

YOUR LIFE

Once a year, it's just us

Gal-only trips can help keep life sane

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For the Monitor

Sometimes it needs to be just the girls. For me and for lots of other women, there is an antidote to life's craziness. It's girl time. Yes, we love our significant others, we adore our children, we may even enjoy our jobs and household projects, but there is nothing, nothing, like a get-away with the girls.

Women friends boost us up, listen sympathetically and renew something primal within us. No wonder regular get-aways with women friends are held inviolate by those who've developed this tradition. Even in times of economic stress and impossibly chaotic schedules, women who have a tradition of going away with the girls won't let that practice slide.

My own tradition started

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My own tradition started seven years ago, by accident. At the time I had an 82-year-old aunt living in Lancaster County, Pa. I had not seen Aunt

Lucille in several decades, and our only contact was through annual Christmas cards. The separation nagged at me, so one day I sat down and scouted plane fares online. Discovering a roundtrip ticket for an impossibly low price, I e-mailed my sister in Ohio and asked, “Want to go see Aunt Lu with me?”

“Great idea!” she responded.

We were launched.

Two other family members soon asked to join us: Aunt Lucille’s daughters, whom I hadn’t seen in decades. Because they are 13 and 10 years older than I am and grew up 400 miles away, I had little childhood interaction with them. I remembered them as being full of life and a bit exotic: well-traveled, adventurous and worldly about things I didn’t begin to understand.

I had no idea what to expect. I had only a vague idea what my cousins had done since I had last seen them, or what they were like. My best guess was that we would have a tolerable family gathering, each of us polite and reserved. We would bring each other up to date on our lives, reminisce about the limited times we were together as children, and then be on our way.

What ensued was entirely different. In that one weekend in July 2002 I reconnected with my aunt, and my cousins became dear friends. We latched onto commonalities and probed differences, we found a bond in our world views, we rehashed memories, delightful and otherwise, of family members living and deceased. We noted personality differences, my sister and younger cousin being irrepressible extroverts, my older cousin and I melting into the wallpaper whenever possible. We realized with surprise that our shared religious and cultural heritage – Swiss Mennonite – formed a surprising bond, though none of us has any ties to a Mennonite church. We spent time deliberating life’s biggest challenges (caring for dependents, finding a job with meaning, making a difference in the world) and life’s little hassles (finding the perfect handbag, having to cook, needing glasses to read).

We discussed being brought up in homes where music was central, and we determined that the four of us would form a musical ensemble, no rehearsals required, thank you.

We would take our individual amateur skills and make a quartet of violin, flute, piano and, uh, audience. In Getaway Year II we did just that, sight-reading badly and laughing uproariously. Now our ensemble is a much-anticipated part of our getaways. While we are not likely

destined for any concert halls, we would challenge anyone to have as much fun as we do.

One other critical determination we made that first year: Annual getaways were imperative. It was just too much fun and already felt too fundamental to our lives to let it be a singular event.

Since then our girls' getaway has bounced from place to place. We each take turns being hostess in our respective states (my aunt died in 2004, so Lancaster County no longer had that draw). Together we have toured the Ohio town where our moms grew up, we have hiked and kayaked in New Hampshire, we have taken in the sights of New York City, and this summer, on our second trip to New York, we splurged for a Broadway show and rode a horse-drawn carriage through Central Park.

All these activities created great memories, but as any woman who takes an annual girls' getaway knows, that's not why we get together. Location is only incidental; the four of us would have fun in a dungeon. We get together because we give to each other and take from each other something that we don't get in our everyday lives. A weekend of just good friends – just girls – helps us put our lives in perspective, grounds us, and makes us once again thankful for lifelong, female friends.