

Kitestring

Finding and keeping
close friends in the
modern world

hinterlandlab.com | July 2017



The last great friendship

At 87, Colin Angas moved into a retirement unit next door to Colin Bogner. Within weeks they were inseparable friends.

They shared a love of music, the German language, and good whiskey. They became known as Colin A and Colin B, and every morning they would “swan down” to Blond cafe together.

Colin A passed away last year, but Colin B remembers him every day. “I never thought in my old age I’d ever have such a close new friend again... It was my last great friendship.”

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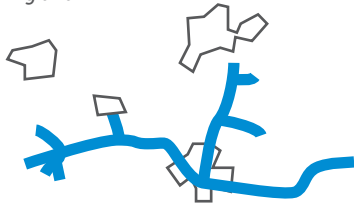
**Like the
big picture?**

**Just want to get to
the heart of it?**

**Want to be
involved?**

Great-Grandfather
40 km² over lifetime

Northamptonshire,
England

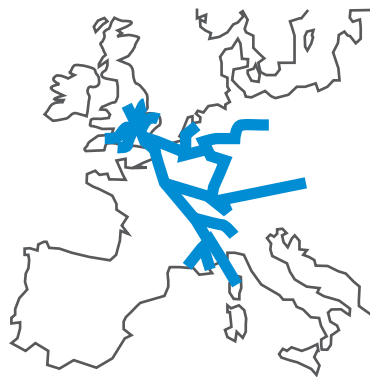


Grandfather
400 km²

Southern
England



Father
4,000 km²



Son
40,000 km²



1 000x

— Lifetime
tracks

Our world has expanded

In 1989, researcher David Bradley compared the breadth of his travel over his life with that of his father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

His great-grandfather's lifetime of travel stayed within 40 square kilometers around a village in Northamptonshire. His grandfather's travel in southern England ranged over 400 square kilometers, his father's extensive travel in Europe covered 4,000 km², and his own world travel has spanned 40,000 km².*

Bradley's family's experience is consistent with general trends[†] showing that our range of travel, and the size of an individual's world, is roughly 1000 times larger than it was only four generations ago.

* Bradley D.J. 1989. *Scope of travel medicine*.

† Haggett P. 1994. *Geographical aspects of the emergence of infectious diseases*.



But we're less close

Though often felt as a personal problem, it is in fact a shared, societal challenge.

1 in 4

adults have **no one** with whom to share difficult news.*

In an expanded world, our lives have become fragmented. It's harder to form and sustain close friendships, and while our context has changed, our need for connection hasn't.

In 2006, a research group famously used data from the large-scale General Social Survey in the US to show that the average size of our inner circles has shrunk from 3 to 2 over the past two decades, and, even more worrying, that as many as 1 in 4 of us have *no close people at all*.*

Our expanded world has opened up new opportunities for ways to live and work, and it's easier than ever to form many weak connections with people far away. This same expansion, however, means the time and structure necessary for forming strong, close ties are often missing.

Similarly, many technological and agricultural innovations have also simultaneously improved our lives

while creating barriers to connection. We now longer rely on the people immediately around us for survival, and we've replaced many relationships with transactions. Frozen dinners and delivery pizza are a big step up from hunting and gathering, but they make it easy today to isolate ourselves without even noticing.


As a society, we need to reflect. How can we structure our lives so that progress and connection aren't in conflict? How can people like David Bradley achieve the same sense of connectedness and close friendship that might have developed more naturally and easily in his great-grandfather's community?

* McPherson, M. et al. 2006. *Changes in core discussion networks over two decades*.

Kitestring wants that to change

This report is a synthesis of our findings from a year of research into close friendships and how we can form and maintain them in the modern world.

We're always **looking for collaborators** to help us build and test applications of these insights. We want to try things like apps for individuals, training for social services, and toolkits to turn cafes and libraries into more effective social hubs.

A photograph of a social gathering at night. In the foreground, a woman with dark hair is wearing a VR headset and smiling. She is being embraced from behind by another person. In the background, other people are seated at tables with white tablecloths, and warm, glowing lights hang from the ceiling. The scene suggests a friendly, communal environment.

Get updates on our work at
www.hinterlandlab.com/kitestring



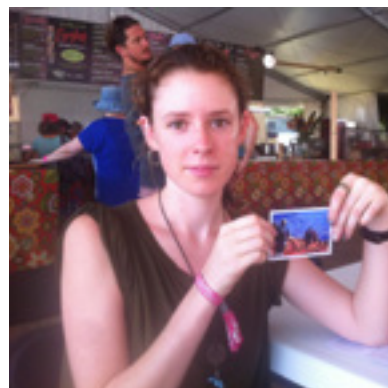
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in-depth
interviews



50

casual
interviews



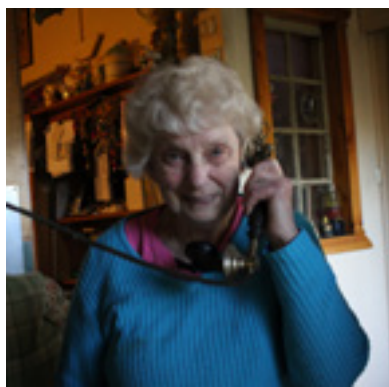
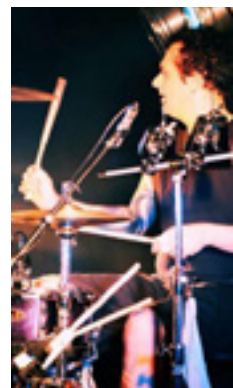
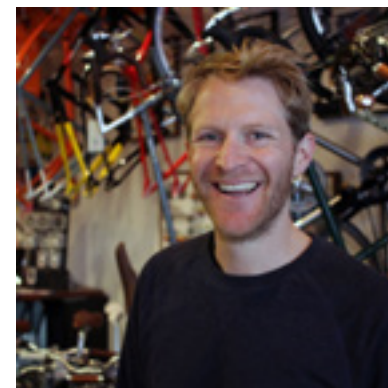
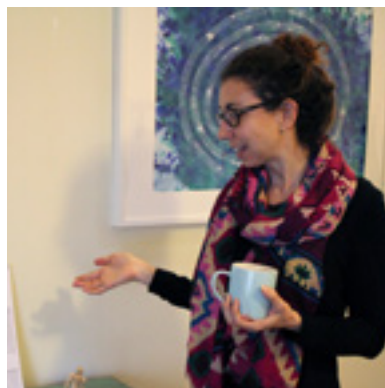
5

ethnographic
immersions



80k

transcribed
words



1

year of
research



70

articles
and books





We interviewed people like Fran to better understand the variety of ways people experience close friendship.

Our approach

We're taking a human-centred design approach, starting with real people's experiences, integrating those with social science, and turning what we learn into new ideas and opportunities for action.

We've interviewed mothers, fathers, aunts, grandparents. Men, women, gay, straight, married, single. 20-year-olds to 80-year-olds.

We conducted in-depth contextual interviews and ethnographic immersions, looking for stories of people making friendship work.

Students, business owners, a board chair. Introverts, extroverts. Indigenous and anglo-Australians. Recent immigrants and a refugee who arrived by boat. Professionals, stay-at-home parents, and a full-time carer.

We combined these stories with research from psychology and sociology, and from all of that we've drawn out three broad insights about what it takes to foster close friendships in the modern world.





Shoulders of giants

While our insights and opportunities are grounded in the lives of real people, we are greatly indebted to the wealth of literature that was available to inform, complement and bring structure to our research.

We footnote the key sources in each section, but head to 'References and further reading' for a more comprehensive list.

Where are we now?

With this report we've completed our initial **research** and **sense-making** process, and are now turning our focus to **partnering and prototyping**.

In this phase we are looking for partners to work with to design new programs, products and practices that help build social connectivity, resilience, and close friendship.

Turn to the **Get Involved** section for opportunities to collaborate with us in the next round of work.

Where to from here?

We are working on projects with a variety of collaborators from local government to research institutions to corporate and community education. If you want to be involved, get in touch at hinterlandlab.com

Design research

Insight: Learning from people and social science

Making sense

Synthesis: insights and opportunities

Partnering and prototyping

Trying out a number of small experiments

Building and growing

Detailing and spreading what works



We are here



time

In human-centred design processes like this, qualitative research is followed by real-life prototyping and testing. In practice, the process is never perfectly linear, but clarity and focus emerge over time.

What did
we learn?

