

unforgettable

Are women's friendships perilously toxic, as several popular books declaim? Or instead, as recent research offers, are they the necessary—and sometime sufficient—armature to our happiness and successful functioning? Here are four high-octane friendship stories, wildly different: one elegiac, one bitter, one grateful, one celebratory.

Balm in Gilead

MARCIA FALK ON BETH UVAL

I feared it would be awkward to talk by telephone, she so many thousands of miles away, barely able to respond. But the words pour out of me—a groundswell, a flood. I talk and talk, trying to tell her what her life has meant to mine these 47 years, from the summer we met, two New York girls, not quite 17, in (of all places) northern Wisconsin, until this September when, 10 days apart, we turned 64. When I pause for a breath, she says, in a low voice but distinctly, *todah*—thank you. Twice more I pause; twice more she says *todah*.

I don't want to tire her, but I can't stop holding on. Finally her daughter comes back on the line. She tells me that Beth hasn't spoken more than a few words in the last two days, and they aren't sure what she comprehends. But I believe Beth has heard me, just as I have heard her. This isn't the first time I've felt her presence from afar; ours has been a friendship that has survived more than one kind of distance.

We met in 1963, in a Hebrew-speaking summer camp where our daily schedule included an eclectic array of classes: we read the Babylonian creation myth alongside Genesis, studied Maslow's post-Freudian theory of "self-actualization," learned modern Hebrew poetry from an Israeli woman with an enchantingly musi-

cal voice, and were instructed by Shaul, an Israeli ex-scout, how not to chop wood: *Af pa'am lo al haritzpab*—never on the ground! (Hardly a life-changing experience, but in its anomalous quirkiness, it lodged itself in my memory.) My seventeenth summer was a magical time, filled with new discoveries and temptations (my first real kiss, my first taste of marijuana) and peopled with unforgettable characters. But Beth—soft-voiced, gentle-mannered, with a smile that revealed a radiant inner joy—was the jewel in the crown. Every day, between classes, we'd sit on the sun-warmed grass and do what teenage girls do best: talk, and talk some more.

We had much in common, not just in background but in interests, among them, a love of literature that would stay with each of us our whole lives. But our personalities were strikingly different—opposites attracting. Although neither of us was lacking in adolescent *joie de vivre*, Beth's was a quiet enthusiasm, coupled with an easy and natural optimism. If I had to choose a single word to describe her, then and now, it would be "grace"—in Hebrew, *hen*. My own demeanor (as I'd been told more than once) was "intense," my moods changeable. I threw myself into life and had joy in many things, but I was also susceptible to bouts of fretfulness. If I was sorrowing or brooding, Beth's words filled me with comfort and light.

At summer's end, Beth invited me to visit with her family in Gilead, their 200-acre tree farm in the Catskill mountains. I had heard much about Gilead from Beth, but there was no way

friendships



I could have imagined its beauty. When I stepped out of the car and inhaled the crisp blue air, its stillness lightly punctuated by the calls of late summer's birds, and took in the harmony of meadow, woods, and pond, vistas all around, it was love at first sight and scent and sound. Did I sense, at that moment, that Gilead would become my life-long sanctuary and that its devoted stewards—Beth's parents, Lillian and Paul—would become family to me? How could I have known that my vision of marrying under a *huppah* on Gilead's lawn would be fulfilled a quarter-century later?

Glorious Gilead was where our friendship unfolded and blossomed, and where it continued to be nurtured over the years to come. In our walks together along the stone walls bordering the woods, we were cocooned in intimacy, sharing the stories and confidences that best friends share.

For five years following that first summer, throughout our senior year of high school in different cities and four years of college in separate states, Beth and I remained close, maintaining our connection through Gilead excursions and correspondence. But after college our lives branched in opposite directions, and

not just geographically. Beth stayed in New York for a while, then headed east to Jerusalem—while I went west, to California. It was the late sixties, a time of enormous changes in the American social and political landscape, and California was at the epicenter. The new wave of feminism engaged both my intel-

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lect and my passion, and I soon became disenchanted with the patriarchal order and many of its engraved traditions, such as the “nuclear family.” With the ardency of a new convert, I tried to impress upon my best friend the benefits of raised consciousness. But the women’s movement had yet to reach Israel and wouldn’t get there for another decade; Beth must have been, at the least, bewildered by my letters. So far away from each other, in such different environs, with no opportunity for face-to-face conversation, we fell prey to mutual misunderstanding. One example: Although we were each of us single and living with female housemates, we looked upon our situations rather differently. When, in one of her letters, Beth made the comment—innocent enough, from her perspective—that she was tired of living alone, she meant that she wanted a male life-partner. But I was dismayed by what I took to be the implication that women friends didn’t count, and I retorted that living with other women was not living “alone.” I didn’t receive a reply to that letter. Had I, in my advocacy of the ideal of Sisterhood, ruptured the bond with the closest real sister I had?

