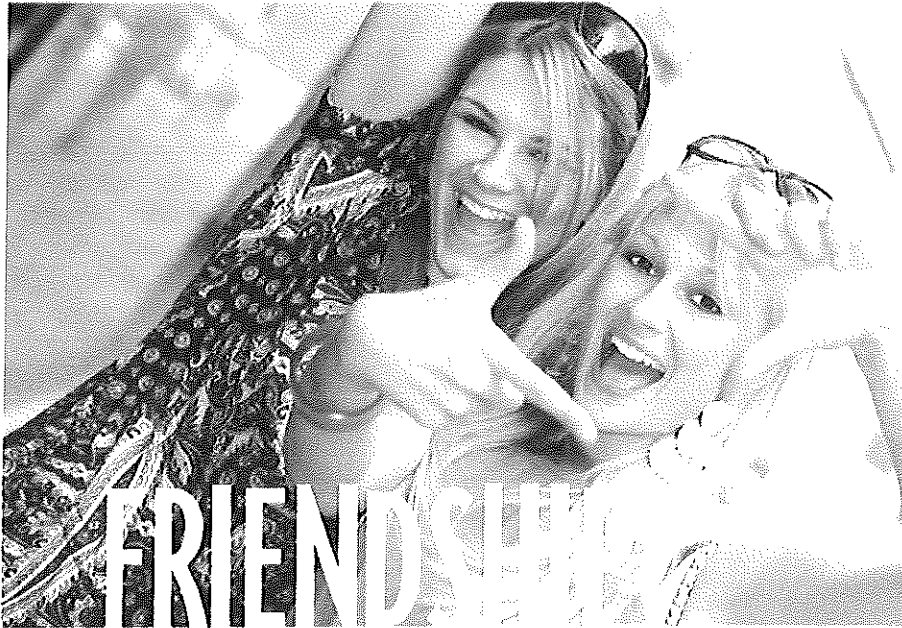


BY SUSAN CHARNEY, MSW, LCSW



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"A friend is someone who reaches for your hand but touches your heart." This was sent to me from a friend of mine who lives in Geneva. It was part of a general email she sent showing 2 children holding hands.

The best way for me to define what a true friendship, an intimate friendship, is will be shared through my personal experience. It is the ability to trust, feel safe and share all of life's journeys without judgment. In different stages of life, people have multiple friendships that cover different needs. A young girl may measure her friendships by her popularity and the amount and type of people in her high school circle. Later on it is the single life and who is available to go out. Many share intimate details about boyfriends and family. At that stage, they learn more about who they cannot trust.

Boys are a little different. If they are sports-obsessed, they can sit and watch a game with a friend and then state that that person is their best friend. It is very possible that they never had an intimate discussion other than sports.

I read an interesting article in the *New York Times* recently. The basic concept was about how people view gender friendships. If 2 men are having dinner at a quiet restaurant, the public may think many things. Are they gay? Is it a business discussion? Usually last on the list is the genuine possibility that they are having an intimate discussion. Two women having dinner at the same place raise few questions. It is mostly assumed that they are sharing a "friendly" discussion.

As we progress in life, people come in and out of our lives. When friendships are over it's not as though we no longer care, it's just a passing stage of life. The friendships that last are precious and most valuable.

As an example, my husband is truly my best friend. There is a mutual trust—we support each other with family and career. Most of all, and most challenging, is that we try to understand and respect each other's differences.

I have a very close friend. The expression "friends are the family you choose" fits our friendship well. She is ill. When she needed to see the doctor and have tests, without discussion I arranged my schedule, took a pad and paper, and went with her.

No matter how old you are, you always learn something new about yourself. I asked myself why I rearranged my life without a question, when I have problems calling others back or going for obligatory lunches and dinners? What is different about this friendship that I feel no obligation, just a need to be with her throughout this difficult journey?

The answer to this is really quite simple. We can share anything safely. I trust her completely. We mutually share our happiness and difficulties with respect and caring, and most of all, without judgment. We respect each other's sensitivities and differences. There are times when we can laugh about these differences without it coming back to haunt us. Our differences also allow us to learn new things.

I don't know what will happen to my friend. I worry about it all the time while trying not to let her know. I try to use humor to get us through the tears we share. This is a new skill I've learned, and continue to work on.

Erikson, the theorist, believes that you keep growing and learning until you die. At this stage in my life I am still learning. I measure out my time as precious and have let go of the periphery of people who have mutually proven that we cannot have a pure friendship. This was not easy to do. It has made me establish boundaries and focus on those who are really important. I don't know what the future will hold for EJ, but I do know she will always be my friend.