3 insights

*that open new possibilities for
fostering close friendship*

1. We connect **through**

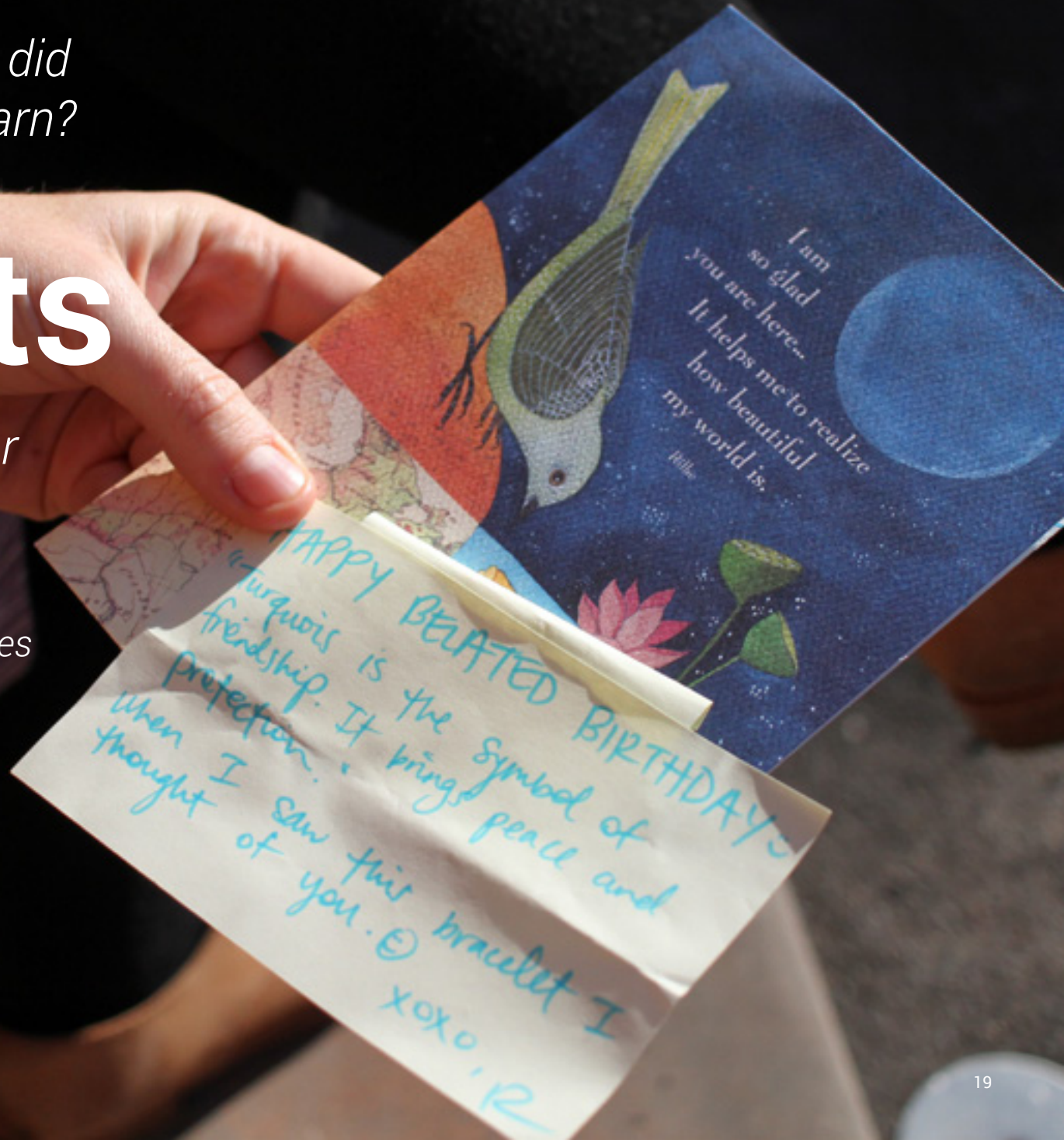
*Strong friendships aren't singular entities
but rather a rich abundance of ties*

2. The **virtuous cycle**

*Friendships become closer through
small, continuing acts of bravery*

3. Friendships need **holding**

*Friendships that last are held in
something bigger than themselves*





One of our interviewees, Anne, spins her own yarn to make gifts for friends.

1

We connect through

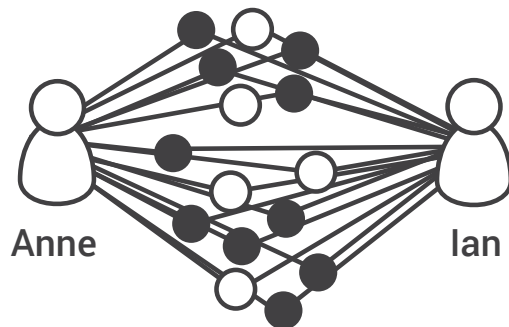
What do close friendships look like?

They are not singular connections from one person to another. Rather, close friends are connected through an abundance of meaningful ties.

What does a close friendship look like?

Anne and Ian have been friends for more than fifteen years. They run together three times a week, moved to live around the corner from one another, and their families often share meals.

Friendship isn't something you can see, but if you were to try to draw a picture of Anne and Ian's friendship, it wouldn't be a singular connection. Instead, it's a complex structure of meaning, composed of many small ties.



Close friendships are built on an abundance of meaningful ties.

We don't connect to, we connect through

Anne and Ian first met through a shared passion for activism. This proved a strong foundation for their friendship which deepened when they later lived as housemates.

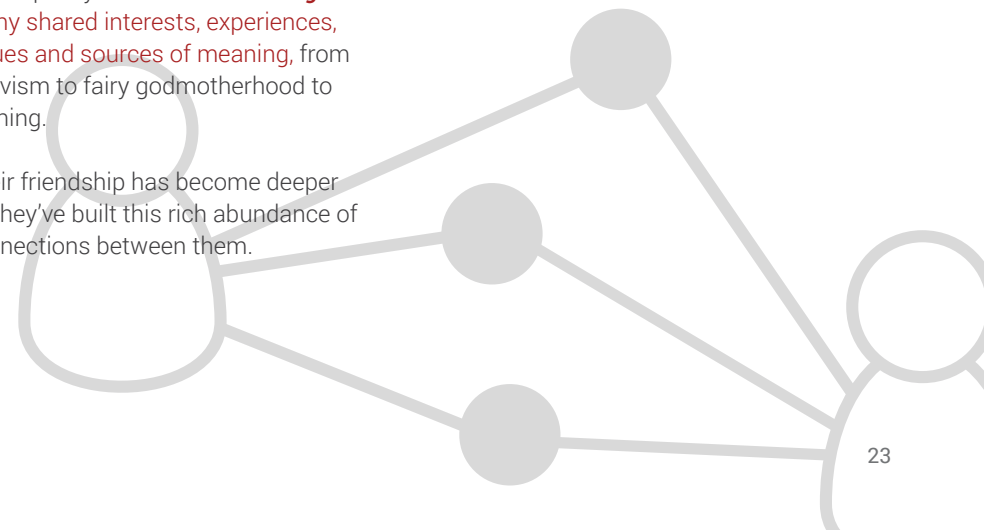
Years later, they've each started families who have become close as well. Ian has taken up woodworking with Anne's partner and he's named Anne as his son's 'fairy godmother.'



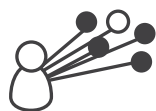
Anne is knitting a sweater for her 'fairy godson.' As he wears it, it will become yet another meaningful connection between their families.

With these many ties, Anne and Ian's friendship isn't a singular, monolithic connection **to** each other so much as a multiplicity of connection **through** many shared interests, experiences, values and sources of meaning, from activism to fairy godmotherhood to running.

Their friendship has become deeper as they've built this rich abundance of connections between them.



What does this mean for forming friendships?



Anne

Anne had a rich set of connections and values around activism.



Anne

Ian

Ian shared many of those, helping the two of them have a strong connection right from the start.

Strong from the start

You aren't going to become close friends with just anyone. Deep friendships are best built on a shared base of values and interests.

For her part, Anne said, "I think there are connections that can be really warm and strong right from the beginning, and I think there are some forms of connection that really take time to build. [Ian and I] have some of both."

When they first met, Anne and Ian shared a lot of values and interests around activism, an important part of their identity for both of them. It's one of the reasons Anne said that their connection was "warm and strong" right from the beginning.

We're most likely to meet people with whom we're "strong from the start" through activities and situations that connect with what's important about who we are as people and how we want to live in the world.

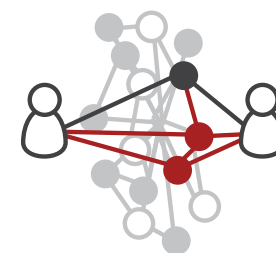
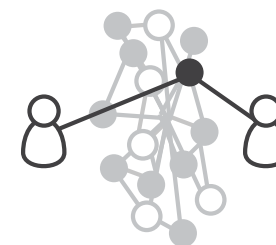
Treasure hunts + small talk

How can we find out if the people we meet are those with whom we share a lot of potential for connection - where we might be "strong from the start"? We need to be able to create some kind of map of potential points of connection between us.