Within three years, Beth was married, but by then our correspondence had tapered off, and I found out about the wedding after the fact, from her parents. I was saddened to have missed such an important event in my friend’s life, and I regretted my part in creating the distance that had arisen between us. But I had no idea what to do about it. Beth and I had lost much of our *safah m’shutefet*—our common language—and I didn’t know where to find it again. So I did the only thing I knew to do: I tucked the friendship into a corner of my heart, and held it there, for safekeeping.

A decade and more passed, during which Beth and I saw each other only sporadically, even during the two year-long periods when I was living in Jerusalem, not far from her doorstep. Beth’s husband and I had not yet—how shall I put it?—learned to love each other across our differences, and this created a dilemma for Beth. (Ezri wasn’t exactly a fan of my feminist beliefs, nor, probably, of the ardor with which I advocated them. Happily,

though, he and I bridged the distance between us at a later stage, when I turned to him to be a Hebrew consultant for a book I was writing. How ironic—or was it poetic justice?—that *The Book of Blessings* was a feminist re-creation of prayer!) And, too, Beth was raising children (ultimately, she was the mother of four) and

I wasn’t sure where—or even whether—there was room for me in her world. Had she forgotten me? I kept hoping we might find a way to be more present in each other’s lives, but our orbits didn’t intersect, and it was not to be.

And yet, Beth remained, for me, still, the friend dearest to my heart. I knew I could never lose her. And I didn’t.

How to explain this? Is it enough to say that, like most young loves, friendships that burst forth intensely in adolescence have a way of embedding themselves in the neural pathways? Or is it that Beth and I were born soul-mates, our friendship as *bashert* as any marriage made in heaven; that we were, simply, meant to be in each other’s lives?

Part of the explanation is surely the magic of Gilead, a place that welcomed and embraced me continuously over the course of almost five decades. Gilead was not just the site of my wedding; it provided the *msaderet kdushin*—the officiator—in the person of Beth’s mother. I gave my son the middle name “Gilead” and brought him to his namesake often as he was growing up, so that he too became part of the intergenerational circle.

Beth had given me Gilead, and Gilead gave me back Beth, over and over again: each hike on its trails, each swim in its pond, each session of blueberry-picking brought me close to her, whether she was present in person or not. If, for periods of time, the friendship seemed suspended, Gilead reminded me that the connection was still there. And, in truth, Beth and I always found our way back to each other with remarkable ease. There was never a conversation that didn’t seem to pick up right where we had left off.

The geographical distance is hardest now, at this time of perhaps our greatest closeness. This far away from her, I can’t know, at any given moment, if Beth is still among the living. I find myself wondering what I’ll feel when the news finally arrives. Will the moment stun? Will it be numbing? Or will it come as a relief, putting an end to the waiting, allowing the full grieving to begin? I’ve already faced the hard facts: we won’t be taking any more walks together, or writing impassioned letters, or even talking long-distance on the phone. The last conversation I had with Beth will, it seems, be the last conversation we’ll ever have. And it will have to be enough. Now, in this window of not-knowing, is my time to practice not needing more.

One of Beth’s sons has told me that, even after she was admitted to the hospital, too weak to stand, Beth never lost faith that she would get up and stand again on her own two legs. This doesn’t surprise me. Just three months ago, unable to contain my yearning for things to be different from the way they were, I blurted out to Beth, “I want you *one-hundred-per-cent well*”—to which she replied calmly, confidently, “I *will* be. I know it’s not rational, but I believe it.” One could call this denial, one might opine that she deprived herself of the chance to say good-bye.

But Beth doesn't need "good-bye"—and I no longer need to say it either. Her last words to me speak for both of us: *today*, three times *today*.

—Berkeley, California, 27 September 2010
Hol Hamo'ed Sukkot, 5771

Postscript:

The moment has come. It is neither numbing nor a relief, but more stunning than I could have imagined. An ocean of grief, and no more words.

—5 October 2010 / 28 Tishrei 5771. ■

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Click: IGNORE

BY ALICE SPARBERG ALEXIOU

Opening up my e-mail one night a few months ago, I saw it: a message from my closest friend from late childhood. She'd found me—no surprise—on Facebook. "Hi Alice! You remember me—I hope!" As if I wouldn't.

