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Twin Closeness— Assumptions and Realities

I feel better when I do things without my twin. This is not to say that I don't enjoy doing things with her, but somehow when she is not there I feel more like myself. I love her, but I just feel smothered around her. By myself I can be myself. —Brianna, 18

I get along with my twin, but it's kinda like being with a copycat or wanna-be version of myself. —Noah, 23

I think my husband is glad that I have my close relationship with my twin sister because he cannot meet my emotional needs the way she does. —Eileen, 45

What does it mean to be close to a sister or brother? For most people, it means enjoying family experiences and memories, being able to be yourself around each other, sharing how you feel, and being there for one another in times of need. While a close relationship with your sibling is something to value, not all sisters and brothers are close as children, and many are not at all close as adults. When that's the case, it is considered a shame but not a tragedy.

For twins, however, the expectations are a lot higher. Due to the beliefs implicit in the twin mystique, many assume that throughout their lives, twins will feel closer to each other than to anyone else. Some take for granted that twins will enjoy a closer relationship with each other than with their parents, friends, other siblings, or even their mates. Such devoted intimacy does exist for a great many twins; however, many others experience their twinship quite differently.

In this chapter we're going to explore how the ultraclose relationship thought to be the norm for adult twins doesn't always gel with reality. What may feel like closeness to one twin can feel like overdependence to the other. The stories in this chapter reveal a spectrum of twinship experiences: some adult twins feel unable to get their needs met by anyone other than their twin; others feel frustrated by their desire to be more independent from their twin; some feel inauthentic for faking a closeness with their twin that they don't really feel; still others are seeking a balance between connection to and separation from their twin. Wherever you place yourself on the closeness continuum, this chapter will help you assess how comfortable you are with your own level of twin closeness and what changes you might want to consider.

Twin Closeness: Choice or Obligation?

When twins have been raised as individuals, they experience their relationship as quite similar to that of singleton siblings—with perhaps a deepened connection due to their identical age. While they are likely to enjoy a close companionship, same-age siblings raised as unique individuals perceive themselves as separate from their twin. Their primary attachment is to their parents, not to their twin, so as children they receive essential parental nurturing and caretaking, which then enables them to develop a “self” apart from their twin. They may choose each other as playmates (and later on as best friends) when they're at home or at school, but they

feel free to develop their own friendships without any sense of obligation to include their twin.

In families where twins have not been given the chance to define themselves as separate from each other, they often grow up in a relationship that resembles a dysfunctional marriage. In such cases, parents have likely abdicated their role as primary nurturer, giving over that function, sometimes unconsciously, to the twins, who are expected to care for each other both physically and emotionally. Parents may also instill in their same-age children the notion that one's twin is an automatic "mate," and the twinship is thus based on pleasing—and expecting to be pleased by—one's twin. This may sound idyllic to nontwins, but when one is solely focused on either pleasing or being pleased by the other person, one lacks experience in pleasing oneself. It then becomes nearly impossible to discover one's true likes and dislikes or what it means to be authentically close to someone. Twin closeness may be experienced as an obligation, not a choice. You are close to one another because that is your expected role. And unlike marriage, not only have you not chosen this "mate," but you are placed in a quasi marriage before you are old enough to know who you are as an individual. So the "marriage" precedes your own development and is based upon someone else's expectations, not on your own emotions or proclivities.

In such a twin-defined bubble, you learn at a very young age to accommodate and compromise. Your perspective is that of a twin couple, so that you habitually think of yourself in relationship to your twin. You may find that you are in constant collusion—enabling, accommodating, and codepending on each other—rather than feeling free to act on your own or make your own decisions.

This is not to say that all twinships are either one type or the other: "twins-as-a-couple" or "two completely distinct individuals." You may consider yourself very much an individual, yet sometimes your behavior may be influenced by how it will impact your twin. And twinships very

often change over time. A twin “couple” may find that their relationship changes significantly when one goes off to college in another city, becomes involved with a partner, or gets married.

Still, it can be difficult to alter a pattern that has been in place throughout your lives, even when you desire change between you and your twin. Fundamental to making desired changes is to understand what type of relationship you have with your sibling. Is your closeness based on choice and rooted in your secure, individual identities? Or are there elements of codependence and enmeshment in your twinship, so that sometimes you worry that without your twin you don't really feel whole?

