

THE WEEKEND ESSAY

THE TROUBLE WITH FRIENDS

The wonder, and the curse, of friendship is choice.

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Illustration by Camille Deschiens

...**n**a daily basis, I teach kids. By kids, I mean teens to college-age, sometimes mid-twenties. When I started teaching, I was still a kid myself, so I was careful to refer to my students as students, but now I feel a distinct gap. Kids talk a lot about their friends. For any length of time that you allow them, they will bring up this friend and that friend and a birthday

party they went to, a concert, a sleepover, a study sesh, another party, the mall, a Starbucks run, the movies, a two-week trip across Asia which they're planning to take or have taken with friends. Kids don't usually talk about their families. Sometimes I'm taken completely by surprise when, months into our knowing each other, a student mentions having a twin. I suppose hearing the constant chatter about friends has made me consider my own, and how hard it can be to maintain these bonds as an adult. Mostly, what I notice is attrition: I lose more friends than I make.

An obvious reason for that attrition is marriage. Friends get married and their spouses become their closest friends. My husband is now the person I spend the most time with. Face to face and over text. I tell him everything and anything, because I'm a chronic oversharer and I trust him with my thoughts, however stupid they may be. I used to be the same way with friends, but more and more I check myself. My ten-second rule: write the text but wait ten seconds before sending it; evaluate whether it's truly vital to pass on this piece of information. When I tell friends something now, I must accept the possibility that they will tell their spouses, with whom I'm friendly but not friends. A friendship is truly strained when you don't like the spouse. Here is my person, your friend proclaims, flag in the sand, and you must tread carefully. Sometimes this new person is so far removed from what you imagined for your friend that you wonder if you knew your friend at all.

After marriage, any walls that already existed between two friends invariably thicken. A friend who used to discuss things with you simply to work through them stops doing so, and updates you only on definitive good news, never the bad, the ugly, or the in-progress. All of that, you suspect, she saves for her partner. In other words, you're no longer included in the problem-solving. Of course, some matters belong first to the marriage: the stuff of intimacy, finance, family. To have or not have children. To want children but not be able to have them. Increasingly, my friends leave me out of these big conversations, and vice versa, but when an outcome is certain or a plan set, we do update one another, which reminds us that we're still, in fact, friends,

but also boils the friendship down to a PowerPoint.

If I don't have kids, I will lose more friends. This is not a hypothesis. It has already started to happen. Friends, during pregnancy, assure you that nothing will change. You contribute to the diaper fund, attend the baby shower, and, once the child arrives, you try to see them, plan for dinner at 2 P.M., between nap times, but, somehow, something always comes up. Next time, yeah, next time, let's hang out soon, yeah, soon—but no one proposes a new time, and months go by, years. You never see them again, you never meet the child, and that begs the question of how close you really were. You consider the possibilities. Perhaps you said or did something irrevocably wrong. To avoid ever saying anything about a child that could be misconstrued, I overcompensate. I never bring up the child or ask after it, or, if I do, I make the mistake I just made, and refer to the child as an "it." A likely scenario is that my friends, as new parents, went down their friend list and crossed people out. Having friends without kids is harder for them to justify. What is our baby going to do at their non-baby-proofed place? And remember that time they referred to our child as an it? An it! But I could be overthinking. Doing what writers do, adding nuances to interactions that aren't there. A simpler reality is that my former friends just don't have time for me. Parenting is hard enough without their having to worry about my feelings.

I do greatly appreciate the rare friends who stay with me after kids. We meet, as we used to, at restaurants, bars, shows, or, when child care gets hard to schedule, we meet at their apartment, the office now a nursery, now a toddlers' room, now a girls' room, and, throughout dinner, the girls (twins), who are supposed to be in bed, come out, one at a time, sometimes together, to tell us that they would like to be read to, they would like to drink an entire glass of water, they would like to go to the bathroom, they would like new pajamas, they would like chicken nuggets, they would like to have their hair combed, they would like a specific teddy, they would like a hug, a better hug, they would like to see a rainbow, they would like to go to the bathroom again, they would like more water, they would like to know if it's tomorrow.

For the short duration of an evening, I greatly appreciate being part of this.

There's a Grace Paley story that I think of when I think about how friendships end. A woman named Cassie asks her friend Faith, a writer, why she has written about their other friends but never about her: "You let them in all the time; it's really strange, why have you left me out of everybody's life?" Faith doesn't have a good answer and asks to be forgiven.

Forgive you? [Cassie] laughed. . . . With her hand she turned my face to her so my eyes would look into her eyes. You are my friend, I know that, Faith, but I promise you, I won't forgive you, she said. From now on, I'll watch you like a hawk. I do not forgive you.

