

A photograph of three women from behind, walking through a vast field of purple lavender flowers. They are dressed in white, summery attire. The woman on the left wears a wide-brimmed straw hat and a long, tiered white dress. The woman in the middle wears a short-sleeved white dress and holds a small wicker basket filled with lavender. The woman on the right wears a white dress with a braided hairstyle and carries a large, textured woven tote bag. The background shows a soft, hazy horizon under a twilight sky.

THE REAL GIRLS' GUIDE TO

Taking It All Off

A SMALL GROUP GUIDE FOR REMOVING THE LAYERS
BETWEEN YOU AND TRUE FRIENDSHIPS

Stephanie May Wilson

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*For
every
story*

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FOR THE WOMEN WHO TAUGHT ME EVERYTHING I KNOW
ABOUT FRIENDSHIP & ABOUT LIFE

LAYERS

Throughout our lives, we accumulate layers. We put them on like clothes, piling them on top of one another until we're waddling through life fully covered. We put on the uniform of our job or our after school activities, we carefully select an outfit that will help us fit in, or stand out (in the best way of course). We put on our mom shoes, or the hat that deems us the “funny girl.” We put on the glasses that make us look smart, and the makeup that hides our imperfections. We keep our house perfectly decorated, our profile photos perfectly selected, and our Instagrams perfectly filtered. We learn what's acceptable, what's reject-able, and we adjust accordingly. We build the walls that keep us from being exposed, or hurt, or worst of all, abandoned.

Our life is a journey of piling things onto ourselves—covering ourselves with layers and layers of how we want to be seen, and who others expect us to be. The more layers we pile on the harder it is for anyone to get to know us, for us to be able to show anyone who we truly are, for us ever to feel connected. Because to feel connected, to feel truly understood and loved, we have to be known—not for our layers but for the beating heart underneath them all.

So that's what we're doing. In the next 6 weeks, we're taking off the layers one

by one. We're going to do the hard, beautiful work of revealing the true us to the women around our table, and the relationships that will form along the way will change our lives. Friendships like that always do.

WELCOME

To Be fully
Seen by Somebody,
then, & be Loved
anyhow—this
is a Human offering
that can Border on
Miraculous.



Elizabeth Gilbert

READ THIS OUT LOUD AT THE BEGINNING OF YOUR FIRST GATHERING

Hello and welcome! This is the very closest thing to having you all around my kitchen table, and I couldn't be more excited.

That's where I wish we were whenever I'm writing. In fact, it's what I picture as I'm sitting at my desk, or on the couch (more likely), typing strings of black words on the white page, and trying to feel cozy.

Because to me, the words aren't the point, the connection is. And my blog, my book, and this guide are the closest I can get to fitting us all around the table—stories and whoops of laughter filling my home like the smell of freshly baked cookies still warm from the oven.

So come in, and make yourself comfortable. I'm so glad you're here.

The journey we're embarking on is a great one, and I can't wait to get started.

THE PROBLEM

Have you ever scrolled through Instagram photos of dinner parties, and vacations, and gatherings wondering if you're the only person in the world who feels like an outsider?

Have you ever gazed longingly at a table of laughing women, wishing there was a seat reserved just for you?

Have you ever felt like you missed the boat on deep friendships, like it should have somehow happened already and now it might be too late?

I have.

Sometimes it's a set of circumstances that leaves us with loneliness rattling around in our bones. We move away, or our best friends move away, or our husband's job keeps us in a perpetual state of motion.

Sometimes we find ourselves in new season of life feeling like a freshman all over again—like we're starting from scratch and have no one to sit with at lunch.

Some of our stories include lots of moves and transition—we've never been in a place long enough to form those deep, soul-filling connections.

But sometimes we do have friends, lots of them in fact. But even that doesn't seem to quell the loneliness the way we wish it would. We have people to talk to at parties, and co-workers to invite over for dinner, but those friendships seem to be lacking something. We feel surrounded but not deeply so. Known, but not in the way that makes us feel like we're not alone.

No matter your story or how you got to this place, so many of us are walking around this earth feeling lonely. So many women feel disconnected, or left out,

or like they'll never have the kind of connection their hearts so deeply crave.

