

"The world needs this book now more than ever." —Reese Witherspoon

The Secrets of Strong
Connections in a Lonely World

VIBE



ADAM
GRANT

#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of
THINK AGAIN and **HIDDEN POTENTIAL**

Prologue

I love people, but for a long time, I struggled to connect with them.

In eighth grade, I met up with my friend group to play pickup basketball at a local gym. I'd saved up for a new ball—the official NBA edition. I was excited to bring it to the game, but after we played, I couldn't find it.

Weeks later, I learned that one of my “friends” stole my ball, and the rest of them knew but didn't bother to tell me. I was devastated.

The thief was my oldest friend—we were born in the same room at the same hospital two days apart. I was the one who'd introduced him to the rest of the group. We'd been close since kindergarten. Or so I'd thought.

On my first day of high school, I had a grand total of two friends left. One of the main things we had in common was not really having other friends. I set out to find my people, but I didn't know where to look, and it certainly didn't feel like they were looking for me. A typical conversation went like this:

Me: *Grapes of Wrath* was the worst book ever.

Guy in literature class: Glad I didn't do the reading then.

Me: Did you see *Friends* last night?

Guy: Yeah, it was funny.

[end of conversation]

After a few months I stopped searching and settled into my niche as a diver on the high school swim team. I rarely hung out with my new teammates, but at least I'd found a place.

It had to get better in college—that's where you're supposed to make lifelong friends. I left Michigan and went halfway across the country for a fresh start. I felt optimistic: The pool of people was much bigger, and everyone was eager to connect. I followed all the clichés. *Get involved. Meet new people. Put yourself out there.* It seemed to be working. I racked up a solid list of acquaintances. Yet when it came time to find roommates for the following year, most people were noncommittal. I'd made surprisingly few real friends.

I kept trying. I'd been performing as a magician, so I started doing shows for student groups, but their enthusiasm vanished as soon as the sleight of hand was over. I tried going to parties, but I was too self-conscious to dance, the music blared too loud to say anything of substance, and the only people I could hear were close talkers who cornered me and drained my energy. I preferred hanging out in my dorm with my buddies Joey and Chandler. *Sadly, they weren't in the market for another roommate. Also, they live in a TV.*

After freshman year, I roomed with two guys from Michigan I'd gotten to know before college. Eventually I convinced them that instead of going to drunken parties, we should host board game nights. These gatherings were a magnet for fellow geeks in our dorm, who flocked to trivia matches and anagram battles. Although we had fun, we failed to form links that lasted beyond the semester. I kept asking myself: *Is this really it?*

I thought bonding was hard because I'm a shy introvert. I'm not antisocial—I'm just pro-quiet.

Then I learned I was doing it wrong.

My junior spring, I wandered into a course on personality psychology. After the first lecture, I got so absorbed in a conversation with a few of the other students that I was late to my next class. It wasn't long before we were meeting up for dinners that went past midnight and waxing poetic about the meaning of life. It wasn't just one group; I sat near different people every week and hit it off with almost everyone in earshot. Things were finally clicking.

The catalyst was our delightfully quirky Canadian professor, Brian Little. He was so introverted that after his lectures he darted out of the classroom to recharge by hiding in a bathroom stall. Yet the way he engaged with us was contagious. Taking his course was like joining a secret society. It changed how we talked to each other—I ended up having more deep discussions with those classmates than the rest of college combined. I'm still friends with a bunch of them today.

I couldn't stop wondering why these interactions were so different. I finished the class with a mission: reverse-engineer the dynamic and figure out how to foster that kind of kinship. I had to know what it takes for people to vibe.



We often attribute vibes to specific people and places. *I love her vibe. This room has good vibes.* But a vibe isn't just automatically there. It comes alive in our interactions.

A vibe is the quality of connection between people. The Latin root is *vibratio*, for vibration. When we vibe, we're in rhythm. It's more than a feeling: Neuroscientists can trace our brainwaves and heartbeats synchronizing. Conversations pulse

with energy. Thoughts soar. Trust grows. Time flies. The product is more than mutual attraction—it's mutual transformation.

When we don't manage to vibe, we make mistakes. Studies show that professional golfers miss more putts when they're playing alongside peers who don't share their politics. Pilots make more potentially catastrophic errors when they've never flown together. And surgeons have higher patient mortality rates when they're operating with new teams. When the stakes are high, a vibe can become a matter of life and death. It even determines whether countries go to war or find peace.

A great vibe fuels happiness and success. It underpins our most memorable moments with our families and our most enjoyable evenings with our friends. It buffers against stress; there's even evidence that if we're standing with a friend, a hill looks less steep.

Vibing with other people propels our best work and our biggest breakthroughs, enabling us to do together what we can't do alone. Chemistry between classmates spawned the sublime sound of Simon & Garfunkel, the comic genius of Tina Fey and Amy Poehler, and the technical elegance of the Apple computer. Synchrony between siblings gave us the lifesaving Mayo Clinic, the mind-bending *Matrix* films, and the first skyscraping Kitty Hawk flight. The fusion of the Founding Fathers gave America the Declaration of Independence. Collaborations between couples spurred the development of treatments for diabetes and the discovery of radioactivity. *For Marie and Pierre Curie, the chemistry was literal as well as figurative.*

Sometimes we vibe instantly and effortlessly. We sit next to someone on a bus and within minutes it feels like we've known them for years. We move into an apartment and feel immediately at home with our new neighbors. We leave a dinner party

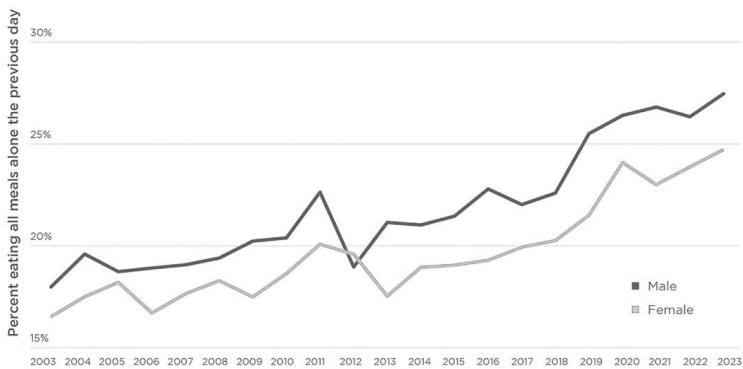
and find ourselves missing people who were strangers earlier that day.

But other times, no matter how hard we try, we can't even build rapport. This is one of the great mysteries of social life: If we can vibe spontaneously with some of the people some of the time, why can't we do it deliberately with more of the people more of the time?

Human connection is one of the most pressing problems in our world. In the U.S., loneliness has been rising steadily since the late 1970s. Today, the average American feels more isolated than the typical person anywhere in Europe. The proportion of U.S. adults who have no close friends quadrupled from 1990 to 2020. Research suggests that most of us would rather interact with a stranger who shares our political ideology than a friend who doesn't. Although shared meals are a robust predictor of happiness, more and more of us are dining alone. Growing numbers of adults are relying on chatbots for conversation, connection, and emotional support. And teens are dating less and spending half as much time with friends as they did a decade ago—and millions now prefer their sycophantic AI companions over humans.

