Weak Ties

[Those] deeply enmeshed in [a close-knit group] may never become aware of the fact that their lives do not actually depend on what happens within the group but on forces far beyond their perception.

—Rose Coser, sociologist

Yes is how you get your first job, and your next job, and your spouse, and even your kids. Even if it's a bit edgy, a bit out of your comfort zone, saying yes means you will do something new, meet someone new, and make a difference.

—Eric Schmidt, executive chairman of Google

A few summers ago, a big box showed up at my house. The return address on the label was a major publishing house in New York City. The box was addressed to me.

I was prepping two courses for the fall and had ordered some textbooks to look over but, when I opened the box, I found not textbooks but about a hundred paperback books—some fiction, some nonfiction, some academic, some popular. The invoice inside listed the name of an editor. I put the box of books in the middle of my dining-room table and friends who came to the house would ask about it: How did I find time to do so much reading? Had I lost my mind? No one found my explanation of "it came in the mail and I don't know why" very satisfying.

After some time, I made an attempt to follow up. I e-mailed the editor on the invoice to let her know I might have a box intended for her. She discovered the

books were sent to me in error but said to enjoy them. I thanked her, and we exchanged a couple of e-mails about choosing textbooks. Some months later, she asked if I would be interested in writing an instructor's guide for a book she was editing; I said sure. At the next barbecue at my home, the big box of books was still on the dining-room table. I told friends to please take home whatever titles looked appealing. It made a good story.

About a year after the box of books arrived, I started to want to write a book of my own. My private practice and classes were filled with twentysomethings who sincerely wanted, and needed, help moving forward. I envisioned a book that pulled together what I knew about the twenties from teaching and research and clinical work, a book twentysomethings anywhere could read.

I borrowed a sample book proposal from a distant colleague, and I went to work on the project in my spare hours. When I finished the proposal, I asked the editor whose books I had accidentally received if she would give me her impressions. She read it and quickly introduced me to interested parties. Soon, the book had a publisher.

I had never met the editor with the box of books or the publisher who ultimately acquired my book. I had only once met the colleague whose proposal I used as a model. No one had any reason to give me preferential treatment and, business is business, so no one did. This book, like most things in adulthood, came to be because of what is called the strength of weak ties.

The Strength of Weak Ties

The urban tribe is overrated. For the past decade or so, there has been much talk about the urban tribe, or the makeshift family that has come to the fore as twentysomethings spend more years on their own. Sitcoms and movies tout the value of the tribe, the fun of having a place to go with that store-bought pumpkin pie when we can't make it "home-home" for Thanksgiving, how nice it feels to have a group to call our own.

Without a doubt, these friends play a crucial, supportive role for many twentysomethings, and they provide lots of good times. Essentially the college buddies of the twentysomething years, the urban tribe, are the people we meet up with on the weekend. They give us rides to the airport. We vent about bad dates and breakups over burritos and beer.

With all the attention paid to the urban tribe, however, many twentysomethings have limited themselves to huddling together with like-minded peers. Some are in almost constant contact with the same few people. But while the urban tribe helps us survive, it does not help us thrive. The urban tribe may bring us soup when we are sick, but it is the people we hardly know—those who never make it into our tribe—who will swiftly and dramatically change our lives for the better.

In work that predates Facebook by more than twenty-five years, sociologist and Stanford professor Mark Granovetter conducted one of the first and most famous studies of social networks. Granovetter was curious about how networks foster social mobility, about how the people in our lives lead to new opportunities. Surveying workers in a Boston suburb who had recently changed jobs, Granovetter found it wasn't close friends and family—presumably those most invested in helping—who were the most valuable during the job hunt. Rather, more than three-quarters of new jobs had come from leads from contacts who were seen only "occasionally" or "rarely." This finding led Granovetter to write a groundbreaking paper titled "The Strength of Weak Ties" about the unique value of people we do not know well.

According to Granovetter, not all relationships—or ties—are created equal.

Some are weak and some are strong, and the strength of a tie increases with time and experience. The more we have been around someone, the stronger the tie because, likely, we have shared experiences and confidences. In childhood, strong ties are family and best friends. In the twentysomething years, strong ties grow to include the urban tribe, roommates, partners, and other close friends.

