9 Old Friends

Reimagining Care Relations Through Helen Garner's *The Spare Room*

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Introduction

Long before a global pandemic made the social isolation that follows from physical distancing a widespread concern, myriad research funding calls, most age-friendly discourse, and much of social gerontology had been raising a clarion call about the accelerating risks of social isolation. Along with such calls, heartwarming human-interest stories would appear in the popular press, often featuring students treating a nursing home as their dorm, women collectively creating their ideal late-life housing settlement, friendly visitors going door to door to check on older adults, and buses arranged to take older adults to do their shopping, offering the side benefit of social connection. I refer to these as *curated friendships* which offer a seeming solution to a problem that goes far beyond a lack of companionship, often to a lack of adequate care support for people who need it. Of course, these curated friendships are less possible when in-person contact causes grave danger. The pandemic has amplified how these programmes individually promise important social connections to otherwise lonely older people, but a collective reliance upon them is worrying. Not only do such stopgap approaches push longer lasting and more genuine friendships into the shadows, they also fail to recognise, let alone address, the broader structural problems that were already contributing to the social isolation of many older adults, even prior to COVID-19.

A humanities-based focus on meaning-making separate from stark use-value provides a much-needed vantage point from which to offer a hopeful yet sobering vision of late-life friendship rife with possibilities for creativity and empathy, particularly when care is involved. I argue in this chapter that questioning the social practices and cultural politics of friendship through fictional analysis exposes productive tensions and complicated connections at the heart of care relationships, opening up new ways of addressing social isolation as well as loneliness. I draw on team-based ethnographic research conducted to find practices¹ that hold the promise to expand or even move beyond age-friendly to what we call

age equity. Findings from the Imagine Aging team's fieldwork in Toronto at organisations that serve so-called marginalised older adults provide context for my analysis of Helen Garner's 2008 Australian novel *The Spare Room*. I turn to that novel as an example of how fiction that centres friendship can broaden what we imagine to be possible within social relations and can portray multiple perspectives simultaneously. My reading of the novel exposes how friendship can illuminate as much as it can assuage loneliness, especially during acute illness. Caring for a friend can be isolating too, so friendship is not an antidote to the slippery combination of loneliness and social isolation, no matter what other benefits it yields.

Noting the implications of aforementioned curated friendships, such as through paid companions hired by family members to visit their loved ones in long-term care, dementia "friend" programmes, and "friendly" visitors that organisations arrange for those they deem to be dangerously lonely, I concentrate on how "friendly" terminology, such as the dead metaphor behind the age-friendly movement,² feeds on the significance of genuine, voluntary social connections; on how real friendships shift, develop, deepen and weaken with age, especially when care is needed or desired; and on what literature and film have to tell us about both.

Why Friendship?

By friendship, I invoke a Western conception entailing *voluntary* social connections outside family and romance, based on mutual affection, interests, values, trust, and respect.

Of course, I am far from the first person to consider the role of friendship throughout the life course, in old age, or in relation to care. Indeed, the ethic of care was pushed forward because of feminist philosophical considerations of the friend relationship, such as Carol Gilligan's analysis of 11-year-old friends in *In a Different Voice* (6–9) and Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson's discussion of friend carers in "Circles of Care: An Introductory Essay" (11). Though they do not explicitly mention it, they appear to share influences with feminist literary theory, especially the renowned exchange between Elizabeth Abel and Judith Kegan Gardiner.

Elizabeth Abel and Gardiner explore the reciprocity within female–female friendships as a way to articulate what literature does in the world as well as how readers are positioned. Their conversation, published in *Signs* in 1981, offers an exchange in which Elizabeth Abel, who focuses on how the literary imagination shapes women's friendships (413), argues that

female bonding exemplifies a mode of relational self-definition whose increasing prominence is evident in the revival of psychoanalytic interest in object-relations theory and in the dynamics of transference

and countertransference, as well as in the growth of literary emphasis on theories of influence and intertextuality.