There's an epidemic of loneliness in our world today, and I truly believe it's because of our layers. We talk to each other, but we don't really talk to each other. We rarely say the thing we need to say, the thing we need someone to know about us, the truth that would really set us free.

We keep our makeup perfect, and our dirty laundry hidden. We only let people see us when we have the world at our feet, when we're spinning the plates of our homes, and our families, and our jobs, and our perfectly-styled appearance all effortlessly, not even breaking a sweat.

But those outer things—our success and our perfectly blown out hair—aren't the real us. They may be the parts we want people to see, the protection we keep around our tender, beating hearts, but they're not the parts we need people to see.

When we're only known and loved at our best, we're left wondering if anyone will ever love us at our worst. Worst of all, we're left to face the world alone. Our layers and the illusion of perfection makes the world a lonely place.

So that's what we're here to fix. We're here to connect, to create and cultivate the kind of friendship that changes everything. And it starts with breaking right through the idea that we need to be perfect in order to be loved.

So today, right here, around this table, we are doing something audacious and truly, wonderfully terrifying. We're going to strip off that perfect façade and we're going to do it together.

I am on a mission, for you, for me, and for women everywhere to help us stop trying to be perfect, and start being us.

I am on a mission to give all of us the courage to be who we were meant to be—to bring our whole selves to the table, with all our dreams, quirks, and the boisterous laughter we keep hushed at nice restaurants. I want us to be able to connect with one another, unashamed of who we are, or what we brought with us, or the things about us that might not be as shiny and perfect as we wish they were. I want us to know each other—deeply—and love each other anyway. Because that, my friends, is the cure to loneliness.

FRIENDSHIP CHANGES EVERYTHING

Many of the greatest gifts of my whole entire life are the women who fill it. I am surrounded by a group of women who know the worst things about me, who have seen me at the lowest points of my whole life, and who have loved me relentlessly through it all.

And my life is proof that love like that changes you.

There's nothing in the world like friendship. I am who I am, and am doing what I'm doing, unequivocally because of the women who have loved me throughout my life.

I recently got married, and while my favorite moment of the weekend was the, you know, actually getting married part, my other favorite moment of the weekend happened during our rehearsal dinner.

Carl, my husband, isn't a frequent crier. Although I've seen him tear up on several occasions, I'd never seen him actually cry, really cry, until this point.

He stood in front of our family and friends and gave a toast to my bridesmaids. He cried the whole way through, thanking them for making me the woman I

am today. He thanked them for loving me, for teaching me, and for being there for me. The night before we got married, he made a point to recognize the women who have impacted me more deeply, more permanently than anyone else in my life.

Suffice it to say he wasn't the only one crying as he made that toast.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, but I think it takes a village to help us become the women we were always meant to be.

We need each other—a group of women to cook with, and go out with, and laugh with, and just do nothing with. We need women who will bring us dinner when something bad happens, or to answer our call at 4am to pray with us or tell us it's going to be okay. We need women who will help us paint the spare bedroom, or pick out a pair of shoes, or help us make sense of our wild and messy lives.

We need people who are like warm blankets in their comfort and peace, and people who tell us the truth, and shake us out of our mess when we need a strong word from someone who truly knows us. We need to be loved at our best, and at our worst by people who are standing next to us, fighting alongside us as we become our best selves.

We need each other. We need to be a team. We need people who are our people. We need a village.

SO WHERE DO WE GET THESE
KINDS OF FRIENDSHIPS?

Depending on who you are and what your friendships have been like to this

point, you may be thinking something along the lines of, “That’s great for you. I’d love friendships like that. But it just hasn’t happened for me.” You may be taking inventory of the people in your life and feeling like the list is sparse—an unwelcome reminder that you don’t have these kinds of friendships. I hear you.

All of us are going to come at this journey a little differently. Some of us have wonderful friends, all in the same place, just down the road, and available for an impromptu dinner party, or a good cry when needed.

Some of us have never had a village. We’ve tried to connect with other women but found ourselves hurt, rejected, or disappointed when the friendships didn’t turn out as deep or committed as we thought they would.