Weak ties are the people we have met, or are connected to somehow, but do not currently know well. Maybe they are the coworkers we rarely talk with or the neighbor we only say hello to. We all have acquaintances we keep meaning to go out with but never do, and friends we lost touch with years ago. Weak ties are also our former employers or professors and any other associations who have not been promoted to close friends.

But why are some people promoted while others are not? A century of research in sociology—and thousands of years of Western thought—show that "similarity breeds connection." Birds of a feather flock together because of homophily, or "love of the same." From the schoolyard to the boardroom, people are more likely to form close relationships with those most like themselves. As a result, a cluster of strong ties—such as the urban tribe or even an online social network—is typically an incestuous group. A homogeneous clique.

Here we get to what another sociologist, Rose Coser, called the "weakness of strong ties," or how our close friends hold us back. Our strong ties feel comfortable and familiar but, other than support, they may have little to offer. They are usually too similar—even too similarly stuck—to provide more than sympathy. They often don't know any more about jobs or relationships than we do.

Weak ties feel too different or, in some cases, literally too far away to be close friends. But that's the point. Because they're not just figures in an already ingrown cluster, weak ties give us access to something fresh. They know things and people that we don't know. Information and opportunity spread farther and faster through weak ties than through close friends because weak ties have fewer overlapping contacts. Weak ties are like bridges you cannot see all the way across, so there is no telling where they might lead.

It's not just who and what our ties know that matters. It is how we communicate with them as well. Because close-knit groups of strong ties are usually so similar, they tend to use a simple, encoded way of communicating known as restricted speech. Economical but incomplete, restricted speech relies on in-crowd colloquialisms and shortcuts to say more with less. Texters all know that FTW means "for the win" just as businesspeople know that JIT stands for "just

in time.”

But in-group members share more than slang and vocabulary. They share assumptions about one another and the world. They may have gone to the same schools or have the same ideas about love. Our strong ties probably all watch Glenn Beck or Rachel Maddow or Stephen Colbert—or they decidedly do *not*. Whatever the particular sources of sameness, hanging out with them can limit who and what we know, how we talk, and ultimately how we think.

Weak ties, on the other hand, force us to communicate from a place of difference, to use what is called elaborated speech. Unlike restricted speech, which presupposes similarities between the speaker and the listener, elaborated speech does not presume that the listener thinks in the same way or knows the same information. We need to be more thorough when we talk to weak ties, and this requires more organization and reflection. There are fewer tags, such as “ya know,” and sentences are less likely to trail off at the end. Whether we are talking about career ideas or our thoughts on love, we have to make our case more fully. In this way, weak ties promote, and sometimes even force, thoughtful growth and change.

Meet Cole and Betsy.

Cole burst out of college toward his twentysomething years like a middle schooler runs toward summer on the last day of school. As an engineering major, he’d spent his undergraduate years solving equations while it seemed everyone else was having fun. His twenties were Cole’s chance to have a good time. He took a low-key job within a firm of surveyors, preferring to clock in and clock out without thinking much about work. He moved into an apartment with a group of guys he met, some of whom had not gone to college at all. Over some years, this became Cole’s urban tribe:

> We’d sit around and drink and talk about how much we hated work or how the job market sucked. We were anti doing anything. We were all just preaching to the choir. None of those guys was thinking about a real career, so I wasn’t either. I was part of the cool club, I guess you could say. I wasn’t thinking about anything except the next basketball game I was going to or whatever. That’s what I thought everybody else was doing too because that’s what everyone I saw *was* doing.
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> Then sometimes I’d hear about somebody I knew from college who had made bank starting some business or who had some awesome job

> at Google or something. And I'd think, "*That guy?* That's not fair. I was busting my ass in college while he was majoring in anthropology." It was like the fact that he'd been doing something with his twenties while I'd been screwing around didn't mean anything. I didn't want to admit it, but after a while I wanted to be one of those guys who was doing something with his life. I just didn't know how.

Cole's sister dragged him to her roommate's thirtieth birthday party. Uncomfortably surrounded by people who were older and more successful, Cole passed the time talking to a young sculptor he met, a client of mine named Betsy.

Betsy was tired of dating the same kind of person. It seemed like the moment she broke up with one boyfriend who "didn't have his shit together," she started dating another guy who didn't either. Eventually, Betsy came to therapy to examine why she was drawn to this sort of man again and again. But having more insight about it did not change the fact that she kept meeting the same fun and unambitious guys. "I can't get a decent date," she said.