Often one of our least favourite things is small talk. It can be tiring or unrewarding, and we'd quite like to skip to the part where we already know everything about each other.

In fact, small talk is necessary if we want to find points of connection that aren't obvious when we first meet.

How can we make small talk less of a chore? In *The Art of Conversation* Catherine Blyth says we should re-frame small talk as a treasure hunt. More than a superficial conversation to pass the time, small talk is a search. Like panning for gold, we're looking for a glimmer of an opportunity for connection, and that's when we dig deep.



When treated as a treasure hunt, the goal of small talk is to uncover hidden connections.



One connection isn't enough

As a first time mother, Ash wanted to make some friends going through the same transition. She was connected into a local new mothers' group but as a way of forming new friends, it was a flop.

"I suppose the premise there is that you've all got something in common, and it's a big thing in common. But then in every other way, you're random," she said. "You just happened to have had a baby at the same time as someone else... In the case of my group—I know groups work really differently—that really big thing in common wasn't enough to make that meaningful... I didn't click with anybody."

Who are the 'right people' for us? If we think about the example of Anne and Ian, we know that we want to start strong by finding people who will share our values and have more than just one thing in common.

Perhaps if the mothers' group had brought together young mothers who also shared a second thing in common, Ash might have found someone she connected with.

For Ash, a former back-country backpacker and social justice advocate, this could have involved choosing a group for new mothers who like hiking or new mothers who feel strongly about refugee rights.

Opportunities

For services who connect people

We should try to match people so they have more in common, especially focusing on life journeys or who they are as a person. We want people with similar responses to phrases like "I'm a ____ person" or "____ is a big part of my life."

For individuals

To meet people with whom we might be "strong from the start," we should look for activities that would be chosen by people with similar values or are at a similar life stage.





The power of introductions

Nathan came to Australia as a refugee. He had access to many services and supports that helped him get set up with a new life, but he struggled to find new friends.

Although he had attended a few multicultural events hosted by the Red Cross, Nathan found that he was "going but not making friends."

Nathan, like Ash, found that having just one thing in common with other members of the group (being recent arrivals in Australia) wasn't sufficient for him to make a real connection.

He had better luck when a friendly nurse, hearing of his love of film, told him about a local independent cinema run by volunteers.

He went to the cinema and signed up to volunteer the very next week. Over time it proved to be great at connecting him to other people.

Nathan now says that, looking back at the roots of his Australian friendships, 'nearly 90% of them' branched out of his involvement in the cinema, or people they then introduced to him. "One by one each of them connected me... From this spot I was connected to the next and [they in turn] connected me to others."

Finding your people

A friend of a friend who shares interests or values is much more likely to be someone with whom we could become a close friend.

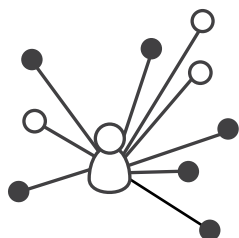
An introduction lends the potential friendship a bit of trust and gives it a greater chance to get past awkward beginnings.

This is not unlike the service Amazon provides when they make product recommendations: "People who like this book also like..."

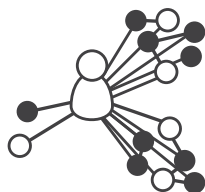
We don't always think to do it, but given what a difference it makes, more of us need to become introducers.

That doesn't just mean getting people in the same place. Like a good party host, we need to give them a way in, giving each a bit of background about the other and highlighting shared interests and connections.

What does this mean for deepening friendships?



The amount of choice we have makes it easy to cultivate disconnected worlds.



For stronger friendships, we should actively work to have them embedded in densely connected areas of our lives.

Fragmentation vs vital engagement

The amount of choice we have in our modern lives is unprecedented. It makes it easy to cultivate more numerous, but weaker, connections to people, places, and activities.

There is nothing wrong with diversity and breadth, but we all benefit from complementing that with depth: people and things with which we feel deeply and richly connected.

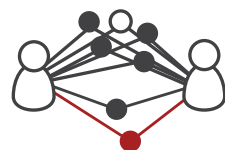
Quality of life researcher Jeanne Nakamura has given a name to the kind of connection that is deep and enduring. She calls it “vital engagement.”* She primarily applies the concept to work and creative endeavours, but we think it is also a useful way to think about friendships.

When we deepen our friendships, we are creating a rich, dense web of connection, embedding the other person more strongly in our lives.

* Nakamura, Csikszentmihalyi, 2003. *The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement.*



Our happiness and friendships benefit from cultivating areas of life where we are deeply, vitally engaged.



Anne and Ian have chosen to continually build their friendship: "We both look for ways to hang out together"

Choosing to build

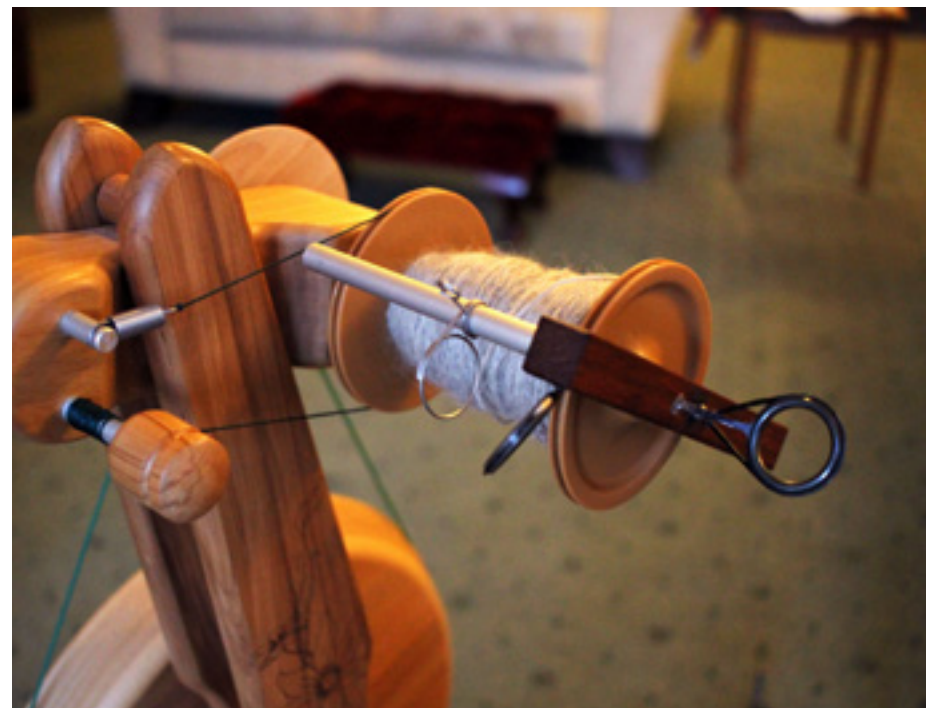
What does it look like to build and deepen a friendship? At least part of the equation seems to be about choosing to do so.

Returning to Anne and Ian, they actively continue to invest in each other. "I think it's also just been about building up," Anne says, "We both look for ways to hang out together."

"You know, I give them seedlings and they give us preserved fruit and we share stuff from the garden, and I bought them chooks one time... We do practical things as well as things of the heart."

Investing in friendship

Anne invests in friendship in many ways (see page 33), and she says, "To some extent that's a political choice; I think this is a political period in which we're invited to think of ourselves as individuals first and foremost, where community is a distant concept, rather than a lived reality, whereas I'm trying to figure out how to have community as a lived reality in my life in lots of different ways."



Anne actively cultivates an ethic of community. She has sought out a variety of avenues through which she can connect to others.

She runs music nights at her house, makes jam to share, and, appropriately enough for Kitestring, spins and dyes her own yarn.

What does this mean for keeping friendships?



Big life shifts like moving, having kids or losing a loved one often remove or add whole contexts of connection.



To stay connected with old friends through shifts, we have to actively invite them into our new contexts.

Dealing with life shifts

Some of the biggest challenges in friendships come when we add, lose, or change big areas through which we are connected to other people.

Think about when we move cities, have a child, lose a loved one, get a new partner, or get a divorce.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett describes the self as “the centre of narrative gravity.”* When a large shift of our identity is occurring, it almost always has an impact on our close relationships.

If we want to preserve relationships through a shift, we have to find ways to invite friends into our new contexts.