Maybe you just moved (like I did recently), and left your village behind. Maybe you’ve found yourself crying to your husband because you miss your people so much, going on friend dates with perfect strangers in an effort to create a new community. Or maybe that’s just me.

Maybe you have lots of friends, but they all hover somewhere around the surface. Maybe despite the fact that your calendar and Facebook is packed with acquaintances and invitations, you still feel incredibly lonely.

No matter how you got here, this isn’t where we’re going to stay. I’m going to take you on a journey into the life-long, life-changing friendships we all so desperately need. Are you with me? I hope so!

HOW WILL THIS GUIDE HELP?

Like I mentioned earlier, I got married just a few months ago, and my husband and I couldn’t wait for our honeymoon. We dreamed about lots of places to go,

and I slipped in the word “Europe” as often as possible. I was trying to be subtle, until he reminded me of the millions of other tourists with the same brilliant idea, and how hot it would be in the middle of the summer. Touché sir, I’ll take a raincheck.

We spent weeks scouring the web for honeymoon locations until we found a resort in the Dominican Republic that had among its many luxuries, a pillow menu. Yes, a menu featuring various styles and varieties of pillows. Let’s be honest, you can’t just pass up a pillow menu.

Also, Carl’s brother happens to be an accomplished diver and had mentioned that the DR is known for their scuba diving. He went over Christmas and couldn’t stop raving about it. So on Zack’s recommendation (and because of the pillow menu), to the Dominican Republic we went!

To be honest, I was hoping Carl would forget about that scuba diving thing. I was hoping he’d get so tied up in napping on the beach, eating, and other important activities that he would forget his desire for the depths altogether.

No such luck.

Now would be a good time to mention the fact that I’m semi-afraid of fish. I know they can’t hurt me, (most of them). But I also know that I have little to zero desire to meet them face to face, or to be surrounded by them on their turf (as opposed to when they’re in an aquarium and I’m peering in at them from the outside with a latte in hand).

Everything about scuba diving felt foreign and uncomfortable, and I was nervous about it from the minute he said he wanted to go. But knowing that I had been his wife for about 5 minutes by then, and not wanting to push my luck (just kidding, I just wanted to make him happy), I agreed.

So if you haven't scuba dived before, there's a whole process you have to go through before you actually do it. We didn't get certified, but we still went through a class, took a written test, and practiced in the pool before we ever got nose to nose with any fish.

The video was terrifying. In Spanish and English they described all the bad things that could happen to us if we weren't careful. If we didn't adhere to a ridiculously long list of rules, our ears could explode, our lungs could explode, any number of things could explode and it felt like a fine line between having it be a great day and having it be our last.

Once we'd gone into the pool and learned how to use our gear, they put us on a boat and took us out into the ocean. They dropped anchor and one by one, had us hop out of the boat and into the water—which is much easier said than done when you have that much weight strapped to your back and waist. We looked a bit like beached whales being rolled back into the ocean.

We floated in the water like awkwardly shaped buoys, until our instructor took our hands one by one and led us to the anchor's rope. He showed us how to grab onto the rope, and mimed from behind his scuba mask that we should climb our way down. So hand under hand, we followed him down the rope and to the bottom of the ocean. It was so comforting to have something to hold onto.

That's what I want this workbook to be for you. Exposing the depths of your heart to people you don't know super well might sound as fun to you as a trip to the dentist. You might be breaking out into a cold sweat already at the thought of such vulnerability. I totally hear you. But let this workbook be your rope — something to hold onto along the way. Let it be a constant reminder that there's a plan, and a promise that we'll get somewhere spectacular if you just stick with me.

When we made it to the bottom of the ocean, my frantic heartbeat started to

slow, and the experience of sitting on the ocean floor is one I'll never forget. That day I learned that sometimes the scariest things are the most worthwhile, and I know journey this will be the same way.

So hand under hand we go. Grasp on, and get ready.

As you begin to remove some layers, you'll be well on your way to creating your village. And just like with scuba diving, our destination will be so worth the courage the journey required.

Are you ready to get started?

LET'S TALK LOGISTICS

How will this work exactly?