Codependence and Enmeshment versus Authentic Closeness

Codependency is often used to refer to a particular dynamic found in couples. It includes the tendency to be passive or overly caretaking in ways that negatively impact the relationship and the partners' quality of life. And it involves giving one's own needs a lesser priority while being excessively preoccupied with the needs of another person.⁶

As it pertains to twinship, codependency can be defined as each twin being dependent on the other to fulfill a particular role or function. In fulfilling these functions for one another, each sibling has a sense of purpose; however, with this shared dependence as a constant, neither twin is likely to learn how to perform the other person's functions for him- or herself. Psychotherapist and author Audrey C. Sandbank refers to this dynamic in terms of “allocation of tasks”:

Tasks can be emotional as well as practical. One partner may make friends and bring them home, while the other may be more cautious. They may inhibit such skills developing in the other twin . . . They become like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, each needing the other to become complete.⁷

Because codependent twins need and depend upon each other to feel complete and to define who they are, neither sibling is able to attain an individual sense of self.

Enmeshment refers to the blurring of boundaries between individuals such that one feels one does not really exist without the other, that one has no “self” without the other person. The term enmeshment derives from family systems theory and describes a condition in which “two or more people weave their lives and identities around one another so tightly that it is difficult for any one of them to function independently.”⁸

In a twin relationship, this is evidenced in the need to maintain sameness and equality because any differences between the two siblings are seen as a threat to the two-as-one entity. There is the sense that one cannot live without the other and that one does not exist without the other twin’s constant presence. Outside relationships—friends, lovers, or spouses—are often seen as a potential threat to the duo, unless the friends are equally shared and the spouses can accept that the twinship takes precedence over the marriage. Enmeshed twins tend to have little capacity for self-reflection and lack the emotional space required to consider their own choices, desires, and needs. Carving out such space for themselves entails confronting the fear that they might forever alienate their twin, with whom their life is so closely intertwined.

Given these descriptions of overly involved twinships, what might an authentic, healthy closeness look like? Ideally, it would reflect two distinct individuals, each with a secure sense of self, who keep in touch and get together because they care about each other and enjoy each other’s company. Their relationship would be based on choice, not need. As mentioned earlier, such healthy twin relationships are most often the result of secure attachments to the parents during childhood and adequate opportunities for each twin to discover his unique self, apart from his twin. However, even if this has not been the case, adult twins can still develop a healthy closeness. If, for example, twins acknowledge that theirs is a

codependent relationship, each can make a commitment to understand how their twinship has functioned so far and work toward cultivating an individual identity. As each sibling develops a distinct sense of self, he or she is able to embrace the twinship out of caring and love rather than insecurity and need. In turn, the twinship becomes flexible and resilient enough to tolerate other important attachments in each twin's life, without feelings of abandonment or resentment.

The Closeness Continuum

The following stories highlight the issue of closeness within twin relationships and how feeling closely connected to one's sibling is often confused with codependence and enmeshment. The first story reveals the struggle of a young woman who feels lost without her twin sister but realizes she must create an independent life for herself, something her twin has already done. The second focuses on two overly involved sisters who cannot seem to live with or without each other. The third shows how twins can remain so closely connected that the prospect of differentiating themselves seems both threatening and unbearable. And finally, the last story shows how a healthy closeness between twins can develop in adulthood and is reflected in each sibling's individuality, authenticity, and ability to enjoy her twin's company without needing her to feel complete.

“I’m Afraid of Losing Her”—Gina’s Story

At twenty, Gina is struggling to discover who she is apart from her twin sister, Priscilla. Gina is a college junior and feels lost without the sister on whom she depended until high school, when family circumstances forced them apart. (Gina moved in with their mother, while Priscilla remained with their father.) But while Gina has been on her own for years, she still longs for the companionship and guidance she once enjoyed with her twin. She offers several reasons why friendships with other people would be not only pointless but virtually impossible. First of all, she claims that

friendships with others would pale in comparison: “I don’t have the desire to be as close to anyone as I am to my twin sister because I know that no one understands me like she does. I don’t even want to waste my time getting frustrated by trying to explain what I mean or how I feel about a particular situation to a friend because I don’t have to do that with my twin sister.” Gina also claims that making new friends would seriously jeopardize her relationship with her sister: “If I have other best friends,” she said, “my bonds to my twin will weaken and I will lose her.” And finally, she holds back from making new friends due to her professed social anxiety, which had been ameliorated by Priscilla’s presence:

I just feel that I never say the right thing, that I’ve lost the ability to talk to people, or make a good impression on people. Priscilla was always able to make up for what I lack, for what I couldn’t say or do. She could put into words what I meant, and without her I just feel like I can’t express myself properly so I don’t say anything. I’m afraid to open up so I cut myself off from potential friendships.

