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cakes arrived, she carefully poured first boysenberry, then maple, then strawberry syrup over the stack. “I just want to try a little of everything,” she said.

Our friendship now consists mostly of monthly letters and semiannual breakfasts. While the pancakes grow soggy and the coffee cold, we compare the exploring we have done, question and encourage each other. The breakfasts are not unlike the dinners I have with Jenny.

These are special friends, and I do not see them often. They are not the ones I call if I need groceries when I am sick, or have to borrow ten dollars. But when a situation calls for more common sense than I have, I wonder what Jenny would do. If patience is what I need, then I remember Sister Gregory.

I came so close to missing these relationships entirely. It is easier to make friends with contemporaries, but reaching across age barriers brings special rewards. I am reminded of this whenever I am with my youngest or oldest friend; they may offer one of the few chances I’ll ever have to discover some of the people I have been and hope to be. ■



MY BOOSTERS

by Bette-Jane Raphael



Real friendship for me pre-dates the appearance of my waistline. Through the years I’ve taken a lot from my friends, starting with Gail’s prized white satin flats—borrowed for and stepped all over at a sixth-grade dance—and working my way up from there. All my life, it seems, I’ve depended on my friends to be many things: bulwarks against loneliness;

sounding boards for my grievances and disappointments as well as my profundities; yardsticks for measuring my progress through life; advisers who don’t ask for fees; and havens of acceptance in a world otherwise fraught with demands and challenges to prove myself. For all these offices, I’ve always felt I give my friends good value in return, happily taking my turn as bulwark, sounding board, yardstick, and so on.

There is one thing I never considered using my friends for, however, and that is as boosters for my self-esteem. Indeed, because they were my friends, I always dismissed their attempts to make me feel good about myself. “She just wants to make me feel good about myself,” I would think, refusing to see the effort as anything but charity. And as charity it became irrelevant to the issue at hand, which was, as I saw it, my worthlessness.

Even now, the notion that my friends can raise a self-esteem thus far impervious to all efforts strikes me as lunatic. Especially since I have always shown such ingenuity in using my friends to put myself down. When Carole got into Vassar, for instance, I saw it as proof positive that I was a moron. And when Emily’s book got glowing reviews, I took it as evidence of my own inability to string two words together. In this way have I invariably used my friends’ triumphs to make myself look bad. No wonder, then, that the idea of going to them for an ego lift didn’t enter my mind for close on to 40 years.

Slowly, however, the notion has been moving in on me. I could even say that my friends have been pushing it on me, at a time when I’ve needed all the help I can get. A massive professional disappointment several months ago left my chronically shaky ego flat on its face. With the cunning of an expert, I used this setback in one area

of my life to reinforce a total view of myself as someone devoid of any redeeming value. Now, I thought, the world would know what I had known all along: that I was worthless. I felt so, and I was miserable, and all my friends knew it.

And that is when, one after the other, they all spoke up. This they did in a variety of ways: with direct testimonials, the most delightful being from a friend I’ve cherished for ten years who told me he wouldn’t hear of my regarding myself as a failure when I had him for a friend (intimating that this accomplishment alone lifted me into the realm of the blessed—which, come to think of it, it just about does!); with a noticeable increase in the time and attention they lavished upon me, the most surprising change exhibited by a laconic old friend—a woman who has never been known to initiate a social engagement and who accepts none that are not within six blocks of her home—who exerted herself so far as to call me three times in one week; with an avalanche of personal advice and professional guidance, as when the same friend who suggested that his friendship alone qualified me as a successful human being took me out to a wonderfully posh restaurant, suggested a number of viable professional possibilities and, for good measure, handed me a writing assignment; and with a breathtaking sensitivity to my feelings, as when another friend, who’d just gotten a terrific job, called to make sure I understood that her work wouldn’t come between us, that she still had plenty of time to give to our friendship and that I shouldn’t feel left behind because I was having a tough time with my career just as she’d gotten a break with hers. She assured me my turn would come.

At the moment when I needed a great deal from them, my friends bothered to say all the good things we

usually remember only to think. I came to feel as if I were being surrounded by a great retaining wall of love and support, at which point I could no longer willfully ignore what it was my friends were doing: They were giving me back that which was no small thing; they were giving me back myself.