We first have to help them have an understanding of our new lives (the new place we live, what life is like with our new child). Then we have to actively look for ways to involve and include them.

* Dennett, Daniel. ‘The Self as a Center of Narrative Gravity’ in *Self and Consciousness: Multiple Perspectives*, Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum, 1992.

Inviting friends into change

Jen knows that lots of people lose friends when they become parents, so for her closest friends she looked for ways to invite them in.

“Having Frankie has deepened my friendships with people who are mothers,” Jen says. “So my friend Melanie, for example, has two little girls, and I think that friendship’s become much closer.” She says they have that shared understanding, and it makes her see Mel in a whole new light. “I just had no idea of everything that she went through.”

“That friendship survived regardless of me having been blissfully unaware of all the ups and downs she must have gone through. But I think now I feel much more connected to her.”

Thanks to her realisation that she had no idea what had been going on with Mel, Jen has actively tried to “find ways to let other people in on where I’m at, and what’s changed for me since having Frankie.”

Jen says she knows that lots of people lose friends when they become parents. “They’re on a different schedule. Their priorities are probably different. I didn’t want that distance [to

grow], so I’ve tried to let friends in. And also ask them about their lives, which is also really important.”

Another of our participants, Maria, a counsellor and social worker, says that when these shifts happen, old friends can sometimes begin to act strangely toward us. Often, she tells us, this is just misplaced worry about their place in our lives. “The best thing to do is reassure, reassure, reassure.”

Opportunities

There are lots of ways to let people into a life shift. For moving to a new place, we might help friends and family get a better picture of our new normal and daily life by sending a series of day-in-the-life photos and scheduling Skype and phone calls.

When our friends are experiencing a life shift that’s new to us, perhaps dealing with an illness or caring for a loved one, we might have to find our own way in, making an effort to better understand their new reality.

A photograph of a man with a beard and a woman smiling at each other outdoors, sitting at a wooden table. The man is on the left, wearing a light pink shirt, and the woman is on the right, wearing a black top and a necklace. They are both looking towards the right side of the frame. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with trees and sunlight.

2

the Virtuous cycle

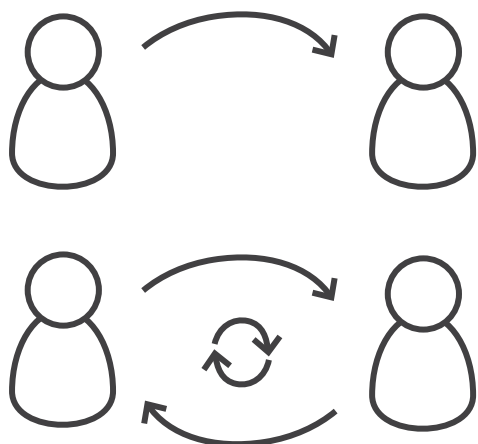
How do friendships deepen?

They grow closer through small acts of bravery in a virtuous cycle of increasing vulnerability and trust.

How do people grow closer?

Jennifer and her husband are becoming friends with an older couple down the road. They met at a community dinner night and first connected through a shared travel bug: “They have a camper trailer and we just bought one.”

From there Jennifer says the friendship has deepened slowly, “building the relationship a little bit and then feeling more willing to open up and be a bit more vulnerable about our struggles [and theirs]... and just a bit of time as well, being regular and being present.”



Friendships deepen through bids: small requests for connection.

Bids drive a virtuous cycle of increasing vulnerability and trust as friendships grow closer.



Gifts are an especially concrete example of a bid

Bid by bid

When trying to understand how friendships deepen, a good starting point is the work of sociologist Brené Brown who says “vulnerability is the birthplace of [...] belonging.”*

In day-to-day life, psychologist John Gottman suggests this vulnerability is most commonly expressed through many small requests for connection that he calls ‘bids’.[†]

Bids can feel like an offering: sharing a joke or making a compliment, or a question: “What’s new with you?” They can even be nonverbal, like a big smile when you greet someone. They are the hundreds of subtle, vulnerable gestures that pepper each interaction in all of our relationships.

The virtuous cycle

As Gottman says, each time we choose to “turn toward,” or accept, a bid for connection, we build a bit of trust in the friendship. This trust then helps each of us to feel comfortable making and accepting larger, more vulnerable bids, which in turn increases trust yet again. This drives a virtuous cycle in which acts of vulnerability, met by gestures of acceptance, bring friendships closer.

Take our interviewee Jennifer’s descriptions of getting to know her neighbours—the more they opened up and felt accepted by the other couple, the more she felt it was possible to open a bit further again.

Once we understand the dynamics of this virtuous cycle, the design opportunities lie in helping people get it started and then keep it going.

* Brown, Brené, 2012. *Daring Greatly*.

† Gottman, John, 2001. *The Relationship Cure*.

Starting the cycle: forming friendships

Go first. Start small.

If we want to be intentional about building friendships, we need to be prepared to go first. This can sound hard, but we needn't be overwhelmed.

The tricky thing about the "virtuous cycle" is that one of us needs to get it going. For many of us, that is a real challenge.

The nice thing about Gottman's way of thinking about "bids," however, is that they can start small, and in fact, when we don't know the other person very well, it's important that our bids do start small.

If we make too strong a bid for connection with someone we don't know well, we place ourselves off balance. We can overwhelm the other person, who may not know how to respond. Brené Brown calls this "floodlighting," describing the "deer in

the headlights" look that comes over people when we over-share this way.*

So we need to make appropriate bids that don't presuppose high levels of trust between us and the other person. We want bids that invite connection without overwhelming and bids that won't hurt us too much if the other person "turns away."

These bids might involve commenting on your surroundings, or asking people about something they're wearing. Starting the cycle may not take much, but we may need to be the one to go first.

* Brown, Brené, 2012. *Daring Greatly*.



Calling for backup

Even these small bids for connection can be very scary sometimes for people like Kerry, who experiences social anxiety.

Kerry is about to move to a new city to start her PhD. A self-described introvert, Kerry shared her strategies for dealing with the anxieties attached to meeting new people.

Kerry plans on going along to some clubs and groups as ways to meet people, but she knows that will be difficult for her. She says she gets "very worried in big groups about what I say... I know it's silly but it's something I can't not do." Often this anxiety means she won't go to meet new groups of people, or she'll go but stay quiet the whole time.

To make it easier for her move, she has a strategy: she'll set up a call with a friend back home for after the event.

She says that means she'll feel OK, even if it goes badly; "Especially if it's awkward," she says, because then even in the moment she feels better knowing "at least it will make a funny story." Knowing she has a call planned for later means that even in the moment she doesn't feel alone. In her head she's already composing the story she'll tell on the phone, and emotionally it feels like the friend is right there with her.

Opportunities

For social services

Kerry's story is especially pertinent to the role support workers and case managers play in supporting stronger social ties. They often can't accompany clients, but they could plan a call to debrief after a nerve-racking social interaction and help with what Brené Brown calls the 'vulnerability hangover.'

Continuing the cycle:

deepening friendships

Thresholds and commitment

Kate and Tracy became friends at university. They enjoyed each other's company and often studied together. Their friendship really deepened when Kate broke up with her long-term boyfriend and needed a new place to live.

Right away, Tracy offered to let Kate stay at her house while she figured things out. Kate says that's when she realised Tracy really was a good friend. They grew even closer over the two weeks that Kate crashed on Tracy and her husband's couch, often talking late into the night about their lives, their struggles, and their hopes for things to come.

Crossing thresholds

For a lot of people we interviewed, the difference between 'could be a good friend' and 'is a good friend' was often a demonstration of commitment through some significant practical or emotional help.

These offerings of help often came at times of great vulnerability, bringing into focus the trust that had been building slowly over time. People commonly described this as helping their friendship 'cross a threshold.'

Returning to the theory of Vital Engagement (page 30), people build meaning in their lives and friendships through the ongoing "pull of enjoyment" as well as the "push of problems." In this language, the virtuous cycle is usually powered by the 'pull of enjoyment' and thresholds are often crossed when a friend helps out during the 'push of a problem.'

* Nakamura, Csikszentmihalyi, 2003. *The Construction of Meaning through Vital Engagement. Flourishing: Positive psychology and the life well-lived.* 83-104.

Close friend

Good friend

Friend

Nearly everyone we spoke to described levels or circles of friendships. Then when they told a story of how a friend became close, people often spoke of specific times when they 'crossed a threshold.'



Giving and getting help

Many people, like Tracy and Kate, said that their friendship was cemented when one of them provided support during a difficult time.

These weren't always big things. For David, it was about driving his friend Bec to the vet.