Interestingly, during our conversation, Gina expressed herself beautifully and was articulate, animated, and insightful. But after years of acceding to her sister’s willingness to “talk for both of us,” Gina is convinced that her sister was much more capable of communicating for her than Gina is of communicating for herself. “Priscilla could express what I felt and did it so much better—and I was happy for her to take over,” she said. So she holds on to this alleged handicap as part of her rationale for not pursuing new friendships, which then becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Gina’s longing to be more closely connected to her sister is definitely one-sided, a fact of which she is painfully aware. Priscilla is doing fine on her own, and Gina admits that “It sometimes hurts me because she doesn’t act as bothered by not having me around all the time. It seems like her life hasn’t skipped a beat compared to mine, which I feel is in shambles without her.” While it is true that Priscilla is happily proceeding with her life, that doesn’t mean she doesn’t want a close relationship with Gina. She

constantly reassures Gina that they will be connected no matter what. But connection and dependence are not the same.

I told Gina that there is a profound difference between a close sibling connection and a dependent relationship, which is what she experienced with her sister throughout their childhood. Due to problems between their parents and their parents' inability to be there for their daughters emotionally, the girls turned to each other for nurturing. In addition to their twin dependency, the girls witnessed repeatedly how much their mother constantly relied on men for her sense of self-worth. So theirs was a family where everyone was codependent, and there was no role model for healthy relationships.

As they matured in their teens, Priscilla was able to break free from her dependence on the twinship but Gina was not. Gina had never fully experienced herself as an individual, as someone who existed apart from her sister, even when they were forced to live apart. She told herself she needed her twin to complete her and never learned how to own her feelings or experiences. Learning to speak for herself, even if such attempts might seem awkward or stilted at first, would be a worthwhile challenge in making friends and getting involved in healthy relationships.

I explored with Gina how relinquishing her dependence on Priscilla will necessitate getting in touch with and fulfilling her own needs. Holding on to her sister out of desperation will not insure a close connection, but could in fact threaten it.

“We Have This Anger toward Each Other; Where Does It Stem From?”—Fiona and Paulina

Fiona and Paulina, college graduates in their midtwenties, have both moved back home with their parents. Like many young adults whose jobs don't yet afford them the ability to live on their own, both women feel frustrated about still being under the influence of their parents. What exasperates them further is their relationship to one another. They rely on each other

as a married couple would; but unlike a married couple, theirs is not a committed relationship that they chose as consenting adults. Rather, they have been counting on each other since they were children in ways that they now take for granted but also resent.

In speaking with Paulina and Fiona separately, I learned that Fiona resents being the one who is obligated to make the social plans, which always have to include Paulina. If she fails to invite Paulina, their mother gets angry at Fiona, demanding to know why she didn't ask Paulina to go with her. Since Paulina recently broke up with a boyfriend and has been feeling depressed, Fiona feels sorry for her and relents. But the resentment builds.

For her part, Paulina feels she does her share of looking after Fiona's needs, such as reminding her to get her driver's license renewed. "She expects things of me," Paulina says, "like she'll say, 'You're doing it for yourself, so why wouldn't you tell me to get my license renewed?' And then she'll call me selfish because I thought about it but I didn't tell her. So I said, 'You're a human being, don't you look at your driver's license that expires on our birthday? Can't you think for yourself?' Those kinds of things bother me. I'm more responsible, and she expects me to take care of that part of her life."

Again, from Fiona's perspective, Paulina is the one who needs constant "baby-sitting":

She likes to "sulk" in her own worries. I'm just tired of it. We've had enough of each other. I got a television for my room—she doesn't have one in her room. So she's in my room every night, and half the time she falls asleep in my bed, and I'm like, "Please leave. Please leave my room. I just want to be by myself tonight. Is that so much to ask?" She'll say, "You're such a bitch, why are you kicking me out?" and I'll say, "Because I need to be by myself. You need to understand that I need my time." But she gets really offended that I tell her to leave. And I go, "Look, I'm not telling you because I hate you. I love you, but I just need to be by myself." She doesn't understand.

A simple request to have one's room to oneself should be easy for a twenty-four-year-old sibling to understand, but Paulina and Fiona have been thrown together throughout their lives, so that feeling entitled to her own space seems foreign to Fiona, even though not having that space becomes exasperating. The cycle goes something like this: Fiona becomes frustrated with Paulina's behavior; she calls her on it; they argue; Fiona feels guilty and either gives in to Paulina or laughs it off; Fiona's resentment grows. In describing this pattern, Fiona seemed at a loss about how to break it.

I would love for you to help me. So much of how we are together bothers me. For instance, when we're going out together, it feels like I'm always pulling her along. We were supposed to have dinner with our girlfriends the other night, the reservation was at eight, and she decides to take a shower at 8 o'clock. It drives me nuts! So I just left the house. I used to wait for her, but I don't wait anymore because I'll be late and my friends will say, "Why are you late?" and I'll just answer "Paulina" . . . and it bothers me. I shouldn't have to threaten her, constantly be on top of her, checking in on her. She's not my husband. She's not my partner. Why should I constantly have to oversee her? I need to worry about myself!

