A CALL TO CONNECTION

Rediscovering the Transformative Power of Relationships

Casper ter Kuile with Angie Thurston, Sue Phillips, and Derrick Scott III

EINHORN COLLABORATIVE
Greater Good Science Center
Sacred Design Lab

Table of Contents

Foreword

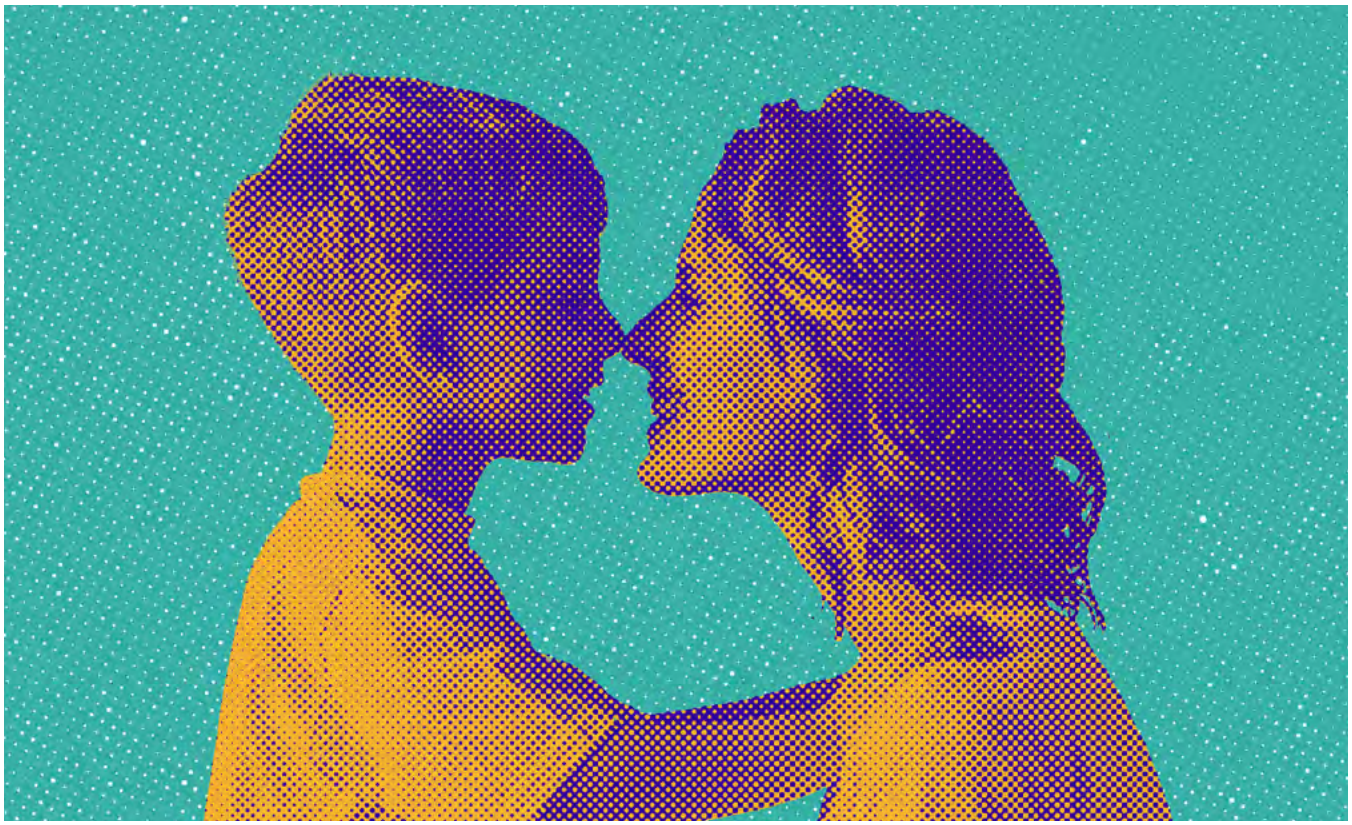
BY JENN HOOS ROTHBERG

"Mommy, I just asked you for a hug. Take your hands off your computer and focus on what you're supposed to do."

My eight-year-old lifted my hands off the keyboard and cradled my face, turning my gaze towards his. So many things were asking for my attention at that moment that my eyes had trouble breaking contact with the screen. Luckily, the power of my son's physical touch ultimately took hold. Ten seconds into our twenty-second hug, it hit me: the only thing I was "supposed to do" was take him into my arms and relish the nourishing rush of oxytocin that came coursing through our bodies.

This simple act was a gift of mutuality. Employing the radically *old technology* of human connection, my son offered the absolutely necessary and increasingly impossible, giving me exactly what I need when I couldn't see it for myself.

Sometimes what's in plain sight is easy to miss.



As we navigate the realities of a global pandemic, economic crisis, and racial justice reckoning, we face a deeper challenge that's harder to see, and yet lies at the heart of all others—**a crisis of connection**.

Despite our desire for connection and belonging, more and more Americans are living in isolation, loneliness, anxiety, and fear. And our economic, political, and social systems keep pushing us further apart—eroding our faith in our institutions and each other.

Over the past decade, our work at Einhorn Collaborative has helped us realize how vital nurturing, trusting relationships are not only to weathering this storm, but also to reweaving our social fabric, together.

We commissioned "A Call to Connection" in an effort to help leaders in multiple sectors better understand how vital human connection is to effectively addressing the challenges of our time.

To investigate a topic that is already rich with research, we invited Sacred Design Lab, with support from Greater Good Science Center, to capture why and how human connection is a necessary and often missing ingredient in many of our efforts to ignite positive social change.

By weaving together extensive scientific findings, insights from ancient wisdom traditions, beautiful stories of those leading effective work in communities across the country, and concrete practices any of us can use, this primer seeks to help us all take the call seriously.

"A Call to Connection" is intended to spark conversation and inspire action in the many different settings and roles we inhabit. It does not put forward a prescriptive blueprint, but rather a set of accessible and adaptable ideas on the why and how of human connection. As a primer, it's a powerful tool for beginning our work together and igniting a shared understanding and collective consciousness that opens us up to the possibilities before us. From there, it will be on us to imagine and co-create the steps we'll need to take to truly build the culture of connection that we are all yearning for.

The complexity and severity of the challenges we're facing seem overwhelming, and we'll struggle to solve them if we can't see, hear, and understand each other first. When we bring empathy, mutuality, vulnerability, and curiosity to our interactions, we feel seen, validated, and understood. We're able to appreciate what makes us distinctive and what we have in common. Relationships become a source of sustenance, and differences become our strength.

Our hope is this primer reminds all of us that when we put healthy, trust-filled relationships at the center of everything we do, the benefits for ourselves, our families, our work, our communities, and our society are beyond measure. We're longing to be part of a healthy and thriving culture that prioritizes the relationships between us. Let's together put this radically old technology of human connection to good use.

Jenn Hoos Rothberg is the Executive Director of Einhorn Collaborative, a foundation dedicated to addressing America's crisis of connection.

“You think that because you understand ‘one’ that you must therefore understand ‘two’ because one and one make two. But you forget that you must also understand ‘and.’”[1]

– Donella H. Meadows,
environmental scientist, quoting Jalāl ad-Dīn Mohammad Rumi

Executive Summary

Vibrant human connection is central to our health as individuals, our efficacy as organizations, and our collective wellbeing as a society. Across disciplines, studies show that we are wired with an instinctive drive to mirror and coordinate, build relationships, and help and support one another.

These findings are echoed and enriched by wisdom teachings and cultural practices going back thousands of years. Relationships are at the heart of what makes life worth living.

Though we long for connection, too often our relationships take a backseat to other demands and priorities. Elsewhere, our differences are exploited and connections severed, fueling toxic polarization. In the midst of a mental health crisis, social conflict, and a global pandemic, how do we cultivate a culture of connection?

This primer is written for leaders who are ready to answer that call, or curious enough to explore it. While celebrating efforts to change systems, structures, and policies, our focus here is the everyday steps that can recenter our culture on connection. How we conduct our work, choose our priorities, set strategies, and measure success—each of these helps or hinders our connection with one another.

Relationships are not just a means to an end. They are ends in themselves, and they are vital to enhancing most every aspect of our lives and society. This is the relational truth at the heart of everything we do.

We offer this primer in four parts:

- Why connection matters
- What gets in the way
- Bonding, bridging, and healing
- Practices to cultivate connection

Throughout, you'll encounter reflection prompts and vignettes that illustrate the essence of connection in vivid and practical ways. These stories reveal the messy beauty and transformative power of fostering a culture of connection.

As a systems thinker, environmental scientist Donella H. Meadows taught us to see the world differently, to pay attention to the "and" in "one and one make two." We must now put on Meadows's metaphorical glasses and notice what may have been previously hidden in plain sight. The time has come to stop giving up on each other and to start seeing, strengthening, and celebrating the connections that hold us together.

Cultures of Connection: The People's Supper

"Stop looking for common ground. What we need is common humanity." Lennon Flowers has learned that the hard way.

She co-founded The People's Supper after the 2016 election, using shared meals to bring people together across lines of difference. Like many efforts to bridge divides, theirs is based on social contact theory, which suggests that under the right conditions, interpersonal contact reduces prejudice and bias among conflicting groups.

This insight was put to the test in Creede, CO in 2019. The People's Supper teamed up with the local public health department to host a year-long series of potlucks in this historic mining town of 350 people, which skews older, white, and conservative but is also home to a storied repertory theater that attracts thousands from around the country every summer, skewing younger, more racially diverse, and progressive.[2] As such, the town is a remarkable microcosm of the United States as a whole. It is also a place that Flowers calls home.

The potlucks were an experiment in improving public health outcomes by strengthening relationships. Or more bluntly, as Flowers puts it, "We wanted to offer an antidote to the toxic waste dumps that were most people's social media feeds."

> “The eloquence of our own affection for one another keeps the world healthy. Praise and the depth of our grief expressed for one another keeps the world in love. Love is health.”[3]
>
> – Martín Prechtel, author and educator

Creede was in a tender place. Traditionally, the big divide depended on whether you’re a “newcomer” or an “old-timer.” But things were more fraught than they used to be, even if Washington felt far away. There were disagreements over municipal decisions, fights on the school board, and local issues that were, in some cases, splitting families apart.

So The People’s Supper approached each dinner gathering with questions like: What do you love about our town? What do you fear for it? What is the thing that is getting in the way of who we want to be in this community?

Over the course of the year, 151 people in Creede—43% of the population—participated in at least one supper, and many came to two or more. Nearly a third of participants identified as conservative or very conservative.

Then the pandemic lockdown hit and people were more isolated than ever. And, ideological divisions grew more extreme.

Did the potlucks make a difference? Lennon is cautious in her assessment. Knowing that this work takes time, it was simply too soon to tell. If nothing else, the meals were an excuse to get together, to enjoy moments of positive social contact in place of their opposite. The brief encounters may not have been enough to challenge entrenched beliefs, or make it easier to navigate COVID-19, or affect public health outcomes. But they were defiant acts of common humanity, and if we had more of them, the parameters of “us” and “them” would be irrevocably changed.

Introduction

Our relationships are what make life worth living.

You knew that already. So why write about it?

Because our dominant culture—which we inherited, yes, but which we also perpetuate—treats connection as secondary. Second to work, wealth, social status; to "getting what's mine." In our politics, in our communities, on our campuses, and in our digital worlds, our differences are exploited as we are turned against one another for private profit or political gain. By losing sight of our relationships, we now face crises of mental health, loneliness, and toxic polarization that wreak havoc on our private and public spheres.

The roots of disconnection run deep. They have been shaped by venerating productivity and hyper-individualism at the expense of mutuality and care. And these roots stem from the legacy of racism and inequity that persists to this day. Whether we feel that pain or have grown numb to it, we have all suffered its moral injury.

So here we are: desperate not only to connect meaningfully with one another, but to live in a culture in which connections flourish. And though we are increasingly skilled at diagnosing the pain and pointing to the systems that perpetuate it, our strategies for cultivating connection can be found wanting.

"A Call to Connection" is a primer for leaders, to help you take practical steps toward fostering a culture of connection across your areas of influence. Of course, policy change is essential, but it is also insufficient. To complement structural change, we offer a lens, indeed an orientation to life, that prioritizes and strengthens relationships.

Whether you lead a foundation, a business, a nonprofit, a faith-based institution, or a government agency, or you've stepped into leadership amongst friends and neighbors, you can choose to contribute to a culture of human connection. This primer will show you how.

More than any specifics we'll share, the key to unlocking this potential is to shift the paradigm from seeing relationships as a means to an end—i.e., "let's get through this meeting agenda and onto the next"—to valuing connection as a *fundamental end in itself*.

We'll make this case with insights from scientific research, ancient wisdom traditions, and the harsh and beautiful reality of lived experience. Each of these sources affirms that a culture of connection is not only vital to human flourishing and organizational change but also makes new things possible: a life together that is healthier, safer, more creative, more loving, and more just.

So how do we nurture that culture?

We offer a series of practices that we can draw on in our own lives, and in our leadership—making space for celebration, creating covenants, and telling and listening to stories, for example. Throughout, we illustrate how these practices find inspiring application in contexts as diverse as a New York City hospital, a Chicago law clinic, and a farm in North Carolina. Most likely, none of these practices will be radically new to you. But it is precisely the fact that they are *radically old* that makes them powerful and accessible to all of us.

Each section also offers questions for personal reflection and group discussion, to explore how you can strengthen a culture of connection with your team and across your projects and pursuits, as well as in your everyday life.

Fear not: We are not naive about how hard and harmful relationships can be. That's why we've named numerous obstacles that can get in the way of life-giving connections and interviewed experts for guidance on how to generate them, even in some of the toughest contexts imaginable. Throughout, we invite you to take seriously the discipline of cultivating a mindset, or heartset, of connection, as well as the skills that make it possible.

New scientific discoveries and complex geopolitics, growing climate and other environmental threats, and long-overdue steps toward undoing racism and inequality all make clear an enduring truth: *We are all connected*.

The great sages of old have told us this truth. And today's greatest scientists explain how. The time has come to stop giving up on each other and to start seeing, strengthening, and celebrating what holds us together.

We must heed the call to connection.

Cultures of Connection: Thread

On paper, Thread's mission is to harness the power of relationships to create a new social fabric in which young people facing the most significant opportunity and achievement gaps are supported by a diverse group of individuals—and that is all true. But the real magic of Thread's work is that it starts with the assumption that everyone needs the relationships Thread weaves together; particularly because they are usually cross-class and cross-race relationships of true friendship and reciprocity.

"The first core competency? Show all the way up," explains Mel Brennan, former Senior Director of Thread.

Building relationships isn't just a part of Thread's strategy; relationships are the strategy. Not the kind of "helper" relationships where the richer, white, recently-arrived, college grad shows up once or twice to mentor a younger kid of color at risk of dropping out of high school. But the kind of transformative friendships that demand consistent investment and enable mutual flourishing.

The need is familiar and clear. Pockets of concentrated poverty have deepened in Baltimore, making it increasingly difficult for families to get the support they need for their kids. During the 2011–2012 school year, 41.3% of Baltimore's high school students were chronically absent, and the five-year high school graduation rate was just 71.7%. Thread has built a model that turns those statistics around.