Come to think of it, who better than our friends is qualified to give such a gift? After all, these are the people who *choose* to have us in their lives (unlike our families, who are stuck with us). These are the people who've seen us through the thin as well as the thick, who know our weaknesses and our strengths as intimately as anyone is going to know them and who still elect to call us friend, as beautiful a noun as any yet invented.

I'm not talking about casual acquaintances, or those with whom we hook up because of proximity, fleeting mutuality of interest or desperation. I'm talking about the friend I phone when I'm afraid my partner doesn't love me any more; the one I took to the movies when she was depressed and who reciprocated by taking me out to dinner to celebrate a new job; the one who had me over to her house the Christmas I felt so alone. I'm talking about the people who have regularly shared their bounty and partaken of mine.

Who but they have a better right to think well of me? Who speaks with more authority? Whose good opinion should I cherish more? It's their attempts to "make me feel good" that

are worth attending to, their high esteem that is worth trying to reproduce inside myself. It takes my breath away to realize how much I've thrown aside by reasoning, She's my friend, so of course she thinks well of me, when it's the corollary that's relevant here: She's my friend *because* she thinks well of me. ■

THE WORST BETRAYAL

by Barbara Lazear Ascher

I still smart when I recall September, 1958. It was the fall of seventh grade; we were returning to school with new loafers, lunch boxes and breasts. I was also returning to a new club. The I Hate Barbara Club.

My friends—truly, they were my best friends—had organized with a determination and efficiency that labor and protest movements should emulate. Sally Brown, my favorite playmate of that period, led a group of seven or so chanting children around the playground. They carried signs that matched their song, "We hate Barbara. Go home Barbara." That's what I felt like doing, but I had my pride and no small amount of disbelief.

Why should I believe this?, I wondered. These were my *friends*. It's a funny thing about friendship: We want to believe in it so fervently, so completely that when it turns mean and

career, in the lean years, was always so caring—always cooking for me, making sure I was okay." In addition to being a friend in the most practical senses, Eileen remembers that "she was also quite chic and adept and very well-read, all of which influenced me, I'm sure. When I was so ill, we reconnected. She made sure I had a note every day, and her notes were not 'get well' notes, but stories—bits of her days—about taking her dogs for a walk in the woods, picking flowers, about books she had read, things she looked forward to. A friend like that is always in your consciousness, somewhere.

"I don't know what life would be without friends. I mean, there wouldn't be—that's what life is."

surely the first reaction is often, "I must be imagining this," or, "What did I do wrong?" There is a long delay between being betrayed and sensing betrayal.

I continued to go to school day after day, facing both taunts and silence. Shame prevented me from telling my parents or a teacher. My friend Jeanette tells me that she too kept the "P.U. Jeanette Club" a secret from her parents. "It ruined third through fifth grades," she says. "It was one of the most agonizing periods of my life. But my parents never knew; I felt that to tell them would have been to say, 'I am a failure.'"

Looking back, I realize that the great passion fueling those hate clubs was jealousy; but I didn't know it then. Childhood is hardly a time of psychological acuity. We are thrown on the mercy of others' irrational acts.

I'm not so sure that it changes all that much in adulthood. I think that we carry real blind spots into friendship. For instance, here I am, a grown-up, a lawyer, a writer. I don't take a wooden nickel or no for an answer. I can spot a shady deal and a wolf in sheep's clothing. I was a whiz at Psych. I, II and III, yet when a 1984 version of Sally Brown appeared in my life not long ago, I reacted pretty much the way I had in 1958.

I failed to see that jealousy was gnawing away at the fibers of this friendship. I was deaf to the hostility behind certain remarks. After sensing the initial stab, I would anoint the wound with denial. Oh, she couldn't possibly have meant that. Oh, but she did. *I believe* in friendship, so it wasn't until the final act of sabotage, not dissimilar to the "Go Home Barbara" signs I faced long ago, that I was forced to face the fact that this friendship had come to an end.

Now you must understand that she was a true friend, a kindred spirit. Our backgrounds were similar, not just in the superficial ways that allow you to use a kind of shorthand to express yourself, but in the most subtle ways that fashion your responses to the



Eileen Brennan

In the fall of 1982 Eileen Brennan was hit by a car and seriously injured. In the subsequent physical and emotional ordeal of a recovery that has stretched over two years, Eileen has found new meaning in some old friendships.

"There was one woman in particular," she recalls, "who, at the beginning of my