I told Fiona that she and Paulina have been playing off each other throughout their lives, so there must be something that Fiona gets from telling Paulina what to do. I asked, "If you didn't have that powerful effect on Paulina, how do you think you'd feel?" Fiona said that she would feel good.

I wouldn't feel stressed or annoyed or irritated. Honestly, it is really annoying. I feel like I have to baby-sit her. For instance, when we go out she sometimes acts bitchy with our friends. I was growing to hate her for this, and I didn't want to hate her. So I just distanced myself a lot from her. I would go out with my other friends and I kind of wouldn't tell her. I would just kind of do my own thing. I need my own space, but I can't tell her I need it because she's going to hate me if I tell her, "I need space from you." So I kind of did my own thing for a while, and that was kind of good—I kind of had my own space and I really needed it. I felt like she was too much in my space.

There is a great deal of equivocating in Fiona's statement. She "kind of" did her own thing, but she couldn't bring herself to tell Paulina that she needs her own space. She recognizes that she needs her own life and the distance from her sister, but she can't be straightforward with Paulina about it. I told Fiona that her fear of hurting Paulina's feelings is doing more harm than good. By refusing to set boundaries with her sister that would allow for her own needs to be met, Fiona is preventing both sisters from breaking the dynamic of codependency. Paulina is dependent on Fiona not only for scheduling social activities but for keeping her in line emotionally, as a toddler is dependent on a mother. And Fiona goes along with such caretaking because she is dependent on Paulina as well. Fiona's well-being is contingent on Paulina feeling okay and not having her feelings hurt. Helping Paulina to allegedly feel better provides Fiona with a degree of power over her sister, which, though unacknowledged, Fiona depends upon.

Unfortunately, this unhealthy dynamic keeps the sisters in a constant state of bickering because neither one really wants to be dependent on the other, but neither knows how to break free from the cycle. Paulina confessed, "My sister and I have these issues, we argue, and we have this anger with each other, but I don't even know where it stems from."

In order for the sisters to break the cycle of codependency, they need to understand what causes their anger and fights. Fiona and Paulina's codependency began early on. Their parents believed (and still do) in the sanctity of twinship and that the girls should be together as much as possible, so that is how they were raised. Given little opportunity to be on their own, they grew to depend on each other and yet to resent their lack of freedom and independence. While a lot of positives exist in their relationship—being there for each other, having fun together—it is no wonder that their anger derives from never having had their own space in which to develop their individuality. Fiona related that one of the best times in her life was a vacation she took with college girlfriends. Her parents tried

to convince her to take Paulina along, but Fiona insisted that this was her time with her friends. “I had to beg my parents not to buy Paulina a ticket to come,” Fiona said, “but it’s the best thing I ever did. It was so much fun.”

I explained to Fiona and Paulina that in a codependent relationship, both individuals are angry. The person who is dependent is angry because she doesn’t really want to be dependent on someone else but can’t seem to extricate herself from a position of dependency, and the person who is in control also feels angry because she doesn’t want the burden of having someone dependent on her but can’t let the other person be on her own for fear that something terrible might happen. So both parties are locked in an ongoing scenario in which anger and frustration rule their relationship. With twins, codependency is likely a dynamic that has existed since childhood, so it is that much more difficult to undo. In Fiona and Paulina’s case, Fiona cannot imagine how Paulina will survive without her protection. She hates having to include her in all her social plans and resents having to kick her out of her room at night so that she can have some space to herself. But she continues to defend Paulina’s neediness, only to state in the next breath that she feels it is unfair that she has to constantly hold her hand. Her parents’ demand that she take care of Paulina only makes matters worse. All of this emotional turmoil leaves Fiona feeling she has no viable course of action:

I feel bad because Paulina doesn’t have anyone to hang out with. And if I don’t tell her to come, then she’ll have no one to hang out with, and then my parents are going to say, “Why don’t you tell Paulina to come with you, she’s home alone.” Well I don’t want her to come with me! Why do I always have to hold her hand?

I told Fiona that the bottom line is this: if she doesn’t start standing up for her own needs, she will be crippling herself and her sister. Fiona is enabling Paulina’s dependence, ensuring that Paulina will be tied forever to her sister’s coattails. By failing to draw a boundary between her life and

Paulina's, Fiona is allowing Paulina to stay stuck in a forced reliance that she likely detests. But one of them needs to make the first move.

I explained (to both of them) that setting physical boundaries is an initial step. A physical separation—declaring their own rooms off bounds to the other, going out separately with friends—can then grow into a psychological and emotional separation. Fiona can tell Paulina, “I need time to myself in my own room” or “I need the freedom to be with my friends on my own.” And Paulina can create her own ground rules: “I need you to be responsible for your own documents and paperwork (for example, remind yourself to get your license renewed).” When Fiona and Paulina can be consistent in setting their own boundaries, their behavior will change—and so will their dynamic.