It looks like this: Each Thread student is matched with a group of three volunteers, an extended family that does whatever it takes to provide their student and family with completely customized support. This might include packing lunches, providing rides to school, tutoring, connecting students and their families to existing community resources, and coordinating clothing, furniture, or appliance donations. Whatever it takes.

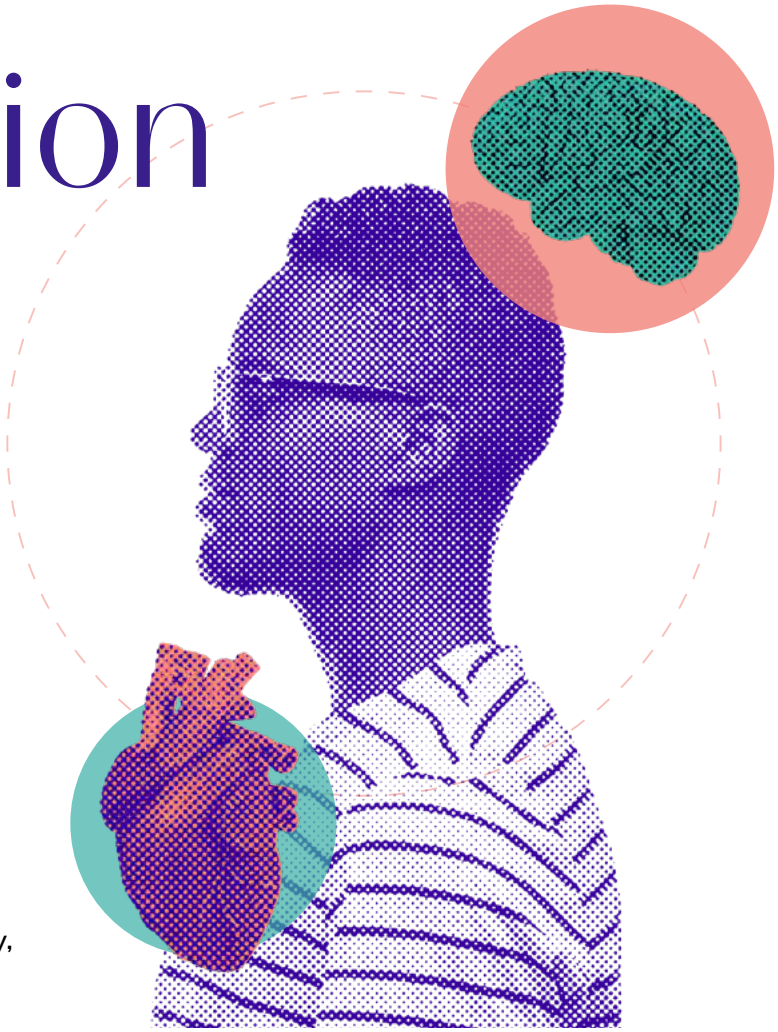
No surprise: High school and even college graduation rates skyrocket.

Volunteers need to grasp a specific mindset and set of skills, and so are supported by a relationship coach. Volunteers learn to invest in authentic, mutually enriching friendships again and again: getting nails done in the mall together; sitting down to meals with the family; and sharing their own challenges and welcoming help when it is offered. Because 100% of students remain enrolled in Thread for ten years, no matter what, volunteers continue to show up offering support—sometimes for over a year—before enough trust has been built for families to actively connect. True community is built when the quality of the relationship is not the marker of whether you show up. You show up because you show up because you show up.

This is the magic of a focus on connection: Graduation rates alone are not the goal. Building new relationships is valued as a practice, because of the manifold possibilities these friendships unleash in the lives of Thread's members.

> "Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about [them]."[4]
>
> – Urie Bronfenbrenner, developmental psychologist

Why Connection Matters



WIRED FOR CONNECTION

A good ritual leader quickly learns that their job is not to conjure connection out of nowhere, but to stoke and nurture it. At a wedding, for example, the officiant's role is not to create new love, but to name, elevate, and shape the love that already suffuses the couple and the community that has gathered around them.

Our relationships grow out of our innate yearning for connection. The longing we feel for community, the heartbreak that accompanies a relationship gone sour, the joy of celebrating together, "This is what our brains were wired for: reaching out to and interacting with others," explains neuroscientist Matthew Lieberman in *Social: Why Our Brains Are Wired to Connect*. "These social adaptations are central to making us the most successful species on earth."[5]

Evolutionary biologists and developmental psychologists agree. We are primed to build relationships, and to help and support each other.

Our connections start in the womb with parents and children co-regulating one another, and they become vividly measurable the moment we are placed in our parents' arms. Our heartbeats start to sync. In fact, when parents and babies are emotionally connected with each other, they improve each other's heart function.[6] Soon our hormones and brain activity start to match as well. Scientists call this "biobehavioral synchrony," a

“Independence is not a concept that explains the living world. It is a political concept humans have created. Nobody can survive by themselves, it is only in relationship that we survive, and only in relationship that we can live in full expression of who we are.”

– Margaret Wheatley,
writer and teacher, drawing on the work of biologist Lynn Margulis

phenomenon in which our behavior and biology begin to mirror the person we're interacting with.[8] This process shapes our capacity to connect in the future, so much so that we sync in similar ways with romantic partners, friends, and even strangers. Without even thinking about it, we are constantly drawn toward other human beings. Each of us has the capacity to be "in sync" with others.

This is the biological grounding from which empathy and willing vulnerability emerge later in life. And our first experiences of separation, as hard as they are, teach us how to repair trust and connection—something we'll rely on over the course of our lives amidst the fraught reality of human interaction.

Countless rituals have been created to help us find our way back to one another after a breach in relationship. Confession and absolution, ritual bathing, pilgrimages asking for forgiveness, and, of course, sharing food and drink together to mark renewed friendship and trust. But social adaptation isn't just practiced in adulthood; even very young children can be naturally generous and cooperative. Our deep instincts for connection become more apparent as we emerge from infancy: Studies demonstrate how toddlers will voluntarily give their blanket to someone who is cold[9] or share a favorite toy with someone who is sad.[10] Even 14-month-olds will go out of their way to retrieve an object for someone who is failing to reach it on their own.[11] The instinct to care for each other starts before we can fully understand its implications.

Kids are so attuned to relationships that, in one study, after 18-month-olds saw a series of photographs with dolls facing each other *in the background* of the images, they were then three times more likely to perform helpful behaviors than were children who viewed photos with dolls standing back-to-back or alone in the backgrounds.[12] In other words, our drive for connection and helpfulness is so strong, it can be primed with even very subtle cues.

Evolutionary biologists, too, have discovered countless practical examples of this deep relational instinct. Archeological evidence suggests that in times when temperatures drastically cooled and food was increasingly scarce, our ancestors may have banded together to compete with other carnivores to scavenge for large carcasses left by more powerful predators.[13] These cooperative instincts are what have helped our species survive since the dawn of time.

The science cannot be clearer: We are wired for connection. So it should come as no surprise that scientists can now prove extensive benefits of connection for us as individuals, organizations, and society as a whole.

THE BENEFITS OF CONNECTION

Not far from the Delaware River in Pennsylvania's Slate Belt lies the little town of Roseto. Stop by Ruggiero's Market and you can still trace the town's Italian-American history as you pick up some pecorino romano or a sweet pizzelle. By the 1950s, some 60 years after the first Italian immigrants arrived to work on the railroads, this community was still tight-knit, where everybody knew everybody else.

Roseto stood in stark contrast to nearby Bangor, where connections had steeply declined. So when a local doctor happened to share a few beers with researcher Stewart Wolf and mentioned the low rates of heart disease in Roseto, Wolf saw an opportunity to discover if social ties might influence the health of these two populations.

Across 50 years of data comparing the deaths in both towns, the researchers found that Rosetans died of heart attacks at much lower rates in the years that the community was still tight-knit.[14] But as the cohesive family and community relationships in Roseto eroded over time, as they have done across most of the country, the number of heart attacks gradually rose to the level of those in Bangor. This finding is consistent across studies of human connection.

Harvard University's Bob Waldinger, who leads perhaps the most comprehensive study of the impact that human relationships have on health, has reached a similar conclusion: "The clearest message that we get from [the research] is this: Good relationships keep us happier and healthier. Period."

Tracking the same group of people over 80 years, the Harvard Study of Adult Development has collected reams of data about the factors that help people live long and fulfilling lives.[15] "People who are more socially connected to family, to friends, to community, are happier, they're physically healthier, and they live longer than people who are less well connected," explains Waldinger in his TED talk.[16]

Today, there are hundreds—if not thousands—of studies that illustrate how relationships play a vital role in our personal health, longevity, and life satisfaction. To name just a few:

- Relationships **make our** immune systems **more robust.**[17] People with more social connections show less susceptibility to disease,[18] a stronger antibody response to vaccines,[19] and heal more quickly from injuries.[20]
- Relationships help us live longer:[21] Loneliness is comparable to smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day—a greater risk than drinking alcohol, obesity, or air pollution.
- An active social life may help delay cognitive decline **and dementia** by as much as 70%.[22]
- **Connection increases motivation**: In one study, when people felt connected to the author of a math paper—they were told that they shared the same birthday!—they persevered for much longer on a difficult math problem.[23]

- And while there's no perfect recipe for happiness, research suggests **you can't have it without strong social connections**.[24]

Just as scientists have discovered how connection impacts our personal health, so too do relationships consistently improve our experience of working together.

- Having strong connections at work may lead to **better job performance**, according to a review of 64 relevant studies;[25] and inversely, loneliness can hinder job performance, even among CEOs.[26]
- Relatedly, studies of a bank[27] and large telecommunication company[28] found that **when employees are ostracized by their colleagues, they are less creative** on the job.
- When their managers are empathic, employees have **fewer physical health complaints**.[29]
- And a study found that when people perform acts of kindness for their coworkers, they report increased feelings of **autonomy**, **competence**, and life and job **satisfaction**, and **fewer symptoms of depression**.[30]

This trend extends to our educational, political, and broader social contexts too. Extensive research indicates that fostering empathy, collegiality, and social connections enhances the outcomes of schools, civic groups, and other organizations. It's even clear that strong social connections help create a safer, more democratic society.

- High societal trust is correlated with positive outcomes like **lower crime rates**,[31] **lower rates of** violence, [32] and **stronger economic growth**.[33]
- **More connection equals more trust**: A ongitudinal study found that people who socialize with neighbors are more likely to think other people are helpful, fair, and trustworthy.[34]
- **Countries with stronger social cohesion have** higher GDPs.[35]
- According to a 2020 UN report, **cohesive societies are more likely to have stronger citizenship norms, such as voting**; more accountability from elected officials; and greater support for democracy.[36]

This scientific evidence is conclusive: Healthy social connections nourish us, our families, our communities, our workplaces, and our society. Is it any wonder, then, that even as many families have moved away, hundreds of people return to Roseto, PA every year to celebrate "The Big Time," a festival of food, family, and community that has been going strong for 128 years?

"Everybody comes back. The Martinos. The Sabbatines. The Falcones. The Romanos. It's a big thing for us," explains one Big Time attendee in ***The Italian Americans***, a PBS documentary.[37] The memory of "the Roseto effect," as researchers call it, seems to stay in people's hearts and minds forever.

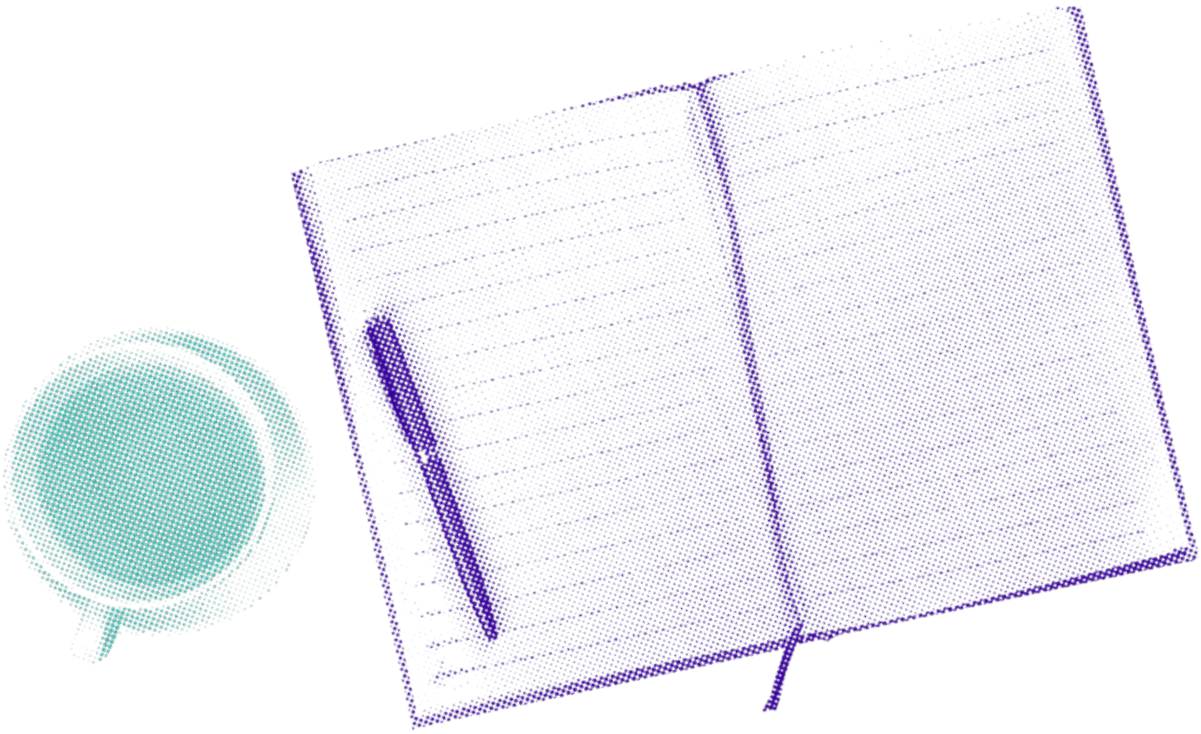
REFLECTION

Personal Reflection Questions:

- What relationships have shaped your life? Which have made it meaningful?
- When do you notice your instinct to connect with others? What's happening for you when it is absent?
- While living or working in different places, what have you noticed about the quality of connection in your life? What impact do those differences have on your mood, health, or any other aspect of your life?

Strategic Questions for Groups:

- What decisions could we make now that might improve the quality of our relationships?
- How might stronger relationships serve our work?
- How can we better measure and tend to the health of relationships in our work?
- How might the experience of relationships help us solve the challenge we're facing?



“Creating a connected life begins with the decisions we make in our day-to-day lives. Do we choose to make time for people? Do we show up as our true selves? Do we seek out others with kindness, recognizing the power of service to bring us together? This work isn’t always easy. It requires courage, the courage to be vulnerable, to take a chance on others, to believe in ourselves. But as we build connected lives, we make it possible to build a connected world.”[38]

– Vivek Murthy,
physician and Surgeon General

Cultures of Connection: The Learning Tree

It isn't every day that the Deputy Mayor of Indianapolis invests over $10 million in a group of local residents to rebuild and run a housing unit. Nor is it likely that historically marginalized citizens trust city officials to see their potential or treat them with dignity.