The long and short of it is that I'll be asking you questions. Each week we're talking about something different and the questions and topics get progressively deeper. Someone will need to read the introduction out loud (there's just something more communal about doing it that way), and then you'll dive into the questions.

You can either read the questions aloud one by one and answer them immediately, or give yourselves a few minutes to scan through them first. After each question I've given you some space to write notes. If you're the kind of person that needs to think through their answer first, this space is for you. It's also a good place to record your thoughts for later — a way of documenting the journey so you can look back and see how far you've come.

How you answer them is entirely up to you. You can do it discussion style, jumping in with your two cents whenever the person before you is done. Or you can go around in a circle, sharing one at a time. I'm a fan of the circle method over the "go whenever you feel like its your turn" method, just because I know when to be prepared, and then you avoid that awkward "do you want to go, or should I? dance" (Is it just me that hates that?)

How long should each question take?

It's up to your group and depends on how much time you've allotted for your time together. Regardless of how much time you have, it's helpful to have someone keeping an eye on the clock. The questions get deeper as we go, and I don't want you to skip the last ones for the sake of time. Also, if you're anything like me and my girlfriends, you could spend a year on the first question if left to your own devices. Set a time limit so you get through them all and aren't up all night.

Any tips or guidelines?

As people are talking, my humble request is that you give them your full, undivided attention. Put your phones on silent and stick them in your bag. Keep side conversations to a minimum and just listen. The things you'll be sharing in these weeks are intimate, and often scary. And there's nothing worse than sharing your deepest and darkest while someone is texting or checking their watch.

The other thing I'll ask of you is total safety. It's impossible (and foolish) to open up to people who aren't going to guard and protect the tender things you're sharing with them. So before you begin, I want you all to commit to keeping what's said in the group private, and being kind, and gentle with the things each woman shares. Safety is key in creating deep friendships, and so we have to start there.

What do the bonus questions mean?

After you're done with the questions each week, you'll find two bonuses below. The first says, "Stop and Smell the Roses," and the second says, "Go a Little Deeper..."

"Stop and Smell the Roses" is a place for you to reflect. So often we blaze through experiences and moments without taking the time to notice the beauty unfolding right before our eyes. I find that when I do take a moment to stop and notice, the world and what's happening in front of me becomes a kaleidoscope of color—showing me dimension and brilliance I didn't notice at first glance.

This section is a chance for you to reflect on what happened that week, a way to notice and remember the beautiful things you just watched unfold.

"Go a Little Deeper" is optional, but I highly recommend it. It's a challenge, a dare to take this to the next level, to be bold in the friendships you're creating and to make them even richer.

Tips for next week's meeting.

Before you end for the night, it's always a good idea to talk about next week's meeting, making sure everyone knows the time and the place. The weeks go progressively deeper, and this works best when everyone is fully committed and present each time. So take a minute before you leave to sync your calendars, and you'll be good to go!

With that, I think you're ready! Go ahead and keep reading. Week 1's questions are right around the corner.

NOTES

NOTES

WHEN WE DO THE
HARD, INTIMATE
Work of

FRIENDSHIP

We Bring
a LITTLE
MORE OF THE DIVINE
INTO

DAILY LIFE

SHAUNA NIEQUIST

FRIENDSHIPS & FRENEMIES

A big, official welcome to week one! I'm so happy you're here! I feel like I am (or rather wish I was) welcoming you into my home, hurrying into the kitchen to get a drink in your hand or some food in your belly.

I love bringing people together. It makes me so happy to think about each one of you gathering together, and about the love and connection that's going to multiply throughout the next six weeks.

We're about to jump in and get started, but before we do, I have just one last request of you.

BE BRAVE

There may be times over the next six weeks when this doesn't feel easy. There might be times when it feels much easier to keep your mouth shut, to keep your story to yourself, or even to stay home, and watch another episode of *House Hunters*.

I feel that every time I'm a part of a committed group activity. Whether it's a small group situation or an event, the idea of small talk and having to be "on" can be exhausting. My couch begins beckoning, and then come the excuses.