"[Her] cat got really sick, once. Late at night she needed to get to the vet, so I drove over... then hung out with her for a couple of hours... I think that was a really big thing. It wasn't big to me... but I think Bec really appreciated it."

These simple acts of solidarity or support can be powerful symbols of commitment.

Anne supported her friend Ian through a difficult time, and then he later returned the favour. For Anne, she says that's one of the most important things that makes friendship work. "I think that friendships that go well often have an element of that person being able to hold onto what they believe is true of you, even when you forget."

"Ian's been there at moments of crisis in my life," Anne says. "He's been extremely kind, not in a fussy way, just rock solid. I'd stick around for that."

Signals of commitment

Including our friends in important events in our lives can be a significant signal of commitment to our friendships.

Karen recalls when she was invited to her friend Claire's wedding, only shortly after their first meeting.

"I started working life in November and she was getting married in February, and I got invited to the wedding, and I was like, 'You've only known me two minutes: are you sure you want to invite me?'"

"It was a really small wedding, because they were pretty strapped... And I was like, that is just so meaningful. She's trying to watch

her numbers, and she invites me, someone she's known for two minutes."

For Karen, this consolidated her friendship with Claire in an important way. People we interviewed frequently described invitations to weddings or significant birthdays as particularly important gestures marking out their most valued friendships.

Tracey's old friend Caroline has a small child and lives on the opposite side of the city. They don't get to see each other as often as they'd like, so they keep their friendship going with lots of small bids through text messages and notes in the mail.



Sustaining the cycle: keeping friends

Vulnerability, bullsh*t, and being seen

When we asked Kevin what was important for him in good friendships, he said a lot of it was about getting past the bullsh*t.

Often when you talk to people, even those you know well, there's "a bit of bullshit going on," Kevin told us. "I'm sure you've experienced places when people are in auto-mode: *Hi, how you doing today? I'm good, how are you?*

"I think friendships can do that... So *how's work? Well it's good. Your work? Yeah, it's really good. How's the family. Family's good?*"

"OK, that is going nowhere, quickly. One of us has to give some detail to see if this is going to go anywhere else. That's what I mean by 'bullshit.'"

As sociologist Brené Brown says, it takes courage to "show up and let

yourself be seen."* It takes courage to be vulnerable and to move past, as Kevin says, "the bullshit."

Opportunities

For new and old friends, we can let bullshit creep in. Getting beyond that takes effort. For old friends, we're curious about how we might help people recognise when they've been closing down and need to re-open the friendship. Are there trip-wires we could set? Special occasions that allow for reflection and re-setting?

* Brown, Brené, 2012. *Daring Greatly*.

The friendship roster

Ash keeps a list of her most important people and puts one or two people down to contact each day.

"I think it came from now having friends in a number of places and time zones. It's not that easy to just pick up a phone and call the States, and also I was here [in Adelaide]. My friends were in Melbourne mainly, or in America, and I wasn't seeing people face-to-face in the way that I had.

"I think the thing that is nice about it is I don't have to do any particular form of communication with that person on that day, but always something. Sometimes it is a text. Sometimes it's a really lengthy email or a Skype... the format isn't fixed.

"I know it's dorky... I just find it helpful. Otherwise... it's not that I don't love people or think of them, it's just that doesn't translate into being in touch."

For well-established friendships, we may not be focused on deepening them further, but mostly on keeping the virtuous cycle going. And that might mean regular, small bids for connection. Ash's roster helped her to remember to make these small

gestures of trust and commitment that maintained the positive upward spiral of trust. "Because how do you sustain those connections over that time?" Ash asked. She felt that if a long time passed you'd lose a lot.

"You don't speak for weeks or months. You click back in because these are really good, close friends, but I think you just lose that everydayness."

"It's not that I don't love people or think of them...it's just that doesn't translate into being in touch."

"If it's been a month since you spoke to someone, so much has happened, and you don't say that sort of stuff in conversation with people, because they're little things sometimes, or you've forgotten about them by then. And all those little things are kind of what make up your life."



3

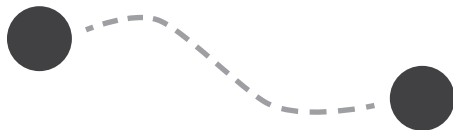
Friendships need holding

The fastest way for a friendship to fall apart is to rely on fitting in time for catch-ups here and there. Enduring friendships benefit from being held in something larger.

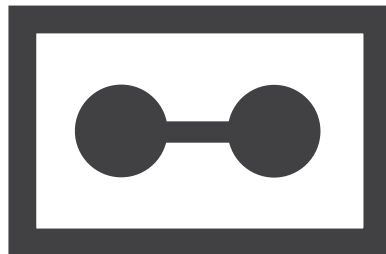
Containers hold friendships

10 years ago, Craig says that his close group of guy friends gradually stopped hanging out. “We were all having kids, had increasingly less free time and just exhausted, you know.”

“So one of my best mates said to us, ‘I want to float the idea that once a month we get together,’ and it’s become known as Man Date. Now we have a mandate to have a Man Date.”



Left to the entropic forces of modern life, most friendships will drift apart.



Most enduring friendships benefit from being held in a container.

Good containers have a structure or rhythm and balance intention with air.



Craig says the Man Date is “my lifeline for staying in touch with those guys.”

Creating new containers

This group of Craig’s friends goes “all the way back to church youth group days,” but most of them no longer belong to the church. Without that regularity of seeing each other, they just never got around to organising catch-ups. They invented Man Date as a way to make that easier.

It’s not complicated, Craig says. “Usually we just go out to eat somewhere,” but it’s a good-humoured group, so it’s always a good time.

For Craig, Man Date is a container—a structure that helps hold those friendships. “That’s really my lifeline for staying in touch with guys I’ve known since primary school. And they’re my dear friends. Some of them I don’t see other than at Man Date.”

In years past, friendships had more ‘default’ containers like small towns or strong institutions like Craig’s church.

For Craig, Man Date is a container—a structure that helps hold those friendships.

We have fewer of these ‘default containers’ in modern society, but our friendships still need to be held in something larger. In our research we were delighted to uncover dozens of inspiring examples of people intentionally creating new containers (like Man Date) to fill this need.

What makes a good container?

In our research we encountered an inspiring variety of informal friendship containers, including a neighbourhood dinner, a Wednesday drink, a Tuesday dance lesson, a community project, a monthly book club, a local political party branch, a new mother's coffee date, a kite surfing club, a weekly curry night, a weekend Skype date, a WhatsApp group, a dinner discussion group, an intentional living community, a connected apartment block, and a community-oriented pub.

Some containers were good for forming new friends, others for deepening friendships or sustaining them over the long term. All of them shared some kind of structure or **rhythm**, and they all struck a balance between **intention** (a focus on connecting) that was balanced with a bit of **air** (breathing room).



Balancing intention and air

All of the containers we encountered had ways to help people **intentionally** connect while also managing the pressure of the situation (by letting in a bit of **air** to avoid things becoming too intense or awkward).

If you imagine sitting with someone and you meet their gaze, that's a simple form of intentionally connecting. If you look away, that gives the interaction a bit of air. In friendship containers, we need both.

Air

In film, the device that drives the story, like the stolen suitcase full of nuclear codes that everyone is chasing, is called a “**McGuffin**.” It's the excuse for the tale, but the heart of most film is the characters and the way they and their relationships develop. That's why we watch.

What we call “air” is kind of the McGuffin of our friendship containers. It's the thing that brings us together, the excuse that gives room for our relationships to deepen—the food, drink, soccer practice, hike, French class, board game or movie.

Intention

However, too much air means our relationships don't develop much. It can't just be a coincidence that we're in the same place at the same time—to some degree it also needs to be about that specific relationship. In Craig's case, the Man Date was set up for the express purpose of helping maintain their friendships. The food and laughter add air, but the intention to connect is a clear part of Man Date.

Too much intention and too little air in our containers, and things get awkward. It can be all too intense being in an environment in which we are gathered together for no reason other than with the intention to deepen our friendship. Where we don't have a lot of built-up trust, that can make us feel very vulnerable.

However, too much air and too little intention means we never get anywhere. We need to find the right balance for our friendships.

Games are an example of a ‘McGuffin’ we commonly use to add air when we spend time with friends.



Photo courtesy
Alex Kwong

Containers for forming friendships

New friendships need plenty of air

Where there is less trust in our friendship—perhaps because we’ve just met each other—we need plenty of **air** in our container.

Karen, who recently arrived in Adelaide from Ireland, found her container for her friends Christie and Len initially had so much intention that it was really awkward, but they managed to inject it with some air.

“There’s a website called “Poms in Adelaide”, which is English people in Adelaide. So, we went to one of their gatherings one Saturday on the beach.