Betsy didn't want to be at the party any more than Cole did. She'd met the birthday girl in a spin class a couple of years earlier and had been declining her Evites ever since. In an effort to meet new people, this time Betsy replied "Yes." She took a cab to the party, wondering why she was subjecting herself to this.

When Betsy met Cole there was a spark, but she was ambivalent. Cole was clearly smart and well educated, but he didn't seem to be doing much about it. They had some nice dinner dates, which seemed promising. Then, after sleeping over one night and watching Cole wake up at eleven a.m. and grab his skateboard, Betsy felt less bullish.

What she didn't know was that ever since he'd started spending time with Betsy, Cole had regained some of his old drive. He saw the way she wanted to work on her sculptures even on the weekend, how she and her friends loved to get together to talk about their projects and their plans. He eyed a posting on Craigslist for a challenging tech job at a high-profile start-up, but he felt his résumé was too shabby to apply.

Cole remembered that an old high school friend, someone he saw about once a year around town, worked at the start-up. He got in touch, and this friend put in a good word about Cole. After a handful of interviews with different people in the company, he was offered the position. The hiring manager told Cole he had been chosen for three reasons: his engineering degree suggested he knew how to work hard on technical projects, his personality seemed like a good fit for the group, and the twentysomething who vouched for him was well liked in the

company. The rest, the manager said, he could learn on the job.

This radically altered Cole's career path. He learned software development at a dot-com on the leading edge. A few years later, Cole moved over and up as a director of development at another start-up because, by then, the capital he'd gained at the dot-com could speak for itself.

Nearly ten years later, Cole and Betsy are married. She runs a gallery co-op. He's a CIO. They have a happy life and gladly give much of the credit to Cole's friend from high school and to the woman with the Evites. Weak ties changed their lives.

When I encourage twentysomethings to draw on the strength of weak ties, there is often a fair amount of resistance: "I hate networking" or "I want to get a job on my own" or "That's not my style" are common reactions. I get it, but that doesn't change the fact that, as we look for jobs or relationships or opportunities of any kind, it is the people we know the least well who will be the most transformative. New things almost always come from outside your inner circle. And twentysomethings who won't use their weak ties fall behind twentysomethings like these, who have this to say:

> Networking, using contacts, whatever, is not a bad thing. I never really was overly worried about it, but I have some friends who always were so stressed about working somewhere where a family member helped them get the job. I work in one of the top three companies in my industry, and literally I know only one person who actually got a job there without knowing someone. Everyone got it because they know somebody.
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> I hate randomly calling people I don't know. Hate, hate, hate it. But my dad met someone at a holiday party who used to work at the company where I am now and he told him I was interested in the fashion industry. I finally called this person just to get some information, and he passed along my résumé. That is how I got the interview.
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> There was a hospital where I wanted to work, and I kept looking for them to post some job openings, but they never did. I finally called a friend of mine who worked there. I'd put that off because I wasn't

sure if that was wrong or if I'd be putting her in a bad spot. But right away she gave me the name of someone to call at the hospital. When I did call, they were about to post a job. I got it before they even posted. Everything can change in a day. Especially if you put yourself out there.

I think sometimes people think, "I don't know anyone and everyone else does," but people would be surprised at the untapped resources they have. Alumni networks from college and high schools can be really helpful, and if there's not an official network, go through the Facebook group or LinkedIn group for your school. Look through and see where people work. If there is someone who does something you want to do, call or e-mail them for an "informational interview." That is what everybody ultimately does.

Most twentysomethings yearn for a feeling of community, and they cling to their strong ties to feel more connected. Ironically, being enmeshed with a group can actually enhance feelings of alienation, because we—and our tribe—become insular and detached. Over time, our initial feeling of being part of a group becomes a sense of disconnection with the larger world.

True interconnectedness rests not on texting best friends at one a.m., but on reaching out to weak ties that make a difference in our lives even though they don't have to. When weak ties help, the communities around us—even the adult community that twentysomethings are warily in the process of entering—seem less impersonal and impenetrable. Suddenly, the world seems smaller and easier to navigate. The more we know about the way things work, the more we feel a part of things.

Favors are how things begin. Take Benjamin Franklin, for instance.