Fiona confided that she didn't enjoy trying to manage her sister's life and was fed up with the constant arguments and squabbling. She was definitely ready to give up a role she didn't really choose:

When I tell her what to do, it kind of gives me power but a big part of me doesn't want to have that power. And it's at the expense of myself—like additional stress and anxiety. It is so frustrating for me. I don't want to be like a Nazi—I really don't. It's not fun for me.

A nontwin who does not understand how an overly dependent twinship can cause such rifts might get the impression that Paulina and Fiona have little love for each other, that it has been driven away by antagonism and conflict. But that would be the wrong impression. Here are comments from each sister describing their closeness even in the context of their current troubles. Fiona said:

When we have good times, it's great. We bond over how annoyed we are with our parents, or what one of our friends said or did. We can sit and talk for hours. But she has to know when she's crossing the line with me. That's what it is.

Paulina added:

I'm lucky to have had her because we share a bond that nobody else would ever have. It is comforting to have her there, but there are also times when I just want to say, "I want you away from me!"

I assured Paulina and Fiona that their sisterly bond will not be broken when each of them learns to be less dependent on the other and begins to develop her own sense of self. In fact, I believe their relationship will be strengthened once they break free from their pattern of codependency. They will then be able to enjoy each other's company without the oppressive feelings of resentment, anger, and insecurity.

"I'd Rather Be Dependent and Happy Than Independent and Unhappy"—Grace and Victoria

Like many twins, Grace's and Victoria's voices sound remarkably alike. Interviewing them on the phone, it was hard to tell them apart, but what came across most vividly wasn't the similarity of their voices so much as how startlingly identical their opinions were about their twinship, their jobs, their plans for the future. Enthusiastic, thoughtful, and devoted—to their career, their religious faith, and each other—they seemed as delighted with their relationship as any two siblings could be. Grace and Victoria are in their early twenties. They live together and even share the same job since their professional backgrounds are so similar. They describe the work arrangement as a godsend.

Victoria said:

We were both looking for the same type of job—and I managed to see this job-share opening. So it was just perfect, like a sign from God that we could have the same job.

Grace commented:

And now that we've got the same job, we say that we couldn't do it without each other, really. And we wouldn't be able to live here without each other because it would just be really, really lonely.

In the last several years, each sister had to endure the occasional loneliness of being without the other, but both insisted they do not wish to repeat that experience. Grace explained:

We didn't live together at university, but we lived in flats next door to each other. And then in my last year, Victoria graduated one year before me—because I had to change my course—so I had an extra year at university. I was there without her for a year, which was really hard. She came to see me all the time.

Victoria added:

I recently lived on my own for about six months with a family that I didn't know, and I was really independent. And now since living with her again, it's like I've become more dependent on her. And I don't really like doing things on my own. It's a bit worrying because it is like a step backwards. But all that time for those six months I really missed her. And I'm just so happy that she's here now that I don't really care that I'm not independent because I'd rather be dependent and happy than independent and unhappy.

So what could be the downside in being so ultraconnected to one's twin, given that the close connection seems to make both siblings so happy? They talked about difficulties when one had a relationship and the other didn't, including when one twin's boyfriend tried to involve the other twin in helping to solve the couple's problems. But they managed to get through such situations and claim that they look forward to future relationships, as long as each remembers not to be involved in the other's romantic problems.

What about friendships? In describing their social life, both sisters talked about enjoying casual friendships but not needing a close friend since their twinship more than satisfies that need. Victoria explained:

We always introduce a friend to each other, and that person will automatically assume that they're friends of both of us. But I would never, ever expect a friendship to be as good as the relationship with my

twin. Because I know it can never be, and I don't expect it of a friend. It's like I don't really need it because I've got her. She's better than a friend. I don't really need someone who's a best friend because I have a best friend. So I wouldn't expect it to be an amazing friendship; I just expect it to be a friendship, and that's enough really.

Grace added:

We don't really have close best friends; we just have friends. We have different groups of friends, and we try to get our groups of friends to meet each other and be friends with each other. Victoria made a friend when she was on her own, and now that friend comes to visit us, so she's gotten to know me as well and is now my friend. And also the friend I made on my own got to know both of us. When our friends get to know the other one (of us), they're friends with the other one as well.

Like so much of the togetherness that exists between them, it seemed that both sisters earnestly approve of the social setup they've established—where a friend to one automatically becomes a friend to both. But during our conversation one twin would inject a slightly different perspective. For example, Victoria confessed it was nice to have her own friendship, apart from Grace:

But I like having a friend that doesn't know both of us because it can be more like they like me for who I am, instead of just meeting us as the twins. I have friends from when I was living here on my own. They know me more so they're more my friends. So I would go and see them without bringing her—just go and see them on my own, and just be more of a friend, an independent thing.

