Irene Young

Above: Carol S. Becker, author of Unbroken Ties.

Healing the ties that bind

UNBROKEN TIES: Lesbian ex-lovers, by Carol S. Becker, $10.00

Through a series of nearly one hundred personal accounts and interviews, Dr. Carol Becker, a practicing psychotherapist, charts the various stages of lesbian breakups and examines the ways in which women maintain ties with their former lovers. Becker shows how the end of a relationship can be a time of personal growth and how former lovers can form the core of an alternative family network. She describes how the book came about in her introduction, excerpted below.

During the summer of 1986, as I was beginning work on this book, I spent a lot of time in the library of a New England ivy league college. Each day I took a route through the old cemetery that was part of the campus. Carrying my stack of interviews, I read the gravestones as I passed them. There was an infant who had lived a day, a teacher who had dedicated twenty years of her life to the college, and women and men side-by-side with their children and grandchildren. Shafts of sunlight fell through the tall pines and birds chirped their busy songs as I made my way to the library, mulling over ideas and phrases.

I found myself touched by the irony of a college campus built around a cemetery: the juxtaposition of youth, learning, fresh beginnings, hopes and accomplishments — with death, endings, losses, disappointments and finitude. Although these aspects of life are often dichotomized into polar opposites, they are, in fact, parts of each other. Beginnings contain endings; losses bring forth new insights; disappointments help us to realize our unspoken hopes.

My interest in writing a book on lesbian ex-lovers evolved from such an ending, when my five-year relationship ended in 1983. Experiencing the breakup of the lover relationship, packing up the belongings of the two children I'd lived with for five years, dividing a household, and finalizing the legal separation of property was more painful than words can express. My lover and I had sat with friends during their breakups, but the end of my own relationship felt like being cut loose on an uncharted sea of pain.

Although I tried to act lovingly toward my ex-lover, I could not sustain it. My love had splintered into anger, sadness, relief, fear, abandonment, anxiety, guilt, and loneliness. My ex-lover wanted to maintain contact, but I needed a separation. I became caught between what I should do for her and what I needed to do for myself. With the support of my therapist and friends, I finally did what felt right for me: I stopped seeing her and began rebuilding my life around myself and other people.

Because books have always been a source of comfort and inspiration to me, after our breakup I searched for writings on lesbian breakups — and found none. As part of my recovery process, I decided to fill this gap. I asked lesbian friends and colleagues to tell me the stories of their breakups so that we could learn from one another.

I wanted to know how lesbian partners separated, what they felt and did after the breakup, what kinds of relationships they maintained afterward, and what influenced the extent of contact between them. These phases — the breakup, the immediate and long-range responses to the breakup, and the eventual relationship that develops between ex-lovers — constitute what I call the "ex-lover transition."

I began collecting women's stories of the ex-lover transition in order to make the common themes and diverse patterns visible to other lesbians. I hoped that this information would help lesbians to trust their ways of resolving and recovering from the breakups of their relationships.

I collected ninety-eight stories of the ex-lover transition from forty lesbians between January 1985 and May 1987. These women ranged in age from twenty-four to sixty-six years. While the majority of the women were white, 25 percent were women of color and half were from working-class backgrounds. Diverse professions, political attitudes and religious backgrounds were represented. All resided in the San Francisco Bay Area.

I collected lesbians' breakup experiences through the use of an unstructured, phenomenological interview. This involved asking the women to tell me, in their own words, what they actually experienced when their partnerships ended. Some women talked about one transition; others spoke about several. I encouraged them to recount their experiences exactly as they remembered them. I asked for clarifying examples, and tried to garner the most inclusive and detailed descriptions of their experiences. I asked each woman to tell me about her current relationship with each ex-lover she had mentioned. Each interview lasted an hour or two.

These interviews were taped, then transcribed. Names and identifying information were changed to ensure confidentiality. The transcripts were analyzed to determine what caused the breakups, the milestones that marked the breakups, the postbreakup recovery, what helped and hindered ex-lovers' ability to form non-lover relationships, and the kinds of relationships they eventually formed.

The results of my research corroborated my clinical insights about the ex-lover transition for lesbians. In the individual and couples psychotherapy I have done with lesbians during my ten years in private practice, I have observed great diversity and complexity in the range of lesbian breakups. When my clients were confronted with the pain and losses of a breakup they also gained the opportunity to increase their self-awareness, to clarify their interpersonal needs and desires, and to build more durable relationships in the future. My research enabled me to delineate the aspects of the breakup, to show how breakups gave women the chance to grow and change, and to portray the kinds of ex-lover relationships that resulted from these changes.

I begin my study of lesbians' breakups and their recoveries with an overview of four relationships: Lulling and Marge, Ellen and Rachel, Louise and Fran, Alice and Melissa. I look at why these relationships ended and what kinds of relationships the ex-lovers formed. Then I discuss the various parts of the breakup and its aftermath: the reasons for ending the relationship, the concrete changes involved in the breakup, and the emotional tasks which the ex-lovers faced.

As the women rebuilt their lives, they relied on new lovers, friends, family members and each other for support. On the one hand, contact between ex-lovers brought up the emotional issues of their breakup and gave them opportunities to resolve these issues. On the other hand, a period of separation enabled them to understand what had been important to them about the relationship, to reorient their lives around themselves, and to use the pain of the breakup to further their emotional growth.

Relationships between lesbian ex-lovers ranged from antipathy to close friendship. Women were able to become friends when they held onto their mutual love and respect despite the pain of their breakup. As friends, they had to establish the new commitments and boundaries of their relationship. When former partners could not resolve their feelings of betrayal and anger toward one another, they did not form a viable ex-lover relationship.

Each of the diverse resolutions of the ex-lover transition had its difficulties and its rewards. Regardless of the kind of ex-lover relationship that a woman was able to create, she retained ties to her former partner. Ex-lovers remained important parts of a woman's evolving identity — as a woman, as a lesbian, and as a constructor of intimate relationships.

When a person is a member of a stigmatized minority — a lesbian or a gay man — the pain and loss of the ending of a lover relationship touches accumulated wounds from the homophobic negations they have endured. But this added dimension of pain can act as a common bond: a bond of gay pride that enables ex-lovers to set aside their differences and salvage what they can from their changed relationship. Because their partnerships and their breakups are not given status and recognition by society, lesbians and gay men must develop ways of validating their experiences and making their cohesion, despite change, visible to themselves and to others. This motivates them to remain in contact with ex-lovers and, when possible, to include them in a family of friends that provides a reference point for personal continuity and growth. ▼

"*Unbroken Ties* is valuable reading for lesbians before, as well as after, they break up."
—*New Directions for Women*

"*Unbroken Ties* has the nitty-gritty feel of real life. There's a lot more craziness here, more raw pain, intense emotion, and a wide swathe of human behavior. These stories and Becker's way of categorizing them feel like lesbian life as I have lived and observed it."
—*Bay Windows*

"This is an important addition to the lesbian literature and community. Becker presents a fascinating account of the diverse experiences of lesbians as they break up, rebuild their lives, and develop varied relationships with ex-lovers. I especially like the descriptions of friendship formation between ex-lovers and the discussions of lesbian families. Every lesbian can profit from reading this book."
—JoAnn Loulan, author of *Lesbian Passion: Loving Ourselves and Each Other*