More Americans Eat All Their Meals Alone

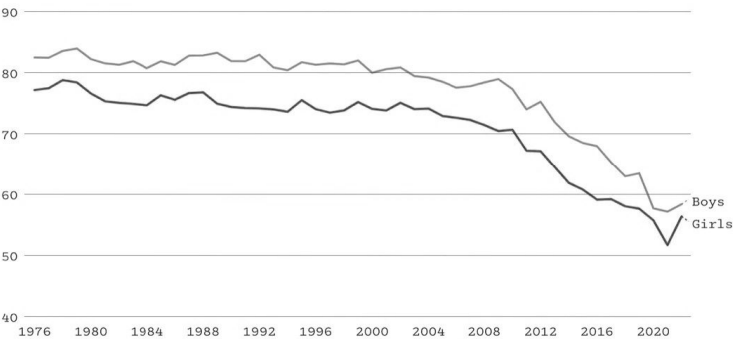
Dining alone in the United States by gender
ATUS (2003-2023)



Note: Data from the American Time Use Survey weighted to be representative of the general population (n = 234,185). Dining alone measured as the share of respondents in each survey year reporting eating all meals alone in the previous day.
Source: World Happiness Report 2025

High School Seniors Are Less Social

Percent of Teens Who Say They Go Out with Friends Two-Plus Times a Week



Source: Derek Thompson, *The Atlantic*. Data from Monitoring the Future survey of 12th graders, compiled and analyzed by Jean M. Twenge, author of *Generations*

We're lonely because we're missing connection. We're missing connection because we're struggling with its foundation: interaction. The problem isn't just that we're having fewer in-

teractions—we're stumbling our way through them too. Replacing face-to-face conversations with digital screens can stunt our capacity to read social and emotional cues. Outsourcing communication to chatbots can leave us asleep at the wheel, lacking the aptitude to form genuine ties. Social skills are like muscles: without regular training, they atrophy. It's been documented with astronauts coming back from isolation in space, prisoners coming out of solitary confinement, and the rest of us coming out of the pandemic. As places of worship wane and community clubs disappear, there are fewer chances to exercise those muscles.

But withering social skills are only part of the story. Social norms can also constrain our connections. In every culture, there are routines and scripts that govern our interactions. Ask strangers what they do, not what they love to do. Chat with colleagues about the weather, not their families. Talk with kids about their homework, not their crushes.

Sociologists call these patterns interaction rituals, and they can make or break a vibe. Successful interaction rituals fire us up and cement our connections. Finishing each other's sentences on a first date. Riffing on each other's ideas in a brainstorming session. Being in harmony with the whole crowd at a concert. Missing a friend so much that you sprint toward each other for a hug at the airport.

When interaction rituals are failed or forced, it's an instant vibe killer. A parent complains that you never call...but never picks up the phone to call you. Your boss stands up in your weekly meeting and reads the presentation slides verbatim. A neighbor walks by and barely grunts hello.

Sadly, many of our modern rituals maximize convenience and comfort, yet deprive us of the chance to vibe. If we're not careful, our lives can become endless loops of mindless ex-

changes. As we repeat shallow conversational routines, we become prisoners trapped in bad interaction ritual chains. You've probably seen it at family holiday gatherings. The norm is to steer the dialogue to food, traffic, or sports, avoiding not just current events but also our formative moments from the past and our foremost dreams for the future. We swap a slice of our humanity for a piece of predictability. Gobble gobble.

That's a mistake I made repeatedly growing up. In eighth grade, my interactions with my friend group were confined to superficial communication at pickup games. When our basketball routine ended, so did our relationship. What I thought was a bond was actually a charade. *I still want my ball back, Alvin.*¹

It turns out that even small rituals can reveal a great deal about connections. There's evidence that you can predict a basketball team's success just by counting how often the players touch after big plays. The more NBA players high-five, fist-bump, and bear-hug in an October or November game, the better their teams perform all the way through April. That subtle habit is a sign that they're vibing. Looking back, it was missing from my basketball games. When I scored, my team didn't cheer.



What happens when we stop going through the motions, and start exploring new ways to connect? That's what Brian Little helped us do when we walked into his personality psychology classroom. I'll never forget my first visit to office hours.

Brian: Hey Adam, how ya doing?

Me: Good, how are you?

Brian: No, *really*: How are you doing?

[beginning of connection]

It was immediately clear that he cared—he genuinely wanted to know about my life. I confided that I was grappling with career indecision; I had no idea what I wanted to be when I grew up. In a matter of minutes, I was telling Brian about my upbringing in Michigan and my path from basketball benchwarmer to springboard diver. He joked about my passion for “controlled falling” and asked what my current hobbies might mean for my future plans.

A few days later, Brian sent me some articles that built on our discussion. Over the next few weeks, he kept delivering tiny treasures into my inbox. A study hot off the presses, a new class to consider, even a clip of an impressive Olympic dive he’d caught.

Brian was extending our vibe with an interaction ritual that came naturally to him. It’s called pebbling. The name comes from a ritual among penguins. When they’re courting potential mates, some penguins collect pebbles to present. They share smooth, shiny stones that are appealing and suitable for building a nest together.

The digital equivalent of pebbling is sharing memes, links, and reels with others. These aren’t trivial gestures—every pebble is a bid for connection. Pebbling is an act of care. It’s a modern version of the lost art of writing letters and sending postcards. It signals *I’m thinking of you*.

Research shows that pebbling helps us solidify and sustain bonds—especially with people we don’t know well. What makes it meaningful is that it’s personal. You’re not spamming people with random junk from the internet; you’re taking the time to share something that reminded you of them. And you probably don’t realize how much it matters.

Think of someone you've met recently. You're going to write them a note to make them feel appreciated. What would you say?

If you're like most people, your instinct is to show warmth by writing a note filled with praise and enthusiasm. *You have cool energy. I enjoyed meeting you!* But psychologists find that something else makes people feel more valued: mentioning a few tidbits you recall about them. *You have cool tattoos. I enjoyed learning about your passion for axolotls!* A little memory flex shows that we listened—and we cared enough to remember. It makes others feel closer to us. Being friendly says *I like you*; being personal says *I see you*. It's nice to send someone a pebble you love, it's moving to find one they'll love—and it's bonding to share one you both love.

This is why pebbling is so powerful. To send someone an article or video that resonates, you have to remember their unique interests and experiences. That's what Brian Little did. I couldn't believe he'd kept track of so many specifics from our chat, let alone took the time to shoot his favorite finds my way. Throughout the semester, he asked novel questions and listened intently to the answers. *How did you get over your fear of public speaking to become a magician?* He was like a detective searching for clues, except he was solving for connection instead of crime. He saw each of our lives as an exciting mystery to unfold together.

Brian shared my curiosity as we revisited pivotal scenes from my childhood and my joy as I uncovered new aspirations for my adulthood. He recommended books to read and people to meet based on one-off comments I'd forgotten making. He also gently steered me away from classes that wouldn't be for me. *I don't want to speak ill of a colleague, but that professor is the fourth most boring person on earth.* And in lectures, he

dangled threads for all of us to pull. *Did you realize you don't only get goosebumps when you're cold? Many people have them in response to beautiful art, music, or poetry—they're called aesthetic chills.*

By modeling a more authentic, more effervescent form of communication, Brian inspired us to reinvent our rituals. We posed questions with more gravity. *What's your biggest regret?* We opened up with more levity. *Well, right now I regret making you uncomfortable by asking such a personal question.*

The vibe in Brian's class was so electric that my classmates and I carried the charge beyond the lecture hall. Several of my roommates were skeptical of psychology. Instead of just following the old script of asking about their day, I started sharing factoids with them. *Did you know that if you sprinkle lemon juice on their tongues in the morning, introverts salivate more than extraverts?* Now they were fascinated, and it led to real dialogue about our personalities and eccentricities. It gave me aesthetic chills.