(414)

She concludes by claiming that studying female friendship reveals “the sketchy pattern of the intersubjectivity that permeates the framework of recent humanistic inquiry” (435). Gardiner challenges Elizabeth Abel to think of commonality and complementarity within female friendships as fluid processes (436), a point with which Elizabeth Abel agrees. Gardiner suggests an interpretation that attends more closely to the fictionality of the novels studied so as to “understand the meaning the authors give to the social contexts within which the women’s identities are formed” (442). The exchange between these two scholars not only illuminates the reciprocity of friendship, but also demonstrates that the approach to a literary text affects how it might contribute to understanding social relations.

My own approach benefits from existing theoretical work that idealises friendship as a model for a broader social and political world, such as Jacques Derrida’s connection between friendship, democracy, and the future, upon which Leela Gandhi builds to develop an anti-imperialist theory of transnational collaboration, and Michel Foucault’s contemplation of male–male non-sexual relationships as harbouring the potential to challenge social norms. However, like Elizabeth Abel and Gardiner, I situate my work in a feminist tradition that considers friendship a means to make up for the limits of existing social and institutional relations, rather than as a figure for broader social and political structures. I remain attentive to the potential for literary fiction to add to our understanding of the social context that bears upon friendship. Like Gardiner, I want to go beyond considering the figurative resonances of friendship. I am most interested in safeguarding lived friendship from cooptation into a system that cannot properly allow it to thrive, and I aim to do so by exploring what literary fiction has to offer that process.

When Friends Care

The friendships I am considering – in literary depictions, film, popular media, and empirical research – emerge because of a combination of similarities and differences tied to often-serendipitous circumstances that allow for mutual learning that can be transformative. As Marilyn Friedman puts it: “No particular people are assigned by custom or tradition to be a person’s friends” (208). Comparing friendship to reading novels, biographies, and autobiographies, Friedman demonstrates how narrative contributes to the potential positive outcomes of friendship when she argues that by listening to our chosen friends’ differing life stories that

come from disparate moral vantage points, we open ourselves to potential moral change that could lead to broader social change (199–206).

But *care* changes and is changed by friendship. Emily Abel and Nelson pose a pivotal question: “Because friendships are established voluntarily and are anchored in equality, are they more likely to provide the basis for reciprocal care?” (11). Friedman argues, “In countless ways, from the trivial to the monumental, friendship invites us to marshal the greater part of the scarce resources of our care, attentiveness, and trust in the selective support of our friends, even though other human beings have similar needs or qualities” (190). Because friendship differs based on the individuals in the relationship, arguably making no two friendships alike, it pushes care beyond repetitive, mundane task-based care work: “a friend is supposed to show not simply the mechanical features of caring behaviour but positive concern as well; not simply the techniques of loyalty but also personal commitment” (214). Indeed, as Friedman argues, “to fail to provide the care, assistance, or support needed by a friend is to fail to be a genuine friend, a friend indeed” (216). Nonetheless, when it comes to what she refers to as “dependent children, elderly persons, and all other individuals whose lives and well-being are at great risk,” Friedman insists on the need for “social relationships whose other members do not or cannot choose arbitrarily to leave” (254). Friedman thereby expresses that the voluntary and variable nature of friendship means that family members are better suited to care when it involves intimate physical work. To her, friends require a caring affect but, for the grittier and enduring care work, friends remain Friedman’s alternative.

For a significant minority, friends are *not* the alternative but rather the obvious option, even for late-life care work. With this in mind, Sasha Roseneil draws on queer theory to centre friendship. She argues that, in fact, social science research should “care about friends” because of “the importance of thinking beyond the conjugal imaginary,” not only for queer seniors but for all (411). She brings together affect with care work, arguing, “If we take friendship seriously we will have to confront the question of how care may be given and received by equals, without violating individual autonomy, without self-sacrifice and subservience, and maintaining the affection which constitutes the relationship” (414). Friendship, for Roseneil as for Emily Abel and Nelson, has the potential to allow for reciprocity rather than the unequal relations that often proliferate in familial caring. For Roseneil, friendship is both everyday life and a broader model for care relationships as it can tackle the thorny desire for autonomy in community. Centring friends, Roseneil argues, offers a way to reassert autonomy without losing connection.