“I was like, ‘Oh, this is totally awkward’; it’s on a beach, and there’s this group of people who look like they’re English, and you’re like, what do you do?”

“[My husband] got talking to Len, who is Christie’s husband, and they had arrived in Adelaide three weeks

before us. We just got talking, and we were like, ‘Hey, are you doing anything Wednesday night? Let’s go to the cinema.’ So we found out that we had a real similar love of film.”

It’s clear that Karen’s initial interaction had so much intention—at a group for English people aimed specifically at introducing them to one another—that it felt pretty uncomfortable.

However, while it may have been a bit awkward, having some intention in their first meeting also meant they were inclined to make bids and find points of connection, and they were able to discover that they were going through similar experiences as recent immigrants, and shared common interests.

They used this to quickly transpose their container so their interactions had more air—they started organising it around their common love of film, so they had another excuse to get together and connect.

When we’re just getting to know people, we haven’t yet built up mutual trust, so we’re likely to feel very vulnerable. For that reason, attempting to make bids for connection in an environment that’s charged with intention can be very intimidating, and we need some air.

Opportunities

We can design containers so that they have plenty of air, but just enough intention that things go somewhere. We can see how workplaces that are interested in encouraging friendships between colleagues will want to get this balance right. We can see the same thing in cafes or eateries that want to facilitate interactions between customers.

What about social gatherings? How can we bring together different groups of people in ways that have the right balance of intention and air so that it’s easy for them to get to know one another?

Changing containers to deepen friendships

Re-potting friendships

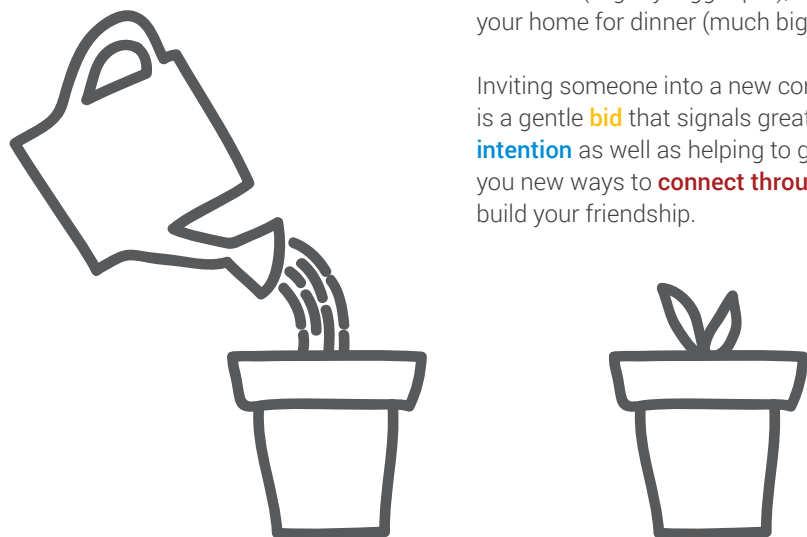
Sometimes our friendship container needs to change to have more **intention**. Rowan told us that “if friendship is a plant that you nurture,” then to help it grow, it occasionally needs “re-potting.”

We might ‘water’ our friendship through regular contact, but at some point that may reach a natural limit. The friendship will reach the size of its pot and grow no longer, like a work friend whom you might see every

day but grow no closer to. “They stay small in their little pot.”

“For the friendship to grow,” Rowan said, “you need to move it to a bigger pot.” This is like inviting that work friend to a new context, like going out for drinks (slightly bigger pot), or to your home for dinner (much bigger).

Inviting someone into a new context is a gentle **bid** that signals greater **intention** as well as helping to give you new ways to **connect through** and build your friendship.



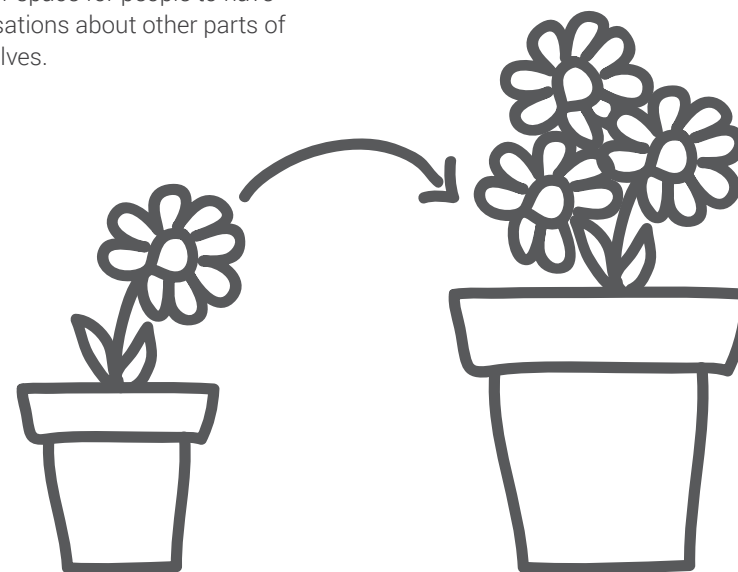
Opportunities

For groups, clubs or services

If you gather people around a particular interest or activity, you might think about inviting people to extend the connection to a “bigger pot”. This could mean making plans to meet for food after an event, or space for people to have conversations about other parts of themselves.

For individuals

For friendships we want to grow, we have to take the initiative to move them beyond a particular context. This can also apply to friendships that feel stuck or stagnant.



Once-off containers for deepening friendships

Friendship fertiliser

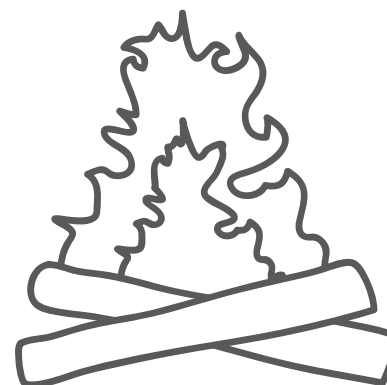
While most containers had a rhythm, some common containers for deepening friendships, like road-trips or camping, are short-lived but allow for more vulnerability and connection.

Building on the re-potting plant metaphor, Rowan's partner Ronja said that you can do more than just water or re-pot friendships. "Some experiences are like super-fertilizer for a friendship," she says. "We just went on a road trip with two new friends, and the two people I knew at the end of the trip were completely different from the ones I knew at the start."

This was echoed by Craig who had just returned from a camping trip he ran for young men who struggle with drugs and alcohol and who have all gone through some really difficult

experiences. He told us they had a moving conversation the first night about one thing each they were proud of in their life and one thing they wished was different.

"I had met them that morning," he said. "I guess just having spent a day kayaking with them, chatting as we kayaked, getting to know them a little bit, doing something practical together and then cooking dinner together and then sitting around a fire together."



A campfire itself is a great case study in giving "air" to a situation, allowing space for people to be safe and more vulnerable.

Opportunities

"I'm always amazed at how often young people actually engage in those conversations when you think, 'hang on, you really don't know us from a bar of soap.' If you just asked them that same question before... It would have been a different kettle of fish." He added that even "the campfire itself is something magical."

All of that shared activity adds "air," and increases the trust in the container, allowing it to hold a little more vulnerability and intentionality about connecting.

Tourism companies like The Adventurists (who organise events including a 3,000 km rickshaw race across India) or fundraising groups like Sh*tbox Rally (a challenge to drive barely-functioning cars through the Australian Outback) create intense experiences that have the potential to deepen many friendships.

We wonder what it would mean for organisations like these to think a bit more intentionally about the friendship container they're creating. We also wonder what other business opportunities exist that build friendships through great experiences.



Often short-lived, intense containers like a road trip, a shared holiday house, or a backpacking trip can be a space for deepening friendships.

*Photo courtesy
Tracey Martinovich*

Sustained containers for deepening friendships

Rhythm and structure

All of the containers we encountered had structure, whether that was a regular rhythm, virtual or physical proximity, or an organiser.

Containers as a one-off event (see pg. 62 'friendship fertiliser') can be useful for forming deeper connections, but most of the containers we encountered included a structure that created a **rhythm** to connection.

The rhythm helped reduce the friction of organising and made sure that people could actually catch up. As interviewee Ash said, "It's not that I don't love people, or think of them, it's just that doesn't translate into me being in touch."

A few of the containers we encountered didn't have an explicit rhythm, but instead a physical **proximity** that produced a natural rhythm of bumping into one another.

One example is Anne, whose story we told in the "**We connect through**" section. She moved around the corner from her friend Ian for a 'sense of everydayness.' Their proximity made it easy to connect even if they hadn't made plans in advance.