After taking Brian's class, my career indecision vanished. I would become an organizational psychologist and study how to spark, strengthen, and sustain bonds.

That's what I've been doing for the past two decades. I've been called by Olympic coaches to cultivate team chemistry and NASA leaders to help nurture trust on the space station. Although I still stumble in plenty of interactions, I've honed my ability to vibe with guests as a podcast host, audiences as a speaker, and students as a teacher. At Wharton, I teach a course on synchrony, and I've turned my classroom into a living lab for building community. I'm finally ready to share what I've learned about the art and science of successful connections. My younger self would be thrilled to know that like

shooting and dribbling a basketball, vibing is a skill set that can be learned and taught. No matter how good you are at connecting, you can always get better—and help others improve too.



There are many books about specific types of ties, from dating and marriage to parenting and friendship to leadership and teamwork. My goal is to illuminate the ingredients for connection across all kinds of relationships. As a social scientist, as always, I started with the data—which challenged some of my basic assumptions about bonding. I created a framework to organize the core insights and then found stories to animate them.²

The first section of *Vibe* focuses on the catalysts for connection. I'll introduce you to a crew of astronauts who learned to trust people they don't like and a pair of sworn enemies who became best friends. They bust the myths that similarity is necessary for solidarity, chemistry happens quickly, and closeness takes time.

The second section examines steps for sustaining connections. You'll meet a troupe of comedians who swear by months apart as a key to staying together, two classmates who preserved a pebble to maintain their friendship for nearly a century, a basketball star who cracked the code on helping teammates avoid meltdowns, and a therapist who saved a rock band by coaxing them to fight more. You'll see how conflict can be harnessed, complicated ties can be handled, and sporadic touchpoints can have lasting benefits.

The third section explores strategies for scaling connection and finding belonging in groups. You'll learn how to design great gatherings from a friend of mine whose parties led to dozens of marriages, how to build strong communities from an educator who turned a school into Hogwarts, and how to get

squads in sync from my work with an elite team that didn't get along. And a family that came together by accident will reveal a recipe for lifelong bonds.



Over the past quarter century, my interactions with Brian Little haven't followed a regular rhythm. Sometimes months go by without any contact. I only see him in person every few years. Yet he's been there for all my little questions and big milestones.

When I taught my first course, Brian crossed the Canadian border to deliver a guest lecture to my students and got a standing ovation. When I got married, he and his wife made the trip again to celebrate with us. And 15 years after I took his class, when I gave my first TED talk, Brian was in the green-room helping me manage my nerves...even though he was the next speaker onstage. For me, it was like opening for the Beatles.

Today, Brian is 85, and he still sends me regular pebbles and checks in to see how I'm *really* doing. Recently, he asked what kind of magic I'm hoping to make this year. I haven't told him yet, but this book is my answer.

Like the best illusions, a great interaction can surprise us with the joy and awe it sparks. But a vibe doesn't just appear out of thin air. It's the magic we make together.

1. Name changed to protect the guilty.

2. This book is anchored on the best available randomized controlled experiments and longitudinal studies by credible scholars in reputable peer-reviewed journals. Since social science can be messy, I've focused on areas where the evidence is clear, consistent, and compelling. Where possible, I've center-staged research that's transparent, independently replicated, or meta-analyzed to cumulate results while adjusting for data quality as well as the file drawer problem (failed studies are

frequently harder to publish). You won't see the sources in each paragraph thanks to overwhelming feedback early on that my chronic habit of excessive citing was cluttering my prose. But if you're a fellow nerd, flip to the back of the book for an exhaustive list of references, and you'll find all the research cited by page number.



PART 1 · SPARKING CONNECTION

The Three Myths of Chemistry and Closeness

A few years ago, I ran into an acquaintance at a conference. He'd been generous in recommending my work, but I didn't know him well—we'd only chatted a handful of times. When we sat down to catch up, this happened:

Acquaintance: Come stay with us next time you're in L.A.

Me: I wouldn't want to impose.

Acquaintance: Impose? We love hosting our friends!

Me: Wait...we're friends?!

Acquaintance: I thought we were good friends!

In romantic relationships, we have rituals to define the relationship. *What are we? What's up with us?* That conversation is frequently a formality—we're labeling what we're already feeling. In platonic relationships, though, we lack the vocabulary to discuss where we stand. And we often don't see eye to eye.

When sociologists ask us to list our friends, only about half name us back. *Ouch. Half of our friends don't see us that way.* It sounds bleak. But maybe the issue isn't that our friendships are asymmetric—it's that we have different ideas about what it means to be friends.

"Friend" is far too broad of a label. It says nothing about the kind of relationship you have. Some people solve that by distin-

guishing acquaintances from buddies from besties. Yet this overlooks the fact that you can be close in multiple ways.

If you're like most people, you categorize relationships by life domains. You sort people into friends, relatives, neighbors, or colleagues. These terms describe how you're connected, but reveal little about why. They fail to capture how some colleagues become friends—and what makes some friends feel like family.

My research for this book led to a revelation. It's a way of understanding interactions that expands our potential for connection across all kinds of relationships. In reviewing evidence across a wide range of cultures, I've discovered that we can connect with people on four different wavelengths. We can vibe as associates, allies, pals, and companions.

Associates are transactional ties. Your primary reason for communicating is to exchange resources. Your interactions are based on reciprocity. Some of my associates are our neighbors—we take turns shuttling our kids to activities. My associates also include the programmers who manage my website and my distant cousin the dermatologist who treated my poison ivy rash. We're joined by compatible needs.

Allies are partnerships based on purpose. You're on a mission together. You might volunteer together, worship together, or launch a startup together. Among my allies are the members of my podcast team, the students in my research lab, the early readers who give feedback on my books, and the fellow travelers who write about behavioral science. We're united around compatible goals.

Pals are alliances of amusement. You hit it off because you enjoy the same forms of fun and entertainment. Basically, you like to do the same stuff. If you've never hiked together, shopped together, seen a movie together, partied together, or

decorated someone's car with shaving cream together, you're probably not pals. My pals are the people who share my love of games (anagrams, Mario Kart), comedy (*Seinfeld*, *Billy Madison*), and sports (skiing, Ultimate Frisbee, padel...really anything but golf). We're linked by compatible interests.

Companions are connections based on care. You confide in one another and rely on one another for emotional support. You go to them when sh*t hits the fan, and they lean on you when they've lost their fans. They don't think it's weird if you text them a family photo or FaceTime them randomly. My closest companions include my wife and kids, a handful of mentors, and my (remaining) friends from middle school. We're attached by deep affection and compatible values.

Different wavelengths involve different priorities. With associates and allies, your primary focus is on the outcome of your interaction. Your connections feel worthwhile when you solve a problem or achieve a goal together. With pals and companions, you're living in the moment—you're there for the process itself. When your time together is delightful or meaningful, the vibe is rewarding regardless of the result.

We connect on different wavelengths for different reasons. We usually become associates and pals based on convenience. We find ourselves in situations where we can trade favors or discover shared hobbies. We gain allies and companions based on commitments. We choose to team up with people who are on a common path and confide in people with common principles. This helps to explain why many people have such heated conflict with a parent or sibling. You're expected to be companions, but since you don't choose blood relatives, you don't always share that chemistry.

