and sat in the playground together. I don't know how I could have done it without her. We helped each other through it.

"God, when I think of it; we shared so much. We had plenty of fights, too, but..." Her eyes turn inward as memory calls, then she smiles and continues. "No matter how mad we were, we always got back together. It's funny, I think we've even gotten closer now that we're old. It's like there aren't any more distractions. Or maybe we just need each other again, like we used to when we were young. You lose so much when you get old; you're different, like you've changed, only you're not sure how. But Rita, she was there for it all. She's the only one I can do that 'remember when' stuff with. She remembers."

I listen to her words, and I think about my oldest friend, a woman I've known for nearly five decades, the only friend from that distant past who's still closely entwined in my life, who knew me even before I knew my husband of forty-five years. She, too, remembers. She's the one who knew the person I was then, knew

what I looked like, thought like, was like—a version of myself who seems barely recognizable to me now, but not to her.

Unfortunately, not all old friendships fare so well. Some people who are lucky enough to be physically and mentally fit want to look away from a friend, even someone they've known for decades, who is no longer their match. They don't mean to be cruel. It's just too hard to look closely at another's deterioration, too hard to be with someone who can no longer keep pace with you when you walk, too hard to listen to a friend's litany of pain, too hard not to compare the person you see now to who he was then.

I had an e-mail from a sixty-seven-year-old friend recently who is not aging easily. A lifetime battle with the effects of rheumatic fever, heart surgery that weakened her and left her housebound for many weeks, and assorted other health problems have often left her in despair. Knowing I was writing this book and thinking about friendship, she wrote with a breaking heart to tell me about a breach with her oldest friend, the woman who, in her words, has been "the sister of my heart."

"She was the first person I called when my children were born, when I was accepted to graduate school, when I decided to remarry. We have gone through life hand in hand sharing one another's joys and sorrow. This week while having lunch with her, the unthinkable happened . . . I was unaware that my distress, frequently voiced, was getting on her nerves until she snapped at me and said I spend too much time thinking these depressing thoughts. When I protested and said talking helps me to handle my anxieties about aging and its accompanying problems, she said she rarely thinks about these issues and mortality is not a topic of conversation amongst her other women friends. I don't know how to respond to this rebuff. Can it be she fears aging so much that she has to silence me? Do my complaints about ag-

ing and mortality interrupt her constructed world where she can avoid these anxieties? I want to ask why my feelings were so upsetting to her, but I fear another attack, so I am silent. I pick up the phone and see her less often now . . . our closeness has been fractured. I am bewildered as to how to reshape our connection. What am I to do?"

When the decline is mental instead of physical, it can be an even more difficult problem for friends. It's hard to know what to do, how to act, how to relate to someone whose mind is no longer agile enough to engage the kind of conversations you used to have, someone with whom you can no longer share your life or the things that interest you. It's as if your old friend were already gone, and indeed, it's true. The person you knew is no longer, the one who replaced him isn't the friend you chose so long ago, the friend with whom you shared so much over so many years.

"We were close friends as a couple and also friends individually, especially with the wife," says a seventy-four-year-old woman who shifts uncomfortably in her chair as she explains her husband's response to an old friend whose mind is slipping. "But the last couple of years, it's been hard. I'm okay with it, but my husband has trouble being around him now. What can I say? He feels bad about it, but it's just too hard for him, so we don't see them much anymore."

Her words strike my heart. This woman, this stranger, could be one of my friends. For my husband, too, has suffered a cognitive decline in recent years, and her words brought to the fore all the feelings I've tried to deny about the changing nature of several of our friendships. In that moment I forget everything I know about interviewer neutrality. Her words hurt, and I want to confront her, maybe even punish her. So I ask with some heat, "What about the wife? She's your close friend, but she gets abandoned along with her husband."

She looks up, surprised at my tone, starts to say something, changes her mind, and finally with a helpless shrug, "Yes, I know, but..."

I left our conversation locked in my thoughts about my own friends, about all the times I've watched anxiously as they squirm uncomfortably when my husband says something that reminds them he's no longer the man they used to know. I've watched also as friends began to slip away while pretending not to. I've had some sympathy for their feelings, perhaps still do, since they mirror some of my own difficulty in dealing with the situation. But in that moment sympathy and understanding weren't enough to quiet the turmoil that brought me up close, closer than I'd wanted to be, to my anger at those friends and my feelings of abandonment.

In a society where age grading—people separated and separating themselves by age—is as common as it is in this one, most old people don't have friends across generational lines. But when they do, the issues that can separate them grow even larger.

Such friendships are most likely to exist among professional people who, in the course of their careers, have become friends with students they mentored and junior colleagues they held a hand out to. I have friendships born in those circumstances, too. But because I was thirty-nine when, along with a few thousand eighteen-year-olds, I entered the University of California at Berkeley as a freshman, the trajectory of my professional development was out of sync with my age and life stage. Consequently, most of my friendships across the age divide weren't initially the product of unequal relationships—an inequality that isn't easily resolved when the balance between mentor and mentee shifts, as it almost inevitably must. Instead, my cross-generational friendships came into being out of shared experience.

