



Good Read

The Art of Keeping in Touch

WITH HER DAYS SWALLOWED UP BY KIDS, WORK, AND AN ENDLESS TO-DO LIST, CATHERINE HONG MISSED HER FRIENDS—AND THE KIND OF FRIEND SHE USED TO BE. BUT THEN SHE REALIZED GROWN-UPS GET TO PLAY IN A DIFFERENT WAY. (JUST DON'T EXPECT A HOLIDAY CARD FROM HER ANYTIME SOON.)

LIKE CLEANING MY OVEN or checking my credit score, sending out holiday cards is something I know I should do, yet don't. Finding a usable family photo—by corralling my husband and kids into a forced moment of jollity—is just the first hurdle. There's the wading through the sea of design options, the hunting down of snail-mail addresses, and, because I've never figured out how to print labels, the hand-lettering of them. And since I really appreciate when



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friends take the time to personalize their cards with notes—incontrovertible evidence that the cards were not somehow processed through a bot—I'd definitely want to scribble a personal greeting on each one. Given how long that would take me on top of the aforementioned steps, you can see why I've scrapped the endeavor entirely.

So yes, I've snuffed one time-consuming project out of my life. But in doing so, I've flung myself into a thick tangle of holiday guilt. As soon as I see dear friends' holiday cards faithfully trickling in, I'm filled with... mortification. The faces on the cards are all smiles, but I know they're silently saying, "Why do we even bother to keep you on our list?" They seethe: "You are a taker and not a giver!" They mutter: "We haven't heard from you in years. This is a farce."

Who knew it would be so hard to keep up with friendships? After all, the older we get, the more opportunities we have to make them: work pals, mom friends, neighbors. Now that I'm approaching 50, with decades of school, work, and plain old living behind me, it seems I should have a rich network of friends. And yet the older I get, the more people seem to fade from my life.

From what I can tell, I'm not alone in my feeling of, well, aloneness. As science writer Lydia Denworth writes in her fascinating book *Friendship: The Evolution, Biology, and Extraordinary Power of Life's Fundamental Bond*, our 30s "are sometimes described as the decade where friendship goes to die, killed off by marriage, children, jobs, relocating."

In our 40s, this slide continues, as "most everyone has work responsibilities, and/or houses full of school-age children who need to be fed, transported, and generally tended."

This echoes the "four burners" theory of life's priorities, as explained in a *New Yorker* essay by David Sedaris: Life is like a four-burner stove, with family, friends, health, and work each represented by one burner. The stove can't run well with all four burners going at the same time, so to be successful, you have to switch one of them off. For working women with children, it's often the same story: The first flame to get extinguished is the friendship one.

My tendency to put relationships on the (cold, unlit) back burner is reinforced by a few factors. As an introvert, I've never been especially proactive about initiating social events. I also have strange anxiety when it comes to cancellations. The busy person's dance of scheduling, canceling, rescheduling, and recanceling makes me so uneasy that I sometimes avoid making plans in the first place. (Honestly, when a lunch date has been shoved back more than twice, doesn't it feel like the fun has already been sucked out?) What's more, in the past decade, our family moved to a new town, and I went from working in an office to freelancing from home.

While I've stayed tight with a few of my very closest female friends (a lunch here and there, bouts of texting, a rare get-together with our families), I can't say we've been foremost in one another's lives. My other friendships—including with women I saw weekly or even daily at one point—have declined dramatically. We all have these friends circling our lives. These are the people you are sincerely fond of, the ones you love seeing on Instagram, whose children you feel like you know (even if the only time you saw them in person was 10 years ago when they showed up at the office in diapers). I'm talking about the kind of friend who, if you bumped into them on the sidewalk, would join you in a shriek of joy, and you'd both launch into a rapid-fire catchup session until—invariably—one of you needs to get to a meeting or dash to Trader Joe's or pick up a kid. There's always that heartfelt promise to get together "for real," but it never happens. And before you know it, it's time for the ol' holiday card.

"We have to stop thinking about friendship as a luxury," Denworth told me. "It's as essential to our health as diet and exercise." She spent five years studying the biological, psychological, and evolutionary workings of friendship for her book, in which she lays out the overwhelming evidence that strong social ties positively affect



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everything from cardiovascular health to the immune system to stress response to susceptibility to Alzheimer's. "If you don't take time for friendship during the busy years, a lot of damage can be done," she explained. Letting friendships atrophy for too long means we may not have strong bonds later, when we need them most.

Weirdly enough, it took a pandemic to make many of us realize just how essential friendship is. I called linguist Deborah Tannen, who's written several best-selling books on communication. *You're the Only One I Can Tell* focuses on the language of women's friendships. When I confessed my unease to Tannen about where I stood with my own friendships, she knew exactly what I meant. "The pandemic is a good pretext for reconnecting without awkwardness," she told me. "You can simply send a message saying, 'I've been thinking of you. How are you doing in this crazy time?'"

She also encouraged me to put aside my calendar phobia. "Schedule the time to talk!" she urged. "These days, the divide between work and home life is so blurry, it's

harder than ever to find time, so don't wait until you have a free half hour to talk, because you won't." To reduce any chance of awkwardness, she suggested establishing an end time for the call before it begins. "Sometimes people aren't sure how to get off without seeming rude," she said.

Even just regularly texting with or emailing a friend, she pointed out, could go a long way toward relieving a sense of isolation. "If you are connecting on an emotional level, it doesn't matter if it's purely digital," she said. "You don't have to see someone or hear their voice for it to be meaningful."

While I had not been making individual calls, I had been part of a standing Wednesday-night Zoom gathering with two or three of my closest friends, a ritual my pal Michelle (a habitual scheduler) initiated a few weeks into quarantine. This virtual meet-up—where we'd discuss the usual topics of work, kids, and various brands of frozen dumplings—has turned out to be the most consistent socializing I've engaged in since I had kids. It's a low-key affair, where nobody has to feel "on" or even have brushed hair. If friendship is like

a muscle that needs exercise, it's also like a habit-forming drug. By Tuesday morning of each week, I'm craving the sight of these familiar faces.

What about my wider group of friends? Sometimes seeing all these women commenting on one another's Instagram photos and behaving as if they were godmothers to one another's children has made me feel like I'm being left out of something. But I'm not about to cut ties. I truly do love following friends on social media, and I know we still have a genuine relationship, just not one on full boil.

It turns out I don't have to beat myself up about not being tight with them. "There's a vitality to having a wider circle," Denworth assured me. "But when it comes to your health, experts say quality is more important than quantity." In other words, having deep bonds and meaningful interactions with one or two close friends is more impactful than having a girl squad of semiclose friends.

So even though most of my friendships are not going to get their own burner on the stove, I can still keep them

going—just perhaps at a low simmer, bubbling along on Instagram and other social media platforms. I'll think of it as the Crock-Pot theory of friendship: Like slow cookers, Instagram is better for quantity than quality, but the low-maintenance demands makes it perfect for busy people. (And I can always switch back to skillets when the kids go to college.)

As for those holiday cards, I mustered up my courage and called three friends who send me a card every year.

"Do you think it's rude that you never get a Christmas card in return?" I asked them, wincing.

"Nah, I know you're lazy," one of them told me.

"You're crazy," another said.

"I'd only be pissed if I found out you were sending cards to other people," a third explained.

I felt relieved, though still like a jerk. I think this year, as cards arrive, I will send a quick text or email—even something simple like "What a great card!" Here's looking forward to a happier year. And maybe a new slow cooker.