Proximity wasn't always physical. Many people used technology to create **virtual** spaces like Arthur who used WhatsApp to create a virtual space (see pg. 72).

Finally, some containers, like large families or friend groups, included a particular individual or **anchor** who led the organising of semi-regular gatherings.

Tuesday swing class and dinner

A group of six friends saw each other as part of a broader group, but it wasn't until they started weekly dance lessons and dinner that they began to become closer friends.

Rather than go to a public class, they organised a few different couples and a teacher to come in for an hour each week for private dance lessons in one of their homes. After the lesson, everyone stayed on to make dinner, taking turns cooking each week.

They tried it for a month and enjoyed it enough to keep it up for over a year, until work took some of them overseas. The rhythm of the container came from the weekly paid booking with the instructor, but most of the intention and building of the friendships happened over the dinner after each lesson.

The dinner was a kind of 're-potting' (see pg. 60) into a space with a

bit more vulnerability and a bit less 'game face'. Over the dinner, people were more open with who they were and the rest of what was happening in their lives. Little by little, they built a shared structure of meaning and connection, from birthday celebrations, to providing support during the hospitalization of a family member, to celebrating an engagement of one of the couples.

Opportunities

How do we more commonly emphasize the social aspect of learning? How do we help people to commit to regular activities that allow for showing up as yourself and not just with your 'game face'?



Shared projects from restoring cars to political activism are great containers for deepening friendships.

Sustained containers for **deepening friendships**

Shared endeavour and “good oil”

Shared projects are one of the best ways to build connection. What do we have in the modern era to replace barn-raising and corn shucking?

For many people, working together on a shared project was a powerful way of establishing bonds of trust. Interviewee Fran spoke warmly of working with friends in the garden every Saturday and called the work “good oil” for the relationships.

For her, “good oil” seemed to stand for a container in which a shared project provided both air and rhythm for deepening a friendship.

For others, political engagement or social change projects provided the “good oil” that eased connections to new friends with shared values.

A couple of our older American interviewees talked about bygone days of their youth when they gathered with friends and neighbours during the harvest season to snap peas and shuck corn. These day-long

(and often late-night) work sessions brought people together from across the community, and (with the help of homemade liquor) were filled with plenty of jokes and good cheer.

More contemporarily in Australia, the traditions of volunteering for a Surf Life Saving group, Community Fire Service, or playing for a local cricket club provide good opportunities for shared endeavour.

Opportunities

How do we make more spaces in modern society for shared endeavour? How do we turn individual chores like yard work or spring cleaning into group activities? How do we encourage more group projects from serious political action to light-hearted projects like yarn-bombing a street?

Containers for keeping friendships

Rhythm as a person: the anchor

Barb creates the rhythm for her family; she organises gatherings, cares for people during tough times, and holds everyone together. We probably all know an anchor like Barb, and she's probably a woman.

One of the things we've witnessed again and again in our research is the power and importance of individuals like Barb in people's lives. These people carry out the often under-appreciated role of nurturing the relationships between the individuals in any community.

As is likely to align with our own experience, academic studies consistently indicate that women are more involved in maintaining family and community ties than men.* And as is also well-established, it's frequently an undervalued role.

When it comes to containers, these self-appointed facilitators often play a vital part in creating the rhythm for regular gatherings, in being the glue

that holds everyone together. If you're not that person in your community, you certainly know who they are.

Opportunities

Are there ways this role can be formalised and shared around in groups, in ways that avoid presuming that this role always falls to women? Or is there value in assigning the role to one person who is responsible for bringing people together on a regular basis? Can training be offered in being a great host and friendship facilitator? Or could we make opportunities to honour and appreciate the people who play the role of the anchor?

* Chris Segrin and Jeanne Flora, 2005, *Family Communication*



Containers for keeping friendships

Virtual rhythm

How do you create a sense of everydayness when your close people are spread all over the map?

Originally from India, Arthur grew up close to his cousins who are now scattered all over the world. He lives in Australia, some are still in India, some in Canada, and some in the US.

To keep in touch, they've started using WhatsApp, a messaging application. "We have a group," he says, "[where we send] motivational stuff. Self-help stuff. Books that I'm reading.

"Thanks to technology you kind of at least know they're alive, you know? And somebody's become a new dad or found a new girlfriend or got pregnant. And, 'Oh man, I'm going for a date. What should I wear?'

"This past week, one of our aunts passed away. So everybody's nostalgic: 'Oh yeah, she used to make these banana nut cakes and puddings,' and just talking about her."

That regular sharing of small news as well as the big milestones helps give Arthur that sense of "everydayness"

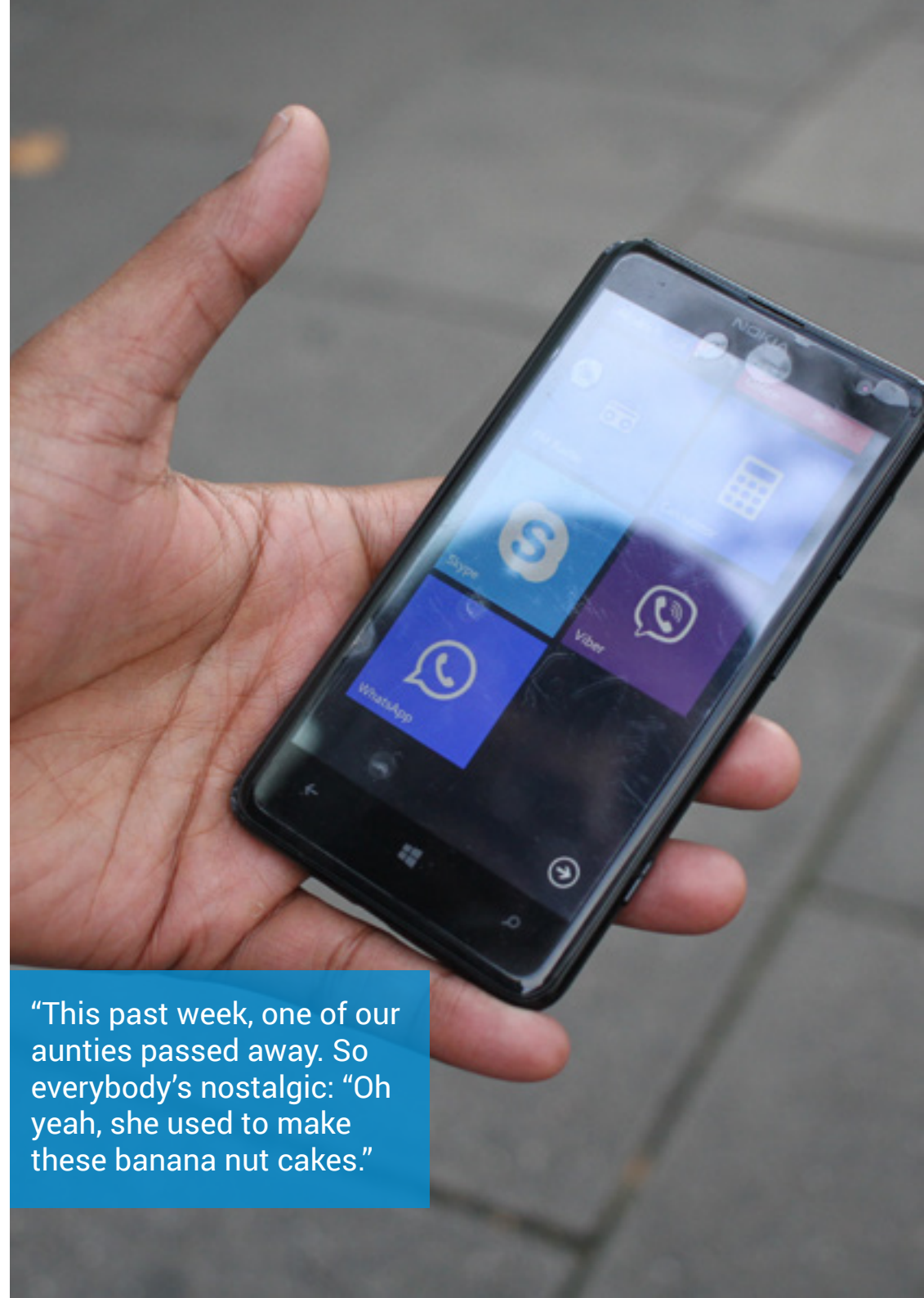
that people often told us helped make their friendships closer.

Arthur recently created another group for his brothers. "There's one saying, out of sight, out of mind. I knew this was going to happen. I didn't want this to happen to our family. So we do a (video) conference every weekend."

