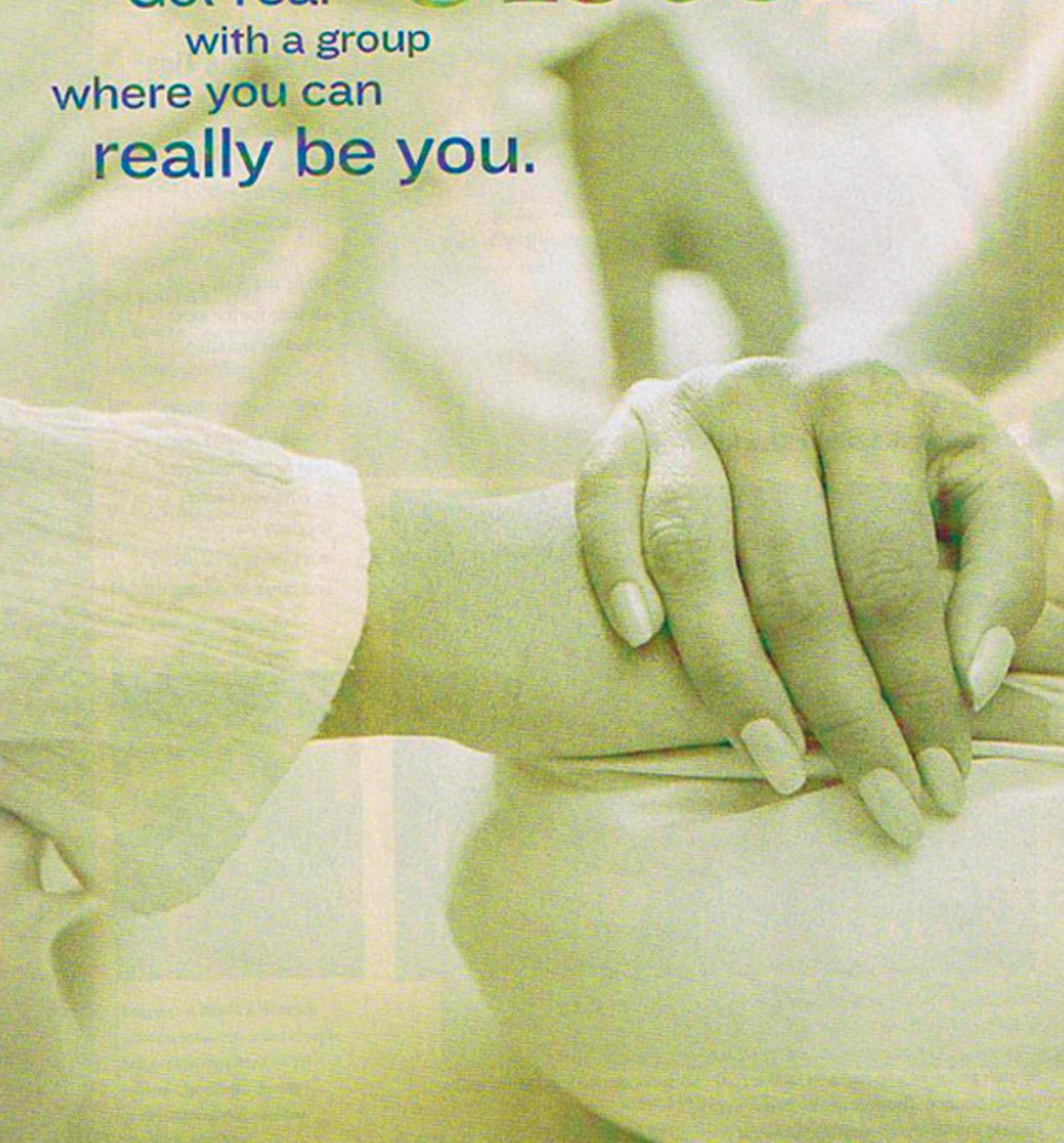


SoulSisters

Get real
with a group
where you can
really be you.





BY JANE RUBIETTA

The phone rang at 8:30 a.m. I glanced at my watch and grinned — caller ID confirmed my friend Suzie in Texas was keeping our phone appointment. I grabbed the cordless and my coffee cup. She and I make it a point to talk — really talk — a couple of times a month, and we e-mail every week. We fill in the blanks in our journeys, ask each other tough questions, and pray together. Sometimes we laugh; sometimes we cry. God always shows up and connects us, despite our geographic distance.

Friendship Lite | Most women have a collection of friends — from mother's group, church, the neighborhood. We exchange hellos, how-are-yous, and I'm-fines; offer a few innocuous details (kids are doing great in school, everything's good); and move on. Maybe we chat on the phone or complain with them. But most of the time we're surface-y, like water bugs that walk on the tops of ponds without getting wet. Our lives don't really impact each other.