We'd met at Jewish summer camp when we were both nine. Until age 15, we'd been best friends. She lived two suburbs over from me on Long Island, close enough to yak every week on the telephone and visit often. When my mother bought me a red plush winter jacket with fake white fur trim around the hood, she got one too. When I acquired a pen pal from England—a guy—so did she. We did sleepovers, which she always insisted take place at her house, and I always acquiesced. There she'd

"I'd like to read your book, Alice. What's it called?"

show me her parents' wedding album, we'd sing to all her records, eat Carvel, watch "Car 54." Then we'd be up all night, whispering and giggling at whatever struck our little-girl selves as funny: the voice of a bunk mate, which I compared to a fog horn; the pecan pie that her family's African-American housekeeper had served for dinner—disgusting, my friend declared; the toothy, lopsided smile of the camp handyman's wife; the strange behavior of her adult cousin with severe disabilities. Some of the private jokes in our arsenal—cruel, even racist—we carefully hoarded, to be whipped out whenever we felt like cracking up. She was my laugh buddy.

"I love you!" she often reminded me. And, yes, I loved her too. Every summer, she and I returned to camp, and that's where I would begin to question this professed love. Sports ruled at

camp, and the athletic gene had completely passed my family by. I'm built just like my grandmother, short legs and a big *tuchus*. My friend, shapely, muscular, was the one everybody wanted on their color war team. At camp, she could be friends with anybody she chose; even the older girls coveted her. One of them, a girl who reminded anybody who would listen that she was a cheerleader back home, once threw me a gratuitous insult in front of my friend. Something about my having a "big ass." The meanness stung me, but worse was the hurtful fact that my friend said nothing in my defense. Truth was, when we were at camp, my friend turned into Mean Girl. She'd sit next to another girl on a bus trip after promising to buddy with me. She'd inform me she "hated" how I wore my hair—it was, like many a Jewish girl's, dark and thick, pulled back into a ponytail. She'd help herself to my comic books, then pass them on to somebody else.

"We've spent many a great summer and winter together and I hope that wherever we may be, we will always be the best-of-friends," she wrote in my autograph book at the end of one long-ago summer. "Love and luck to one of the greatest (underlined 10 times) girls I know. May we never part, ever."

The following year, I told her I wasn't returning to camp. She was indignant. For months she tried to change my mind. Finally she gave up. "All right, Alice, suit yourself. Stay in the hot city," she said. (For the record: I lived in the verdant suburb of Great Neck). "She's my best friend, but she hurts me more than anybody in the world," I wrote in my diary. "I was at her house today, and we were playing basketball with the kids across the street. I fell and scraped my leg. And she called me a klutz! She's so bratty. I'm never speaking to her again! See if I mean it!" Reading this now, calls forth the scene in her driveway perfectly: she, her hands on her hips, looking at me with palpable disgust as I lay sprawled on the concrete, before turning her back on me.

Our relationship limped along for a few more years. She continued to call, but now when my mother called me to the phone, I refused to take it. Finally, the calls stopped, and I stopped thinking about her. She phoned me one last time, at the end of our senior year in high school, a terrible time for me. I was suffering from severe depression, and I told my friend I was seeing a psychiatrist.

Did she want us to meet? I don't remember. In any case we had no more contact. Until she found me on the Facebook site for our summer camp alums.

I ignored her message.

A few weeks later, she messaged again, after another alumna had congratulated me on the publication of one of my books. "I'd like to read your book, Alice. What's it called?" This time, I toyed with the idea of answering her. I'd recently attended my high school reunion, and returned feeling unexpectedly gratified. People I had remembered as the antithesis of kind were now, to my astonishment, effusive and warm. People do grow up. People change. And perhaps this too would be true of my friend. Maybe we could now laugh at the memories of ourselves, and she would acknowledge—and apologize for—being such a mean girl.

I asked myself, do I really want to get into the sandbox with her again? I haven't heard from my childhood friend again. Has she any idea why I didn't respond? Did my ignoring her hurt her? I'm ashamed to say this, but I hope so.

I called a grown-up good friend to talk over my uneasiness. Despite my long-ago realization that my childhood friend was also my tormenter, I was, I told Roberta, still tempted to recon-nect with her. "But I'm not sure why," I added.

"Sometimes," Roberta offered wisely, "you just have to close the door." ■

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"Folks, this is what a feminist looks like."

