

Unexpected Connections

A Sermon Delivered on January 29, 2012
by
The Reverend Axel H. Gehrmann

*“The art of conversation is the art of hearing,
as well as being heard.”
-- William Hazlitt*

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Opening Words: from *Singing the Living Tradition* #434

May we be reminded here of our highest aspirations,
and inspired to bring our gifts of love and service
to the altar of humanity.

May we know once again that we are not isolated beings
But connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe,
to this community and to each other.

Meditation: attributed to Black Elk of the Oglala Sioux tribe

Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle.
The sky is round and I have heard the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars.
The wind in its greatest power, whirls.
Birds make their nests in circles for theirs is the same religion as ours.
The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle.
The moon does the same, and both are round.
Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing,
and always come back again to where they were.
The life of a [person] is a circle from childhood to childhood,
and so it is in everything where power moves.

Reading: by Nicholas Christakis and James Fowler from *Connected – The Surprising Power of Our Social Networks and How They Shape Our Lives*

Given our research and our own diverse experiences in life – from meeting our spouses to meeting each other, from caring for terminally ill patients to building latrines in poor villages – we believe that our connections to other people [matter], and that by linking the study of individuals to the study of groups, the science of social networks can explain a lot about human experience... [Our connections make] us uniquely human. To know who we are, we must understand how we are connected...

Our connections affect every aspect of our daily lives... How we feel, what we know, when we marry, whether we fall ill, how much money we make, and whether we vote all depend on the ties that bind us. Social networks spread happiness, generosity, and love. They are always there, exerting both subtle and dramatic influence over our choices, actions, thoughts, feelings, even our desires. And our connections do not end with the people we know. Beyond our own social horizons, friends of friends of friends can start chain reactions that eventually reach us, like waves from distant lands that wash up on our shores.

Reading: by Christina Baldwin from *Calling the Circle – The First and Future Culture* (p. 25)

[Baldwin imagines the First Culture of humanity as concentric circles of interconnection. She writes:] deep in my cells, I remember the first circle.

Many, many thousands of years ago, when we captured the spark of fire and began to carry the embers of warmth and cooking and light along with us from site to site, fire brought new experience into being. Coming in from the [grasslands] where we had been wandering in small [...] groups we found shelter in caves and crevasses and brought the safety of the light with us. The fire warded off predators, cooked the meats and roasted the roots and nuts that were our staple diet. With the flame, we could provide more food, extend the safety, sustain more people.

We made a circle around the flame and started to face each other. We came into circle because fire led us there. Struggling to keep warm, struggling to keep safe, it made sense to put fire in the center. A circle allowed space for each person to face the flame, to take place. As a member of a fire circle, we each could claim a place of warmth and a piece of food...

When I see someone again and again in the firelight, the fire becomes symbolic of our connection; I see a spark in the other. Perhaps as we first faced each other across the shimmering circle of light, we were able to envision the spark of the Sacred in each other's eyes. We wondered about our place in the larger circle of the earth and sky, in the community of creation.

Reading: by feminist peace activist Starhawk from *Dreaming the Dark*

Community. Somewhere, there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us, eyes will light up as we enter, voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

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“Connections, connections, connections.” That’s what my father would always say to me. “Connections, connections, connections, Axel!” Part mantra, part entreaty, part demand. The words always hurled at me with a fierce urgency.

Throughout the last years of his life, my father suffered from aphasia, a language disorder, which interferes with the ability to understand and use words correctly. My father could hear and he could speak, but most of the time the meaning of words heard and spoken was jumbled. Except for certain key phrases he could express reliably, which had assumed a special place in his mind, because of their centrality and significance.

When my father looked me hard in the eye, often grabbing me by the arm, and said “connections, connections, connections,” it was part of his parental effort to convey what to him was a critical ingredient of professional success as he understood it: to make connections with colleagues and co-workers near and far, and to establish a place for myself in his “old boys network,” the network of liberal religious professionals he had spent a life-time negotiating. My father was a minister, too.

Ever since I graduated high school, he had been trying to persuade me to make connections. And for as long as I can remember, I stubbornly resisted his efforts. I resisted cultivating the kind of connections he had in mind.