That final line, which is also the last line of Paley's "Collected Stories," strikes me as brutally honest and true. When I have trouble forgiving a friend, my husband says it's because I go all in. I pour everything into a new friendship, the honeymoon period, the getting to know each other. I have an incurable habit of sending pop-up holiday cards. I'm a big fan of digressive group chats. *Here are my deepest, most authentic feelings, friend. Please kindly tell me yours.* But when that gesture is not reciprocated, when I sense the wall coming up, I'm so mad at myself for having revealed so much that I withdraw.

Sometimes I ask my students to write about a time when they were blindsided, or an incident that made them take stock. More often than not, they turn in stories about a friend betrayal. In one class, a student mentioned that their parents didn't have any friends. Around the table, everyone nodded. It seemed that no one's parents had friends, and my students couldn't fathom this, couldn't fathom it when I admitted (foolishly) to having fewer friends in my thirties than I'd had in my twenties. Horror. Pity. I tried to defend myself. More horror. More pity. How could this happen to a person? How could a person let it happen? No, it would not happen to them.

The wonder, and the curse, of friendship is choice. You can't choose your family, but you can choose your friends. For me, common qualities and

habits help. Female. About my age. Sense of humor. I would not choose a friend who went out dancing all night on Ecstasy. No offense to dancing or Ecstasy, but in comparison with those things I would be a total bore. I would not choose a friend who had a second home somewhere like the Hamptons or Lake Como or Austria. Of course, it is superficially nice to be invited to garden parties or SoHo lofts, but I don't want to be the lone Asian woman in that garden wearing a cotton dress and sensible shoes, my only topics of conversation being work, the grind, and not that new art gallery down the street. In other words, the supposed freedom of friend selection goes only so far, and, given how deeply my choices are informed by my background, family, and upbringing, I wonder if they are choices at all.

I'm the only child of immigrants who are not only children but whose siblings and parents stayed in China. I have no cousins here. No aunts, uncles, or grandparents. As a kid, I was distressingly lonely, and, like my students, my younger self placed grave significance on having not just friends but the ability to make them. To befriend was to assimilate and to speak English. To have a friend was to have an ally. I still fear the time when I am alone. Statistics predict that I will outlive my husband, and then what? I get through my last decade texting my friends? Having kids is a solution. I could spend the last decade texting them, or their kids, and getting wrapped up in all that. But I don't see myself having kids.

I live in a building where the parents are friends because their kids are friends. Hard to say if they would have been friends without the kids, and that makes me wonder if friendship is genuine if the choice to stay connected and on good terms is not entirely a solo one. My husband and I have friends in our building because our dogs are friends. We have a group chat, named after our dogs, with this other couple, and we pet-sit for one another. Our friendship is so rooted in our dogs that, when we ate out together for the first time, dogless, more than a year after we'd started looking after each other's fur babies, we all felt that it was kind of weird. But then we did it again, and it wasn't so weird. I used to think that our friendship with this couple was

one of convenience, but I don't think that anymore. Sometimes you have close friends because they are close by and have compatible dogs.

If a friendship is meant to be a give-and-take, an ideal friend should, in theory, give as much as she takes. But this, then, opens the door for the frustratingly fair friend. She weighs every gesture and transaction, splits every bill down to the cent. She remembers every favor, every imbalance of favors. She looks up the price of your birthday gift to her, in order to give you an item of commensurate value. In Chinese, *chi kui* means "to eat a loss." This friend will never *chi kui*, yet is shrewd enough never to seem like she's taking advantage. Technically, the fair friend is not in the wrong, and if I'm noticing her behavior, then I, too, am guilty of keeping score.

But do I accept the friend who takes more than she gives? The taking is not always tangible. There's the friend who keeps forgetting her wallet, and then the friend who expects you to be there for her at whatever cost. Inconvenient as it may be for you to step out of class, mute the Zoom screen, get off the subway, this friend is having a crisis and she would like your opinion, even though it's not an opinion she'll take; she would still like you to hear and validate her crisis. I've never known a crisis friend to have just one crisis, and, before you know it, you've read and replied to thousands of texts about her problems, which are all interrelated and endemic, and soon, mired in another emergency that you're coaching her through, she throws up her hands and announces, "I've had it. No one in the world cares about me. I can't rely on anyone anymore, except myself." She sighs with profound feeling. You blink, balk. You think, What the fuck have I been doing? What the fuckity fuck has every conversation we've ever had been for? Then you realize that what your friend wanted from you is a mother, and, when you couldn't measure up, you, too, became part of the cold, unfeeling world.