It's also really tempting to keep our thoughts and our words to ourselves. It's easier not to tell your story. It's less embarrassing if you don't risk crying in front of the group. It's safer to let people think you've got it all together, that you don't struggle with that, or worry about that, or feel insecure about that.

Telling your story and letting people get to know you—the real you—is the bravest thing you can do. And that's what I'm asking you to do today.

It's not safe, and it won't feel safe. It will feel uncomfortable and wild and like you want to crawl back into your shell.

But I'm going to ask you not to. I'm going to ask you to risk it. I'm going to ask you to keep going, to dig into what we're starting here, and to see what can happen when you actually let the women around you get to know the real you.

So be brave. For the next six weeks, be brave with the women around you. Share your story; say what you really think and feel, what really happened, and what you're really worried about. Then watch what happens. I promise it'll be miraculous.

So that's the favor I'm asking of you. No big deal, right? ;-)

FRIENDSHIPS & FRENEMIES

Without further ado, lets get going with Week 1. Week 1 is all about friendship: past, present, and future. We're starting here because we need to lay the foundation for where we're going.

As women, friendship is a tricky thing. It evokes a thousand different images, and emotions for each of us. For some of us, the word brings about memories of slumber parties and life-long companions. It's a happy word, a warm word, a connected word. For others of us, the word "friendship" carries memories of mean girls, and backstabbing, of being left out, or simply lonely.

None of us have the same experiences or foundations with friendship, and that's why I want to start here today. It's time to get real with each other about where we come from in our female friendships. If we don't know where we each come from, we'll have no idea how to approach each other. We need to know what we've all been through, what we've experienced when it comes to friendships, what's worked and what hasn't.

A few years ago I made a friend who I just couldn't figure out. We had tons in common, lots of things to talk about, and shared experiences to discuss. But for the longest time we were never able to go deep in our friendship. It was like there was a thick piece of glass between the two of us and nothing I did was able to remove it. I couldn't get her to open up, couldn't dive deep, couldn't seem to gain her trust. I thought I was doing something wrong for a long, long time, until I found out she'd been had terrible experiences with female friendships in the past. It wasn't about me at all! Once I understood where she was coming from, we were able to build something beautiful. To this day, she's one of my closest friends, but we had to start out on the same page.

Let's get started!

WEEK 1 QUESTIONS:

Tell us about the closest friend you've ever had. What made that friendship so close and special?

What do you value most in friendships? What do you look for in a friend?

What is going through your mind as you're meeting new women? (Do you have an open heart or a guarded one? What thoughts are you thinking about them, and what thoughts are you thinking about yourself?)

What's the worst experience you've ever had with a female friendship?

What holds you back from investing deeply in friendships?

What kinds of friendships do you have in your life today, and what kinds would you like more of?

Thank you so much for answering with such bravery and honesty. I'm so glad we started here, because this is the foundation. We have to know where we're starting before we can get to where we're going.

Not only is this great practice for opening up and getting to know each other, but I hope it's also a great reminder that even the people you think have more best friends than they know what to do with sometimes feel lonely and disconnected. Everyone could use more connection in their lives, and it takes a whole lot of honesty and bravery to admit that out loud. With that foundation under our feet, we can now begin to build.

I'm so proud of you for your courage, and for showing up here tonight. I know we're only at the beginning, but I hope you can look at the women around you and feel like you know them a bit more deeply than you did when you walked in the door.

Keep going, make this a priority, and stay in it. You'll be amazed what happens when you stick this out for six weeks with the women around your table.

The last thing I want you to do is pray together. Have someone pray for the group, for all the things you just shared, and that God would bless the friendships you're creating here. I know He will.

And with all my love, and gratitude for you showing up here tonight, I'm sending you on your way!

Have a wonderful night, don't forget to set the date and time for your next meeting, and I'll see you next week!

All my love,

Stephanie

P.S. Your bonuses are on the next page!

Stop and smell the roses:

Go a little deeper:

This week, I dare you to start a group text. It can be a place where you share stories, links to great articles, fun things that have happened during the week, and even prayer requests. Having that consistent communication—even via text—is a great way to take friendships deeper one day at a time.