These relationships are important. They provide spice and relieve a bit of loneliness. But they're friendship lite, and each of us, beneath the everything-is-fine facade, longs for more.

Soul Friends | God created us for deep, authentic, sustaining relationships — for soul friendships. A soul friend will connect deeply with you in matters of the heart and soul. This friend has permission to ask hard questions: "How's your marriage going? How are you growing closer to God in this trying situation?" This friend covenants to hear your past without condemnation, hold your dreams for the future carefully, and wait with you in the present.

A soul friend goes beyond a Bible study or prayer partner, though Scripture and prayer are part of what

you share. Deep soul friends commit to push you toward integrity when you're on the verge of fragmenting.

I've been in a covenant group with five other women for eight years. We have covenanted to journey together and to push one another closer to Christ. They nail me when they see me speaking one thing and living another. "You are in danger of becoming spiritually schizophrenic," they said to me once.

Knowing my writing and speaking frequently focus on rest and finding quiet places with God, they saw a disconnect between my soul and my lifestyle. I was speaking a lot (sometimes 15 times a month), writing furiously, and trying to be a wife and mother. My heart was splitting, and they refused to passively watch the fragmentation continue.

Going Deeper | A friend who knows your spirit has your number! She can provide stability and offer accountability. A soul friend goes deeper by learning your dreams and hopes, whether specific, like the dream to write I once shared hesitantly in a group, or broader hopes, like becoming a person God could use however He chooses. A soul friend offers accountability even in unspoken areas.

Suzie will call out what she believes is in my heart, even though I'm not living it at the moment. "I know you really want to be this kind of a woman, Jane, though you may not see it right now," she might say, reminding me where I want to head.

A soul friend sees past your messiness — the places where you blow it, the relationships that haven't worked, the mistakes you've made. She loves you in spite of yourself and is committed for the long haul.

Becoming More | A soul friend provides perspective. Because she can be more objective and because she knows you inside-out, this companion offers you the chance to live beyond the limits you might create for yourself.

When I might say with dread, "I just can't have that conversation with

so-and-so," a dear friend will say, "Of course you can. Let's role play." She'll help me look at my resistance or fear or exhaustion — whatever is blocking communication.

Growth is the common denominator between soul friends. A desire to grow more like Christ — to become more who He created us to be — motivates our lives and our friendships. A soul friend keeps us from giving up or caving in. She points us to the cross. After spending time with her, we want to be more like Jesus.

Biblical Soul Friends | God has a heart for soul friendships that reflect His nature. This alleviates some of the fear of vulnerability that goes with transparent friendships.

Scripture offers many models for soul friendships. Think of Ruth and

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JANE'S STORY

Eleven years ago, I voiced my longing to write. I attended a writers conference where they advised, "If you want to write, you need a critique group." I found four women in my area from that group, and we began meeting the next month. Our lives melded beautifully, and within a month we were telling our stories, learning each other's pasts, and praying for one another regularly.

We have kept each other writing and submitting, all the while praying together. We've gone through graduations, medical emergencies, weddings, problems in parenting, and professional dilemmas.

We're somewhere between the "Ya Ya Sisterhood" and the "Joy Luck Club" with a little "Fellowship of the Ring" thrown in. Along the way we coax out manuscripts. "You need to write that," we will say. Between us, we have 18 books and hundreds of articles published.

What I love about this group is not only the depth of the friendship, but the impact it has had on the world. Millions of readers have heard what Christ has done in our lives and what He longs to do in theirs. Not bad for a tiny group of women with a longing to be like Jesus, a passion to write, and a commitment to be together.

Naomi, Moses and Aaron, David and Nathan. Nathan loved David enough to refuse to allow him to let murder and adultery destroy him and his people. Paul had Barnabas, and Jesus had Peter, James, and John. Yes, even Jesus wanted friends to walk with Him as far as they could go. And so do we.

Sharing the Journey | Think back to childhood girlfriends. Remember the laugh fests, slumber parties, and secret telling? Maybe you also remember a friend spilling your secrets and the intense humiliation that followed.

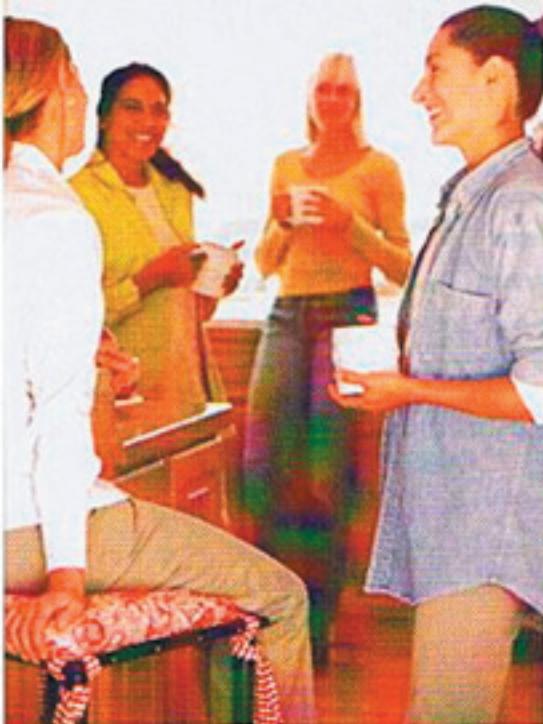
Feelings of betrayal stay with us; we remember what it's like when a trusted friend turns on us. These memories break our hearts. They also make it harder to take risks, even as adults. It's hard to expose our deepest secrets because the depth required to live a transparent life makes us vulnerable.