The Four Wavelengths of Connection

		Focus of Attention	
		Outcome	Process
Reason for Connection	Convenience	Associates <i>compatible needs</i>	Pals <i>compatible interests</i>
	Commitment	Allies <i>compatible goals</i>	Companions <i>compatible values</i>

Of course, we have plenty of connections that cover multiple wavelengths. We'll get to that in chapter 1.

Knowing the purpose behind our bonds is a mirror and a map. It helps us make choices and avoid conflict by clarifying where different people fit in our lives. You can text allies and call pals to share good news, but companions are more likely to hold space for bad news. Allies and associates don't expect a wedding invitation, but companions will be hurt if they're not in the wedding party...and pals should help plan your bachelor or bachelorette party.

Considering different wavelengths gives us new ways to vibe and equips us to manage the connections we already have. There isn't time for everyone you meet to become more than an associate. Still, you can have great chemistry with associates if you're on the same page about the fact that your exchanges are pragmatic. There's no master plan to turn them into allies or companions. You just hope they'll respond rapidly to a late-night text when you need a referral to a good plumber.



“Hi, neighbor, can I borrow a cup of sugar, three cups of flour, two eggs, two cups of milk, a dash of vanilla, buttercream frosting, 40 candles, and a thoughtful gift for my wife?”

Similarly, we don’t need all our coworkers to be pals or companions. Many people are uncomfortable when their boss tries to friend them. In the language of *Severance*, their “in-nies” like to keep things professional so their “outies” can let loose. Also, it can be nice to have companions and pals who aren’t allies. When there’s no task or objective looming over our heads, the only agenda item is the relationship itself. It’s all about enjoying the ride together.

Some anthropologists have argued that we can only handle about five people in our inner circles and ten to fifteen more close friends. Recognizing that our bonds exist on different wavelengths relaxes that constraint. Since caring connections are hard to make and maintain, most people don’t have a long list of companions. But there’s no natural limit on the number of allies we can team up with or how many pals we can enjoy.

Each wavelength adds something unique to our lives—one isn’t superior to another. Take it from studies spanning over

50,000 participants around the world: We're happier when we have a balanced portfolio of interactions. Just as we all have multiple love languages, different bonds help us feel valued and add value in distinct ways. Loneliness is the absence of companions, joylessness is the absence of pals, and aimlessness is the absence of allies.

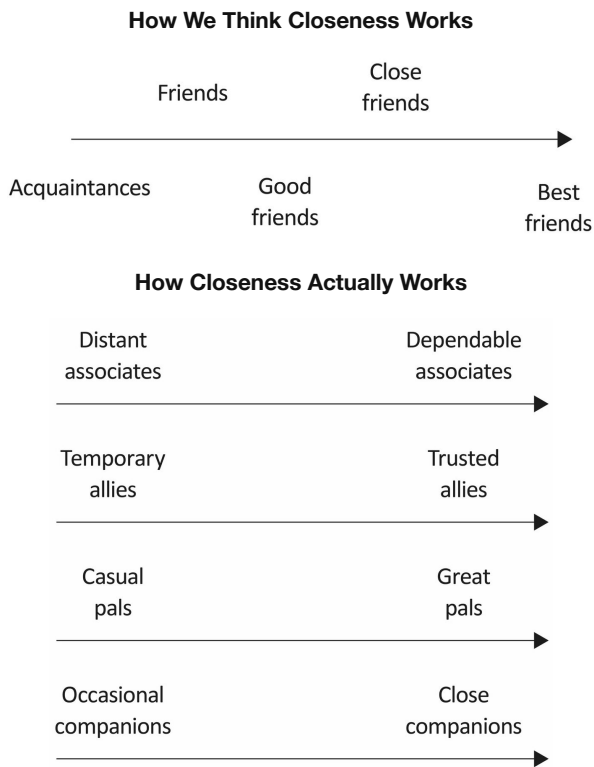
Have you ever noticed that people are often happier with their friends than their partners or kids? Psychologists find that it's not because we prefer the company of our friends. It's because we do different activities with them. We discipline our kids and do chores with our partners but plan fun with our friends. If we spent more family time in pal mode, we'd enjoy the vibe more.

Associates, allies, pals, and companions are types of connections, but they're also modes of interaction. We're doing an ally ritual when we enter a tennis tournament with our doubles partner and an associate ritual when we reimburse them for the entry fee. We're doing a pal ritual when we meet them for drinks and a companion ritual when we express condolences for their loss. Interacting *like* pals or companions doesn't mean we *are* pals or companions, but it can move us toward that kind of relationship.

We vibe when we connect on a common wavelength. Alignment creates chemistry, elevating the energy in our interactions. That paves the way to closeness, strengthening our bonds. We get along and grow tight when we see our relationship the same way—and communicate that way.

It's possible to form strong bonds on any wavelength. We can be close with every kind of connection. The jump from acquaintances to companions may be steeper than the step to associates, allies, or pals. But you might have close associates, al-

lies, and pals you regularly turn to—and more distant companions you rarely rely on.



Being on different wavelengths creates static and interference. We struggle to click when we don't agree on the kind of connection we have or the kind we want to build. It's not fun to be on the receiving end of unwanted advances from people trying to impose their ideal vibe on you. A high school pal suggests going into business together. *Liking you does not mean I would like to work with you.* A work ally tries to rope you into companionship by dumping his marital problems on you. *I am not your emotional support blanket.* Your car salesperson—a distant associate—starts texting to see when you're free to hang out. *Code red! A palvader has entered the premises.*¹

Research reveals that in both personal and professional interactions, being on different wavelengths is a recipe for feeling disappointed or even betrayed. In about half of our conversations, there's a mismatch between what we want and what we get from others. Personally, I've sometimes mistaken pals for companions, only to feel let down when they don't show up (or even show much concern) in a time of need. Part of growing up is learning that the pals we party with aren't always suited to be the companions whose shoulders we cry on.

This is a starting point for sparking connection: finding someone who's open to the same frequency. Usually without having to explicitly ask about it...unless you're me and my L.A. acquaintance. In my mind we were distant allies, but he saw us as something else. That's why I was so surprised when he invited me to stay with him. At lunch several months after our awkward chat, his wife asked if I thought *she* was my friend. It became a running inside joke: *Are you my friend?* That summer I ended up staying with them, and my new pal and I were up past midnight watching magic videos together, trying to crack the secret to a trick we'd loved.

Potential connections are all around us. We miss out on them when we put people in narrow boxes. *Not friend material* keeps people at a distance. *We're just fundamentally different* can spur us to drop them from our lives. Of course, some people will never be more than acquaintances to us, and others might end up being our adversaries. But when we approach the people we meet as possible associates, allies, pals, or companions, we have more opportunities to vibe. Each wavelength offers different options for how to start off on the right foot.

What stands between us and better connections is our beliefs about what it takes to build them. We think we need to search for the right person, hit it off right away, and invest the

right amount of time to bond, but these are all myths. It's time to rethink our assumptions about who we're compatible with, how fast chemistry happens, and how long closeness takes.

1. My daughter Joanna coined the term *palvader* to describe people who overstep boundaries in their efforts to barge into unwelcome friendships. It's especially challenging when it's not until after you've already given them your number and had them over for dinner that you realize you've made a zoning error.

1

STRIKING A MATCH

The Building Blocks of Compatibility

Friendship...is born at that moment when one...says to another,

“What! You too?”

—C. S. Lewis

As they pulled themselves into the cramped space, Cady Coleman and Paolo Nespoli knew they were putting their lives in each other’s hands. His heart raced; her hair was standing up straight. Out the window, they saw an object as big as a school bus hurtling alongside them at 17,500 miles per hour. If they didn’t coordinate their motions perfectly, they could collide with it.