Founder of The Learning Tree, De'Amon Harges is an Asset-Based Community Development expert, bringing local residents and institutions together to discover the power of being a good neighbor. As the original "Roving Listener" in his neighborhood, Harges notices and calls forth the gifts of his neighbors, using those "undiscovered" assets to connect and empower rather than working only from the community's needs and deficits. If he finds out you can fix bicycles, he'll send over the kid with a flat tire. You can cook for 20 people? Prepare to be asked to cater the next board meeting of a local organization.

"I knew Jeff [Bennett, the Deputy Mayor] when I was doing roving listener work early on. He was working on housing and we had disagreed on what the city was doing. He understood the needs of our community okay, but didn't get the way we were doing asset-based organizing." When Harges and his fellow local leader Wildstyle Paschall sat down with Bennett, all sorts of issues bubbled up. "We were talking about community control, housing and economics, and all of this trauma came up. I remember thinking, 'I don't believe anything you're saying you're going to do.' I said to Wildstyle, 'I don't trust him and I don't want to do this.'"

It could have ended there. But Wildstyle reached out to Bennett again and took him for a walk in the neighborhood. "He developed a relationship with Jeff. He started talking about what was possible, like a community land trust—I think Jeff probably saw hammers and sickles!—but Wildstyle also

really listened." Despite early misgivings, they built trust by getting to know one another as human beings, not just their job titles. They shared meals, they told the truth—even the parts that were hard to say—and grew to respect and like each other.

As Wildstyle shared what was happening, Harges gave Bennett another chance. "I did respect that he wasn't trying to please me, he was really trying to figure things out and Wildstyle was helping him with that. It's been informal but intentional—he would show up just to share stories." After a while, Harges says, "I invited him to some public events we were organizing and was kind of surprised that he was excited about our imagination. I guess he works in a vocation where it's not so imaginative sometimes, so he benefited from being around folks who were thinking big."

That bold imagination started to get practical, and the conversations returned to housing, community control, and financing, with starkly different results: fourfold increases in the city's home repairs budget; more equitable community oversight on city spending; and, perhaps most remarkably, a project called Rise: the investment and handing-over of an entire city block to the neighborhood. There are still many details to work through, and it is far from simple. But Harges is confident that they can make it work together. "I don't even know if he knows how highly we think of him," says Harges. "This isn't about housing. This is about hope. Together we're cultivating an ecology of hope."

What Gets In the Way

If our roots of connection run deep, and yield such reward, why are we still disconnected from each other? And why does it feel like it's getting worse?

The answers lie within, among, and around us. Individual, interpersonal, and societal factors stymie our relationships, while powerful technologies divide and polarize us.

INDIVIDUAL OBSTACLES

Various factors can get in the way of building healthy relationships, despite our best intentions. Our brains succumb to misperceptions, biases, and **cognitive errors**—like thinking that we won't enjoy talking to strangers, or that they won't like talking to us. In reality, studies show that these conversations generally go well.[39] A generous compliment or shared laugh on the subway can seem terrifying—until it happens, and we feel the contented sense of connection move through us.

Our brains also make all sorts of assumptions about why others behave the way they do.[40] We may think a friend is lazy or rude when they're running late, when, unbeknownst to us, they're caring for a sick parent, for instance. We judge others harshly—even for behaviors beyond their control—and that judgment can sap the motivation we need to stay connected.

These cognitive barriers, and many more like them, are intensified when we **perceive others to be different** from us. Studies have found that people are less generous toward members of stigmatized groups, for example.[41] The same barriers show up when we look at **large groups rather than individuals**—we give less when confronted with statistics about mass suffering than when faced with the story of a single individual in need: what scientists call the "identifiable victim effect."[42]

The good news is that none of these cognitive errors are insurmountable. For example, one study discovered that we can mitigate the experience of "compassion fatigue" by tuning into and identifying the emotions we're feeling rather than blocking them out.[43] But other psychological factors can get in the way, too.

Our **mental health** significantly influences our ability to create and sustain healthy connections. The scale of the mental health crisis is enormous: Nearly 50 million American adults experienced mental illness in 2019—and that was before

the pandemic.[44] Anxiety and depression can impair our social functioning and especially get in the way when we're trying to repair an initial misunderstanding or hurt.[45] For example, those suffering from anxiety often see other people as a source of anxiety. Those suffering from depression often see other people's behavior as affirmation of their self-criticism. The effects don't simply go away when we recover, with one study finding that people continued to have social difficulties three years after recovering from depression.[46]

All of this is exacerbated if you have experienced **trauma**, though there are different ways that its effects can manifest. For some, it becomes natural to isolate from others, withdrawing from friends, coworkers, and family. Others may become anxious or frightened. Across the board, we need trauma-informed pathways toward healthy relationships. Instead of asking, "What's wrong with you?," we need to ask, "What happened to you?" and offer new pathways for sharing and listening.[47]

INTERPERSONAL OBSTACLES

Beyond the obstacles to connection that stem from our ingrained tendencies and personal experiences, interpersonal factors can get in the way as well. Often relational patterns and health concerns shaped by trauma stem from early childhood, and can return later on in our lives. The experience of **early relational health**, or the lack of it, profoundly shapes how stressful stimuli affect us, influences the skills we need to navigate healthy relationships, and affects our experience of subsequent connections.

When a child has needs and those needs are met with responsive caregiving, it fosters a cycle of mutuality, reciprocity, and emotional expression, which are foundational to healthy relationships. This foundational relationship benefits the health of both parent and child, which is especially important for families where a parent experienced early relational health challenges. Without nurturing, calming relationships with a primary caregiver, children's stress levels remain elevated, which negatively affects molecular, cellular, and brain development, a condition commonly referred to as "**toxic stress**." A broader circle of support, in the home and in the community, is also crucial to healthy child development, and the absence or breakdown of broader family and neighborhood bonds can fuel disconnection.

Unfortunately, without the necessary skills and practices, relational disconnection can be a self-reinforcing cycle. When we're emotionally disconnected from others, our bodies become dysregulated,[48] explains Dr. Martha Welch at Columbia University Irving Medical Center's Nurture Science Program.[49] And when our bodies are dysregulated, our brains simply can't function optimally, which further interferes with relationships that would help with emotion regulation. So when we feel disconnected, we're also more likely to experience anxiety, depression or even conflict—which of course makes it more difficult to connect in the first place.

Relationships—at any stage of our lives—must also be actively maintained. Research shows that friends who cultivate joy and emotional support and who make a point to do things together feel a strong sense of mutuality and are more likely to sustain the friendship. If there is **lopsided investment in a relationship,** however, it's more likely to flounder. And when problems inevitably arise, how people navigate them makes a big difference as to whether the relationship recovers or sours. "The manner in which people deal with interpersonal conflict, their **problem-solving styles**, falls along two continua," write friendship researchers Debra Oswald and Eddie Clark, "active-passive and constructive-destructive, resulting in four possible problem-solving styles of exit, neglect, voice, and loyalty."[50] Some of these styles can be detrimental to relationships. Exit behaviors, for example, like treating a friend poorly, are active and destructive responses that can cause a relationship to fall apart.

Conflicts arise in intimate relationships too. Researcher John Gottman, an expert on marital stability and divorce prediction, has identified four **behaviors that contribute to toxic conflict** in close relationships. He calls them the "four horsemen": criticism, contempt, defensiveness, and stonewalling.[51] When these negative communication patterns are prevalent between a couple, the relationship suffers, sometimes irreparably.

Because disruptions are an inevitable part of life, the ability to repair our relationships is crucial to making it through hard times. Connecting on a deep, emotional level with those we love provides us with one of the most powerful buffers to disconnection and dysregulation.[52] We'll share practical strategies for how to do that later in this primer.

SOCIETAL OBSTACLES

There are barriers to connection all around us, too. Inequality, isolation, time pressures, and social segregation are just some of the societal obstacles that get in the way.

According to a 2012 study from Robert Putnam and colleagues, **socioeconomic inequality** had an effect on a wide variety of relationships, with upper- and middle-class kids getting to spend more time with their family, friends, and within social institutions,[53] while working-class kids were more isolated from society and its institutions. The pressures of having to work multiple jobs and unpredictable shifts while also navigating caring responsibilities drastically reduces the time available for the connections that matter most.

Time pressure is a consistent barrier. For some, the changing nature of work has added pressure to be "always on," leading to an unhealthy culture of overwork. Others have to navigate extensive bureaucratic complexity and time burdens to receive aid. The multiple pressures on time are especially hard on parents, with 74% of parents with kids under the age of 18 saying they feel too busy to enjoy life at least sometimes, according to the Pew Research Center.[54]

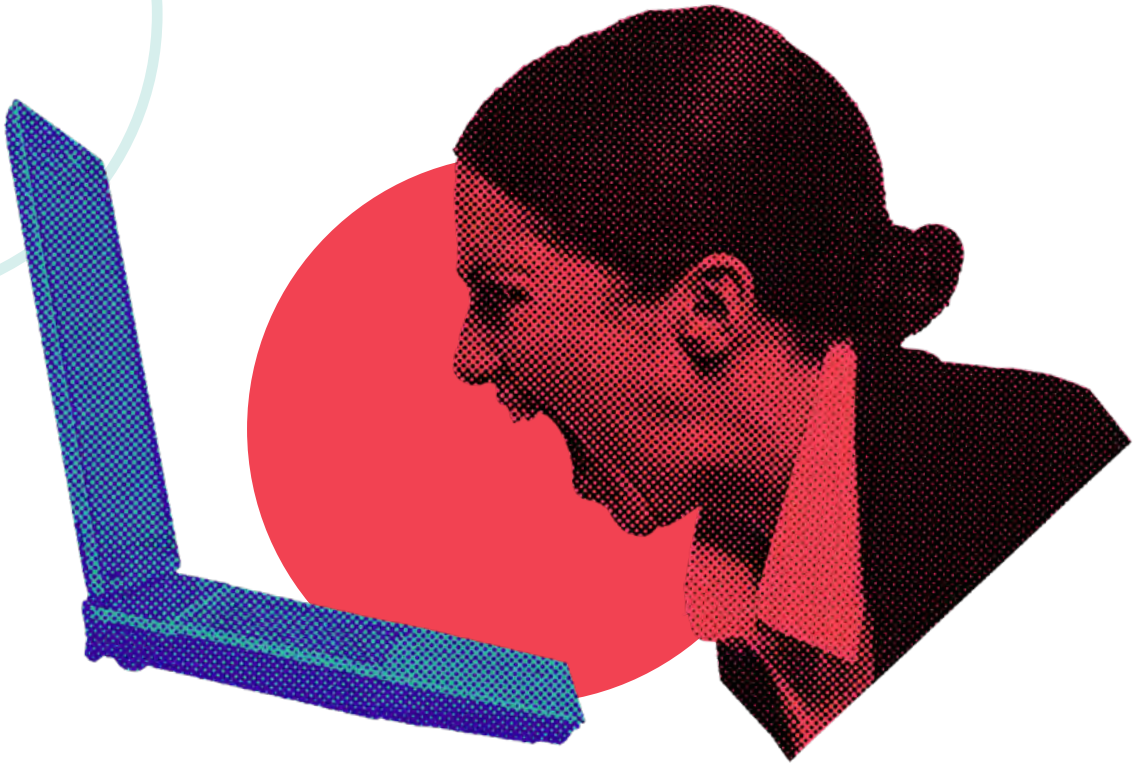
A culture of connection is impeded further by **social segregation**. Consider that 40 percent of white Americans have no non-white friends—with age, religion, education, and occupation following in the list of social network barriers.[55] Sociologists point to the ways that similarity breeds connection, with the relationships that we do have across differences being less likely to last in the long term. Again, these divisions become self-perpetuating, as social segregation leaves us less likely to connect with others who are different, which further exacerbates divides.

These societal **power imbalances** have an effect on our emotions, too, changing how we relate to one another. Studies have found that wealthier people are worse at reading other people's emotions and less likely to give to charity, and even felt less compassion when watching a video about children with cancer.[56]

Even the connections we have to people we feel close to are dwindling, with increases in the rates of **loneliness and social isolation**. One study evaluating social cohesion in 2004 versus 1985 found that on average, people had one fewer close confidant—from three in 1985 down to two in 2004.[57] What's more, nearly three times as many people said there was no one with whom they could discuss important matters, and nearly 25 percent reported having no close friends at all. Just think: A quarter of Americans say they have no close friends. The loneliness epidemic is made worse by various forms of social exclusion. As David Hsu writes in Untethered, this arises "when individuals or groups are systematically denied opportunities that are normally available to the rest of society, usually in connection with a person's skin color, appearance, physical ability, sexual orientation, age, gender, religion, economic status, or criminal history."[58] When lonely and disconnected, it becomes harder for us to build new relationships because we have fewer chance encounters, putting stress on existing relationships, and making us feel less confident in our ability to build new connections.

This crisis is seen and felt across the political spectrum. Pete Peterson, Dean of Pepperdine's School of Public Policy, has galvanized conversations in conservative circles. "We increasingly understand the policy cost of loneliness—measured in economic and health outcomes," he explains. "It points to the significant importance of civic institutions, including local sports teams and faith groups, which actively facilitate new relationships."

Sadly, the pandemic has made this even more difficult. A recent study by Harvard's Making Caring Common suggests that the pandemic has deepened America's epidemic of loneliness, finding that "36 percent of Americans—including 61% of young adults and 51% of mothers with young children—feel 'serious loneliness.'"[59] But COVID-19 is far from the only accelerator people are navigating.



WHY IT'S GETTING WORSE

The **pandemic** is only one of the reasons why so many of these obstacles seem particularly difficult. We live in the midst of intense toxic polarization and are in the thrall of technologies designed to bring out our worst instincts—while our policy and cultural responses struggle to keep up. All of these factors have a destructive impact on the quality of our connections.

Pervasive technologies like smartphones, and the values embedded in them, hinder our ability to shape culture toward connection. One study found that just having a cell phone visible during a face-to-face interaction had "negative effects on closeness, connection, and conversation quality."[60] These impacts were most pronounced when people were discussing a particularly meaningful topic. Other studies have found that smartphones reduce smiles between strangers,[61] distract parents from feeling connected when spending time with their children,[62] and undermine enjoyment of face-to-face social interactions.[63] Elsewhere, self-checkout machines and practically on-demand delivery of anything make life easier but less meaningful, inching guaranteed human interactions closer to zero.

More significantly, perhaps, **social media platforms** atomize and alienate us from one another. While these spaces are ostensibly about connection, they can reinforce loneliness and depression and stoke anxieties like the fear of missing out and comparing ourselves to others. Most seriously, social media business models emphasize content that stokes outrage and contempt across divides, leading to a perception gap in which Democrats and Republicans overestimate how extreme the opposition is, among other negative outcomes.[64]

And while businesses like Facebook promise to change the algorithm to strengthen deeper engagement, it is precisely posts about the "other side" that generate the most responses, including the "angry" emoji—the most popular emoji

across one study. It concluded, "these algorithmic changes made under the guise of bringing people closer together may have helped prioritize posts including out-group animosity."[65] The very financial success of these platforms depends on fueling our disconnection and keeping our eyes on our screens. That also means less time looking at and engaging with others face-to-face.