Friendship shifts everyday practices of care, especially as older adults increasingly turn to friends for practical support (Roseneil; La Pierre and Keating). In their chapter “Towards a Feminist Theory of Caring,” Berenice Fisher and Joan Tronto elaborate on how the equality and choice that

characterise friendship pose challenges to considering the parts of care that hinder choice and are not based on mutual advantage. I build on these feminist approaches to friendship to contend that much of what makes care among friends desirable also risks cooptation in an era of austerity. The austerity-driven process of devolution, whereby responsibility to care is downloaded onto the individual, as Wendy Brown aptly argues, is profoundly and deliberately isolating: “neoliberal practices of devolution and responsabilization produce a structure of isolation, weakness and sacrifice in the figure of the putatively democratic citizen” (4). While many people are then pushed to rely on family members for care that could have been provided through a well-funded, supportive social system, those without the appropriate family connections must turn to others. It is this reliance on informal social connections that risks cooptation in an austerity framework, since funding for adequate care is threatened by austerity’s scarcity approach. Friends, rather than being the alternative as Friedman implies, become part of the essential care structure for many older adults separated from expected family structures. And when friends care, the state ostensibly doesn’t have to.

Keeping in mind Roseneil’s ideal that the equality that underpins friendship also mitigates the self-sacrifice and subservience that can occur in care relationships, I consider how the “discretionary, and perhaps unreliable” nature of friend and neighbour relationships emphasised by Tracey La Pierre and Norah Keating, for example, could be advantageous when friend relationships are *not* set up as simply replacing familial and institutional care relationships (1443). Their very difference from those relationships offers the opportunity to expose and hopefully change care relations. What is more, fictional accounts of friendship and care can generate ambiguity and embrace contradictions while imaginatively offering a way to perceive another way of being. As such, they hold the potential to challenge the conjugal imaginary without replacing assumptions about familial care with similarly troublesome assumptions about friend care. Thus, turning to a literary example offers me a new way to theorise relations in the “care economy.”³ In this chapter (and hopefully beyond), I want to make friendship matter without making it count, or be counted.

Bill Is No Golden Girl

Roseneil’s hopeful vision of mutual equals joining forces to create new bonds in late life has enormous popular appeal to an extent that risks removing its more radical potential. For example, news media adores the notion that women who outlive men might address the economic and social crises supposedly created by an ageing population through a creative return to the communality of the dorm room. They dub such arrangements and groups “Golden Girls,” indicating widespread recognition of

popular culture's influence. For example, a December 2018 Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) piece portrays three white "baby boomers and long-time friends," two widowed and one divorced, who have pooled their considerable resources since their offspring have grown up and moved away (Roussy n.p.). Though they talk about the specific benefits of the companionship they receive, they mostly value the independence it allows them, and yet the story emphasises the communality of their situation.

The CBC piece relies on an assumption that living together is preferable to living alone because it returns people to a seemingly more natural state of community. The story outlines the pragmatism of the arrangement, together with the oft-cited loneliness that it seemingly remedies. Indeed, "Golden Girl" Phyllis Bradley summarises the women's motivations in seemingly ranked order: economy, safety, and companionship. Importantly, none of these "old friends" have serious care needs, so the "sacrifice" that Wendy Brown situates in the putative democratic citizen turns into an accounting of possessions they have *chosen* to relinquish. An array of similar media articles displays similarly relatively well and well-off white women who decide to travel "down the road and back again"⁴ together. There is also great media interest in mutually beneficial intergenerational housing solutions wherein students in search of housing bunk in with seniors who need a few chores done around the house or some company, but mixed income and cross-cultural arrangements have not yet entered this popular discourse.⁵