So it seems that one sister, at least, acknowledged the benefit of having a degree of independence, of being seen as an individual and experiencing life as separate from her twin.

And then there was the matter of arguments. It seems neither sister can tolerate the fact that they might have differing opinions about anything.

Somehow, this signifies to both that their twinship might be in jeopardy. When I asked Grace and Victoria what they tend to fight about, they brushed off the question at first, saying they argued about “really, really silly little things.” But then they elaborated. First, Grace:

A recent argument had to do with dinner. Victoria hadn’t eaten as much as me, and I said, “What are you having for dinner?” and she said, “I can have whatever I want,” and I said something like, “I know but you’re hardly eating anything”—and then she got really annoyed that I commented on her dinner. So I’m not allowed to say anything about her dinner. And then I get annoyed that I can’t have freedom of speech and say what I think. And then she gets mad. And this could go on for ages.

Victoria said:

Or if she implied that she didn’t want to do the job with me, then I would get really upset and then she would get annoyed that I was upset about that. It’s like that: one of us is normally annoyed and the other one’s upset.

Grace added:

And then we get upset that the other one isn’t comforting us, and then the one that’s annoyed gets even more annoyed, or is crying because of something really silly. It is really silly, and then at the end we make up. And then we just say we’re sorry, and then it’s all fine.

I wondered if these arguments were, in fact, just silly or perhaps indicative of more serious, unacknowledged strains in the sisters’ relationship. And was it really possible for everything to be smoothed over at the end of a fight, without an understanding of what the argument was fundamentally about? I suggested to Victoria and Grace that some of their arguments could be related to the fact that they seem to need to keep events and details so equal between them that when one veers off in a slightly different direction, their twin synchronicity feels disrupted, which then upsets them both. My

explanation seemed to resonate, yet Grace reemphasized that the sisters feel more comfortable when they are on the same page:

We have to make sure that our opinions are the same on the big issues. So if we're watching something on television, it can be really annoying if one of us makes a comment and the other one says, "No, I don't agree with that." We'll have a really big debate until we make sure we're basically on the same page.

I mentioned the fact that even spouses frequently disagree on various issues, and I asked the rhetorical question, "Why would two people—even though they are closely connected—always have to agree, given that they are two different people, with two different brains, and two distinct ways of thinking, evaluating, and feeling? If spouses feel entitled to their own point of view, why don't twins?" Victoria responded: "Yeah, that's how we would be with anyone else, but we're just not like that with each other. We just want the other person to think the same thing as us."

I then asked, "What would it feel like if you two had distinctly different opinions and ideas?"

"It would feel like we weren't as close," Victoria said.

Grace responded, "It would feel like we were just sisters."

"It's probably not really good that we're like that," Victoria confessed, "but we are."

Finally, we discussed the issue of secrets and privacy. It turns out that both sisters feel compelled to tell the other everything, in order to maintain their twin closeness, yet they both hinted that they desired the privacy they don't yet feel entitled to. Their statements reveal ambivalence about their self-imposed obligation to share all feelings and experiences with their twin. Victoria said:

It can be really hard because sometimes you don't know how much to tell the other person. Like sometimes I feel that I should tell her everything, and then I have all these things I want to tell her, but I don't want to tell her everything. But I feel I have to.

Grace added:

Sometimes I feel like I have to tell her something to make it okay. If I don't tell her, I don't know if it's okay or not. Like if I do something really embarrassing, I go to her and say, "Is it okay that I did that?" and she'll say, "Yeah, it's okay." And the fact that she says it's okay makes me feel much better about myself. It's like someone loves you no matter what.

When twins feel compelled to tell their sibling everything in an attempt to maintain the strongest possible bond, it deprives both of privacy. Neither person is entitled to keep his or her own feelings, ideas, or experiences secret. Still, for overly close twins like Victoria and Grace, relinquishing that privacy seems worthwhile because keeping secrets from the other person results in tension and insecurity. Grace and Victoria rationalized their lack of privacy by asserting that they did, in fact, have privacy from other people—just not from each other. Although this distinction seemed to be perfectly reasonable to them, their path toward discovering who they are apart from one another will need to begin with the conviction that they are entitled to their own private thoughts and experiences. Grace explained:

It's like a normal person has privacy with themselves, and we have privacy with us two. So we still have privacy from the outside world—we wouldn't tell everyone everything—but it's just between us that there's no privacy. But we have a lot of privacy and secrets from other people. So we tell each other secrets, and I know I can tell her something and I know she won't tell anyone else. So in that way, it is like an extension of yourself.