This **polarization** erodes institutional trust as many of us don't believe that our interests and values are safeguarded or even respected. Few people want to invest in collective solutions if we aren't confident that we are actually part of that collective. We also trust each other less. Meanwhile, More in Common's 2020 study found that only 37% of Americans feel that "most people can be trusted" and 34% say "there is no community [outside of friends and family] where they feel a strong sense of belonging."[66]

Reports of worsening polarization draw our attention to the most extreme voices—and with an insurrection at the US Capitol, how can they not?—leaving the "Exhausted Majority" with the sense that their voices are not reflected in our politics. At the same time, there is research that suggests most Americans still care for each other across political divides, as Making Caring Common's new report, Do Americans Really Care for Each Other?, [67] makes clear. The report also illustrates how most of us are not engaging in the harder forms of caring that promote and safeguard the common good. Substantial majorities of survey respondents didn't report high levels of concern for the problems faced by racial groups other than their own, for instance. They also were far more likely to prioritize their own happiness over caring for others, and were far more invested in cultivating their children's happiness than in cultivating their children's caring for others.

Add to this continued economic volatility the existential threat of the climate crisis, and on top of *that*, a global pandemic, is it any wonder that we can get stuck in **despair and apathy**? We may ask ourselves how one person can really make a difference and fall into thinking that others matter little, too.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons we humans have relied on spiritual and religious traditions to hold us together in faith. As the great preacher Charles G. Adams once said, "The good news is that we need not be as we are."

The choices we make don't just shape our lives, but the lives of people around us—even when we don't immediately see how. The skill and intention with which we navigate our relationships don't just provide us with meaning and joy, they create a culture of connection that enriches the experience of everyone else we encounter. This is the work that those of us in positions of leadership are called to do.

This litany of obstacles is not an easy read, we know. But understanding what forces counter a culture of connection is essential for strategizing how relationships can thrive, even so. Crucial in that work is understanding how different types of relationships demand different stances and skills. What follows is a framework and seven practices that do just that.

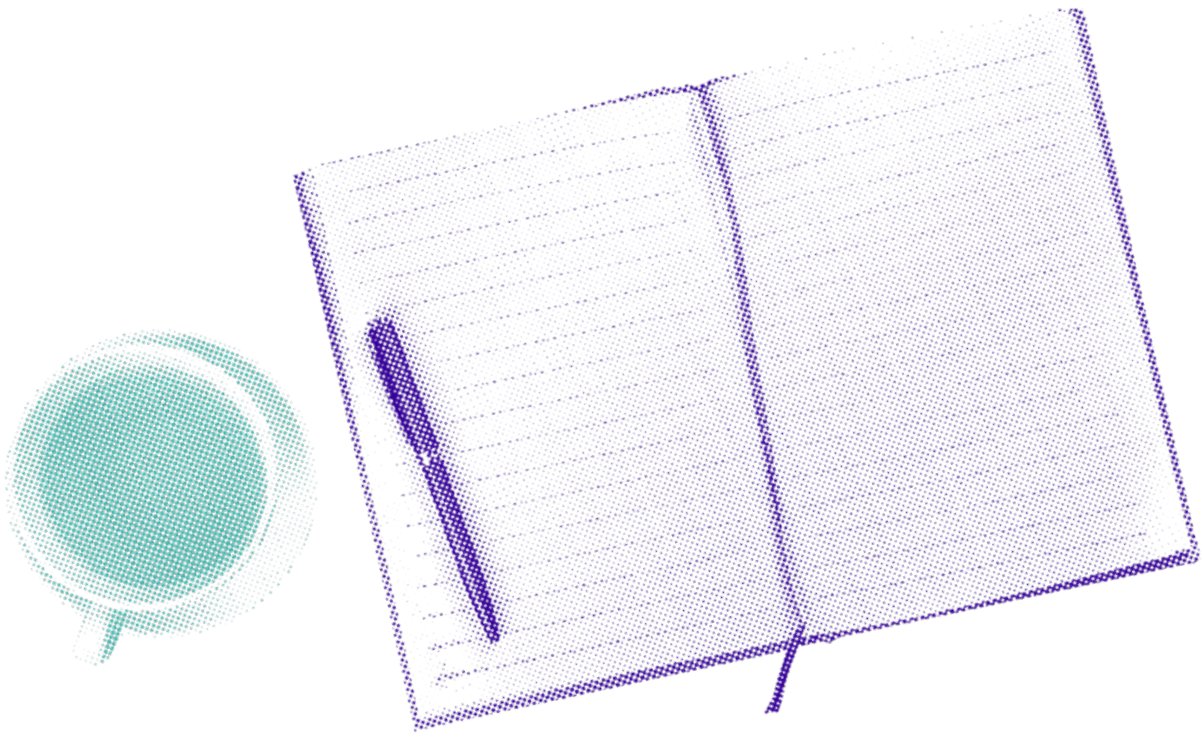
REFLECTION

Personal Reflection Questions:

- What aspects of your environment stop you from being more connected to other people?
- How might you work through these obstacles to create stronger relationships anyway?

Strategic Questions for Groups:

- What gets in the way of us connecting as a group?
- How might a more connected group produce better results?
- How might our program/product/experience be different if we designed it with these obstacles in mind?



“Connection is the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship.”[68]

– Brené Brown,
researcher and author

Cultures of Connection: NYC Health + Hospitals

Even small shifts toward human connection can have systemic impacts. Look at the work of Komal Bajaj, the Chief Quality Officer at NYC Health + Hospitals. “Basketball teams will play 80 games a year, but practice every day,” Bajaj explains. “Healthcare teams have to play the actual game every day.” Her job is to help them get it right every time.

Healthcare systems are notoriously complex with hierarchies that are strongly maintained. Relational blocks show up all over the place. “Communication gaps contribute to over 70% of the cases where something has gone seriously wrong,” says Bajaj, “and that’s just the issues that get reported. We don’t know as much about the stuff below the tip of the iceberg, but it’s safe to assume that the pattern holds.” Staff might not speak up about an issue because they have shared previously and didn’t get the response they were hoping for, or they aren’t sure that their worry is worth sharing. “Thinking about relationships in healthcare is crucial for that reason alone,” says Bajaj.

Her solution to enabling better interaction was not an expensive new technology, but to create a social container, a space for brief, practical, empathetic conversation focused on learning. An added bonus for a cost-conscious context: Conversation is cheap! “Debriefing can be perceived as a dirty word because normally teams only debrief when things go wrong. But sometimes the best improvements can be made because something went right! I might have had a random tool in my pocket that came to good use. If we know that for next time, we can put that tool on the tray,” explains Bajaj.

So she introduced 5–7 minute huddles to debrief common clinical events, for those who wanted to join. She started with a pilot in the obstetrics unit, inviting the super-connectors on the ward to host the huddles. “Things started slow, but soon people started to put their heads around the door to see what we were talking about. We kept strictly to time, so word traveled that these huddles were effective and efficient, and participation rose.”

Crucial to their success was letting the groups feel in charge. “For the first few weeks, we didn’t write anything down. We didn’t want people to freak out that they were being monitored.” The point is to establish psychological safety for staff to talk honestly, the first step in Bajaj’s now widely-disseminated PEARLS Healthcare Debriefing Tool.[69] Next, the people in the huddle are prompted to share what immediate reactions and feelings are on top of following the procedure. One-word answers here are just fine: success, relief, sadness, tiredness, for example. Only then are the facts clarified, so everyone has a shared understanding of the case. Finally, anyone in the group can weigh in with their analysis and offer any takeaways.

“Now, we’re getting further down the pyramid; making the covert, overt,” celebrates Bajaj. An added benefit is that amidst horrific strain on healthcare services, these debriefs also help ring alarm bells if anyone seems in need of counseling or other mental health support. The process is now so simple and repeated so often, that Bajaj has obviated any need for training. The more structured a social container, the less it depends on the quality of a facilitator.

Three Stances: Bonding, Bridging, and Healing

Knowing that we're wired for connection but face a variety of obstacles that get in the way, how might we tend the relationships in our own lives and leadership? Here, we offer a framework of three relational stances to help you cultivate a culture of connection.

- **Bonding**: building or deepening connections with those who are like you and to whom you feel close.
- **Bridging**: connecting with curiosity and empathy across differences.
- **Healing**: addressing conflict or harm and moving toward repair and/or renewal.

Let's explore each of these stances and why they matter.

BONDING

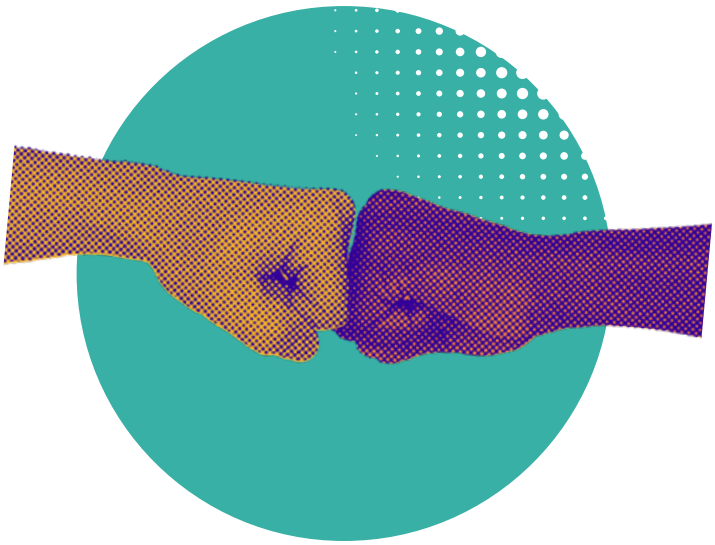
Bonding relationships consist of building deep connections with people like us. Think of healthy relationships with loved ones—family, friends, trusted colleagues with whom we feel an easy affinity and natural draw. No wonder this is the stance that comes to us most easily!

Bonding is an experience of deep emotional connection, with benefits like feeling seen, heard, "at home," and loved: the joy of a shared laugh with a dear friend, or finding peace of mind as you share your deepest worries and hopes with a close confidant.

Our behavior in foundational bonding relationships is deeply shaped by our early childhood experiences. Starting before we're born, the autonomic nervous system connects our gut to our brain, and it learns from stimuli to elicit reflexes such as approach or withdrawal. Heart-to-heart communication between parents and babies trains our autonomic nervous systems over time that the sight, sound, smell, touch, or even taste of a loved one can induce a calming effect.[70] This emotional connection in the early years of life conditions us to relate to others with empathy, mutuality, and reciprocity, and also provides measurable benefits to physical health and brain function.

Early childhood emotional connection is vital because so much formative development happens at the beginning of life. Positive impacts from emotional connection at a young age can pay lifelong dividends. But these skills (and many of the benefits) are essential beyond childhood, and can be developed among pairs of any age. This is so powerful especially if a person's early life was relationally difficult: The benefits of emotional connection are not limited to those who were reached in childhood.

As a leader, you can cultivate the conditions for bonding, or shut it down before those relationships have time to grow or repair. When bonding flourishes, new possibilities abound: teams that collaborate well, a culture of mutual support and psychological safety, individuals who feel able to speak honestly and vulnerably. Bonding relationships allow us to express and receive love and care in our interactions with those who are part of our in-groups. Bonding relationships help us show up as our best selves; without them, we struggle to bridge and heal connections that may ask more of us.



BRIDGING

If we only cultivate close relationships with those who are like us, we can end up othering those who we perceive as different. And in an increasingly diverse and divided society, the dangers here are clear. Cultivating a culture of connection means learning to adopt a stance toward difference as an opportunity to bridge, rather than break, a relationship.[71]

Bridging is an opportunity to grow your circle of human concern, and to open yourself to the likelihood of finding real joy and fulfillment in relationships with those who are unlike you in fundamental ways. Mack McCarter, founder and coordinator of Community Renewal International in Shreveport, LA, puts it best: "When I meet you, I assume there's a bridge from my heart to yours—and I am coming over!"

Bridging asks all of us to hold big differences and deep disagreements without dehumanizing the other person; never reducing them to a caricature or seeing them as less worthy of health and happiness than we are. Those foundational needs can be the starting point to ensuring common dignity—recognizing that another person or group has their own human drives, tastes, values, goals, and worldview, just like we do. We must learn to question the single story we may tell ourselves about others, and to consider how every human holds a complex narrative of joys and pains, gains and losses, privilege and depravity. [72]

Crucially, bridging work is not about erasing differences or persuading someone to change their mind or identity, but is instead about increasing our *own* understanding, as the Bridging Differences Playbook explains.[73] This requires asking questions, suspending judgment, and committing to the bridging relationship over time—not just making a one-time gesture. One way to do that is by continually seeking shared identities above and beyond those which divide us.[74]

To be clear, bridging does not guarantee the comfort of common ground or compromise. It asks each of us to seek authenticity and mutuality while taking into account potential disparities in power. "Social change happens at the speed of relationships. And relationships move at the speed of trust," explains founder of the Faith Matters Network, Rev. Jennifer Bailey.[75] Over time, bridging asks us to be willing to let go of our perceptions and preconceived ideas of who people are and why they act in certain ways, replacing these with a true portrait of the other's humanity.

As challenging as it can be, the personal and societal benefits of bridging are profound. Whether connecting across age, race, nationality, religion, ideology, or something else, learning how to positively relate to someone perceived as an "other" contributes to less stress, better personal health, and a stronger social fabric.

Columbia University professor Peter T. Coleman explains, in his book *The Way Out: How to Overcome Toxic Polarization*, that societies need three things to begin to end enduring polarized conflict.[76] First, a significant jolt to the norm that creates instability; second, an experience of mutually hurting stalemate in which both sides feel weary, as if there's no end in sight; and finally, a mutually enticing opportunity that offers a different way to be together. With a significant "Exhausted Majority" of Americans[77] and a growing field of bridge builders strengthening a culture of pluralism, perhaps that time is closer than we think.[78]

HEALING

Things will fall apart. Mistakes will be made. Conflict and hurt are inevitable in any relationship, be it bonding or bridging—but it doesn't have to be the end of the story. Repairing a strained or broken relationship can replace a burden with newfound lightness and joy. And finding ways to heal from relationships that are beyond repair helps us ensure healthier future connections. A culture of connection gives us pathways toward both forms of healing: within and among us.

Without celebrating pain and hardship, the philosopher and theologian Howard Thurman wrote, "To reject suffering is to reject life" because "openings are made in a life by suffering that are not made in any other way."[79] This wisdom invites us to think of healing at once as the work of repair and creation: repair of what has been broken and creation of what could still be. This is why cultivating an imagination of how things might be different is so critical. How might this relationship look in the future? Who could help us navigate our struggles? What would it feel like to no longer be angry at this person?

The tricky thing is that while healing doesn't happen without effort, it can't be forced, either. It demands an earnest commitment to repair, setting clear boundaries, an ability to acknowledge one's own shortcomings, and the cultivation of forgiveness.