It was 2011, and the two astronauts were part of a crew orbiting the earth on the International Space Station. The bus-sized object was a free-flying ship carrying critical supplies, including food, spare parts, and materials for experiments. Cady and Paolo were supposed to catch the ship with a giant robotic arm. The feat had only ever been accomplished once before.

Paolo gripped the control panel, waiting until the ship was in position for capture. His voice shook as he announced, “Free

drift.” His mind raced, *Oh my God, this is crazy, this is crazy, this is crazy*. Cady started to maneuver the robotic arm forward and waited for Paolo to confirm that her pacing was perfect, just as he’d done hundreds of times when they’d practiced in the simulator.

But Paolo didn’t give the signal. The ship was just five meters away, and they were in danger of a collision. Without missing a beat, Cady instinctively slowed the speed of the arm. Paolo seamlessly followed her lead. He started giving regular updates on the shrinking distance between the arm and the ship. Seconds later, Cady pulled the trigger and captured the ship. They broke out into big smiles as Paolo said, “Houston, we have no problems.”

They’d come within a split second of failure. Their simulations didn’t prepare them for the visual confusion created by the Earth looming large in the background. That made it hard for Paolo to precisely gauge their distance from the floating ship, a task he’d performed flawlessly in the sim. There wasn’t time to explain that to Cady—and she didn’t have time to tell him she had quickly checked the arm speed and realized she needed to slow down. They had improvised together to make the mission a success without uttering a single word. They knew one another so well that they could basically read one another’s minds. “In the end, that’s what really saved the capture,” Cady told me.

Paolo left me a message from the space station, and we talked when he was back on earth. I was investigating how astronauts vibe, because clashes can be catastrophic when crews are isolated together in a captive environment for extended periods of time. NASA needed to understand how to build and maintain bonds under extreme conditions—a pressing challenge as they prepared to return to the moon and send humans

on long missions to Mars. When I asked insiders who to study, they recommended Cady and Paolo's crew.

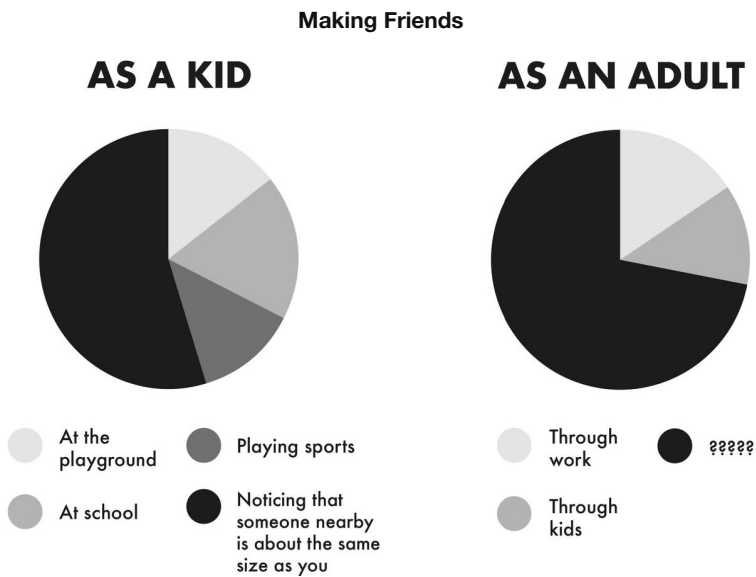
As I talked with the two astronauts about their relationship, it was clear that they had something special. Neither of them had spent more than sixteen consecutive days in space, yet on this mission Cady and Paolo orbited the earth together for almost six months. Near the end of their journey, there were rumors of extending their stay. By that point, astronauts are usually itching to go home, but this crew felt differently. Cady said, "I would spend another six months here in a minute, and I would spend it with these people."

This kind of vibe seems like a miracle of matchmaking. When crews have great chemistry, we figure they've been chosen based on compatibility. Compatibility is something we prize in collaborators as well as friends and romantic partners. The assumption is that to have a strong connection, we need to find people whose traits mirror or complement ours. But that's a myth—and believing it holds us back from bonding with people in our orbit.

When NASA forms crews, they don't have the luxury of considering compatibility. They don't look at the mix of personalities—they focus on who has the technical expertise to complete the mission. Cady and Paolo had the specialized skills, but if they'd taken a compatibility test, they would've failed. She was affable and calm; he was more headstrong and high-strung. She was a perfectionist—a PhD chemist who played the flute and liked to analyze every detail before making decisions. He was a daredevil who wasn't afraid to leap before he looked. *Literally...he's a master parachutist.* They were such a mismatch that the training team was convinced they wouldn't learn to work together successfully. It wasn't until training was underway that Paolo and Cady really started to vibe. Their rela-

tionship evolved from associates to allies, pals, and eventually companions too.

Compatibility is rarely something we can determine when we meet. It’s usually something we develop as we interact. Instead of leaving chemistry to luck or fate, we can cultivate it. Starting on the same page is optional—landing on the same wavelengths is vital.



Birds of a Feather

When we call people compatible, we’re saying that their individual qualities go well together. Something in their backgrounds, beliefs, and traits sets them up to vibe. They’re likely to have chemistry and become close.

Compatibility is particularly prized in dating. People scour profiles and swipe left or right based on fit. Some are hoping to find partners who are kindred spirits or cut from the same cloth. Others are looking for the yin to their yang, the Ross to their Rachel, the cheese to their macaroni. Yet the idea of

searching for a soulmate suffers from a fatal flaw. In the quest for romance, matchmaking algorithms have fallen short for decades.

You can see it in rigorous studies of speed dating events. Before people meet, they take a compatibility test. They answer questionnaires covering nearly everything about them and their ideal partner. The surveys run the gamut from intelligence to personality to politics—nearly 200 preferences and attributes in all. Then participants talk with a dozen people and rate the connection they felt with them. Surprisingly, the pre-surveys completely fail to foreshadow their vibe.

There isn't a single quality—or any combination of qualities—that hints at a match.¹ Even advanced machine learning algorithms can't construct a crystal ball. One of the psychologists behind the study lamented, "We couldn't predict compatibility at all."

This research shatters the theory that opposites attract. Pairing people who seem to complement each other is basically a random walk. Sometimes dreamers and doers make magic together; other times they make a mess. If you put an introvert with an extravert, the quieter person might enjoy listening...or resent an endless stream of unwelcome houseguests. Opposites are just as likely to clash as click.

The evidence also debunks the theory that we vibe with similar people. It's true that at first, being alike breeds attraction. It's well-documented that we tend to befriend, date, and hire people who share our experiences, attitudes, and personalities. There's even evidence that we're drawn to people who smell like us. But once we get to know each other, similarity has astonishingly little impact on our connection. In an analysis of more than 300 studies with over 35,000 people, having similar opinions and traits had minimal to no bearing on

chemistry or closeness between romantic partners or friends. Two extraverts might become the life of the party together...or hate sharing the spotlight. A pair of doers might be in perfect harmony or fight constantly over who does what. As a group of psychologists summarize: “Once its gatekeeper role in relationship initiation is complete, actual similarity demonstrates little or no influence on stable relationships.” Birds of a feather may flock together, but they don’t necessarily fit together.²

We often don’t even pay attention to our own notions of compatibility. When psychologists asked people to describe their ideal partners and then sent them off on blind dates, people ended up being as excited about potential partners who met others’ criteria as their own. This doesn’t mean our preferences are irrelevant—we all have dealbreakers. If you’re a health and fitness maven, you can be confident that you won’t click with a chain-smoking couch potato. My point is that although it’s easy to swipe left on likely mismatches, you can’t judge a good match from a profile alone. It’s true in professional relationships too. Extensive evidence shows that it’s a fool’s errand to try to build a successful team by configuring similar or complementary personalities. It’s nearly impossible to guess whether people will vibe before they meet.

