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Losing Friends, in One Way or Another

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Special to The Washington Post
Monday, September 26, 2005; C10

I went to my 20-year high school reunion last year -- reluctantly. Not for the reasons one might expect; high school was actually pretty kind to me. What I dreaded was not the possibility of finding out that the cheerleaders still had it over me, or that I still stuttered at the cute guys. I knew that wouldn't happen. No, I dreaded showing up in that hotel ballroom and scanning the crowd of classmates for the two faces that I already knew would not be there.

Karen, my petite, sharp, generous friend with the fine-tuned mind and the deep brown eyes, died almost eight years ago, at 31, of cancer. And Howie, my wild-haired friend with the easily wounded, deeply loyal soul, the poet with the wacky edge, embraced Orthodox Judaism to the point at which he and I -- because I'm female and not a relative -- could no longer have contact.

Karen's battle with Ewing's sarcoma, a rare form of cancer that usually strikes children and adolescents, was horrifying -- 10 months after her diagnosis, she was gone. Howie, by contrast, drifted away from me. After college, he spent some time in Russia, then in Israel. Back in the States, I saw him only briefly before he moved to Virginia to attend law school. The last time we saw each other, during a brown-bag lunch in Union Square in Manhattan, my friend -- who had been an equal-opportunity dater; my friend with whom I'd made one of those "let's-get-married-when-we're-35-if-we're-both-still-single" pacts -- announced that he'd stopped dating non-Jewish, non-marriage-minded women. We laughed, but something felt different. He never returned from the South. I later heard he'd gotten married. Neither Karen nor I heard from him in years. Howie's disappearance from our radar screens, our answering machines and our mailboxes (Howie had been an incurable postcard sender; I still have one he sent during college, describing a bit of graffiti he saw on a rock near a river: "Be right back. Godot") was total.

Late in the afternoon that Karen died, I sat alone at my kitchen table, and my thoughts turned to Howie. Did he know? Had he even heard that she was sick? I tracked down his mother, who still lived in our home town. Howie and his family, she told me, lived in Maryland. She'd call him, and get back to me. Within the hour, I had his phone number, and instructions to call; it was the end of his workday, but he was waiting at his desk.

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It felt clandestine. Did he call his wife and tell her he'd be late getting home, but not explain why?

I outlined Karen's short, sad story, from the time she found a mysterious lump in the muscle of her lower back, through the biopsy results, the rounds of chemo, the surgery, the bad news heaped on bad news, the precipitous decline and (even though it was by then inevitable) the shocking end. We talked for perhaps 30 minutes. How long can two old friends talk about death? He didn't seem to want to dwell on Karen. After a morning and afternoon of similarly sad phone calls, neither did I. As we caught up on other friends' news, my old pal's goofy laugh was familiar music. It felt like we were 16 again, trading poetry on the bus home from school, driving to the beach to decompress after the SAT. But then a tone would creep into his voice that I did not recognize, one that made me feel I was talking to someone's kindly yet crusty foreign uncle. Was I married, he asked me? No, but I was seriously involved. Did he have children? I asked. Three, thank God, he answered in the old-man-uncle voice.

Finally, out of the blue, he said he hoped I understood. Understood what? "It's a very powerful thing between me and my wife," Howie told me, "that I don't talk to other women and she doesn't talk to other men." I didn't answer right away. It had been a long day, my eyes hurt from crying, but what he said stung: Was he implying that our friendship had to be sacrificed for the sake of his marriage? Petulance rose, a lump in the back of my throat. No one had asked me if that was a sacrifice I was willing to make. "No, I don't understand," I said. "You were my friend. I miss you all the time."

Though I didn't give much thought to my words' effect, I meant every one. Some friends are not replaceable, some losses always leave holes. Our conversation ended awkwardly. Afterward, I realized that I had, in effect, lost two friends that day. When again would I have an excuse to talk to Howie?

On the day of Karen's funeral, her father told me how he and Karen had spent time in her final weeks paging through her old address book, reminiscing about friends. When they reached Howie's name beside a long-ago phone number, Karen said: "I can respect his decision to change his life. I just wish I could have talked to him one more time."

Well, I had that chance, and I blew it. To be fair, on that particular day, raw grief left me incapable of the kind of generosity of spirit that would have allowed me to acknowledge the changes Howie had made in his life. Now, turning my last words to Howie over in my mouth, they leave a bitter taste. I believe that my friend was asking me something that one's oldest friends have every right to ask: that I at least try to comprehend his choices. That I be happy for him. I couldn't do it.

I went to my reunion. I had a couple of drinks, I looked at the yearbook, I passed around snapshots of my son and my husband and my house. But the whole time I was wishing, as I still do now, that I could talk to either of them, one more time.

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