The collaborative, international, interdisciplinary research team I am part of, colloquially titled "Imagine Aging," seeks to understand the experiences and needs of people missing from these dominant stories of late-life communal living. As part of our catalytic ethnographic method, we produce what we call digital cues – short videos drawn from interview transcripts to illustrate central issues and ideas. Our original plan was to take the videos from one city to the next, as we travelled to 12 cities in 6 countries to conduct fieldwork (we are working on a COVID-19-adjusted alternative plan). These videos help to share our research findings, but they also help us to reach out to interested participants and to think through our collective ideas and findings. Most importantly, they are essential to the catalytic validity of our research, which seeks to change the conversations about and practices of age-friendliness to focus on and create age equity and hopefully age justice.

From our first site, the Canadian city of Toronto, the team created a digital cue, "Less Lonely,"⁶ based on interviews with Bill and his friend Rupert (names changed to preserve anonymity) (Braedley, *Less*). Bill's story offers a vital counterpoint to the CBC's Golden Girls story. Bill is poor, gay, and lonely. He cannot be a Golden Girl – not because of gender, but because his friends are dead, and were they alive they would not have the resources, even collectively. A local organisation focussed

on the needs of queer seniors (the organisation cannot be named due to Research Ethics approval) intervened through a programme that provided a “friend” to Bill, in this case very successfully. The key to that success goes beyond ticking a box affirming that Bill receives weekly visits or phone calls, somehow measurably reducing his presumably immeasurable isolation. As the video explains, Rupert and Bill connect because of shared interests, in art especially, and being willing to develop new interests together, such as Rupert learning about architecture from Bill. Rupert is helping Bill, yes, but there is an unquestionable mutuality as well as commonality that transcends the complementarity brought on by the generational difference,⁷ made more poignant by the HIV crisis Bill survived when so many of his friends did not. The story became even more resonant during COVID-19, as so many other people who weren’t directly affected by AIDS discovered the devastating effects of a global pandemic. Lest we forget, COVID-19 was not the first time some people have experienced the isolation, the loss, the fear, and the stigma that come with mysterious contagion.

Certainly, Bill’s story showcases how important meaningful social connections, including friendships, are to the people our team wants age-friendly resources to better support. At the same time, curated friendships – such as those offered through programming – risk misuse under austerity because they can so easily become the target of responsabilisation whereby the individual becomes responsible for arranging care and turns to friends when family don’t suffice. This heartening individual story shows the enormous promise of these programmes, but the connection between Bill and Rupert doesn’t solve the broader problems Bill has faced, problems that led to him being isolated and lonely, having had most of his friends die. As such, the curated friendship between Bill and Rupert, one that appears to have blossomed into a deeper and truer friendship, is – on the part of the organisation – a helpful individualised intervention that still cannot address the devastating sociocultural context as well as personal circumstances that led to Bill needing a new friend late in life.

The video stories of the CBC Golden Girls and of Bill and Rupert illustrate the growing trend to manipulate and even fabricate friendship as a way to offer older adults what they do not find within the structures currently set up to support them. They both lean on what is becoming a popular refrain about the dangers of loneliness to offer encouraging suggestions about ways to alleviate it frugally. They show there is much promise in this approach. To be clear, I am happy these people have found each other, moved by how significant a very simple social connection can be, and want to support the programmes that allow such friendships to develop. I also sincerely hope people in similar situations found ways to connect during COVID-19. But I worry about the interlocking factors that make such programmes necessary and even normative, as

well as what essential elements of friendship – its changeability and flexibility especially – these examples miss while still relying on uncomfortable happenstance. I especially worry that they do little to edge out the unreliable default reliance on family for which these curated friendships always only compensate.