In the eight years it took me to go from the beginning of my

college career to graduating with a doctorate in sociology and training in clinical psychology, I was surrounded by young people at least twenty years my junior. My professors were my age peers, but it was the students, especially those in my graduate program, who were my real peers, the ones with whom I shared an intellectual life, planned political actions, studied for exams, and worried about term papers. Those students with whom I shared those years were the women and men with whom I would also share the vicissitudes of beginning a professional life. They were all my colleagues—and some were also my friends.

Despite our common ground during those years, we also walked on uncommon ground. I was forty-seven when I got my doctorate; they were in their mid- to late twenties. Some were in the early stages of family building, for others that was still a way off. I was married with a daughter who was already in law school on the same campus I was leaving. Yet it made no difference then, or for many years afterward. We were bound together, shaped by those early experiences and our common professional interests, and held together by affection and decades of sharing our lives, both personal and professional.

But something happened on the way from there to here. Suddenly our lives don't fit together the way they used to. At midlife, they're still working, still striving, still actively engaged in the world, while I'm well into old age and pulling away from all that. My career is largely in the past, as are my ambitions; they're still reaching. As Doris Grumbach notes so pithily, "We become spectators at the show and no longer yearn to be stars."[3] My younger friends *are* the show *and* the stars.

The differences that separate us now often leave me anxious about these friendships, anxiety that may (I say *may* because I'm still not certain what's truth and what's fantasy here) have a touch of paranoia, which recently showed me its unpleasant face. I was with a younger friend when I walked into the lobby of one of the

small theaters that dot the Bay Area's cultural scene, saw old men and women sitting in the chairs that lined the walls, and blurted out, "Oh my God, it looks like an old age home"—words spoken with dismay, if not disgust.

It wasn't the words that shocked me, it was the way I said them. *What,* I demanded of myself, *is going on with you? What's this reaction about?* At the time I wasn't sure; I only knew that I didn't want to be surrounded by all those old people with their straggly gray hair, their wrinkled faces, their bent backs, their walkers and their canes, didn't want to identify or be identified with them.

Later, I mulled over my reaction, brooded about it, wondered why it was so intense. I've never been very good at hiding from myself or denying those parts of me that aren't laudable, so I knew before that evening that I, like most Americans, have an aversion to the old. But why my intense reaction at that particular time? Was it because I'd seen signs that my friendship with this woman, who for a quarter of a century has been counted among my nearest and dearest, had changed now that we were on such different paths? Was it because she, who has just turned sixty and has her own issues about aging, was standing there, seeing what I saw, feeling what I felt, maybe lumping me in with all those old people who were sitting around because it was too hard to stand up? How could it be otherwise? I, we, they—all of us are a look into her future.

I've thought about asking her what she really felt that night as we stood surrounded by the old and infirm (many, I might add, undoubtedly a decade or more younger than I am), but I haven't had the courage. What do I fear? Maybe that she won't speak the truth, and I'll know it; maybe that she will, and I don't want to hear it.

But if that was a paranoid moment, many others are not. Ask any old person who has had young friends with whom they were

close, people with whom they shared interests and activities for years, and you'll hear stories and complaints about how they begin to fall away.

"I don't see my younger friends very often anymore," says a seventy-seven-year-old former professor whose eyesight is failing. She pauses, then with the grim humor of the old, "Did you hear that? I said *see*, as if I can *see* anybody these days." She looks away, her eyes brimming with tears, then her voice edged in bitterness, "I guess the fact that I can hear and think and talk isn't enough for them. It saddens me greatly." She's silent again, reflecting on her words, then, "No, I'm not just sad, I'm angry, too. Dammit, I'm no different than I was a few years ago, when I could still help them out. But I've been thrown away because I got old and I might need some help and they're too busy to be bothered."

It doesn't happen all at once; they don't just disappear. It's a gradual process: They don't include you as they did before and hope you won't notice it. They call less often, and when they do, the conversation is just a bit stilted, awkward, less energetic than it used to be, with little pauses as you both search to hold on to a connection that no longer has the same vitality.

You tell yourself it's not you, it's their busy lives that keep them from the telephone, from the lunch or dinner you shared so often before. You remind yourself that they're still preoccupied with their careers, that they have a second family with young children, that their adult children are having problems that engage their attention, that they have new grandchildren with whom they're entranced. But inside you know—or think you know—there's something more. Not perhaps as simple as the fact that you've grown old, but surely a factor.

I was speaking the other day with a sixty-year-old colleague at my art studio who asked how my writing was going. When I told her I was thinking about how friendships change in old age, she fairly leaped out of the chair as the words poured forth.

"Oh my God, I've been thinking about just that because I've always had older friends. They've always seemed more interesting to me than people my age. My closest friends—family really, the only family I've ever cared about—are all ten, fifteen, even twenty years older than me. The woman who has been my dearest friend for forty years is eighty-one now. We've traveled together, lived together, done everything together, and in the last couple of years I suddenly have begun to feel that something is missing, like we don't have a lot in common anymore."

"What do you think has changed?" I ask.