The derivation of the word "healing" is related to the word "whole"—an image often used to describe the experience of a repaired relationship. And that wholeness is often hard-earned. Frequently messy, relational healing demonstrates a profound and tender faith in the capacity of the human heart for renewal. Indeed, the Quaker activist and teacher Parker J. Palmer writes, "Wholeness does not mean perfection: It means embracing brokenness as an integral part of life."[80]

To be clear, healing a relationship does not mean planning future vacations together. If safe to do so, it means proactive ethical action to seek resolution, understanding, and renewed goodwill. But rebuilding relationships isn't always the most appropriate form of healing; forgiveness doesn't necessarily mean reconciliation. Abusive, violent, or otherwise dangerous relationships do not require reengagement. Instead, they often leave internal scars that need healing. Here, pathways to a culture of connection may focus on the healing arts, therapy, and the building of healthier relationships elsewhere.

Leaders cultivating a culture of connection cannot shy away from relational struggle and pain. Tending relationships requires us to become practiced at healing and repair.

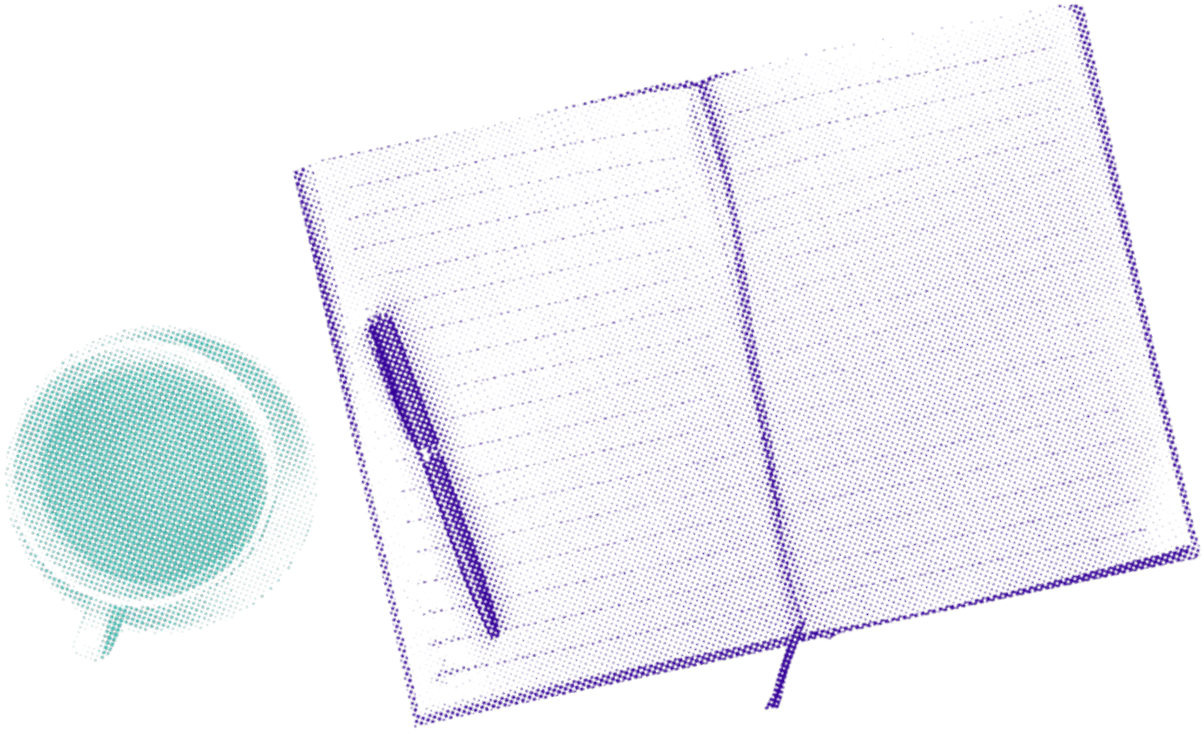
But what does that look like in practice?

Personal Reflection Questions:

- Think of a person you feel bonded with. What happened to make your connection possible? What did you share that facilitated your bonding?
- Bridging sometimes asks us to be brave. What do you need to feel brave? How might you cultivate bravery?
- Try working through a "connection audit." Which relationships in your life need healing or repair? How would you know what the right next step might be toward resolution?

Strategic Questions for Groups:

- What are we doing as a group that seems to help us bridge differences among us? How might we do more of that?
- How might we design our program/product experience to strengthen relational skills like listening and empathy?
- john a. powell, Director of the Othering & Belonging Institute at UC Berkeley, uses the language of the circle of human concern to describe the space in which all people belong.[81] Who is currently outside of our circle of human concern? How might we widen that circle?



Cultures of Connection: Northside Transformative Law Center

The moment you walk into Emmanuel Andre's office, you know he isn't your average lawyer. The space is filled with art illustrating the Underground Railroad, a gramophone player, and, amidst the quotes from Toni Morrison and Biggie Smalls, a picture of the Sankofa Bird—a mythic creature that looks back at the past as it flies forward carrying an egg symbolizing the future.

The Chicago-based Northside Transformative Law Center doesn't use the language of criminal defense, either; it's a "community defense" practice. Andre explicitly centers connection and healing amidst a system that—by and large—is not built for rehabilitation or restoration. "Everybody is made of a network of relationships, but when we warehouse people for a number of years, there's little consideration of the impact on those relationships," he explains.

Andre centers the healing process when he starts to work with a client. "The moment there's an accusation, you're frozen into whatever just allegedly happened. You become ahistorical. Your history doesn't matter, your future doesn't matter," he says. Lengthening the timeline backwards into the past and forward into their future is an essential part of strengthening the relationships that will lead to self-understanding and healing. "It's an ancestral journey. When we start talking, I ask, 'Who are the important relationships in your life?' 'What's your family history?' 'What do you want to see in the future?'"

Frequently his clients interview their own families and neighbors to understand the full context of their upbringing. They go even further back to look at the historical forces that directed migration, for example. Often, there is significant trauma. But,

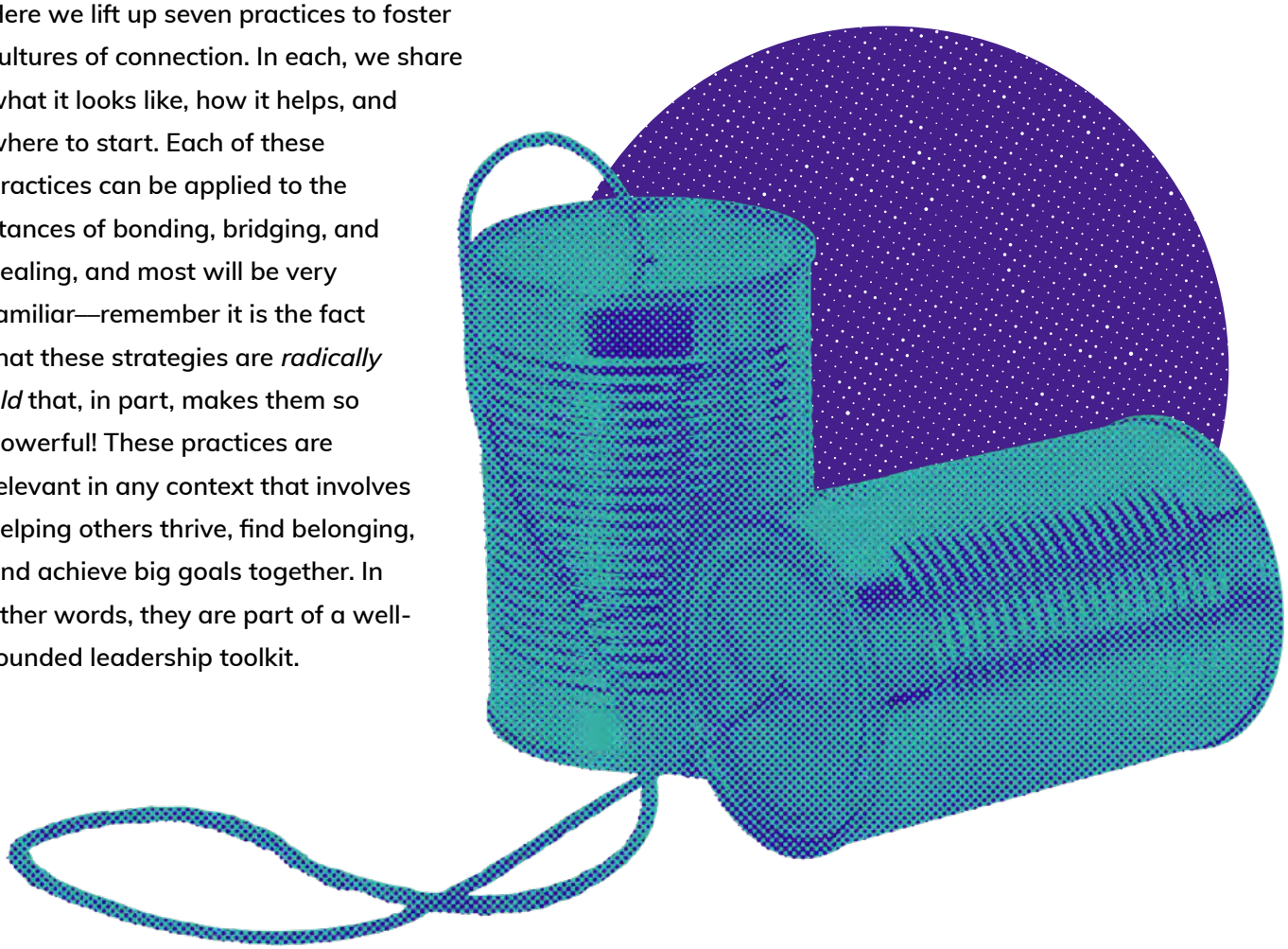
explains Andre, “Beyond that trauma is a story that people discover about who they are that gives them dignity and a sense of purpose. And the relationships they strengthen in the process of learning these stories help them claim a new identity.”

Andre relies on particular practices that enable his clients to explore their inner landscapes and the experience of others. “Music and the arts hold so much healing power. I ask them, ‘What are you listening to?’ and then I go and listen to it and I ask them what about it they can relate to.” Andre has found a way to bridge communication barriers, to find a language for pain and promise, and to deepen a relationship that avoids a typical dynamic of an attorney and client. “After they share, I tell them what I’m into, too!”

In the midst of providing vital legal services, Andre is able to create a culture of connection through his reciprocal sharing, his witness and accompaniment, and his vision in creating these healing journeys.

Practices to Cultivate a Culture of Connection

Here we lift up seven practices to foster cultures of connection. In each, we share what it looks like, how it helps, and where to start. Each of these practices can be applied to the stances of bonding, bridging, and healing, and most will be very familiar—remember it is the fact that these strategies are *radically old* that, in part, makes them so powerful! These practices are relevant in any context that involves helping others thrive, find belonging, and achieve big goals together. In other words, they are part of a well-rounded leadership toolkit.



1. TELLING AND LISTENING TO STORIES

What is it:

Too often, we dismiss everyday conversations as frivolous or unproductive. Embedded within them we find a crucial practice for healthy relationships: listening to, and telling, stories. This can be practiced formally, using prompts in a facilitated workshop, or emerge organically as people share time and space together, working, playing, or eating shoulder to shoulder.

Stories show up best when we actively listen: paraphrasing what the speaker says back to them, asking open and honest questions, and using nonverbal signals to show that we're following what they're saying.[82] Nurses, crisis negotiators, therapists, and even salespeople are often expert active listeners, and these skills can be used to build new relationships in all sorts of contexts, from dating to travel.

How it helps:

Everyone wants to be heard and understood. When others listen to our story, we feel valued. In one study, people who interacted with a conversation partner who was actively listening perceived their partner as more socially attractive and were more satisfied with the conversation than were those who interacted with a partner who only gave simple acknowledgments.[83]

What it looks like:

Elaine Heath leads a team of volunteer farmers and runs a community-supported agriculture program in North Carolina. "We value relationships here at Spring Forest," she explains. "We care about getting the carrots weeded, but we care more about hearing each other's stories. So if we only get one thing done, we can always finish the carrots tomorrow." As a Methodist minister, Heath is skilled at helping people go deeper than everyday small talk and is attuned to the somewhat counter-cultural focus on relationships. "When you value relationships over things and tasks, you know what it costs you. But you're glad to do it because you're doing what matters most—you get to experience belonging."

Where to start:

If you're in a position to shape how people share and listen to each other's stories, you might be inclined to suggest an exact approach, with structured set-ups for partners to share. Heath warns against that. "Set up a natural context for people. Have a basic structure that enables you to journey together as friends." That structure can be as simple as saying, "We're weeding carrots from 2–5pm in the shed!" Or taking time to sit down for lunch and asking an open-ended question about someone's passion or pain. That emotional expression can trigger what's called an orienting reflex in our bodies that helps us be present and pay attention to each other, which sets the stage for deeper connection. Making room for sharing what's in someone's heart is an important part of this practice.

For more on telling and listening to stories, check out resources from Narrative 4's story exchange methodology[84] or this active listening exercise from StoryCorps.[85]

2. CREATING A SOCIAL CONTAINER

What is it:

New relationships flourish when held within a social container. These structures hold people in relationship, even when they don't actively seek one another out. Social containers can be physical, like an office or a college dorm, for example. But they can also take shape as a covenant, agreements for how a group will behave together, like the classroom charters popularized by Yale's Center for Emotional Intelligence.[86] In contrast to a contract, in which a group agrees on what to do together, a covenant is a commitment of how to be together.

How it helps:

The ancient practice of covenant-making is backed by science. Research suggests that setting an explicit goal of getting closer to someone, and intentionally pursuing that connection, makes a new relationship more likely.[87] Plus, because it takes on average 50 hours for an acquaintance to become a friend, according to one study, a social container can also create the conditions in which that amount of time is more easily shared.[88]

What it looks like:

Some of the most effective social containers are found at summer camp. Rabbi Avi Orlow leads education and innovation at the Foundation for Jewish Camp and explains how summer camp consistently creates opportunities for people to do things together. There are the shared bunks and shared meals, of course, but the real magic is in the intentional interactions that create a culture of connection.

Orlow explains how camp counselors support bunkmates to create a "bunk brit," or covenant, to surface their mutual expectations at the beginning of their camp experience. At the end of the summer, many camps will add a plaque to the bunk, memorializing who lived there in that particular year. In so doing, the social container is extended across time, too: a multigenerational marker of belonging.

Where to start:

Whenever you form a team or a group, there's an opportunity to create a covenant. Deciding on principles to commit to is the place to start. But the true magic of a covenant is less in the initial commitment and more in the practice over time. A good covenant sees a group return to each other again and again to celebrate when they've fulfilled mutual promises, and to adjust when they've fallen short.

Orlow explains, "When there is an infraction, there's a common language—agreed by all—for how to have productive discomfort and growth in the group." Ironically, it is exactly when something goes wrong that the real relationships are built. The social container is only truly created the first time it is tested, and the group has successfully navigated something difficult together.

For more context on the practice of covenant, check out Sue Phillips's piece On Covenant.[89]

3. FINDING SHARED PURPOSE

What is it:

Amazing things happen when people believe they have a shared goal and need to work together. Differences can be set aside, suspicion can ease into goodwill, and over time, new relationships of trust and friendship can form.

How it helps:

One sociological study that has become a classic showed that sharing goals strengthens ties—even between members of different groups. Recognizing a shared goal can encourage people from different groups to see one another as allies, not adversaries—especially if they need to work together to achieve their shared goal.[90] This sense of common cause is possible in organizations as well as in placed-based contexts. Think about the diverse crowds that pack into a stadium to cheer on a hometown sports team or the local PTA parents from different backgrounds who connect through a shared commitment to their kids' school.