FLORENCE HOWE ON GRACE PALEY

I met Grace on marches and in political meetings in Cambridge in the 1960s. But our friendship grew specifically in relation to the Feminist Press. Her generosity was as boundless as her energy, and she spoke at fundraisers, signed fundraising letters, wrote blurbs for our books. She also supported me personally. When she knew I was alone out in the Amagansett cottage and depressed, she called every day to ask what I was doing. Once, I replied that I was trying to get several mean blue jays to stop badgering a balding jay.

"Are you saying that you can tell one blue jay from another?" she asked.

"Yes, of course, they're all different," I responded.

"Well," she said, "that calls for an assignment. You must write a poem about blue jays. I'll call tomorrow, and you can read it to me."

Addressing an audience, Grace strode energetically onto a platform, a middle-aged woman wearing a loose jacket over a midlength skirt or a pair of trousers. Her gray hair was unfashionably piled on her head. But her smile shone so that you could see it even from a back row. She'd begin by saying, "Folks, this is what a feminist looks like," and the crowd would laugh and relax.

At the end of the 1980s, she came to see me, saying I could do something for her. She had a small collection of prose and poetry, along with paintings by Vera B. Williams, some of which were first published by the War Resisters League as a datebook called *365 Reasons Not to Have Another War*. Vera's paintings, Grace carefully explained, were not illustrations. They were antiwar art, just as the stories and poems were antiwar art. And they needed to be included in the volume, which she and Vera had worked on together. The problem was that most of the paintings were in color, and no publisher would take the volume on. It was a slim collection: *Long Walks and Intimate Talks* came to only 78 pages when the Feminist Press published it in 1991 in paperback, with a few hundred hardcover boxed volumes signed by Grace and Vera.

Until her very last days, Grace's mind was clear. The cancer that had taken one breast had metastasized to her bones. On July 21, 2007, a month and a day before Grace's death, I drove to Vermont to stay in Grace and Bob's extra cottage. When I awoke the next morning, I found Grace just emerging in a bathrobe from her bedroom. She said she'd like to go for a walk, asking me to go with her. I assumed she meant around the property, perhaps into the woods behind the house, but when we stepped outside, she headed swiftly to her car. I was sure she was in no shape to drive and tried to get her to go in my car.

"No," she said, "You don't know the way."

"Do you have your license with you?" I asked.

"No," she said, "I don't need it."

For a second I assumed she would be stopped by the absence of keys, but she reached for them on the floor of the front seat. Impatient now, for I was still trying to delay her, Grace commanded, "Get in the car."

I really began to worry when she took the curves on the hill much more swiftly than I would. When we emerged into traffic, my worry turned to fear, as she brazenly crossed lanes directly into the face of traffic. Once we were on small rural roads between great fields of grain, with no cars to dodge, I relaxed, simply watching Grace, who was clearly enjoying every moment. Just as I wondered whether we were lost, Grace uttered an "aha," and we emerged onto a road filled with traffic that seemed to dissolve before her beat-up car. She parked in front of a huge farm stand and got out of the car, smiling and saying hello to people whom she greeted by name.

I was sure she was in no shape to drive. Impatient, Grace commanded, "Get in the car."

She chose some vegetables, and then we walked into a coffee bar behind the farm stand, where we sat until she felt ill again and I suggested leaving. She drove back much more slowly and directly.

Several hours later, Bob told me that Grace was not allowed to drive, that her license had been taken away, that the police knew her, and that local drivers tried to stay out of her way. I didn't suggest the obvious: keep the car keys in his pocket and not on the floor of the car.

Fifteen minutes later, Grace walked into the house, looking chipper and very pleased with herself, carrying a stack of mail and magazines. "Someone had to go to the post office," she said as she went off to bed. ■

Florence Howe is the founding editor of the Feminist Press, which in 2011 will publish her memoir, A Life in Motion, from which this is adapted.

For more about Grace Paley, see Lilly Rivlin's just-released documentary film, "Grace Paley: Collected Shorts." lillyrivlin.com

AT LILITH.ORG: Read a piece by Susan Schnur about friendships in the Lilith office at http://lilith.org/landmark_articles

An Ode to 40 Years: The Power of Women's Friendship

BY RABBI NAAMAH KELMAN AND NESSA RAPOPORT

NAAMAH KELMAN: From the minute we sat down to talk on the lawn in front of the library at Camp Ramah in Palmer, we knew. Even as we exchanged details of daily teenage life, we understood the magnitude of our meeting. In peasant blouses and jeans, both descendants of rabbinic families, we felt the insistent claim of our *yichus* (illustrious ancestry) and, as girls, its invisibility.

Our families had known each other for three generations; our futures would reach far beyond the conventions of what Jewish women in 1970 were supposed to be. Across continents, through time, by reams of letters, tapes, faxes, e-mail, and—always—the phone, often daily between Jerusalem and New York, we have taught each other to look at the world not from the narrow limits of self-doubt or despair, but through a great telescope toward the infinite.