Inverting the dynamic completely is the friend who wants to be *your* mother. She demands to be relied on, to be your "go-to." She remembers your birthday, your pets' birthdays, your wedding anniversary, when you moved to

the city, when you plan to go upstate—“about that time, isn’t it?” She knows you. Or thinks she does. She’s the first to like your photos, your tweets, the first to give you the name of a C.P.A., a dentist, a real-estate agent, a doctor (her C.P.A., her dentist, her real-estate agent, her doctor), and for a very long time this feels supportive, until it feels intrusive and like surveillance and not nurturing at all but a show of control. When you seek out your mothering friend in your low moments, you feed her ego. She wants to help, but above all she wants credit for helping you, and she relishes the flex. Whenever you ask after her well-being, she pronounces herself emphatically “great.” You try to poke around more, you sense that she isn’t as well as she claims, and, without fail, she adds, “No, really, I’m great, super, but how about you? You seem stressed. Anything I can do?” How to handle such a question? Do you say, “Yes, please deliver the chicken soup” (which she would gladly do), or do you feel bad for always being the broken one?

I already have a mother, with whom I have a complex, routinely difficult, and uniquely volatile bond that would take over this essay and any story I ever write, should I let it. I don’t need another mother. So I learn to interact with these friends less. I offer up less of my life. I’m great, too, super, never better. I recognize that to question the motives behind a friend’s support is both paranoid and ungrateful. But I worry that if my vulnerability fuels her vanity, then an inherent rivalry exists between us—one that I want no part in—over who is the better friend. I am certainly not the better friend. I can’t remember everyone’s important dates and be there for everything and like every comment within thirty seconds of its existence, and I definitely don’t want to be my friend’s mother. So, if I’m not the better friend, then I’m the worse friend. I’m the one who takes more than I can give.

All this to say that friends grow apart. Commonalities change. Common habits diverge. Qualities that you didn’t much like in a friend amplify, and your own traits, priorities, shift. A friendship is not stagnant, and growing together is usually not the norm. It’s nice to have writer friends, but then all you talk about is writing and how insane you have to be to do it.

Nice to have friends with other jobs, but then all you hear about is their work, which you might not understand or care about. Work colleagues can never be true friends, and neither can one's students. A fake friend is easy to spot, and even easier is the friend or acquaintance who, after a long period of no contact, emerges from literally nowhere with the message *Hey! Just saw you published a book! Here's a picture of that book in a bookstore. Let's grab coffee and catch up.*

Platitudes: A true friend is someone you can be your true self with. A true friend calls you out on your bullshit. A true friend sticks with you through thick and thin. But is any of that really possible or fair? How well do I tolerate being called out on my bullshit, and how comfortable am I now at calling other people out on theirs? Can a true friend stay with you forever, or, a better question, can a friend stay true to you forever? Is Cassie a true friend to Faith?

What my students say: Friendship is a gift, a sacrifice. Friendship is all about timing and who you are at that moment and what you need. My students are always living for the moment, and they have strong opinions about what it means to be a good, true friend. When I was in college, my friend circle was wide and healthy. Thanks to clubs, class, lab, and Harvard's housing system—"the blocking group," wherein, at the end of freshman year, you choose up to seven people you are close to, your "block-mates," and are then sorted into a house with them and live with them for the next three years. To entangle matters even more, your blocking group can link with another group to sort into the same house, and those in the latter group become your "link-mates." Should you not have a group and have to sort on your own, you're called a "floater." These terms were fun to use at the time but are now glaring reminders of how successful my alma mater is at institutionalized friendship. Institutionalized to then build a strong alumni network, which donates large sums back to the nest where the camaraderie began. By the end of senior year, my blocking group, a collection of misfits, had toppled. There was so much politics in my lab, given the constant pressure to publish, and my

friends in clubs were already moving on to bigger, better things, like med school, law school, or jobs in the real world. I don't think my experience was unique. You have friends for the period that you have them for, and that period ends.

I know that a friendship has cooled when I find myself asking, Would we be friends if we met today? I used to think "cooled" meant "over." In the words of that pop icon my students are obsessed with, we are never, ever getting back together. But "cooled" does not necessarily mean "severed." Though friends are not family and are not obligated to stay with me, they have accompanied me for part of the journey, and for that I owe them, I owe us, the chance, at some future point, to fortify the bond again.