What it looks like:

Jesús Gerena is CEO of UpTogether, a nonprofit founded in Oakland, CA that invests in low-income families, allowing them to move themselves, and one another, out of poverty. His work reveals what can happen when people discover shared purpose in community. "People join a small group with friends, family members, or neighbors," he explains. "They sit down in person or online, but we don't give them any direction. We only ask about their goals. I've never asked someone what they want and they haven't been able to articulate an answer—we all have goals! We encourage them to look at one another for the solution."

Gerena explains that the shift in culture is vital. "Because of negative stereotypes about people with low incomes, some believe they can't trust anyone. So many of the systems that families in financially under-resourced communities have to navigate create this scarcity mentality." Instead, UpTogether asks members to share data on progress toward their goals—usually around finances, education, and health—and families receive cash, which they can spend however they want and do not have to repay. This is not what most families expect. Instead of being sent to a professional with the assumption that nobody near them has the answer, they turn to one another to figure out their goals and find support along the way.

Transformational small groups like this show up consistently across wisdom traditions, from Muslim halaqa circles to Quaker clearness committees. They are powerful structures to discover shared purpose.

Where to start:

Assume that everyone has goals, then create conversations in which people can discover which they share. Let people nurture their own and one another's agency, rather than providing all the answers. As community organizers forever repeat: Never do for others what they can do for themselves.

For more inspiration on identifying and pursuing common goals, check out pages 74–77 of the Bridging Differences Playbook.[91]

4. CULTIVATING GRATITUDE

What is it:

Cultivating gratitude is the inner discipline of noticing the good things in our lives and recognizing that we are not solely responsible for generating those good things. This is easy and enjoyable in times when life is smooth, but it becomes all the more important when we find ourselves stressed or feeling hopeless. In those moments, finding genuine gratitude becomes a lifeline back to connection.

How it helps:

Several research studies suggest that gratitude helps us find-remind-and-bind—namely, to identify people with whom we want to connect, remind us what we value in the relationships we already have, and bind us closer to both.[92] Gratitude interrupts patterns of thinking that make us feel entitled or alone and refocuses us on the meaningful relationships we may have taken for granted.

One gratitude study looked at a sorority's "Big Sister Week" at the University of Virginia.[93] It found that "Little Sisters" (new sorority members) who reported that their "Big Sister" gave them especially thoughtful gifts felt more grateful—and that this gratitude predicted the strength of their future relationship with their Big Sister, as well as how integrated they felt within the sorority.

What it looks like:

Gratitude has a deeper impact when it is offered for very particular reasons. Rather than saying, "Thanks to everyone who helped on this project," it is much more meaningful to hear, "Rajeev, the way you coordinated among seven agencies to get this project launched was a wonder. And thank you for checking in on me when I felt overwhelmed!"

The Ignatian Examen is one ancient practice that might offer inspiration. A sixteenth-century Spanish priest, St. Ignatius of Loyola developed a series of reflections to help individuals detect—in his theological language—the presence of God. At the end of the day, we're invited to notice what moments of beauty, truth, and goodness we experienced. Where did we experience love, or notice generosity and courage? The discipline of noticing these moments of grace, and then giving thanks for them, strengthens the practice of gratitude and helps make even the smallest indicator of goodness significant in our lives.

Where to start:

Keeping a personal gratitude journal is a great way to start noticing special moments that you might otherwise take for granted. Or you can practice offering gratitude alone, or with others, at a particular moment of the day—say, the first five minutes of a commute or before going to bed. Using momentous days like birthdays or anniversaries to specifically give thanks for someone is another good place to start. For more ideas, check out the Greater Good Science Center's top ten strategies to cultivate gratitude.[94]

5. CELEBRATING AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

What is it:

Rituals of celebration pull our attention toward what matters most. When we celebrate, we lift up stories that are important to us, bask in communal joy, and deepen our relationships.

Large-scale celebrations like Diwali, Carnival, and Halloween might involve elaborate costumes, music, and enormous platters of food, but smaller-scale celebrations matter, too. In her book *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Rebecca Solnit refutes the idea that celebrations are frivolous, writing, "The utilitarian argument against fiestas, parades, carnivals, and general public merriment is that they produce nothing. But they do: they produce society."[95] Lighting birthday candles, gathering friends for a barbeque, or honoring a colleague—there are myriad ways to celebrate.

How it helps:

Psychologist Sara Algoe explains why celebrating together is so impactful: "Having fun, giving encouragement...and celebrating together draws us in and keeps us coming back for more."[96] In romantic relationships, the more a person shares in their partner's joy, the more their partner feels understood, validated, and cared for. Critically, it is precisely in sharing the good times, and having others celebrate with us, that we learn we can rely on them in the tough times, too.

Brené Brown explains that "the problem is that we don't show up for enough of these experiences. We feel vulnerable when we lean into that kind of shared joy and pain, and so we armor up. We might shove our hands into our pockets during the concert or roll our eyes at the dance."[97] Being together to celebrate is key, and we can't just passively attend. We have to participate.

What it looks like:

Rosa Velázquez is an immigration justice community organizer in Arkansas and has had to find ways to keep going in the midst of extremely challenging political and personal circumstances.

"I celebrate everything. Someone graduates from high school or they get a green card? I celebrate. If they open a business or go to therapy for the first time? I celebrate," Velázquez shares. "Just last week when someone I've helped apply for DACA came out of their interview and called me to share the good news that their application had been approved, I went to Starbucks and got myself a really awesome reusable cup. Then later we got together for coffee and we prayed together. I try to do something for myself and something for the person I'm celebrating; it keeps me going."

Where to start:

Before finding new things to celebrate, think about what you already mark each year. What are the celebrations that can be enriched? Who else might you invite? What special foods or traditions can you share? Holstee's Ritual Life Planner is a good place to start celebrating more.[98]

6. STRENGTHENING INNER AWARENESS

What is it:

When cultivating relationships, strengthening inner awareness is key. This involves noticing whether we're responding with care and intention, or reacting thoughtlessly. With strong inner awareness, we will notice our own reflexive feelings and judgments—good and bad—of others, and this helps us be more socially mindful. Social mindfulness enables us to be aware of others in the present moment and consider their needs and wishes before making a decision.[99]

This echoes many traditions that involve contemplative practices, including the rich Buddhist traditions of meditation, in which practitioners train the mind to see the truths of the Dharma: the wisdom teachings of the Buddha. Practicing meditation strengthens inner awareness and can help us call forth our best selves, practicing what Buddhists call "right speech" and "right action."

How it helps:

Psychologist Marc Brackett explains that giving ourselves permission to feel whatever cocktail of feelings we feel is vital. "Our emotions are a big part—maybe the biggest part—of what makes us human," he writes for NationSwell. "And yet we go through life trying hard to pretend otherwise."[100] The ability to notice, label, express, and work through our emotions; these are learnable skills. All the better if the communities we're a part of—our schools, campuses, and workplaces—reinforce them. Alongside interpersonal skills, we need to create space for asking ourselves searching questions and being self-aware about our biases.

What it looks like:

Christine Lai, who weaves networks of potential collaborators together, consistently cultivates inner awareness among her conversation partners. In a context where so much rests on relationship, she explains, "I invite people to notice how they are in this present moment. 'What's top of head and heart for you?'" Taking a moment to pause, take a breath, and notice where our energy is can make space for a change of pace in a project that ensures we honor what needs our attention. For example, discovering that a colleague has lost a loved one helps us make room for their grieving, and ensures a culture in which people can fully show up with what's present for them, rather than disassociating, which can lead to burn out. As Lai explains, we can show up better for each other when we have a practice of showing up for ourselves, too.

Where to start:

A simple check-in at the beginning of a meeting can do wonders to make space for people to share what they're showing up with. A minute of quiet before a strategy meeting or a difficult conversation will give everyone—you, included—a moment to clarify what they have to offer and steady their internal state to listen more attentively to others.

For five more self-awareness starting points, check out this article from Harvard Business Review.[101]

7. PRACTICING FORGIVENESS

What is it:

Forgiveness is the deliberate decision to release resentment toward a person or group while liberating you from ongoing anger and bitterness—though it is likely an ongoing experience rather than a one-time event.[102]

How it helps:

The more we let people into our lives, the more inevitable it becomes that we will disappoint and even hurt one another, whether we mean to or not. Without forgiveness, relationships can be irreparably severed when this happens. One study found that "in spite of the relationship damage that typically occurs after transgressions...forgiveness appeared to facilitate the restoration of closeness and commitment" in relationships.[103]

Forgiveness does not require reconciling with the person who hurt you—but evidence suggests it can still help even when reconciliation is not possible or safe. A study of a six-week forgiveness training program found that people who completed the training reported less anger, stress, and hurt than people who did not complete the training.[104] Forgiveness brings the forgiver peace of mind, empowering you to recognize the pain you suffered without letting that pain define you for the rest of your life.[105]

What it looks like:

Now and then, we all need to ask for forgiveness. In those moments, explains Nigel Savage, founder of Jewish sustainability organization Hazon, we might learn from the notion of "tshuva," or return and repentance from wrongdoing.

"Jewish tradition is very precise about this," says Savage. "It has two core elements." To return to relationship, first we must demonstrate the sincerity of our repentance by choosing differently the next time we find ourselves in a situation where previously we have done wrong. And second, we must apologize and do our best to fix what has been broken. This echoes what one research study discovered about the necessary elements for a genuine apology.[106] Those steps include: acknowledging offense; explaining what went wrong; expressing regret; offering repair; declaring repentance; and requesting forgiveness.

Where to start:

Although forgiveness can evoke humanity's greatest sufferings, most forgiving happens on a smaller scale, moving past minor irritations, misunderstandings, or surmountable differences. You can model this in your leadership by being the first to own your own mistakes and missteps, and by choosing to forgive transgressions as they occur.

The quiet discipline of practicing forgiveness becomes easier with practice, so start by intentionally forgiving the minor irritations and notice how you can step into greater complexity with confidence. And for more on practicing forgiveness, check out Discover Forgiveness[107] and this guide to letting go of a grudge.[108]

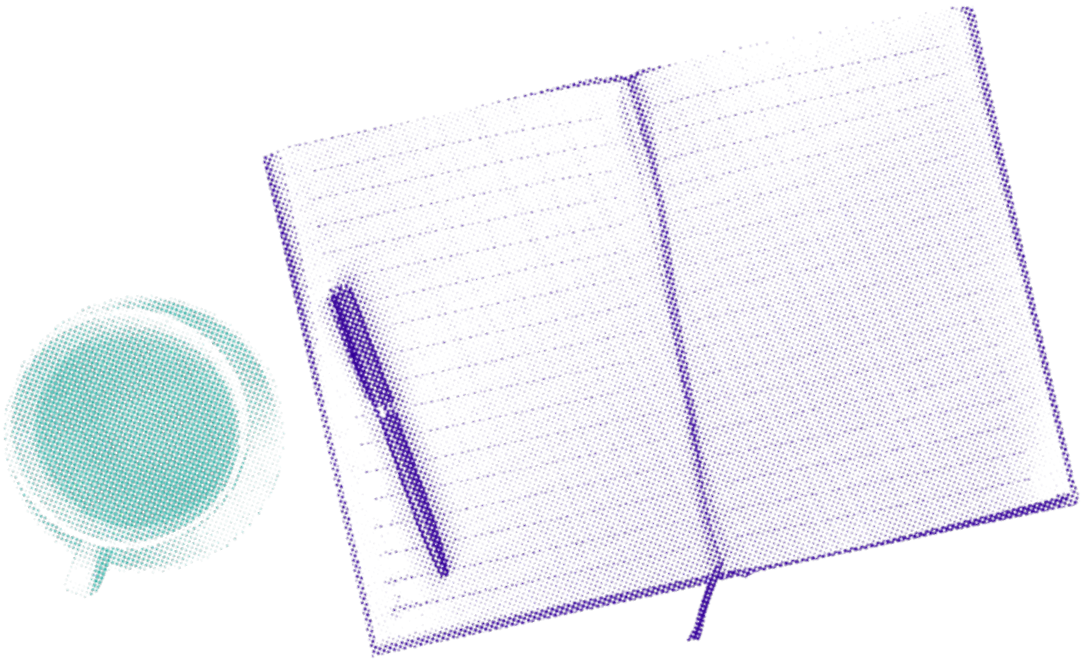
REFLECTION

Personal Reflection Questions:

- What practices in your life feel like keystones for healthy connection? Why?
- Which practices might you want to try next? Where can you start?

Strategic Questions for Groups:

- What is an everyday thing we do as a group—no matter how small it might feel—that has an outsized impact on the quality of our connection?
- What could we do right now to strengthen our connection as a group? What good might come from that?
- Taking relationships seriously will demand new standards and targets, roles, and skills. Perhaps the future will see us surrounded by bridging guides, network weavers, and relational coaches. What other future relational roles, targets, and skills can you imagine?



“I think about the love, the capacity for human connection, for generosity of spirit, no matter how much or what you have or don’t have — that we have, right now, within each of us, every single thing we need to be a part of creating a beautiful future. And we have been living in a time of such scarcity and austerity and zero sum. Everything about our politics is zero-sum. That is not what we were meant for, as human beings. Our inclination is to be connected and to care.”[109]

– Ai-jen Poo,
labor activist

Cultures of Connection: Coaching Young Athletes

Healing is never perfect or complete. Though we can turn to conflict resolution, ancestral healing journeys, psychotherapy, or plant medicine—all of which may have an important role to play in healing—the reality is that we humans have a propensity to hurt each other. And, sadly, this hurt extends into how laws are written and institutions are run.