The Talmud teaches us that when two people study Torah, the *shekhinah* (the feminine presence of God) dwells with them. The Torah and Talmud also tell us of the holiness of great friendships, but they are overwhelmingly between men. The notable exception is the love of Ruth for Naomi. In this remarkable relationship, Ruth embraces all that Naomi is: “Wherever you go, I will go. Your people will be my people, and your God my God.” This declaration, usually seen as an acceptance of the Jewish faith and peoplehood, also represents the ultimate act of love for another person. Ruth’s famous statement is her claim to a new people and faith, but it is also an oath of friendship.

Is the goal of friendship to give ourselves over completely to another? Rather, isn’t it to recognize the otherness of a friend and embrace it? Ruth is offered to us as the ideal; she seemingly negates herself for Naomi. Yet, this biblical account of true and steadfast friendship is about the rebirth of both women. Naomi’s loss creates, through Ruth’s devotion, the opportunity for a new beginning. By the close of the book, both Ruth and Naomi have changed and triumphed together.

A lifelong friendship encompasses the power to comfort and, enduringly, the capacity to impel a friend to realize all her gifts, to celebrate her in her success and even in her love for another: lover, spouse, child, parent, or friend.

Martin Buber has taught us that all real living is encounter. The Divine enters the encounter when two human beings meet. Spiritual intimacy has a tremendous liberating power: When two friends discover works of art together or share a breathtaking vista, surely the Divine is with them.

Above all, there is the compassionate insight that one friend can offer another. I am blessed with a friend who knows the right words to guide and yet to ease. When she responds, it is not only out of understanding but out of a wonderful confidence in me. At moments of anguish and of exultation, she meets me with the same steadfast love, never wavering in the great vision she has always had for me.

NESSA RAPOPORT: *You, carrying your pail ahead of me, spilling mercy and forgiveness daily, calling my name at the same moment I am conjuring you, a voice of unpolluted clarity, half a world away,*

beside, within me. You, my theological relief, my proof that even in the midst of unslaked cruelty in a barbaric century, nothing less than a divinity could have tendered what you give me, and allowed that in my being on earth I give to you.

NK: In my worst times, and hers, in the losses of love and work, in devastating grief, we have found the strength to console one another, even within our own desolation. Ruth, in the midst of her tragedy, beheld a vision of Naomi’s life that Naomi herself could not see. The essence of redemptive friendship is to see well beyond the pain and fears of a friend, to foretell a glorious future for her, and to cajole and guide her there.

NR: *The symmetry of leaving earth with friends is not allotted in this ragged life. We debate: When you and I grow old, which one ought to go first, to spare the other pain. But that choice is not offered us. What we can choose, and do, is perishable, imperfect love, intimate with loss and bound to it. To let go. Give us a natural parting in old age, completed lives, our children raised, indifferent to each other, like children forced to play together, our husbands tolerant, you mocking my distress at wrinkled flesh, me tender of your eccentricities. Neither to save nor be saved, not remarkable, Lord, transmute a passionate youth, grant two mortal friends an ordinary life.*

NK: What has held us together, kept us sane, has been not sorrow but laughter. When the biblical Sarah, well into her nineties, howled at God’s promise of a son, I believe that she laughed not at the absurdity of the idea but out of hope—the laughter of our reaching beyond our most improbable and seemingly foolish dreams.

Once, when we were young, we laughed for an entire day, falling asleep to a joke we invented, waking up to find it just as funny, and laughing even when we traveled together on a plane to another city. That day became the metaphor of our friendship.

We could say that we were unseasoned, naïve. But now, 40 years later, we still laugh. When all the sound, professional advice falls short, we somehow find a way to laugh ourselves back to restoration. With her, I join those who came before and will come after me in the great Jewish sweep of faith and redemption, and I am comforted.

Is this communion not what the Holy One set us on earth to do? It is impossible to undertake the task alone. But when two friends can see the highest in each other, when they can be frail and then fortified, God dwells with them. ■

Rabbi Naamah Kelman, dean of HUC-JIR/Jerusalem, is the first woman to be ordained in Israel and a longstanding activist in Jewish education, feminism, and interfaith work.

Nessa Rapoport is the author of Preparing for Sabbath, a novel; A Woman’s Book of Grieving, a collection of her prose poems; and House on the River, a memoir of family and place. Her words here are adapted from A Woman’s Book of Grieving by Nessa Rapoport ©1994. All rights reserved.