According to the sociology of group dynamics, a triad is more stable than a dyad because one member can act as a mediator. An example is a doctor, a patient, and a cultural liaison. But I have never found a triad of friends to work as well as, say, a tetrad, and especially a tetrad made up of two couples. In a triad, two people are always closer and risk icing out the third. The exclusion is not usually intentional, but the ousted person always feels that it is, somehow. And what if no one wants to mediate, or the person who mediates also likes power, likes games? I've had triads of friends begin, then fail, and, when the final calamity hits, I think of the dumping of water into a nuclear reactor and then of Yeats's "widening gyre": "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold." My preference for tetrads makes sense only because of my husband. He has been, for me, an ally, a cheerleader, and my first reader, and we have, thus far, a happy marriage. Along the way, we've made couple friends as a couple, and I've discovered that the tetrad works only when every possible combination of two members does.

There are only a few couples with whom this holds true for us, and there is only one tetrad that we have tested through long periods together and international travel. I evoke my closest childhood friend here, a girl I've known since fifth grade. Let's call her Diana. We have not always been so

close. In middle school, she moved away, then my family moved to the city she had moved to, but although we went to the same high school, our social circles rarely overlapped. Still, from middle school on, Diana and I were part of a triad. I was extremely close with the third girl, as we were both immigrant children, from China, and lived in similarly shabby apartment complexes across the street from each other in the rural Midwestern town where the three of us met. The third girl and I often iced out Diana. Together, we were mean. A few years out of college, that girl and I had a huge fight by text on my birthday. (Lesson learned: when friends decide to burn it all down, they don't care if it's your birthday because they've stopped caring about you.) A litany of grievances was aired and contested, and no one was generous enough to get on the phone. We haven't spoken since.

By chance, Diana went to college and grad school in the same city as I did. As the triad imploded—she tried to mediate, negotiations failed—I vented to her about it, and, eventually, I stopped venting and she and I became close. She met my husband when he was still my boyfriend. I saw her through her breakup with her high-school sweetheart, a boy who was also a friend of mine, with whom I have since fallen out of touch. By the end of grad school, Diana had found a new boyfriend, who would later become her husband, in a wedding that was delayed three years by the pandemic. Her husband and I get along. My husband and Diana get along. Our husbands have inside jokes with each other, and we buy them matching backpacks to wear when we go on trips. I think the fact that Diana and I are both married has actually made our friendship stronger. That we make a point of travelling together, as a tetrad, at least once a year has taught me that a long friendship has to be maintained. So does family, but, unlike family, a friendship can be deprioritized. My mother will always be my mother, and I will always have space for her, but that's not how it works with friends. I can choose to take my heart away.

Diana and I and our husbands have now travelled to Europe a few times. No fights, no drama, except the comedic kind. In Paris, Diana was tricked, by

her husband and mine, into knocking back a wineglass that had a dead fly in it. In London, at the Harry Potter Warner Bros. Studios, in the Great Hall decked out for the Yule Ball (Diana is a Harry Potter fanatic), her husband—still her boyfriend then—was set to propose, but we couldn't figure out how to open the "snitch" ring box and we couldn't get the ring out. In Europe, trains have four seats facing one another. When Diana and her husband and my husband have fallen asleep, and I'm the only one awake guarding our stuff and checking the stops, I think, Why is it always me who stays awake? I also think, I never want this to change.

I chose the name Diana for my friend in tribute to Diana Barry, the best friend of the "Anne of Green Gables" books, by Lucy Maud Montgomery—a series that had an enormous impact on me. They were the first novels I read from beginning to end in English, and I distinctly remember having to look up the term "kindred spirits." Anne is an orphan who then finds great friends and thrives. A lot of children's books have this trajectory. See also: Harry Potter.

A final anecdote: the building that I live in houses both faculty and students. Often, I smell weed in the stairwells. Every weekend of the school year, students, never dressed for the weather, are just leaving to go out as my husband and I are coming back in. Sometimes I can't even move through the lobby, because, when there's a party in the building, every student is trying to sign in three others. Faculty and students share the common spaces, the laundry room, the elevators. It is very awkward to bump into familiar students while you are removing your underwear from the dryer or while they are removing theirs. A terrible arrangement, I tell people. Mixing students and teachers. But here is something that happened the other day while I was writing this essay. From the lobby, I entered the elevator with my dog. A pair of summer students came in, too, with their suitcases and totes, and my dog and I were pushed into a corner. I was annoyed that summer students were already moving in, less than two weeks after the regular ones had left. I imagined more weed, more parties, full washers and dryers, rank

trash drips in the hallways for workers to clean up. Then the two students started talking about their afternoon plans. Today, they were going to go to Central Park, sit on a blanket, make friendship bracelets, and braid each other's hair. They were earnest. I heard no sarcasm. An interloper to this casual, wholesome moment, I was reminded that, though most friendships are temporary, they are very beautiful in bloom. The friends left the elevator laughing, tote bag to tote bag. All my annoyance went away. ♦