The Spare Room

Narrative fiction invites deeper, multifaceted ways of thinking and feeling about late-life friends, loneliness, and isolation in context than these video vignettes can offer. Helen Garner's novel *The Spare Room* offers a compelling example of the role, obligations, and limits of friends who want to care and who have the means to drop their other obligations to do so. Alternately criticised and praised for its spare prose, with the pun usually intended, the novel offers an almost journalistic account of a semi-autobiographical experience (Dessaix; Coslovich; Carr). Garner paints a portrait of 65-year-old Nicola, who, having exhausted other treatment options for stage-four bowel cancer, arrives from Sydney to stay in her 63-year-old friend Helen's spare room in Melbourne while she undergoes costly alternative therapy at the dubious Theodore Institute. The ensuing narrative exposes how a friend relationship is permissive, in that a friend can support someone making daring care decisions without the personal consequences that might fall on a family member with genetic links and legal duties. But it also draws sharp attention to how a friend, though she is free to be more openly critical as well as to walk away, lacks the power to intervene officially when choices turn out to cause harm. This is a thorny autonomy, limited by the prevailing social prioritisation of the family and familial links for care.

The novel rides waves of alternating tenderness and rage tempered by fear, offering the relatively rare perspective of a fictionalised caregiver but, in this case, one who can choose to walk away with relative impunity, having already done more than anyone would ask of someone unpaid and outside the family. Host-cum-carer Helen boils with anger and resentment at the shoddy establishment ripping her friend off while offering devastatingly false hope. But she also rages at Nicola for her ever-present, maddening grin and refusal to face surely looming death. Feeling trapped after just three weeks, Helen lashes out to express her frustration and pushes Nicola to acknowledge death, neither of which (being so frank nor acknowledging death) Nicola's niece in Sydney has managed. For a time, Helen eases her anger by intervening to take Nicola to a conventional doctor: "What was all this anger? I needed to be kinder to her. Dying was frightening. But it was easier to imagine being tender when I had a packet of slow-release morphine capsules in my bag" (74). The tenderness peaks when Helen refutes Nicola's worries about a wasted life by offering a list of Nicola's accomplishments and contributions, from

her grudge-free character through her generosity to the way she makes people feel free (143–144). But when Nicola tries to stay even longer, this time to pursue now-essential surgery, Helen finally explodes saying “Will you fucking listen to me? . . . I. Can’t. Do it” (183).

Having cancelled all work and personal obligations for what was to be Nicola’s three-week stay, Helen is nonetheless surprised to find herself cleaning sheets, mopping up sweat, and cuddling with Nicola to warm her up. In her extended review of the novel, Martha Holstein draws attention to the extraordinariness of the situation, asking, “What are we to do if we find ourselves in Helen’s position? I don’t know. I have watched friends die. I have tried to be attentive, but I’ve never had to clean up after them or take them to the bathroom” (459). Though Helen had not anticipated this shift from hospitable pillow fluffing to intimate care work, the menial work is not what angers or exhausts her. As she puts it, “This was the part I liked, straightforward tasks of love and order that I could perform with ease” (48). But she cannot (but must) abide sharing in the self-deception about the charlatan treatment regime, what she calls “the sick air of falsehood” (59). Her anger arises from the emotional work of playing along and then later, contradictorily, having to be the one to refuse to play along with the “cloudy hope” Nicola seeks at the Theodore Institute (93).

The novel’s retrospective last lines “It was the end of my watch, and I handed her over” (195) signal Helen’s refusal to remain centrally responsible for Nicola’s care. They thus expose the broader network involved in friend-based care as well as the limitations of friend-based care, leading to the need to acknowledge the multiple but limited roles that friends can play. As Bernadette Brennan explains, “Nicola is a bohemian and part of the bohemian ethos . . . involved forming new configurations of family among friends and lovers. Helen’s care for Nicola affirms the legitimacy of those youthful aspirations. *But only to a point*” (242; my emphasis). Helen’s fortitude comes from knowing this period will end and that there are others to take her place:

I was her friend, yes, and I loved her, but I was a recent friend: I had known her for only fifteen years. Surely her dearest, her oldest friends were Sydney people. In a couple of days, when her three weeks with me were over, she would fly home to them, and to her family: they would take over, and I would go back to my role as *darling Hel in Melbourne*, the practical type with a handy authoritarian streak, who had work to do and a ticket to Vienna in December.

