

# The Ties That Bind

WALKING AND TALKING PROVE GREAT GLUES FOR FRIENDSHIP.

BY BETTE-JANE RAPHAEL

For more years than either of us can believe, my friend Sylvia and I have been hanging out together. Our friendship has spanned five presidencies, four wars (if you count Grenada and the Falklands), two babies and diets too numerous to tally. Year after year we do what all friends—women friends, anyway—do together: We talk and gossip and laugh; we give one another support and advice and sympathy; we share meals, shop, go to movies, have coffee.

And we walk. Actually, we walk a lot, so that much of the time when we're talking and laughing and supporting and advising one another, we're also walking.

This is a rather surprising facet of our friendship, considering my own mostly sedentary habits. In general, I would as soon walk a plank as I would a mile. Although I'm aware that the exercise involved is considered a staple of any cardiopulmonary fitness plan worth its salt substitute, deep down I secretly believe that endlessly putting one foot in front of the other in order to get no place in particular is loony.

Still, Sylvia loves to walk, and I love to be with Sylvia. So when she comes to visit me in the country, I invariably find ways to duck out of parental and household duties and, slipping on sneakers and my most worn-in jeans, hit the quiet streets and back roads with her on my own slightly surprised two feet. And when I go to visit her in the city, I navigate the crowded avenues and park paths alongside her, my hands jammed deep inside my pockets to keep them from succumbing to habit and hailing a taxi.

The rewards of our perambulatory relationship have, I must admit, been



extraordinary. For our walks together have provided us with more than simply fresh air and exercise. In plain fact, they have given us some of the most intimate moments of our friendship. When we stride along side by side—two no-longer-young women in serviceable rather than fashionable clothing, animation our only makeup—we leave everything else, *everyone* else behind. No kids or spouses, no waiters or salespeople interrupt our communion. The very fact that we are moving, that we are never in one spot for more than a moment, heightens our sense of privacy while the feel of our bodies moving rhythmically in sync heightens our sense of closeness. Exchanging confidences in such circumstances is as natural as breathing.

And that is exactly what Sylvia and I do. With the exercise turning our faces ruddy and stimulating our brains and our bodies, we confide in one another; we let loose and tell each other what's on our minds, what's worrying us, what we think and feel about the most trivial matters ("I'm bored with my hair. Think I should cut it short?") as well as the weightiest concerns ("I'm afraid my

mother is getting too frail to live alone").

Not that we are oblivious to our surroundings. Quite the opposite. Being out in the world actually invigorates and gives breadth to our conversation. Clusters of flowers by the roadside, fellow pedestrians on the street, colorful offerings in shop windows all become food for thought and for talk. Often they can send our discourse off on an uncharted tangent, where one of us might unexpectedly reveal something entirely new about herself to the other. In this

way do our walks become small journeys of mutual discovery.

The weather itself, the feel of the air on our faces is like a third party to our wanderings, dictating whether we are wearing down jackets or sleeveless tees, whether our hair is being whipped into our eyes or hanging limp with sweat on the back of our necks—directing our steps toward sun or shade, toward open stretches of beach or protected byways. It keeps our pace brisk when the temperature is likewise, more languorous when the mercury climbs high.

But whatever our tempo, our route or our surroundings, the essential thing—the walk itself—remains unchanged: an outing on which we delve inward, into the core of our friendship, and from which we come back restored.

Then, if you were to catch me as we take off our sweatshirts and smooth down our tousled hair and shed our possibly wet or muddy shoes, I would probably admit quite freely that, yes, walking is good for the heart. □

*Bette-Jane Raphael is a writer and an editor-at-large at FAMILY CIRCLE.*