Sometimes we learn to distrust because someone in our family took advantage of us or abandoned us. If a girl had to assume the mother role in her home, virtually raising her siblings, she might struggle with mutual relationships as a woman.

But mutuality distinguishes a soul friendship from mentoring, where a more mature adult models Christianity to a less mature believer. Soul friends are not disciplers, teaching principles of spirituality to learners. Soul friends learn from one another by sharing life and their journeys. They are students in the same classroom of the heart.

Overcoming Distance | Transience can make it hard to establish and sustain deep friendships. In one Chicago suburb near me, people stay an average of only 18 months before moving on.

When we relocated to our current community, one of many moves during our marriage, I observed a woman who appeared to be emotionally mature, deeply spiritual, and funny. She, like I,



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was the mother of a small child, and I learned she shared my love for coffee. We chatted a few times, but one day I received a contract for my first book and had no local friend with whom to share my news. I looked up Ellen's number and called her. "Good news is so much better shared, so I'm calling you," I said, and thus began our deepening friendship. We remain close even though she has since moved.

Choosing to go deep quickly in a relationship, regardless of the possibility of another relocation, means taking a risk — but it's what keeps us joined at the heart with others. And this prohibits isolation or loneliness from crouching at our door.

Making Time | Perhaps the biggest barrier to soul friendships is our infernal busyness. Deep friendships require time. Yet, responsibilities run most of us ragged, like too little butter spread over too much bread.

When I was once new to a committee, the chairperson left me a message: "I haven't had a chance to get to know you and would love to meet for coffee." To this day, I'm embarrassed my first thought was, *I don't have time.*

How do we beat the busyness excuse? We have to listen to the message underlying our addiction to

HOW TO START A COVENANT GROUP

- Ask God to show you women of varying ages who love Jesus and with whom you get along well.
- Look for women who display vulnerability and self-awareness, move quickly to repentance, admit when they're wrong, and ask for and offer forgiveness. These women are emotionally and spiritually mature and have a deep, growing relationship with Christ.
- Don't include women who talk about others (you can assume they will talk about you) or who refuse to talk about their own pain or joy.
- Invite a small group of women (six or fewer) together to consider the possibility of forming a monthly covenant group, to deepen your lives with God and one another.
- Establish guidelines for the group: transparency; confidentiality; unconditional acceptance; commitment both to calling one another forward and to the longevity of the group (ours is a life-long commitment, but some ask for six months or a year); accountability; and willingness to ask wise questions, not just offer advice.
- The fewer details, the better. My group often just drinks water. That way the hostess has few responsibilities and can focus on the group.
- The time opens with each person sharing where she is spiritually, emotionally, and relationally. Pray for one another — specifically and sincerely.
- Try to keep the sharing to about 30 minutes each; timekeepers aren't necessary, but everyone needs a chance to process her journey.
- Set regular dates. Meet the second Tuesday each month, for instance. Regularity is crucial for the group to become a covenant of accountability and growth.

busyness: it is, at its core, a longing for love and acceptance. "What a man desires is unfailing love," asserts Proverbs 19:22. Most of our dysfunction — and living in a chronically busy state is dysfunctional — is rooted in that longing.

We invite God to help us streamline our lives and to identify a few people (even one person) who might be open to a soul friendship, one that will provide unfailing love. And we begin to seek.

Sustaining Life | Soul friends need to connect regularly. I'm not talking hours together every week, just minutes. Those minutes, however, are expanded and multiplied by fast vulnerability, authenticity, good questions, and God's presence.

With technology, location is less important than availability. I use my free long-distance cellular minutes to stay current with soul friends spread

across the United States. E-mail keeps me in touch with my local covenant group between meetings.

To sustain the life of soul friendships, we must move from facts and opinions and reports to matters of the heart: ours before God and His for us. When we connect at this heart level, discomfort or fear is replaced by the steady knowledge of being loved, honored, and accepted.

Soul friendships are marked by a gamut of emotions — from laughter and joy to tears and pain. They produce an ever-deepening love for Christ and have a transforming effect on others. If soul friendships are working, the lives of people around us will be changed. And that is worth every minute of time we invest.

Anyone want to love Jesus over a good cup of coffee?

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