I was interested in connections, but a different kind of connection. At the time I couldn’t quite describe what it was I had in mind. It was a quality of connection I had experienced sometimes with friends. Sometimes in the evening, in a quiet corner, undisturbed, sharing a pot of hot tea, and talking from the heart. Sometimes on a long walk together, heading nowhere in particular, lost in conversation, hardly aware of the streets we crossed. It was a rare sense of presence, and authenticity, and trust, and understanding.

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To this day, I remember that quality of connection I discovered as a young man. And I value it, to this day. It is an experience worth recapturing or recreating. But doing so is not easy.

Life has gotten a lot busier. Juggling work schedules and family schedules and school schedules. In our home, Elaine, the kids and I, once had a habit of gathering for dinner almost every evening, to connect. Now that time seems long past, and more often than not we are squeezing dinner in between late afternoon and evening meetings, or after school programs and the social commitments of our teenagers.

More often than not, when we do settle down for a meal at our round kitchen table, we are each tired, and scattered, and rushed in our own ways. Connecting is a challenge.

* * *

And yet, on some level, making connections is completely unnecessary. Not because we don't need connections – we need them. Not because we can live perfectly well in isolation – we can't. No, making connections is unnecessary, because we already are connected.

This is the point Christakis and Fowler make. Their research shows, whether we know it or not, our connections affect every aspect of our lives. Whether we like it or not, our thoughts and feelings, our decisions and our desires are shaped by the social network within which we live. “We can be deeply affected by events we do not witness that happen to people we do not know.”

For instance, a ten-year study showed how a sense of loneliness can spread in a social network. It turns out loneliness is contagious. If someone directly connected to you is feeling very lonely, you yourself are 52 percent more likely to feel lonely. If there is a second degree of separation between the two of you – if a friend of your friend is lonely – you are still 25 percent more likely to feel lonely, too. And if it is a friend of a friend of a friend, who is lonely, you are still 15 percent more likely to feel lonely.

As Nicholas Christakis puts it, it is “like pulling a single thread could unravel a sweater, a lonely person could destabilize an entire social network, spreading loneliness to others...” (“You're lonely, I'm lonely,” by Gregory Jones, *Christian Century*, 1/26/10)

But just as we are affected, we ourselves can affect others. Through our networks, we are influenced by hundreds or even thousands of people. But by the same token we influence them. We can be a source of happiness, generosity and love. We can infect people with kindness. We can create an outbreak of hope. We can transmit a spirit of compassion to thousands. This is especially true when we take an active role in shaping our social networks. We do this all the time.

Usually we have habit of associating with people who are like us. As Christakis and Fowler put it, “Whether it's Hells Angels or Jehovah's Witnesses, drug addicts or coffee drinkers, Democrats or Republicans, stamp collectors or bungee jumpers, the truth is that we seek out those people who share our interests our histories, and dreams. Birds of a feather flock together.” But this is a habit we have the capacity to transcend.

We can also choose the shape of our social networks. We can decide how many people we are connected to – whether we want one partner for a game of chess, or many partners for game of charades. And we can decide where we want to be within this network. Do we want to be right in the middle, the life of the party, or do we want to be on the sidelines? The kind of networks we create, and the place we take within them makes a big difference.

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On one level there is no need to make connections, because we already are connected. We are connected to people we know and people we don't know. We are connected to the world in ways we can't even imagine. The notion that we are isolated and that we are separate is an illusion. This insight has been conveyed by sages and mystics of all great religions.

Christina Baldwin shares this understanding. She writes,

“We have been lied to, have been told we are separate from the rest of creation, that humankind is set apart. We are not. The atoms of this planet are all the same. If we break ourselves down, break our cells down – the skin, the bones, the muscles, the soft tissues – at the atomic level we cannot tell ourselves apart. We are every body: the bird's tail, the oak tree's leaf, the rock in the roadway, the dog's fur, the water running in a brook. My body is the same as your body. Behold – we are one. We know this.” (p. 59)

We are not isolated beings, but connected, in mystery and miracle, to the universe, to this community and to each other.

And yet the experience of isolation is real. Despite the fact that our cities are growing more crowded, despite the fact that the internet provides an abundance of avenues for connection – whether through Facebook or YouTube or plain email, despite the fact that millions of us carry cell phones in our pockets, which allow us to connect any time and any place, to talk or text or tweet – despite all of this, according to a study by the University of Michigan, at any given time, 20% of our population feels unhappily isolated.