Grace and Victoria have an enmeshed relationship. It is as if they want and need to be one entity. Anything that disrupts their sense of identity is perceived as a threat, so that they cannot tolerate even minor disagreements because these disturb their collusive notion of being one person. Any hint of differences, even the slightest crack in their façade of sameness (for example, Grace's concern that Victoria isn't eating enough, which might

result in her weighing less than Grace) threatens the sense of security they both derive from being essentially one being.

How might these enmeshed twins become unstuck from each other? First of all, one of them would have to want that to happen. Perhaps when one sister becomes closely involved with a boyfriend and can no longer maintain the same degree of enmeshment with her sister, something will have to give. Or the crack in their wall of oneness might occur when one wants to have the freedom to maintain a friendship on her own, or quit the job they now share and do something else. At some point, one twin might seek therapy to explore whether living so closely in sync with a sibling is healthy.

Currently, however, Grace and Victoria seem to need to maintain a rigid degree of sameness and equality, thereby disallowing any meaningful self-reflection or development of distinct identities.

Connected and Independent—Hayley and Katherine

Hayley and Katherine were never as enmeshed as Victoria and Grace. They were, however, nearly inseparable growing up. The youngest of nine children, they depended on each other for the attention they rarely received from their single, working mother. Katherine explained what it was like:

Our mom was married and divorced twice, and she didn't have a lot of money. She worked long hours, so she was never around—the older children raised the younger children. But Hayley and I were the youngest so we didn't get a lot of support. We acted as our own parents, and we gave each other unconditional love.

The sisters both talked about how they rooted for each other and provided each other with unconditional love that was never based on the need to be the same. In fact, Hayley said that individuality was always important to her, and she remembers feeling glad that her mother had not given her and Katherine matching names. Although the two accepted each other's distinct personalities and differences, there were times when

their arguments were driven by a strong need to make the other see reality her way. Hayley remembers reaching a point when she could no longer tolerate fights that always seemed to result in bad feelings. So she made a decision to do things differently and tested her new strategy during what she referred to as “the sock incident”:

As teenagers, Katherine and I were always trying to argue our way out of a problem—screaming and yelling because she wasn’t believing me and I wasn’t believing her. We thought that was the end of the world, arguing like that. We would fight until we couldn’t take it anymore, and we would exhaust ourselves. It was so important for us to agree on something that oftentimes it drove us apart.

This one time I was about to put on a brand new pair of socks, but when I opened my drawer they weren’t there. I went into Katherine’s room, and I said, “Hey, did you take a pair of my socks?” and she said, “No”—and I knew she had. And so I just said, “Okay, well I really wanted to wear them tonight and I can’t find them. But okay, thanks.” Whereas, before I would have gone, “Don’t tell me you didn’t take them because I know you took them!” this time I took a different approach, went back into my room, and felt really good about giving her the space to come and bring the socks back to me. And it didn’t take her but two minutes, and she was absolutely bawling: “I took your socks! I’m so sorry!”—and I let her off the hook as quick as I could, and I said, “Katherine, it’s okay. It’s alright. Don’t worry about it. Thanks for returning them.” And we felt closer after that.

When I asked Katherine how she and Hayley had learned to get along so well, forging a closeness that allowed for their individuality, she again mentioned the unconditional love between her and her sister. She also explained how the two had made an agreement when they were teenagers to treat each other with respect. She explained their pact in this way:

We both attribute our success in life—and in our relationship—to the support and unconditional love that we’ve always had for each other. And there’s something else: When we were about eighteen or nineteen we made a pact. We said we would treat each other like

friends, not family. Because sometimes with family there's a certain entitlement. And we just said, "We're gonna be kind and loving to each other"—so we knew whatever we said to the other person, the intention behind it was always supportive. It may not have been the best way to say it, but the overall intention came from a place of love and support. And that's how we've been able to grow.

When Katherine mentioned that the sisters wanted to avoid the behavior that some family members feel entitled to, I believe what she meant was feeling entitled to be overly judgmental or critical. And she and Hayley have tried very hard to avoid those behaviors. As they grew older, they didn't need the other to agree with them in order to feel close. Katherine said that after an argument, "we were always able to get the closeness back. Even if she went her way and I went my way, we were able to come together and feel the love."

After attending separate colleges, Katherine wanted to move to a different city but Hayley didn't because she did not want to leave her boyfriend. So Hayley begged Katherine to stay. Katherine agreed but made one significant stipulation. "I'll agree not to move," she said, "but you're going to owe me one." When Katherine met her future husband and moved to another state, she told Hayley, "I'm going to collect on that promise now," and Hayley made good on her payment, moving out of state with Katherine and her new husband. So each sister honored her firm commitment to live in the same town as the other; living apart did not seem feasible.

