



## Life Support

**W**hile rereading “Stages of Support,” the May/June Design Culture column, I couldn’t help but notice an aspect of support that Wendy omitted.

It is another kind of support, one that is not defined by the stage of one’s career or the role of its source. It is not necessarily even given by someone one works with, although its essence is work-related.

The kind of support I am talking about comes from a long-term connection with someone who cares about you. It might be a colleague, but it could also be a relative or a friend. It follows you, threading through each stage of your career. It evolves as you do, and it accumulates strength with the passage of time.

I’m not talking about the I’m-great-you’re-great or the don’t-worry-it-will-all-be-fine kind of support. I’m talking about the real deal: exchanges that emerge from profound understanding, that dig to the core of who you are; exchanges that enlighten and guide in surprising and subtle ways; exchanges that could not occur in any other relationship.

I know this kind of support because I am fortunate enough to have it. And so does Wendy. It is epitomized by our 35-year friendship.

### Cornerstone

The first time Wendy and I interacted professionally—after ten years of solidifying our friendship—we confronted underlying differences in the way we approached our work. We had each received a National Endowment for the Arts grant to create pieces for a Videotex gallery (Videotex was an early precursor to the Web). We decided to jointly submit an article, about the work we’d done, to an upcoming publication.

For several days, we planned, discussed, wrote and rewrote the piece. It was before the days of ubiquitous personal computers, and we were using a typewriter.

By midnight of the fourth day—the night before our deadline—we were finished and drained. “That’s it,” I announced. “We did it!” I started packing up to go home.

Wendy was looking over the final document. “You know,” she said, “the way we’ve laid this out is confusing. We should fix it.”

In that instant, our working styles clashed. My efficient, get-it-done attitude came face-to-face with Wendy’s studied perfectionism. For me, enough was enough. For Wendy, the possibility of improvement was impossible to ignore. We retyped the article.

When it was accepted and published, we both were proud. “Thanks to your insistence,” I told her, “we made a better piece.”

“What?” she said. “If it weren’t for you, we’d never have written it in the first place. And I almost made us miss the deadline!”

With that, a cornerstone was laid. We had faced our differences in action, but rather than judging them, or worse, dismissing them, we recognized the value of each other’s approach. What we didn’t realize then was that we were setting the stage for what would become a lifelong source of invaluable and incomparable work-related support. This support is possible because of three important ingredients: observation, the sharing of information and unquestioned mutual trust.

### Intentional observation

Wendy is a visual artist, columnist and educator; she is now preparing work for an upcoming museum show. I am a writer and editor, currently working on a memoir. As our Videotex encounter illustrated, I tend to work in a linear and product-oriented manner. I schedule and outline and search for structure. Wendy, in contrast, meanders, scrutinizes and questions. She persists in the pursuit of more. In her process, time is dictated by truth and precision; I aim for goals and am motivated by completion.

Since that initial collaboration, we’ve had many occasions to consider each other’s work. Completing our Videotex project, our observations, though significant, were unconscious. Since then, they have become more intentional.

We watch each other to understand and to learn, particularly in more recent years. Since we’ve each reached a point in our careers where we’re focusing more on personal projects, we sense that the other’s method might hold a clue to what could be missing in our own.

One of the most important traits I’ve witnessed in Wendy is the value she places on enjoyment. “It’s hard,” she says of her artwork. “It’s torture sometimes, but the process has to be

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*joyous.*” Now this is a concept that would never have occurred to me, and one I find foreign but at the same time lovely. When I become lost in the scrabble of details and deadlines, I remind myself of Wendy’s insistence on joy and try to find a piece of it for myself.

### Depositing data

As our relationship has grown, we have deemed each other worthy as recipients of all kinds of facts about our lives, from our most intimate dreams to the results of a shopping spree. From time to time, Wendy will e-mail me about a recent occurrence. “So you will know,” she explains. And I respond in kind, not to gossip or vent, but to *inform*. We are sharing data—for safekeeping, for knowledge, for future reference. We are each other’s diaries. Later, we refer to things we know the other knows, and it helps us.

When Wendy is beginning a large project, she tells me she feels overwhelmed by its scope and complexity, and more than once she has asked me to help her create a calendar. She sends me a detailed outline, and together we determine priorities and assign dates. Then, because I am aware of each stage of her work, I am able to follow her progress and encourage each step.

Over the course of time, we have acquired a familiarity with each other’s experiences: the changes we’ve made, the people we know, our respective successes and failures. This accrual, in addition to what we’ve observed, provides a comprehensive base from which our support originates. When either of us feels stuck in the details of a specific problem or doubt, we have the accuracy of the entire picture to present back.

It also results in a kind of shorthand, a shared language that allows us to communicate quickly and acutely. Not long ago, I had a revelation about my work that I (of course) discussed with Wendy. It took the metaphorical form of the ocean and the shore. Because I feel more comfortable with structure, I search for order when I begin a project. And if I lose touch with that order—a prescribed beginning, middle and end with a template of subheads—I feel as if I am drowning. But at the same time, I know that some of my best writing comes when I can let go of my boundaries. I call that being in the ocean, scary but freeing and necessary. I explained to Wendy that my inclination was to swim back to shore before I begin to write, but that my goal was to stay in the ocean. I deposited that story in my Wendy bank, and now, when Wendy reads drafts of my memoir, if either of us wants to refer to it, we simply mention the ocean or the shore and we know what we mean.

### Safe haven

Such exchanges would not be feasible without a foundation

of trust and a willingness to be vulnerable with each other. That means showing each other early unpolished and perhaps unsuccessful pieces of our projects. It means broaching ideas that aren’t yet thought through and may sound absurd. It means being willing both to be wrong and to tell the other she is wrong.

Another crucial perspective I’ve learned from Wendy is the value of failing. “I probably reject 90% of everything that I make,” she once told me. I was floored. She has written about this in a previous column and calls it “the momentum of failure”—a way of looking at wrong turns as a valid and necessary way to propel oneself to the answer. When I hit a block in my writing, hate what I’ve already done and doubt my abilities to go forward, this viewpoint gives me the courage to proceed.

The things Wendy and I say to each other about our work are always delivered kindly, but not always what the other wants to hear. We rely on honesty. When Wendy tells me she likes what I’ve done, I know it is genuine. When she isn’t so sure, because of our shorthand, I can tell right away. We agree that the most useful feedback is that which isn’t stated, but unearthed, so our conversations frequently take the form of questioning each other. When we are lucky, we arrive at breakthroughs in the answers.

That Wendy and I respect each other goes without saying. That we are willing to expose our inner workings, our amorphous ideas and stabs at products that are destined to fail, is what permits us to truly support each other.

### Mining the rewards

In the past year, Wendy and I have been scheduling regular “workdays.” What we do is everything but actual work.

We meet in the wood-paneled lobby of the Algonquin Hotel, where Wendy selects just the right table and we settle into the upholstered furniture and order tea. That place becomes a portal into a sphere that is insulated and unencumbered. It is where we reap the rewards of knowing each other, and where our work is to talk and our topic is our work.

We have learned to say what we believe without censoring, because sometimes what one of us thinks is a casual comment ends up resonating with the other in an important way. Our conversations dig deeper and deeper and we tunnel in. Because of the years of investment we have placed in each other, we are the beneficiaries of something rare and inspiring, a form of support that has catapulted each of us into realms we might never have found. **CA**

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*Editor’s note: Susan and I are looking forward to our next workday at the Algonquin. —Wendy Richmond*