"I've got their confidence now, slowly. They used to think that this guy doesn't care about us... Now there's this bonding, I feel. We talk, and if they have a problem, I'm the first person they tell... it was not the case before."

Opportunities

We seek out a rhythm to our friendships that has an "everyday" quality to it; are there other ways that technology can help us feel like our close friends are present with us when they're far away? How about when they're just across town?



"This past week, one of our aunts passed away. So everybody's nostalgic: "Oh yeah, she used to make these banana nut cakes."

Containers for keeping friendships

Rhythm through proximity

Our living arrangements usually encourage fragmentation in our lives, but they could be one of the strongest containers for friendships.

Mick is part of an intentional community set up almost 40 years ago. Starting out as a large collection of friends with a common interest in exploring new ways of shared living, the community bought land and houses in the Adelaide Hills.

Over the years, the structure of the community has supported those close friendships and even strengthened the relationships of the couples themselves as they were 'held' within the larger community.

Opportunities

Many models of intentional community got their start out of feminism and post-structuralism in the 50s-70s, but then were written off by society as 'failed experiments.'

In fact, many less-radical versions of these models (like Mick's) remain successful, if seldom publicised. We wonder what the future of our living arrangements looks like with rising trends of co-housing, retiring baby boomers, values-driven housing developments, and the increasing popularity of tiny houses.

Today, all houses and cars are still owned collectively, and the commitment to the community is sustained, but not overwhelming; the community gets together for Thursday evening dinners and Saturday working bees. People in the community have their own professional lives—from a school principal, to a builder, to a university professor—but the interdependence of their day-to-day lives generates a regular rhythm to their interactions.

"What we were trying to get away from was that closed unit that was sort of unassailable," explains Mick.





40 years after singing it for the first time, Mick leads a round of "I'm looking for some long time friends" at his 60th birthday.

Hear the audio at
www.kitestring.org

Well I'm looking for some long time friends
I'm looking for some long-time friends
Life's a long & twisting road many curves & unseen
bands
So I'm looking for some long time friends.

Good friends tend to slip out of your reach
If you walk too tall & keep to straight a path
with your eyes so far ahead that you can't see by

So what?

your side
your long time friends.

There are women that I hold close to my heart
And men I hope will always be a part of my life
You've got to know each heart is real and each life

Why should we prioritise friendship?

I'm looking for some long-time friends

It may, not unreasonably, be argued that friendship is a rather 'privileged' issue to be worried about, or that at best it's an issue that should be relegated to a spot far down the list of society's priorities.

Collectively speaking, we have a lot of challenges to deal with right now—rising inequality, ecological crises, political polarisation, rising suicide rates, growing obesity, xenophobia, gendered violence. In the midst of this, why are we asking people to devote more of their limited attention to a 'minor' issue like friendship?

We find part of the answer in The Harvard Medical School Study of Adult Development, one of the longest-running studies of human lives. For the past 75 years, with hundreds of participants and generations of researchers, it has been investigating the factors that shape health and happiness. It is an extremely rare, extended investigation.

In 2015 the director Robert Waldinger said the clearest finding from their 75 years is this: "Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period."^{*}

He said the single best predictor of people's mental and physical wellbeing at 80 was the health of their friendships and partnerships at 50.^{*} Not cholesterol levels. Not exercise rates. Not even personal affluence. Connection.

~

Yet in the industrialized modern world, the time required to form these connections eludes us. Caught by competing demands on our time and energy, the rhythms of our day-to-day no longer necessarily produce the interactions that enable us to connect, and we can find our lives and relationships fragment easily.

As Robert Waldinger said, the people in their study who fared the best were the people who "leaned in to

^{*} Waldinger, Robert. "What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness." TED Talk. Nov. 2015. TED.com

relationships, with family, with friends, with community." Kitestring is about learning what it takes to help people intentionally do that 'leaning in,' and how to make it easier.

~

Investing in friendships adds richness to our lives and improves our health, but benefits extend beyond individual wellbeing to broader issues of social justice. As George Monbiot has written, "Reattachment holds the key to both our psychological and political transformation. Connected, engaged and happy people do not allow themselves to be trampled into the dirt. By talking together, we find our voice."^{*}

Let's be clear: we don't believe friendship and reconnection with one another are a silver bullet for social

^{*} George Monbiot, 2016, 'Without kindness, our society will fall apart,' The Guardian.

problems. The challenges facing us as a society and a species are wickedly complex and require sustained effort from many directions.

Friendship, especially close friendship, is foundational for personal and societal wellbeing.

However, friendship, and especially close friendship, is foundational. It underpins both our personal and our societal wellbeing. With a stronger sense of belonging comes greater strength to face local and global challenges with courage and creativity.

And in the quiet of every day, with each intentional act of friendship, we build a more connected and compassionate world.

What now?





Giving it a go

We've worked with government agencies, non-profits, co-housing initiatives and app developers to apply these insights. Here are a few ways to be involved in this work going forward.

1

Try it in your life

We've already started trying different things in our lives as a result of this research, and we hope you do as well. Robin held a neighbour day at his new house. A friend of ours successfully 're-potted' a friendship. If you try something, email us to let us know how it goes.

2

Collaborate with us on a project

Have an idea for a project or want to explore opportunities to collaborate? Get in touch!

ryan@hinterlandlab.com

3

Try it with your work

If this inspires some of your own work, either a big new project or a small tweak to an existing one, please go for it and let us know how it worked out. If you want help planning an effective prototype, we'd be more than happy to assist.

4

Extend the research

You may be a designer, academic, or student who wants to delve deeper into a particular area. We'd love to learn about your research and collaborate where we can.



About us

We started this work with our own histories of connection. Ryan began thinking more about friendship after years of moving, and Robin grew up in a small intentional community.

Ryan

I've moved a lot. I grew up in the Appalachian mountains in rural Kentucky. I moved to Alabama, then Tennessee, then Boston. I went from there to Rome, then London, and then Washington, D.C. I spent a year in Austin, then five years in Adelaide before moving most recently to rural Victoria near Melbourne, Australia.

I've had a range of experiences of friendship in these places: some close and abundant, others much less so.

Some of that was down to how I put myself out there, and some of it had to do with the context around me.

Professionally, I've focused for many years in design for social change: working with people caring for a loved one, individuals fighting for a home, and families trying to build better lives.

For me, Kitestring is about bringing my professional background in line with my personal interests, working on the vital questions around how to craft a good life in the modern era.

Robin

I grew up in a small community in the Adelaide Hills in Australia with four family homes sharing a common block of land. Thinking intentionally about close friendship and community has always been a big part of my life, but it's been especially important as I've moved away from the community.

For me, as a social change activist, Kitestring is also about finding solutions to the fear and anxiety produced by social alienation so we can face the challenges of the modern world with greater courage and compassion.

Hinterland Lab

Hinterland is a social lab and systems change consultancy. As a social lab, we launch large, collaborative projects focused on belonging. These include Kitestring and The Nature Festival.

We also consult with social enterprises, non-profits, and government agencies to help them deepen impact and shift systems.

The research detailed in this report was self-funded by Hinterland.



References & Further reading

Useful for Context

Bowling Alone by Robert Putnam and *The Lonely American* by J. Olds.

On connection and meaning

Vital engagement is explained clearly in chapter 10 of *Happiness Hypothesis* by Jonathan Haidt.

On trust and bids

See *The Relationship Cure* by John Gottman and www.gottman.com.

On vulnerability

Daring Greatly by Brené Brown.

Containers

William Doherty's *Intentional family* discusses rituals and structure in family life and friendships.

Many facilitative traditions use the metaphor of the container. See, for example, Ronald Heifetz's *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership* and Peter Senge et al.'s *Presence*.

Friendship across history

"Aristotle's Philosophy of Friendship" podcasts by Mark Vernon are a pleasant introduction to some of the oldest discussions of friendship.

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A photograph of a man and a woman smiling and laughing outdoors. The man is in the foreground, wearing a blue patterned shirt, and the woman is behind him, also smiling. The background is a bright, sunny outdoor setting.

Thanks

To friends old and new who
have helped have helped nurture
Kitestring in its early days.

- Ryan and Robin

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About

You know the people. The ones who have stuck around through thick and thin. You'd do anything for them, as they would for you. They're part of what makes life worth living.

Or maybe you don't. All of us have fewer of these people than we did twenty years ago, and 1 in 4 of us don't have any close connections at all.

We've changed as a society. We live in suburban developments. We move further and work more. We're more connected through new technologies, but forming weaker links than ever before.

But of course it doesn't have to be this way. We can use the same creativity and ingenuity that has changed our society to imagine new communities, services, and ideas to create deeper friendships and grow richer communities.

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