Humans are not like Legos or Tetris blocks. You can’t look at them separately and know whether they’ll fit together. Chemistry and closeness are properties of interactions, not individuals.

Think about someone you know who’s a Nervous Nellie. They make you anxious, so it’s natural to assume they have that effect on everyone. But do they?

Psychologists answer this question by asking you and a bunch of other people to fill out a personality survey. Then you each interact with Nellie and rate how you feel afterward. It

turns out that Nellie doesn't consistently elicit the same jitters in everyone.

Some of your anxiety can be traced back to you—you're more likely to feel uneasy if you're a shy person or a worrier yourself. But most of what puts you on edge is your unique pattern of conversation with her. *For starters, you might want to stop calling her Nervous Nellie.* Maybe your discussions with her tend to bounce from one doomsday headline to the next. *Global democracy is in peril and thousands of innocent people are dying in wars that don't need to be fought and the earth is melting and eggs are overpriced and one of these things is not like the others.* The anxiety emanates from the interaction rituals that emerge between the two of you, not from Nellie herself.

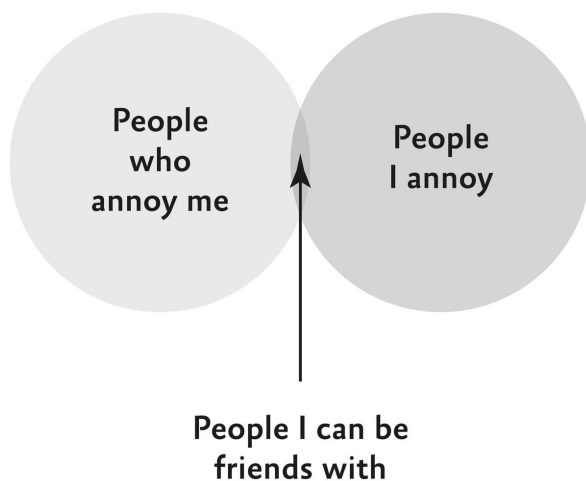
It would be nice if we could catalog Nellie's traits and yours, plug them into a computer model, and calculate how likely you are to click. The dynamics between people aren't that predictable. Every pair develops their own rituals—which means that every relationship has its own microculture.

Our separate traits don't dictate our shared vibe. Scientifically, this is true for all kinds of people across all kinds of interactions. In conversations, how much people dominate, interrupt, listen, and ask questions depends less on their personalities than the rituals they form together.³ When adults collaborate and kids play, a great deal of their friendliness and cooperativeness is a feature of their interaction patterns rather than their individual qualities. A group of argumentative colleagues might be simpatico around feeling underpaid; a couple kindergartners who tend to be easygoing might fight constantly over Legos. When friends compete, the amount of trash talk hinges as much on the traditions they create as the tendencies they bring into a game. People who are usually aggressive can build a shared habit of showing respect—and people who are

normally polite can get in the groove of poking fun at one another. And in groups, cohesion and conflict are driven less by the individual qualities of members than by the collective norms they develop.

There's a reason why actors who should be shoo-ins for their parts are called back for a chemistry read with potential co-stars. As natural as a match might look on paper, you can't know until you see the vibe they create together. At the end of auditions for *The Office*, the casting team had four finalists for each role. They chose the Pam and Jim who had "amazing chemistry."

Compatibility is not determined by how we typically act. It's a function of how we interact. It's not you or me; it's us.



Close Encounters of Four Kinds

In a classic study, psychologists asked hundreds of married couples who they hung out with the most in their buildings. They were four times more likely to name people who happened to live next door than those four doors down. They also made more friends if their apartments were located near mail-

boxes, stairways, or entries. In a similar investigation at a police academy, cadets listed their three closest friends on the force. They were almost twice as likely to be tight with classmates who sat next to them. The cadets weren't sorted on compatible traits—they were seated in alphabetical order. The vast majority had found a way to bond with whoever was plunked nearby. *Take that, compatibility tests.*

Kids manage to find areas of compatibility with pretty much anyone who's around too. Elementary schoolers tend to become friends with the classmates seated next to them. Being nearby leads them to interact more, which helps them identify overlapping needs, goals, interests, or values. That paves the way to become associates, allies, pals, or companions.

The better we know each other, the more compatibility we can build. And the type of bond we form with others is not fixed or static. Our connections evolve as our interaction rituals change. We don't move in stages from associates to allies or pals and finally to companions. It's not a linear progression; you don't have to complete one to advance to the next. Relationships can add (and subtract) wavelengths in any order. If you develop some inside jokes with an ally, you might become pals. If you change jobs and no longer have a reason to interact, you might end up becoming associates. And sometimes distant associates surprise you.

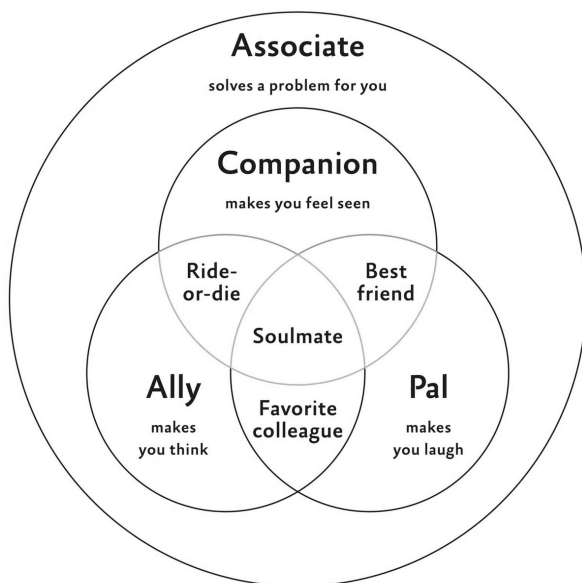
A few years ago, my uncle had a stroke and couldn't access the care he needed. After someone I knew well dropped the ball, a guy I'd met briefly just once stepped up to help. He went so far above and beyond that I started to see him as an ally. Then he checked in regularly for months, proving his potential to become a companion.⁴

Of course, many of our connections don't fit neatly into one box. We all have relationships in which we vibe on multiple

wavelengths at the same time. Think about your associates. Most of them are just associates; your interactions aren't emotionally charged. But if your conversations start to gain energy, you don't leave the associate wavelength altogether. You expand your relationship to include additional wavelengths. It's hard to imagine an ally, pal, or companion who isn't also an associate. When you align on goals, interests, or values, you usually find ways to help one another.

Sometimes it makes sense to stick to a single wavelength, but other times it can be constraining. When you catch up with high school friends, if you limit your contact to reunion parties and shallow gossip about your old classmates, you might become prisoners of pal mode. *Stuck in the past*. If you only reach out to a relative when you're stressed, you could confine your connection to companionship. *Maybe too heavy*. If you only talk shop with your coworkers, you might get trapped in associate or ally terrain. *Probable snoozefest*.

The more wavelengths you vibe on, the stronger a connection tends to be. Your go-to collaborators are both allies and pals: You enjoy their company and you share a common purpose. Your closest friends are pals and companions: You can count on them for an exciting night out or a consoling shoulder to cry on. Your ride-or-die may not be your idea of fun, but you're bound by a pact to have each other's backs. And your ideal romantic partner lives in all four circles. That's what makes the relationship so rich—you can be there for one another in every way.