And then came the biggest shift in the sisters' relationship. When they were in their early thirties, Hayley made the decision to move across the country for an important career opportunity. But this time Katherine did not follow her. She knew it was a wonderful chance for Hayley to advance in her career, and she fully supported her sister's decision to relocate, but Katherine had a son and couldn't restructure their lives in order to follow her sister. Now divorced from her husband, Katherine's adjustment to being separated from Hayley wasn't easy.

Being on my own was absolutely the biggest change in my life. Hayley not being around was so hard for me. I have definitely, at times in my life, used Hayley as a crutch, like going to business events and being able to sit by her—rather than putting myself out there and mingling and introducing myself as an independent person. When Hayley left, I was already in business and running my own life, and a single mother and taking care of myself, so I was already doing some of those things; but without her, I was catapulted to a whole other level of independence and growth. I was out of my comfort zone, but I needed to be. It really helped me to grow into an individual person.

As for Hayley, although she is the one who instigated the move, separating from her twin wasn't easy for her, either.

We had leaned on each other, we always knew we had each other so it was very challenging for me to leave her and go someplace where I didn't have family. And she was more than family—it was the twin connection, where if anything ever happened to me, she would be right there. But I just figured it was going to be now or never for me.

Both sisters talked about how painful it was initially to be without the other. But each also spoke of how their separation provided the opportunity to learn more about themselves as individuals, and to test their ability to meet challenges on their own. The fact that each respected the other and continued to root for one another no matter what meant that Katherine would never have prevented Hayley from pursuing her dreams. And, as Hayley explained, Katherine never once made her feel guilty about the decision to move:

She never said, “Oh, you're leaving me. How can you do this?” She just said, “I understand. I'm upset, and I don't want you to go, but I understand.” There was always that level of respect, of her acknowledging me as being an individual, without me having to feel guilty. She knew I wanted to go, and she was happy for me. I think it was one of the most courageous things for both of us to be able to handle my move with such grace.

Still, both women agree that they had to break through a great deal of fear when they first separated. Hayley spoke of them having been used to “leaning and relying on each other.” And Katherine said she was “very, very afraid of being separated because we had never not been around each other our entire lives. So it was painful.”

After Hayley’s move, she and Katherine met for a series of seminars on love and fear, and each mentioned how the experience strengthened their belief in conquering their own fears of separation. Katherine commented:

Hayley’s move turned out to be a really wonderful gift and testament to our relationship. Because we’re as close as ever and we make time for each other—on the phone, and I travel to see her and she travels to see me—but we’ve become independent from each other in terms of our own friendships, our own day-to-day lives. And that turned out to be a really good thing for our inner strength and personal development. It has been challenging and rewarding.

And Hayley added:

Growing and learning with each other, we know how to take responsibility for our own emotions. We’re twins, but we’re also individual souls, and we have to support each other in making individual decisions. But we’ll always have that sense that “You know I love you, and I’ll always be there.”

Assessing Your Feelings

The following are suggestions for further exploring your feelings about your twinship and how close you want your relationship to be.

- Try this exercise: Imagine that you are a singleton. Articulate your needs out loud, so that you can hear yourself speak. What feelings are triggered when you acknowledge what you want and feel? Do you feel guilty, afraid, awkward, ashamed? Be aware of those feelings.
- Ask yourself these questions, and reflect on what your answers reveal about your closeness to your twin:

- ▷ Am I concerned that I cannot be okay without my twin because I am too dependent upon her/him?
- ▷ Do I feel that I need my twin's presence to complete my sense of self?
- ▷ Do I wish my twin wasn't so dependent on me?
- ▷ Do I want to be able to share my true feelings with my twin, without worrying if she/he will feel hurt or take it the wrong way?
- ▷ Am I close to my twin because I feel obligated?
- ▷ Am I close to my twin because I need him/her?
- ▷ Am I close to my twin because I can be myself around him/her and enjoy his/her company?

Perhaps this is the first time you have considered these particular feelings in relation to your twin. It is quite possible that confronting your responses and facing the reality of your twinship will be unsettling. I would encourage you, however, to be honest with yourself and use this opportunity to think about how you would like your relationship with your twin to develop from this point forward.

Guidelines for Considering Your Twin Closeness

In the Adult Twin Survey at the end of chapter 1 are particular statements on the issue of twin closeness. Consider the following statements, which will help you assess your feelings about how close you are with your twin and whether or not you want to change that level of closeness:

- I feel hurt that my twin shuts me out of his/her life.
- I get very depressed when I think of how my twin and I have grown apart.
- I feel guilty for wishing that my twin lived somewhere else so that I could be more independent from her/him.
- I feel like I have to fake feeling closer to my twin than I actually feel.
- I hate it when my twin tells me how he/she wants us always to be as close as we were when we were kids. That's not how I feel.
- I'm envious of nontwins who enjoy a more normal relationship with their siblings.