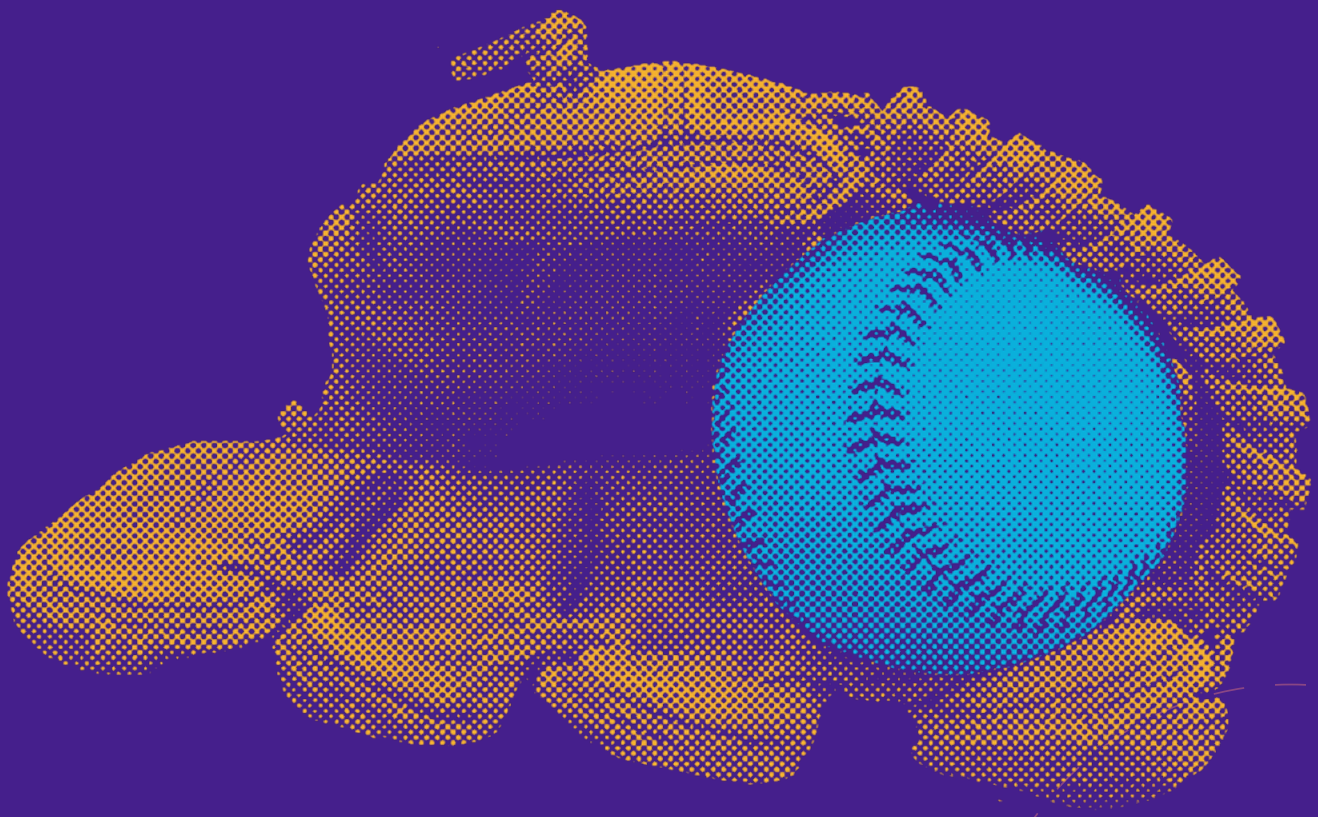
Nanyamka Redmond studies how to coach young athletes and has actively coached and mentored youth together with her partner for more than a decade. She knows that you have to change the metrics of success when supporting healing relationships. “Sticking with it, even when things aren’t shaping up the way you want them to, is hard,” she explains. “We don’t know what the outcomes will be from the investments we make in these relationships. You’ve just got to stick with the values that matter most to you.”

Early in her career, Redmond and her partner invested in one young athlete in particular. As a child, he’d been abused by his mother, later adopted, and understandably struggled with sustaining relationships with adults. “He lived everyday with the story that the person who was supposed to love him had tried to harm him.” Time after time, the young man would try and things would fall apart and the new people in his life would discard him. “Helping him graduate from high school, go to college, going through parole—we stuck with him.” But the story of abandonment was so strong that the young man still believed himself to be without support. “My husband recently showed him a picture of a gathering we’d hosted for him years ago, with all these people there. He told him, ‘I couldn’t give you everything, but I gave you access to everything I had.’ And suddenly his tone shifted. He remembered.”

The process of healing never ends. It doesn’t happen quickly and it is far from linear. But, Redmond concludes, it is worth doing. “You still keep going, keep trying. On a beach full of seashells, you pick up what you can and you just keep going.”

“You can’t forgive without loving. And I don’t mean sentimentality. I don’t mean mush. I mean having enough courage to stand up and say, ‘I forgive. I’m finished with it.’”[110]

– Maya Angelou,
poet and author



A Call to Connection

Annie Dillard famously wrote, "How we spend our days is how we spend our lives."[111] This paper is a call to spend our days cultivating a culture of connection.

While we are wired to be in relationship, tending to our connections takes practice. This mindset demands a commitment to mutuality and cooperation, prioritizing connection even amidst stress or when evidence of humanity's goodness is hard to find. This doesn't have to mean taking an hour to listen to every stranger's story when you pass them on the street. But it does mean moving at the speed of connection, allowing for the kinds of interactions that make people feel human: a smile, a "hello," checking in on someone when they're sick; what William James described as the "civic temper" of a population. And sometimes, it means being the one vulnerable enough to share a fear, a hurt, or an apology.

In 2021, researchers published a study that illustrated something that may seem like common knowledge: Though we want deep and meaningful relationships with others, we are reluctant to have the kinds of interactions that would create that experience of connection.[112] Too often, the expectations we have of what others want creates a psychological barrier that stops us from forming a relationship.

As a leader, you are responsible for stewarding a culture of connection in your own sphere of influence. It is your own way of being, as much as the strategies you implement and the supports you put in place, that creates the conditions for others to feel invited into cultivating connection themselves. We hope that this primer has provided you with practical tools for doing that work, as well as the encouragement to feel it is worth doing—and that you're not doing it alone.

Perhaps you came to this document with enthusiasm for a similar paradigm shift in how we live and work together, and found your instincts affirmed and your imagination spurred. Or, perhaps, you came to it with some hesitation, fatigue, or outright doubt. Whatever you brought with you, we hope you finish reading with a sense of possibility.

A more relational culture is possible. Indeed, it is necessary. Our own wellbeing is at stake, along with that of our families. The health and flourishing of our organizational and civic life hang in the balance too. And we know that when we build structures that foster relationships, outrageously meaningful benefits occur: We are safer and healthier, find work more easily and do it more productively, experience less pain, and enjoy more love.

Sharpening our lens toward a culture of connection will help us find new ways of measuring and rewarding relational health.[113] Community builders will be understood as healthcare providers and integrated into the infrastructure of care. Forgiveness and reconciliation will be understood as core leadership competencies. Each organization will develop cultural tools and rituals—including a calendar of celebrations—where everyone feels valued and that they belong. In a culture of connection, we will focus on the means of how we interact—not just because it will shape the ends—but because, when it comes to how we are together, the means are the ends.

Of course strengthening a culture of connection doesn't undo the realities of racist policing, uneven access to quality healthcare, or the amount of carbon in the atmosphere. This is no silver bullet. But a relational approach is the soil in which good ideas can be planted that may someday transform the entire ecosystem in which we live.

"Strong relationships are not a frilly accessory in a happy neighborhood, a thriving school, an effective health service, a flourishing business, or a successful and cohesive society. They are the making of it all," explains David Robinson, a long-serving community worker.[114]

If we aren't actively strengthening the thing that makes life meaningful, the web of connection that keeps us safer and helps us thrive, the foundation from which society itself arises, what on earth are we doing?

So, may these stories accompany us as reminders that a different way is possible.

May the research give us confidence in our inherent capacity to connect.

May the practices offer pathways ahead when we feel stuck, or alone.

May the awareness of potential obstacles sharpen our resolve.

And, may the wisdom of our forebears and the richness of our own relationships embolden us to put connection at the heart of all things.

Gratitude

One of our principles at Sacred Design Lab is ensuring that the means and ends of a project cohere: How we are together shapes what we do together. What a joy, then, to celebrate the deeply collaborative spirit of "A Call to Connection"!

This was true first and foremost in our team. Collaborative authorship is one of the ways that Sacred Design Lab has learned how much more is possible when we co-create. In a paradigm that looks for singular voices, we know that our best writing happens when we write together. Thanks therefore to the stellar team of co-authors whose creativity and care know no bounds:

- **Angie Thurston,** Sacred Design Lab
- **Sue Phillips,** Sacred Design Lab
- **Derrick Scott III,** Sacred Design Lab

From the outset, we wanted this primer to integrate ancient wisdom and cutting-edge scientific research. That would have been impossible without the wide-ranging and generous expertise from the team at UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center. A deep bow of thanks to co-authors:

- **Summer Allen,** Greater Good Science Center
- **Jason Marsh,** Greater Good Science Center
- **Emiliana Simon-Thomas,** Greater Good Science Center

Always present with encouragement and practical guidance, and without whom this document would not exist, thank you to the team at Einhorn Collaborative:

- **Jonathan Gruber,** Einhorn Collaborative
- **Jennifer Hoos Rothberg,** Einhorn Collaborative
- **Ira Hillman,** Einhorn Collaborative
- **Alicia Bonner,** editorial consultant

This project's inquiry was fundamentally shaped through rich conversations with three relational experts. We offer our deepest gratitude for their conviction, discernment, and laughter along the way:

- **Jennifer Bailey,** Faith Matters Network
- **Mel Brennan,** United Way of Southern Maryland
- **Nanyamka Redmond,** Search Institute

For the design of this exciting, energetic document, many thanks to:

- **Daniel Edwards,** Mind Control Industries

Thanks also to the generous insight from experts across a wonderfully rich set of contexts, whose stories gave shape and direction to what we've shared here:

- **Avi Orlow,** Foundation for Jewish Camp
- **Christine Lai,** The Ready
- **De'Amon Harges,** The Learning Tree
- **Deepti Doshi,** New_Public
- **Elaine Heath,** Spring Forest
- **Eli Pariser,** New_Public
- **Emmanuel Andre,** Northside Transformative Law Center
- **Enrique Silva,** Lincoln Institute of Land Policy
- **Hilary Pennington,** Ford Foundation
- **Jesús Gerena,** UpTogether
- **Jon Alexander,** New Citizenship Project
- **Komal Bajaj,** NYC Health + Hospitals
- **Lennon Flowers,** The Dinner Party / The People's Supper
- **Linsey Morrison,** Eventbrite
- **Nigel Savage,** Hazon
- **Pete Peterson,** Pepperdine School of Public Policy
- **Phil Buchanan,** The Center for Effective Philanthropy
- **Rosa Ángela Velázquez,** Arkansas United
- **Virginia Tenpenny,** Starbucks
- **Wanuri Kahiu,** AFROBUBBLEGUM

Finally, knowing that the longing for connection and the traditions that sustain it are as old as time, we acknowledge the wisdom and insight of our teachers and elders that have guided our work on this project:

- **Desmond Tutu**
- **Donella Meadows**
- **Howard Thurman**
- **john a. powell**
- **Margaret Wheatley**
- **Peter Block**

With gratitude to all of those listed here, and you for reading,

Casper ter Kuile
Sacred Design Lab

END NOTES

[1] Meadows, D. H., & Wright, D. (2008). *Thinking in systems*, p. 12. Chelsea Green Publishing.

[2] Vincentelli, E. (2021, August 4). Friday night footlights: How theater bonds a Colorado town. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/04/theater/creede-colorado-theater.html

[3] Prechtel, M. (2015). *The smell of rain on dust: Grief and praise*. North Atlantic Books.

[4] Brendtro, L.K. (2006). The vision of Urie Bronfenbrenner: Adults who are crazy about kids. *Reclaiming Children and Youth*, 15(3), 162–166.

[5] Lieberman, M. D. (2013). *Social: Why our brains are wired to connect*. Oxford University Press.

[6] Welch, M. G., Barone, J. L., Porges, S. W., Hane, A. A., Kwon, K. Y., Ludwig, R. J., Stark, R. I., Surman, A. L., Kolacz, J., & Myers, M. M. (2020). Family nurture intervention in the NICU increases autonomic regulation in mothers and children at 4–5 years of age: Follow-up results from a randomized controlled trial. PLOS ONE, 15(8), Article e0236930. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0236930

[7] Wheatley, M. J. (2005). *Finding our way* (1st ed.). Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

[8] Djalovski, A., Dumas, G., Kinreich, S., & Feldman, R. (2021). Human attachments shape interbrain synchrony toward efficient performance of social goals. NeuroImage, 226, Article 117600. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neuroimage.2020.117600

[9] Ulber, J., Hamann, K., & Tomasello, M. (2015). How 18- and 24-month-old peers divide resources among themselves. Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 140, 228–244. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2015.07.009

[10] Svetlova, M., Nichols, S. R., & Brownell, C. A. (2010). Toddlers' prosocial behavior: From instrumental to empathic to altruistic helping. *Child Development*, 81(6), 1814–1827. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2010.01512.x

[11] Warneken, F., & Tomasello, M. (2007). Altruistic helping and cooperation at 14 months of age. *Infancy*, 11(3), 271–294. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7078.2007.tb00227.x

[12] Over, H., & Carpenter, M. (2009). Eighteen-month-old infants show increased helping following priming with affiliation. *Psychological Science*, 20(10), 1189–1194. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2009.02419.x

[13] Tomasello, M., Melis, A. P., Tennie, C., Wyman, E., & Herrmann, E. (2012). Two key steps in the evolution of human cooperation. *Current Anthropology*, 53(6), 673–692. https://doi.org/10.1086/668207

[14] Egolf, B., Lasker, J., Wolf, S., & Potvin, L. (1992). The Roseto effect: a 50-year comparison of mortality rates. *American Journal of Public Health*, 82(8), 1089–1092. https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.82.8.1089

[15] Harvard Second Generation Study. (2015). Harvard second generation study. Harvard Medical School. https://www.adultdevelopmentstudy.org/

[16] Waldinger, R. (2015). *What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness* [Video]. TED Conferences. https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness?language=en

[17] Holt-Lunstad, J. (2021). Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors: The power of social connection in prevention. *American Journal of Lifestyle Medicine*, 15(5), 567–573. https://doi.org/10.1177/15598276211009454

[18] Cohen, S., Doyle, W. J., Skoner, D. P., Rabin, B. S., & Gwaltney Jr., J. M. (1997). Social ties and susceptibility to the common cold. JAMA: *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 277(24), 1940. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.1997.03540480040036

[19] Pressman, S. D., Cohen, S., Miller, G. E., Barkin, A., Rabin, B. S., & Treanor, J. J. (2005). Loneliness, social network size, and immune response to influenza vaccination in college freshmen. *Health Psychology*, 24(3), 297–306. https://doi.org/10.1037/0278-6133.24.3.297

[20] Broadbent, E., & Koschwanez, H. E. (2012). The psychology of wound healing. *Current Opinion in Psychiatry*, 25(2), 135–140. https://doi.org/10.1097/yco.0b013e32834e1424

[21] Holt-Lunstad, J., Smith, T. B., & Layton, J. B. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic Review. *PLoS Medicine*, 7(7), Article e1000316. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316

[22] James, B. D., Wilson, R. S., Barnes, L. L., & Bennett, D. A. (2011). Late-life social activity and cognitive decline in old age. *Journal of the International Neuropsychological Society*, 17(6), 998–1005. https://doi.org/10.1017/s1355617711000531

[23] Walton, G. M., Cohen, G. L., Cwir, D., & Spencer, S. J. (2012). Mere belonging: The power of social connections. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 102(3), 513–532. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025731

[24] Diener, E., & Seligman, M. E. (2002). Very happy people. *Psychological Science*, 13(1), 81–84. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9280.00415

[25] Beal, D. J., Cohen, R. R., Burke, M. J., & McLendon, C. L. (2003). Cohesion and performance in groups: A meta-analytic clarification of construct relations. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 88(6), 989–1004. https://doi.org/10.1037/0021-9010.88.6.989

[26] Saporito, T. J. (2012). It's time to acknowledge CEO loneliness. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2012/02/its-time-to-acknowledge-ceo-lo

[27] Kwan, H. K., Zhang, X., Liu, J., & Lee, C. (2018). Workplace ostracism and employee creativity: An integrative approach incorporating pragmatic and engagement roles. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 103(12), 1358–1366. https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000320

[28] Tu, M., Cheng, Z., & Liu, W. (2019). Spotlight on the effect of workplace ostracism on creativity: A social cognitive perspective. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01215

[29] Scott, B. A., Colquitt, J. A., Paddock, E. L., & Judge, T. A. (2010). A daily investigation of the role of manager empathy on employee well-being. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 113(2), 127–140. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2010.08.001

[30] Chancellor, J., Margolis, S., Jacobs Bao, K., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2018). Everyday prosociality in the workplace: The reinforcing benefits of giving, getting, and glimpsing. *Emotion*, 18(4), 507–517. https://doi.org/10.1037/emo0000321

[31] Wike, R., & Holzwart, K. (2008). Where trust is high, crime and corruption are low: Since communism's fall, social trust has fallen in Eastern Europe. *Pew Research Center*. https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2008/04/15/where-trust-is-high-crime-and-corruption-are-low/

[32] Sampson, R. J., Raudenbush, S. W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*, 277(5328), 918–924. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.277.5328.918

[33] Knack, S., & Keefer, P. (1997). Does social capital have an economic payoff? A cross-country investigation. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 112(4), 1251–1288. https://www.jstor.org/stable/2951271

[34] Glanville, J. L., Andersson, M. A., & Paxton, P. (2013). Do social connections create trust? An examination using new longitudinal data. *Social Forces*, 92(2), 545–562. https://doi.org/10.1093/sf/sot079

[35] Foa, R. (2011). *The economic rationale for social cohesion—The cross-country evidence*. OECD International Conference on Social Cohesion and Development. https://www.oecd.org/development/pgd/46908575.pdf

[36] Sisk, T., Rizk, S., Rijal, M., Wilde, A., & Mungenast, H. (2020). *Strengthening social cohesion: Conceptual framing and programming implications*. United Nations Development Programme. https://www.undp.org/publications/strengthening-social-cohesion-conceptual-framing-and-programming-implications

[37] Soenens, M., & Maggio, J. (Producers). (2014–). *The Italian Americans*. PBS. https://www.pbs.org/video/italian-americans-introduction/

[38] Murthy, V. H. (2020). *Together: The healing power of human connection in a sometimes lonely world*. Harper Wave.