Many people imagine their best friend in the center of the Venn diagram too—especially in the U.S. Whereas people in many Asian, European, and Middle Eastern countries have multiple best friends, Americans are more likely to put one friend on a pedestal. If we don't have that one friend who's our go-to associate, ally, pal, and companion, we often conclude that we've failed socially. Research shows that even if they're widely liked, kids feel like outcasts if they lack a bestie. If only they knew that the notion of a "best friend" is a modern invention.

In the 1800s, many people referred to their closest friends as beloved friends, but they didn't rank them or depend on one for everything. They were onto something. Across multiple studies, people who seek different kinds of emotional support from different friends are happier than those who go to the same friends for everything. That's true even if they have the same number of close friends. Pals might excel at cheering us up when we're sad; companions are usually better at soothing

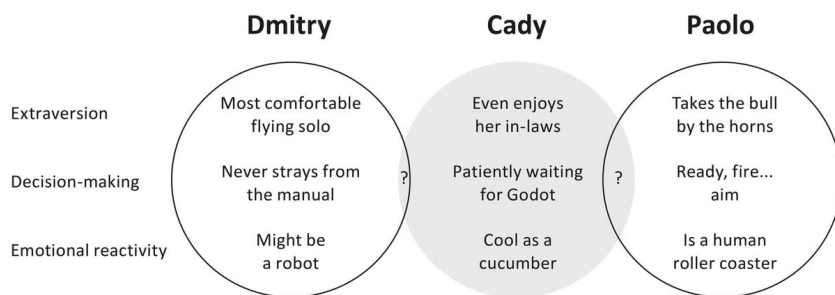
our anxiety. We can't expect everyone in our inner circle to play every role.

Connection is about mutuality, not exclusivity. Understanding wavelengths equips us to develop and deepen bonds. If you identify compatible needs, interests, goals, or values, it's possible to build a stronger vibe with virtually anyone—whether you seem to match or not. I got to see it with my favorite astronauts, who had to learn to trust crewmates they didn't really like.

Houston, We Are a Problem

An American, an Italian, and a Russian walk into space...

It sounds like a bad joke, but it was reality for their crew. Although Cady Coleman and Paolo Nespoli had many differences, that wasn't their biggest source of tension. They had even less in common with their third and final crew member, Dmitry Kondratyev. Dmitry was a Russian fighter pilot who'd trained to shoot down Americans in combat. He had a reputation for being competent, hierarchical, traditional, and aloof—he liked to work alone and stick to formal channels of communication. That didn't jive with Paolo's gregariousness, or with Cady's tendency to think out loud. They were also looking for different things: Cady and Paolo wanted to get the crew together for drinks, but Dmitry had no interest, which left Paolo feeling puzzled and slighted.⁵ From the start, their personalities clashed as much as their cultures. They seemed incompatible:



In their early training exercises, they struggled to align. During a landing simulation, Cady flagged an error in Dmitry and Paolo's calculations. Making it clear that he didn't trust her to be a true ally, Dmitry dismissed her. Then their capsule crashed.

From then on, Dmitry put Cady in charge of calculations. Yet his willingness to rely on her was limited to the occasional task—she was just an associate. Most of the time, he ignored her. Then in an emergency training exercise, Dmitry put out a fire alone, excluding Cady and Paolo altogether. The message was clear: "I can do this without either of you—I don't really need you."

It was alarming. Cady knew that to avoid disaster for half a year in space, her crew needed a stronger bond. *When you're orbiting the earth together, ghosting is not an option.* Whereas associates tend to prioritize their personal goals above all else, allies put the collective mission first. They had to come together to succeed—and survive. And they were running out of time to vibe.

Three Peas in a Pod

Cady ended up calling in a leadership trainer, John Kanengieter, who changed their interaction rituals. He asked them to cook a meal together and sit down for a conversation in their crew quarters. Dmitry wasn't happy about it—he saw it

as a waste of time. But after years of helping crews gel, John had a powerful question to build chemistry. *Why did you want to become an astronaut, and how did you get here?*

The crew started telling their origin stories. Paolo spoke about his childhood dream of riding a vehicle on the moon. Cady talked about being mesmerized by spaceflight but never considering it a possibility for a woman until she attended a speech by Sally Ride. Dmitry described his long journey from Siberia to becoming a pilot-engineer to waiting more than a decade to fly into space.

Cady noticed that a softer side of Dmitry came out when his family came up. She went out on a limb and started asking him more personal questions. He started beaming and showing her pictures of his son, and soon they were playing ping-pong together. Although it didn't magically make them pals or companions, they began to see one another as more than associates.

After witnessing Dmitry's care and commitment, Cady felt she could count on him. "Recognizing what had made each of us the people we were brought us closer," she reflects. "Our discussions changed my ideas about who he was and who he could be." As she put it to me, "We weren't friends, but we weren't *not* friends." That's a telltale sign of an ally (or in Russian, a comrade).

Paolo felt similarly. He and Dmitry didn't become pals, let alone companions. Dmitry was too much of a loner, and it was too difficult to get him to open up. Yet as they collaborated more, Paolo came to see him as an ally. "I respected him," Paolo remembers. "I would even say I liked him, and I'm ready to share time with him today. Maybe I would not have as much fun as with Cady."

To shift the vibe between associates, I wouldn't have suggested talking about their childhoods. I would have advised the crew to discuss their aspirations for the upcoming mission, assuming that would unite them. But a series of studies suggest that to build connection, it's often more effective to start with the past than the future. When we share our life stories and cultural backgrounds with others, it humanizes us and bolsters our bonds—even if it signals that we're different from them. When people learn about our roots, they have an easier time making sense of the branches of our lives. Sharing our stories reveals overlapping needs, goals, interests, and values. Compatibility grows with familiarity.

Side by Side

Opening up came more naturally to Cady than to Dmitry and Paolo. She wondered if that was due to gender as well as personality and cultural differences. Several decades ago, researchers proposed that men and women vibe differently. The thesis was that whereas men typically connect side by side, women tend to bond face-to-face. Basically, men look at a task together, while women look at one another. It fit our stereotypes of women talking over tea and dishing during dinner—and men grunting at the game or the gym or in the garage. Although the distinction makes intuitive sense, it doesn't hold up to evidence. The way we interact with others isn't fundamentally gendered. There's no shortage of men bonding at the bar and women clicking on the tennis court.

We all have both modes of interaction available to us—and which ones we choose can lead us to vibe on different wavelengths. Face-to-face interactions are a natural route to becoming associates or companions. We need to talk to set the terms of our exchange, and to lend one another an ear. Side-by-side

interactions are more likely to turn us into allies or pals. We become allies by putting our heads together and pals by rubbing elbows as we hang out and joke around.

The right rituals can spark chemistry between seemingly incompatible people. Recently, social scientists sought to find the short exercise that would be most powerful in building bridges across differences. They collected hundreds of ideas from around the world and culled them into 25 interventions to test. The winning idea came from an unexpected place.

Upon walking into a warehouse, pairs of strangers found boxes with instructions to assemble a bar and some stools out of wood. As they worked together, they naturally chatted about their backgrounds. When they finished building, they saw videos of one another expressing divisive views. They stood on opposite sides of three polarizing issues: climate change, transgender rights, and feminism. Having learned that, would they be interested in sitting down for a drink together? Despite their apparent incompatibility, every pair decided they had enough chemistry to clink glasses.