On one level we are connected. But on another level we are increasingly isolated and lonely. A survey in 1985 asked Americans how many confidants they had, how many people they could call up when they were feeling lonely or depressed, or if they had good personal news to share. In 1985 the most common answer was three. When the same survey was conducted nineteen years later in 2004, the most common answer was zero. (“Loneliness Can Kill You,” by Monte Burke, *Forbes*, 8/24/09)

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Spiritually and biologically isolation may be an illusion. But on the human interpersonal level, it is a reality, which is growing more pervasive.

But we have the capacity to reverse this trend. We have the power to move from isolation to connection. We have the power to move from loneliness to community.

Christina Baldwin envisions our earliest and most essential community as a circle. A circle around a fire. A circle of safety and sustenance. A circle of connection.

She says, “The need to literally make a circle is essential.” There is a physical dynamic, a magic in creating a circle.

“Even when our minds have forgotten the power of the circle, our bodies remember,” she says. “The circle gives us time to notice who’s here, to greet each other, say names, get comfortable. As the circle gathers, thoughts of family, work, home, and other details are still on our minds. We need to arrive... The circle begins with some ritual which draws a boundary that says: Now. Here. Come into the body of the moment.” (p. 102)

“Imagine being in a circle where we have gathered comfortably together and calmed ourselves from the rush of our daily concerns... Imagine being in a circle where men and women allow each other to finish their thoughts without interrupting; where we listen to what is being said rather than planning rebuttal.... [Imagine listening and trusting] that when it is our turn to speak, we will be able to draw forth the words we want.” (p. 81, 82)

A circle fosters connection between the people present, and more. The circle reminds those present of a connection with something within and beyond them. Something sacred, that might be symbolized by the flame. Baldwin calls it Spirit.

* * *

Creating a circle is an idea worth putting into practice. And, in fact, that is just what we do in our so-called Chalice Circles here at church. They are small groups that meet for two hours a month to intentionally foster a deeper sense of community.

The format is deceptively simple. For most groups it’s this: six to ten people gather in a circle, a candle is lit, a few opening words are shared. Then each person present has an opportunity to check in, and say a few words about their day or their current state of mind. Then an open conversation begins about a relevant topic of common concern. When the time is up, each person offers a final thought, a few closing words are read, and the candle is blown out. That’s it.

It doesn’t seem like much. But experience has shown that these simple gatherings are amazingly effective. They really do create an atmosphere of attentiveness, and trust, and authenticity, and understanding. I am not sure why, but they work.

Maybe it’s because lighting a candle at the beginning is a ritual which draws a boundary, leaving outside the distractions of our busy days, so that within the circle, we can be more fully present. We can speak more clearly and listen more closely.

Maybe it’s because the candle, or the chalice we light, reminds us of that primordial fire around which our ancestors gathered long ago. The flame that symbolized safety, sustenance, and support. The flame that burned through the night and allowed us to see

the faces of the others in the circle, and in the eyes of others, recognize the spark of a living spirit that binds each to all. A spirit which we know moves within us, and all creation.

Emerson called this spirit the Oversoul. “Within us is the soul of the whole,” Emerson said, “the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One.” There is a deep power in which we exist, which is accessible to us. Every moment we feel invaded by it is memorable.

* * *

“Connections, connections, connections,” my father used to say. And his words still echo in my mind. And I cherish them. I cherish them, not because I ever came around to his vision of professional networking. Nope. I cherish them, because I remember our moments together when he grabbed me by the arm – especially in the last years of his life when communication was more of challenge, and when most of the year we spent on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean – I remember the moments when he and I did connect. Moments when we were both undistracted and fully present. When we each spoke from the heart with passion, with authenticity and trust. Moments when – even though words often failed us – there was real understanding.

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Community is a circle. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. A circle of hands open to receive us, and eyes that light up as we enter. Community is where we can speak with passion, without having the words catch in our throats.

May we each do our part
To create communities of connection.
May we do our part to spread a spirit of kindness and compassion,
That all people might find safety and sustenance and support
Within the circle of life, that embraces us all.

Amen.