

Remember Your Old Friends?

BY RENEE BACHER

One day, my best friend accused me of heinous behavior: she called me "conventionally unconventional." It wouldn't have hurt so badly to have been thrown into this broad category, which includes hippies, punks, communists and anyone who wears more than two earrings, if it had been done by someone other than Julie, whom I've always considered my soul mate, the one person who can see beyond the trivialities of appearance. Yet over the past three years, the many miles that separate our respective universities and the politics of our collegiate friendships have made it increasingly difficult for us to retain our old school tie.

One of the great destroyers of high-school friendships is the style one develops in order to adapt to one's college environment. Mine consists of a state school in a rural town, where my peers are concerned with the evils of capitalism. Hers consists of an Ivy League school in a city, where her peers are concerned with the joys of capitalism. While she goes on dates in BMW's, I travel in pickup trucks. While her friends spend winter break in Palm Beach, most of mine stay home and get a job.

Although we grew up in the same socioeconomic stratum (somewhere in the middle of our two collegiate extremes), we soon had trouble remembering where we had been and could only see where we were at present. When I visited her, I thought her friends were affected and snobby; when she visited me, she thought mine were naive and hicky. At times we couldn't get past these superficialities. I made fun of her manicures; she laughed at my hairy legs.

'The Answer to All Questions': It used to be that we would sit up late at night, with cups of tea, to discuss important things. We would joke about someday stumbling across "The Answer to All Questions." We talked about feelings, theories and intellectualizations. We were not adolescents, we were planets in a vast and lonely universe shedding brilliant beams of light for each other. With our new differences, though, we began to have trouble connecting. For me that meant darkness.

I told her she was spoiled because she didn't do her own laundry; she told me I was pseudointellectual for speaking about politics, which I hadn't known a lot about. We really did hurt some good feelings. Yet we knew it was important not to lose sight of the best friend who helped develop these feelings in the first place.

Our differences are really nothing more than a matter of perspective. We've learned to treat what could have been the end of a friendship as the beginning of a learning experience. We've developed some different values, yet we are still essentially the same. One of our late-night discussions about human nature evolved what we call "The Core Theory." The theory states that a core is the very center of someone (the soul), and all

cores are surrounded by a few superficial shells (the personality). The shells can be sculpted, damaged, warped or mangled, yet the core is rarely altered. The start of our friendship was the realization that our cores were a similar shape. The near end was when we viewed the shells, which had been battered by our new environments, as reflective of our souls. Yet when we opened our hearts again, the shells became transparent, and we saw the people we've always been. A cerebral friendship such as this was worth preserving at any cost. Especially for the low price of pomp and circumstance.

I've found that there are other friendships worth preserving as well, although they may require a lot more work. These are the friendships formed as the result of the common struggle of growing up. In the 12th grade three of my old friends

and three acquaintances banded together to brave the other cliques, which had made us feel individually minuscule. We thought of ourselves as a small private company in the midst of conglomerates. But we had fun. We did crazy, silly things that made high school memorable rather than miserable. We sneaked backstage at concerts, sat outside in electrical storms, painted our faces ridiculous colors at department-store makeup counters. We made big plans and shared dreams.

Open ears, open heart: I thought I would never lose touch with these friends, even though most of us were to attend different universities in different states. We thought we could easily remedy this problem with phone calls, letters and school vacations. Except that the more we talked, the more we saw how different we were all becoming. Some were pledging sororities, others trotting off to Europe on exchange programs, still others nurturing all-consuming romantic relationships. Nobody could find the time to get along, and many of us stopped speaking to each other.

After I thought about it for a while, I called one of my alienated friends. "Sandi, I know we haven't spoken in a long time, for a number of reasons, but I wanted to remind you that we used to be friends, and anytime you feel like talking, no matter how much may come between us, I'll have open ears and an open heart for you."

Well, it wasn't exactly that, but it was some soliloquy to that effect, and she wound up coming to my house (with Julie) for a nostalgic chat. Barriers that had been set up were dismantled, and severed lines of communication were reopened. We reached an understanding that has yet to be reached with most of the others. With some I've tried; with others the prospect seems futile. Still, I can't help but see personal relationships as a microcosm of world peace and politics, and I have no desire to abandon my theory that the only way to learn to love one's neighbor is to continue loving one's friends.

Renée Bacher is a senior, majoring in journalism, at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.



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