(162; original emphasis)

Once Helen makes clear her hospitality will run out, Nicola imagines “dozens of darling old school friends who live in Melbourne” who will “take [her] into their homes with all their hearts” (184). Nicola instead

has to fly friends from Sydney to Melbourne to assist during the surgery, after which she returns to Sydney to be cared for by friends and family, including Helen at times. Though Helen ends her solo watch, she still subsequently “[learns] to wash [Nicola’s] arse as gently as [she] had washed [her] sister’s and [her] mother’s, and as someday someone will have to wash [hers]” (191). The collective strength of Nicola’s friend network enables Helen to both exit care and yet continue to participate in even the grittiest of care work, while staying free from the obligation she faced when Nicola was staying in her home, away from her other sources of support.

The Spare Room promisingly tells the story of a person outside the “conjugal imaginary” drawing on a circle of friends to create the care an ill woman desires at the end of life. It offers a decidedly middle-class fantasy wherein a terminally ill older woman can travel about Australia to pursue varied treatment options with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of friends who themselves have time and means to assist and even do care work. Helen represents a freedom not often available to family caregivers, since she is able to walk away, but the velocity with which she reaches a breaking point also emphasises how the intricate demands of care compromise friendship.

The human connection represented by this central friendship initially appears to resist inhumane care structures. Nicola bumps up against a callous medical system that, though it offers pretty remarkable two-tiered care of which she appears able to afford the top tier, refuses to offer her the hope and caring affect she desires. When it turns out that the appalling Theodore Institute also couldn’t care less, that too is left to her furious friend to deal with. But the support of one friend as replacement for the family assumed to be responsible for care is of course insufficient. During Nicola’s brief stay, she and Helen are wedged into an isolated dyad, with Helen cut off from her infectious flu-ridden family who lives next door, reaching desperately out to other friends for advice and support. The shift from a limited view of Helen and Nicola to the broader view of Nicola cared for by a range of friends demonstrates how friendship’s changeability is not its weakness but rather its strength. Nicola’s bevy of other friends becomes essential to understanding how utterly different friends can be from family as well as to exposing the ironic inhumanity of how care works, or doesn’t. They are, in essence, a renewable resource, which is promising, and yet that renewability contributes to my concern that friendship is especially vulnerable to cooptation by a neoliberal system.

Beyond its roots in lived experience, *The Spare Room*’s fictionality disallows the societally unnoticed reduction of friendship to a function that solves a social problem, revealing instead the possibilities and impossibilities of relying on friends for care and the limits of considering friends to be a cure for social isolation. As mentioned earlier, in their

classic 1981 *Signs* debate, Gardiner pushes Abel's psychoanalytic reading of commonality over complementarity in female-female friendships depicted in literature further by emphasising the role of fictionality which helps illuminate social context (442). Indeed, as my analysis shows, the invention of fictive friendships can evoke contexts such as the relative wealth required to access top-notch medical care. Such friendships can illuminate how such access does not render anyone immune to the hope, fear, and anger that accompanies many diagnoses and realities of terminal illness. Their depiction can also uphold in a generative tension the conflicting perspectives of Helen and Nicola, not to mention the conflicting perspectives within Helen alone.

Helen and Nicola's fictional friendship offers a way to imagine beyond, without rejecting, dyadic care relations that trap caregivers and care receivers alike in their narrow perspective on who does the work of care and of what care work comprises. But it also disallows the simple replacement of family with friends. Garner's novel demonstrates the potential for deliberately imagined real, true, and old friends to mitigate the possible harm embedded in considering curated friendships to be a solution for social isolation of seniors. It perhaps offers a means to resist the devolution of responsibility for care to the individual via the family. The very fallibility of Helen's care turns out to be its strength. Her refusal offers a way not out of but into the care that Nicola needs and desires.