[39] Sandstrom, G. M., & Boothby, E. J. (2020). Why do people avoid talking to strangers? A mini meta-analysis of predicted fears and actual experiences talking to a stranger. *Self and Identity*, 20(1), 47–71. https://doi.org/10.1080/15298868.2020.1816568

[40] Gilbert, D. T., & Malone, P. S. (1995). The correspondence bias. *Psychological Bulletin*, 117(1), 21–38. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.117.1.21

[41] Fong, C. M., & Oberholzer-Gee, F. (2011). Truth in giving: Experimental evidence on the welfare effects of informed giving to the poor. *Journal of Public Economics*, 95(5–6), 436–444. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2010.10.017.

[42] Small, D. A., Loewenstein, G., & Slovic, P. (2007). Sympathy and callousness: The impact of deliberative thought on donations to identifiable and statistical victims. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 102(2), 143–153. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2006.01.005

[43] Cameron, C. D., & Payne, B. K. (2011). Escaping affect: How motivated emotion regulation creates insensitivity to mass suffering. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 100(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021643

[44] Mental Health America. (2021). *The state of mental health in America*. https://mhanational.org/issues/state-mental-health-america

[45] Kupferberg, A., Bicks, L., & Hasler, G. (2016). Social functioning in major depressive disorder. *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 69, 313–332. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2016.07.002

[46] Rhebergen, D., Beekman, A. T., de Graaf, R., Nolen, W. A., Spijker, J., Hoogendijk, W. J., & Penninx, B. W. (2010). Trajectories of recovery of social and physical functioning in major depression, dysthymic disorder and double depression: A 3-year follow-up. *Journal of Affective Disorders*, 124(1–2), 148–156. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jad.2009.10.029

[47] International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies. (2016). *Trauma and relationships*. https://istss.org/public-resources/public-education-pamphlets

[48] Welch, M. G. (2019, July 24). *The science of relationships* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RGdL3OBpdDQ

[49] Nurture Science Program. (2021, December 13). *Connecting activities: Joint attention through a nurture science lens*. https://nurturescienceprogram.org/

[50] Oswald, D. L., & Clark, E. M. (2006). How do friendship maintenance behaviors and problem-solving styles function at the individual and dyadic levels? *Personal Relationships*, 13(3), 333–348. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2006.00121.x

[51] Carrère, S., Buehlman, K. T., Gottman, J. M., Coan, J. A., & Ruckstuhl, L. (2000). Predicting marital stability and divorce in newlywed couples. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 14(1), 42–58. https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.14.1.42

[52] Welch, M. G. (2016). Calming cycle theory: the role of visceral/autonomic learning in early mother and infant/child behaviour and development. *Acta Pædiatrica*, 105(11), 1266–1274. https://doi.org/10.1111/apa.13547

[53] The Saguaro Seminar: Civic Engagement in America. (2012, July). *Growing class gaps in social connectedness among American youth, 1975–2009**. Harvard Kennedy School of Government. https://hceconomics.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/file_uploads/Putnam-etal_2012_Growing-Class-Gaps.pdf

[54] van Kessel, P. (2020, February 5). *How Americans feel about the satisfactions and stresses of modern life*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2020/02/05/how-americans-feel-about-the-satisfactions-and-stresses-of-modern-life/

[55] McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Cook, J. M. (2001). Birds of a feather: Homophily in social networks. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 27(1), 415–444. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.soc.27.1.415

[56] Kraus, M. W., Côté, S., & Keltner, D. (2010). Social class, contextualism, and empathic accuracy. *Psychological Science*, 21(11), 1716–1723. https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797610387613

[57] McPherson, M., Smith-Lovin, L., & Brashears, M. E. (2008). Social isolation in America: Changes in core discussion networks over two decades. *American Sociological Review*, 73(6), 1022. https://doi.org/10.1177/000312240807300610

[58] Hsu, D. T. (2018). *Untethered: A primer on social isolation*. https://www.readuntethered.com/s/Untethered-v-12418-for-PDF-Download.pdf

[59] Making Caring Common Project. (2021, February). *Loneliness in America: How the pandemic has deepened an epidemic of loneliness and what we can do about it*. Harvard Graduate School of Education. https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/loneliness-in-america

[60] Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2012). Can you connect with me now? How the presence of mobile communication technology influences face-to-face conversation quality. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 30(3), 237–246. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407512453827

[61] Kushlev, K., Hunter, J. F., Proulx, J., Pressman, S. D., & Dunn, E. (2019). Smartphones reduce smiles between strangers. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 91, 12–16. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.09.023

[62] Kushlev, K., & Dunn, E. W. (2018). Smartphones distract parents from cultivating feelings of connection when spending time with their children. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36(6), 1619–1639. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407518769387

[63] Dwyer, R. J., Kushlev, K., & Dunn, E. W. (2018). Smartphone use undermines enjoyment of face-to-face social interactions. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 78, 233–239. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.10.007

[64] More in Common. (2019). *The perception gap*. https://perceptiongap.us/

[65] Rathje, S., van Bavel, J. J., & van der Linden, S. (2021). Out-group animosity drives engagement on social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(26), Article e2024292118. https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2024292118

[66] More in Common. (2021). *Two stories of distrust in America* (1.0.3). https://www.moreincommon.com/media/yfcbfmmp/mic_two-stories-of-distrust.pdf

[67] Making Caring Common Project. (2021, December). *Do Americans really care for each other? What unites us—and divides us* https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/reports/do-americans-care-about-each-other

[68] Brown, B. (2010). *The gifts of imperfection: Let go of who you think you're supposed to be and embrace who you are*. Hazelden Publishing.

[69] Bajaj, K., Meguerdichian, M., Thoma, B., Huang, S., Eppich, W., & Cheng, A. (2018). The PEARLS Healthcare Debriefing Tool. *Acad Med*, 93(2), 336. https://debrief2learn.org/pearls-debriefing-tool/

[70] Welch, M. G. (2016). Calming cycle theory: the role of visceral/autonomic learning in early mother and infant/child behaviour and development. *Acta Paediatrica*, 105(11), 1266–1274. https://doi.org/10.1111/apa.13547

[71] Othering and Belonging Institute. (2018, November 14). *Bridging—Towards A Society Built on Belonging: Animated Video + Curriculum*. University of California, Berkeley. https://belonging.berkeley.edu/bridging-towards-society-built-belonging-animated-video-curriculum

[72] Adichie, C. N. (2009, October 7). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. TED Talks. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story

[73] Greater Good Science Center. (2020). *Bridging differences playbook*. Greater Good. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Bridging_Differences_Playbook-Final.pdf

[74] Greater Good Science Center. (2021). *Shared identity (Greater Good in action)*. Greater Good. https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/shared_identity

[75] Faith Matters Network. https://www.faithmattersnetwork.org/

[76] Coleman, P. T. (2021). *The way out: How to overcome toxic polarization*. Columbia University Press.

[77] The Hidden Tribes of America. (2018). *The hidden tribes of America*. https://hiddentribes.us/

[78] New Pluralists. (2021). *Many voices one future*. https://newpluralists.org/

[79] Thurman, H. (1963). *Disciplines of the spirit* (Howard Thurman Book) (Reprint ed.), p. 76. Friends United Press.

[80] Palmer, P. J. (2004). *A hidden wholeness: The journey toward an undivided life* (1st ed.). Jossey-Bass.

[81] Othering and Belonging Institute. (2021). T*he Circle of Human Concern: Video + Curriculum*. University of California, Berkeley. https://belonging.berkeley.edu/circle-human-concern-video-curriculum

[82] Center for Courage & Renewal. (2017, November 10). *The clearness committee*. The Clearness Committee. https://couragerenewal.org/wpccr/clearnesscommittee/

[83] Weger, H., Castle Bell, G., Minei, E. M., & Robinson, M. C. (2014). The relative effectiveness of active listening in initial interactions. *International Journal of Listening*, 28(1), 13–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/10904018.2013.813234

[84] Narrative 4, Inc. (2020). *About Narrative 4*. https://narrative4.com/about/

[85] StoryCorps, Inc. (n.d.). *Lesson: The power of active listening*. https://storycorps.org/discover/education/lesson-the-power-of-active-listening/

[86] RULER. (2020). Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence. https://ycei.org/ruler

[87] Newall, N. E., Chipperfield, J. G., Clifton, R. A., Perry, R. P., Swift, A. U., & Ruthig, J. C. (2009). Causal beliefs, social participation, and loneliness among older adults: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 26(2–3), 273–290. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407509106718

[88] Hall, J. A. (2018). How many hours does it take to make a friend? *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 36(4), 1278–1296. https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407518761225

[89] Phillips, S. (2018). *On covenant*. Sacred Design Lab. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1APWUu80WYI4qgei4xLTQig2qGf71oNi9em2VColTuLs/edit

[90] Sherif. M. (1958). Superordinate goals in the reduction of intergroup conflict. *American Journal of Sociology*, 63(4), 349–356. https://doi.org/10.1086/222258

[91] Greater Good Science Center. (2020). *Bridging differences playbook*. University of California, Berkeley. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Bridging_Differences_Playbook-Final.pdf

[92] Algoe, S. B. (2012). Find, remind, and bind: The functions of gratitude in everyday relationships. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 6(6), 455–469. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1751-9004.2012.00439.x

[93] Algoe, S. B., Haidt, J., & Gable, S. L. (2008). Beyond reciprocity: Gratitude and relationships in everyday life. *Emotion*, 8(3), 425–429. https://doi.org/10.1037/1528-3542.8.3.425

[94] Emmons, R. (2010, November 17). *10 ways to become more grateful*. Greater Good Science Center. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/ten_ways_to_become_more_grateful1

[95] Solnit, R. (2009). *A paradise built in hell*, p. 173. Penguin Random House.

[96] Algoe, S. B. (2019). Positive interpersonal processes. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 28(2), 183–188. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721419827272

[97] Brown, B. (2019, January 9). *Why experiencing joy and pain in a group is so powerful*. Greater Good Science Center. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_experiencing_joy_and_pain_in_a_group_is_so_powerful

[98] Holstee. (2020). *Holstee ritual life planner*. https://www.holstee.com/products/ritual-life-planner

[99] van Lange, P. A., & van Doesum, N. J. (2015). Social mindfulness and social hostility. *Current Opinion in Behavioral Sciences*, 3, 18–24. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cobeha.2014.12.009

[100] Brackett, M. (2020, October 23). To build it back better, give ourselves permission to feel. Einhorn Collaborative with NationSwell. https://nationswell.com/news/to-build-it-back-better-give-ourselves-permission-to-feel/

[101] Tjan, A. K. (2015, February 11). 5 ways to become more self-aware. *Harvard Business Review*. https://hbr.org/2015/02/5-ways-to-become-more-self-aware

[102] Greater Good Science Center. (n.d.). *Forgiveness: Defined*. University of California, Berkeley. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/forgiveness/definition

[103] Tsang, J., Mccullough, M. E., & Fincham, F. D. (2006). The longitudinal association between forgiveness and relationship closeness and commitment. *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology*, 25(4), 448–472. https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2006.25.4.448

[104] Harris, A. H. S., Luskin, F., Norman, S. B., Standard, S., Bruning, J., Evans, S., & Thoresen, C. E. (2006). Effects of a group forgiveness intervention on forgiveness, perceived stress, and trait-anger. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 62(6), 715–733. https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.20264

[105] Greater Good Science Center. (2020). *Forgiveness definition: What is forgiveness*. University of California, Berkeley. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/forgiveness/definition

[106] Lewicki, R. J., Polin, B., & Lount, R. B. (2016). An exploration of the structure of effective apologies. *Negotiation and Conflict Management Research*, 9(2), 177–196. https://doi.org/10.1111/ncmr.12073

[107] Templeton World Charity Foundation. (2021). *Discover forgiveness*. https://discoverforgiveness.org/

[108] Greater Good Science Center. *Nine steps to forgiveness (Greater Good in Action)*. University of California, Berkeley. https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/nine_steps_to_forgiveness

[109] Tippett, K. (Host). (2020, April 2). This is our (caring) revolution, with Ai-jen Poo [Audio podcast episode]. In *On being*. The On Being Project. https://onbeing.org/programs/ai-jen-poo-this-is-our-caring-revolution/

[110] *Maya Angelou Interviewed by Oprah in 2013*. (2013, May 21). Oprah.Com. https://www.oprah.com/omagazine/maya-angelou-interviewed-by-oprah-in-2013/5

[111] Dillard, A. (2013). *The writing life*. Harper Perennial.

[112] Kardas, M., Kumar, A., & Epley, N. (2021). Overly shallow?: Miscalibrated expectations create a barrier to deeper conversation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspa0000281

[113] Einhorn Collaborative. (2021, May 11). *Making the relationship the patient*. https://www.einhorncollaborative.org/post/making-the-relationship-the-patient

[114] Lawrence, I. (2021). *Through thick and thin*. https://docs.google.com/document/d/13hSEgDpobde-f2u-iwL7mbccdUnCIlBhWszu29DNbFI/edit

A CALL TO CONNECTION IS A COLLABORATION AMONG:

EINHORN COLLABORATIVE

Greater Good Science Center

Sacred Design Lab

FOR MORE INFORMATION:

www.calltoconnection.us