"They're changing; it's happening right before my eyes. It's heartbreaking. They're losing their zest for life. It's not that they're sick or anything, either; they just don't have the kind of energy for living they used to have. We've gone different ways and different things occupy us now. It wasn't ever that way before. It feels like a terrible loss, and I feel guilty. I sit around thinking I'm disloyal and shallow, and whatever other words I can find to berate myself with. But I have to tell the truth: those are my feelings."

Our conversation turns to other things—a new painting of mine about which she offers an informed critique, the larger studio I'm thinking about moving to, her sister's visit—when she suddenly interrupts herself in the middle of a word.

"I've been thinking while we were talking. They're not the only ones who have changed. I have, too. Leaving my job and becoming an artist ten years ago was a transforming experience. For the first time in my life I feel like I'm doing what I was meant to do. It's as if I've finally grown into the me I should have been all those earlier years. Or maybe I should say the person I knew was there but couldn't find before. But these wonderful old friends who I love dearly can't come with me."

We're both silent, thinking about her words, feeling them, each of us with our own understanding of the truth she has just

spoken—and our own discomfort. I know she's a warm, generous person; I have been the beneficiary of that as she has from time to time guided my unsure hand as I struggle with a painting. But in this moment, her words leave me upset, maybe even a little angry: *How can she be so cruel?* Yet, I also know it's true; her friends can't join her in her journey. Their lives, their needs, even their desires, are too disparate.

At sixty, she's still in middle age—closing in on the end of it, to be sure, but still there. At that age, most people are either at the top of their game, or they realize they've missed something along the way and need to make big changes before it's too late. True, there's a regretful understanding that their youth is gone, a knowledge that's hammered home by the signs of aging their bodies signal and their mirrors show. But by and large they're still looking more outward than inward, still looking more forward than backward, still hopeful, still filled with energy for living.

In old age, the balance shifts from forward to backward, from outward to inward. We retrench, reflect, husband our waning energy, examine the past, and struggle with the limitations of the future. "There is not time to become anything else. There is barely enough time to finish being what it is you are," laments Doris Grumbach in her book *Extra Innings*.[4] Hope, where it exists, is fleeting; the future sits before us like a dagger at the heart, not only because we fear death but because we're frightened about living—about how we'll live these years, how we'll find meaning now that the tasks that dominated our lives are finished, when and whether we'll fall victim to the many indignities old age inevitably brings.

I see it in my own life, and I see it in others with whom I've talked about these issues. I complain that younger friends aren't as present in my life as they were before, but in truth we are nei-

ther of us the same friend we used to be. I'm no more fully present for them than they are for me.

I don't mean I don't love my friends still, but it's not as easy to stay in touch as it used to be now that important parts of our lives no longer match. Where I used to entertain often, pleased to be surrounded by familiar and loved faces while showing off my culinary prowess, I get too tired now to enjoy the evening after a day or more in the kitchen. Where before I picked up the phone easily to touch base, to chat, it's harder now. They're at work during the day, just the time when I might want to talk. By the time they're ready to have a conversation, it's well into the evening, when all I want to do is read my book, watch TV, a movie or whatever other quiet activity appeals to me, and try for the sleep that so often eludes me.

Some people talk about the physical decline that makes it impossible to continue the activities that bound them together.

"Tennis was a big thing that kept me together with my friends," explains a seventy-six-year-old woman. "Until a few years ago, I could beat every one of them in a singles game, even those twenty years younger than me. Afterward we'd hang around the club for lunch or, if it was late in the afternoon, a glass of wine, maybe dinner. Then a year and a half ago I had a stroke, just out of the blue, totally unexpected. At first people came to see me, but it took a long time to get back some mobility, and I guess it got boring.

"I don't blame them; it *was* boring. But it makes me sad. I guess I expected more, but I don't actually know what that would be. I don't have the energy to keep up with them anymore, and I don't even really want to. I mean, I really miss playing tennis, but..." She pauses, looking for words, "Oh, I don't know," she continues, "I'm not the same person I was then, that's all there is to say."

Others say that what used to be fun now sometimes feels like too much stimulation. They want to be with friends, look forward to it, enjoy it, but there comes a time in the evening when they just want the quiet solitude of home.

"I have lots of friends, and I enjoy hanging out with them. But lately it sometimes feels like too much," says a seventy-eight-year-old woman. She looks at me as if waiting to hear what I might say, then, as if I'd asked the question aloud, continues, "I don't know exactly what I mean by that, maybe too much noise in my head, or maybe too much to keep track of. After a while, it makes my head swim, and I feel tired. Not physically tired, just tired of all the talk and the people and... I don't know; I just want to go home where it's quiet."

Friendship, then, presents one of the several paradoxes of this time of life. We want friends, need them as never before, but we're also less tolerant, less willing, as one woman said, "to put up with stuff I don't like anymore." We feel abandoned, an experience that has some objective reality, and are saddened because we're no longer wanted and sought after as we once were. But we can't, maybe don't want to, do what it takes to nurture these relationships as easily as we used to. We want to be in the world, want to have a place in it at the same time that we need more solitude than ever and, therefore, have withdrawn some part of ourselves, some of the energy that was once given over to our friendships, into a quieter, more contemplative and, all too often, lonely place.