Conclusion

The current research and policy focus on social isolation obliges cultural scholars to push the conversation beyond finding friends for poor old people or coming up with cute interim solutions that emulate dorm life. COVID-19 made doing so all the more urgent. Rupert, Bill, and the real-life Golden Girls develop friendships that nonetheless expose shortcomings in the care and broader social systems while revealing the contextual determinants of both loneliness and social isolation. Similar to fiction, their stories offer viewers a "what if" scenario that allows them to imagine solutions to problems associated with population ageing. Indeed, they each seem to offer uplifting solutions. But the need for these fabricated connections speaks to the scarcities that make population ageing a potential problem, especially an undesirable long-term care system. More deliberately imaginative fictional friendships, such as that of Helen and Nicola, help to expose the shortcomings of contemporary curated friendships, which tend to be dyadic, by showing the tenacity and long-term commitment required to do the grittier work of care, best taken on by a broader network of people. I especially don't want already overburdened and under-supported service providers put in the position of counting or tracking friends, let alone finding them, when what they need is better funding. As Garner demonstrates, the trouble with and the beauty of

friendship is its changeability, its ineffability, its individuality, and not its seeming affordability nor seeming capacity to solve simplified problems.

The disproportionate effects of COVID-19 on older adults have meant they faced even greater (and understandable) pressure to socially distance, shield, shelter-in-place, physically distance, and/or self-isolate as well as considerable pressures to find ways to be “Together, Apart,” in other words, to find social connection without physical proximity. Opportunistic approaches to alleviating the perceived demographic burden become even more threatening, and the role of genuine friendship even more elusive. The time is thus riper than ever to draw on what humanities scholars know about friendship to emphasise “what friends are [and are not] for” in late life, especially in care situations, to play on Marilyn Friedman’s book title. Although social bubbles or circles or cohorts became a way of understanding primary social connections in some jurisdictions during COVID-19, they typically referred to the ability to extend one’s physical contacts to include extended family or to join two families together. The dominant emphasis throughout the pandemic was, as ever, on the role of families rather than on broader understandings of the way in which humans need to relate in order to thrive, well beyond the conjugal imaginary. It remains up to humanities scholars to ask and answer: who or what do we leave out when we fail to take true friends seriously?

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Notes

1. The terminology “promising practices” is meant to build on but also resist the more corporate “best practices” that disallows a thorough consideration of context.
2. In my article “‘With Friends Like These’: Unpacking Panicked Metaphors for Population Ageing,” I build on the argument of Amanda Barusch that we need a new metaphor for population ageing to explore how the seemingly benign metaphor of the “friend” as a way to make environments suitable for growing older in – that is, the metaphor that undergirds the age-friendly movement – is

at once a pleasant counterpoint to the odious metaphor of the silver tsunami and a misnomer that props up the neoliberal focus on activity that drives the WHO's age-friendly movement. Although "age-friendly" connotes a pleasant response to an ageing population, it is decidedly an aspect of friendliness – the politesse of the service industry, for example – rather than friendship based on meaningful relationships.

3. Amid circulating usages, Susan Braedley helpfully describes the care economy "as the constellation of social relations through which care needs and wants are met, including market, household, familial, community and state actors" ("Pulling" 265).
4. This is a line in the opening theme song to the popular television show *The Golden Girls* (Harris; 1985–1992).
5. One such program in Toronto (set to expand beyond to include other Ontario cities) can be explored here: www.torontohomeshare.com/.
6. The digital cue can be viewed here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YuTiAOZj1wg and here: <https://imagine-aging.ca/digital-stories/>.
7. We do not collect demographic information in our interviews, but it is safe to assume there are about 30 years separating Bill and Rupert in age.

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