If it sounds familiar, the activity was originally created for a Heineken commercial. Yep, a beer ad outperformed two dozen interventions submitted by social scientists. (You don't even have to participate in the exercise to benefit from it—just four minutes of watching other people overcome their differences is enough to reduce partisan animosity by about 10 percent.) Strangers became allies through doing a task side by side, paying attention to the same thing. They moved toward becoming companions by talking face-to-face, paying attention to one another. A common goal opened them up to some compatible values.



Cady and Paolo almost didn't get the chance to be partners. During their simulations to practice catching the supply ship, when things didn't go his way, Paolo wore his heart on his sleeve. *What?! What's going on here? Damnit! No, do it now!*

The trainers were concerned about incompatibility. They felt Paolo was too loud and opinionated to mesh with Cady, and too passionate and emotional to be steady under pressure. Yet she saw that they were intuitively developing their own code of communication—a language no one else understood. She insisted that they were working well together, and the results they went on to achieve in training backed her up.

Figuring out how to interact with Dmitry cemented their connection. They weren't just strong allies—the pair became pals too. It wasn't by accident; Cady took deliberate steps to learn about her crewmates and find compatible interests. She started with food. One day Paolo teased Cady for carrying a

granola bar around for lunch, and suggested trekking to a far-away cafeteria because it had the best food. During their extended training around the world, this ritual became a strategy for Cady to build their connection. If she wanted to know how Paolo was doing, she needed to eat with him. He joked that her orders were unacceptable to an Italian: “It’s 1 p.m., Cady. No, you are not allowed to have a cappuccino.”

Paolo and his wife had Cady over for drinks and dinners and introduced her to some of their friends. They laughed about Dmitry not smiling in pictures. And when crew exercises took them from Japan to Germany to Houston, Cady played the flute and Paolo came to watch. At a wine bar, she was jamming when she saw him raise one eyebrow to signal that he was impressed. “I think it brought us closer,” Cady recalls. “You need to know what’s important to people.”

Ultimately, the two ended up relying on one another for emotional support as well. When Paolo found out that red tape would prevent him from doing a spacewalk, he shared his frustrations with Cady. When Cady ran into a brick wall with Dmitry, she vented to Paolo. When they struggled to get Dmitry to consider ideas, they advocated for one another. They didn’t just bring out the best in one another—they became the best of friends. Cady came to count Paolo as a close companion: “He was my space brother.”

A few months into their spaceflight, Paolo received devastating news. His mother had passed away, and there was no way for him to grieve with his family. When Cady asked how she could help, he wondered if she could find a way for him to be “present” at the funeral. She calculated that during the service, the space station would be passing over the European land that was unmistakably shaped like a boot. Paolo was touched that he was able to look out over Italy and honor his

mother's memory. As they floated together, even stoic Dmitry showed some emotion. It didn't transform their connection as a crew, but it reinforced that they had one—and revealed how far they'd come.

Compatibility is not about being lucky enough to find the right partner. It's about working together to find the right wavelength.

1. One common dating filter turns out to be totally useless. In a study of over 46,000 marriages in Sweden, the fit between astrological signs had no bearing on whether couples got divorced (or married in the first place). Couples with “compatible” signs didn't have higher odds of staying together—and those with “incompatible” signs weren't any more likely to split up. *Good news, Scorpio and Gemini.*

2. There is some evidence that autistic and non-autistic people tend to communicate and click better with similar neurotypes. However, these differences tend to be smaller when people with autism disclose their diagnoses and when their conversation partners are knowledgeable about it. Real connections can be forged even across real differences.

3. You can even see it with mice. Yep, psychologists have put mice in different pairs to track how often they bite and chase each other over a week. Less than a quarter of their aggression is due to their stable mouse traits—while more than half is pair-specific.

4. Interestingly, it's sometimes easier to say no to a close ally, pal, or companion than to turn down a request from a distant associate. It's called the acquaintance trap. Since the ties are more tenuous, we're reluctant to reject people outside our inner circles, especially if we have low self-esteem and want their approval. *Sorry I missed your call, Mom—I was busy helping my college roommate's ex-girlfriend, who I haven't seen in six years.*

5. Whereas “integrators” enjoy blurring the lines between work and home, “segmentors” like to maintain a strict boundary. Segmenting personal and professional relationships isn't just an individual preference—it's a cultural norm. Thanks in part to the Protestant work ethic, Americans tend to be task-focused on the job: We have associates and allies in the office and save our emotional bonds for home. In many parts of Europe, Asia, and Latin America, people are more inclined to treat their colleagues like pals or companions. In one survey across continents, a quarter of people in Poland and nearly half in India had gone on vacation with their coworkers—compared with just 6 percent in the U.S., where it was rare to even have colleagues over for dinner. (The exceptions might be workaholics, who think it's inefficient to have pals and companions they don't work with...or have already turned their existing pals and companions into allies.)

2

FAST FRIENDS

The Art of Accelerating Attachment

There's not a word yet

For old friends who've just met

—Gonzo

One warm spring night in 1971, sworn enemies walked into a packed YWCA auditorium in Durham, North Carolina. The local leader of the Ku Klux Klan stood within striking distance of a Black civil rights activist. They'd both been invited to a community conversation about school desegregation.

The Supreme Court had long since ruled “separate but equal” unconstitutional in public education, but many North Carolina schools remained racially segregated. Local authorities met protests with intimidation and sometimes violence, and a local newspaper called the city a “veritable powder keg.” After a federal order finally forced integration in Durham, the tension escalated.

The task of preventing an explosion was in the hands of a young Black social worker named Bill Riddick. The few times Bill had attempted to mediate community conflicts in the past, he'd been so wound up that he couldn't keep food down for a

full week. In Durham, his charge was to help the community find a peaceful path to school desegregation.

As Bill stepped up to the microphone at the YWCA, he wondered how on earth he could get a White supremacist and a Black activist to find common ground. He decided to kick things off by encouraging open conversation about what was wrong with their schools. But the discussion quickly deteriorated into a shouting match:

C.P. Ellis (White KKK leader): “If we didn’t have n—— in the schools, we wouldn’t *have* any problems! The problem here today is n——!”

Ann Atwater (Black civil rights activist): “The problem is that we have stupid crackers like C.P. Ellis in Durham!”

Ann was understandably angry, living in a country where she’d faced legal discrimination her whole life. As the daughter of sharecroppers, she grew up being treated as a second-class citizen by White farmers. After marrying at fourteen, she left her abusive husband to raise two daughters by herself and became a civil rights activist. She was known as “Roughhouse Annie,” and even her allies described her as combative; she bragged about her ability to make a Molotov cocktail. She spoke openly about hating White people, often giving them the silent treatment when they walked by, and the one she despised most was C.P. Ellis.

C.P. was raised by an alcoholic father who struggled to make ends meet and cursed Black people when he lost his job. Despite vowing to make a better life for his four children, C.P. toiled in poverty operating a gas station. He internalized his father’s prejudices and became a card-carrying White supremacist. He was president of the Durham chapter of the KKK

—his official title was Exalted Cyclops. When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, C.P. cheered and celebrated by inviting his Klansmen to his gas station for a toast.

Ann and C.P. had a history of bad blood between them. At a march a few years earlier, C.P. showed up with a shotgun intending to shoot someone—ideally Ann—but missed his window when the protestors changed direction. Not long afterward at a city council meeting, when C.P. shouted racial slurs, Ann lunged at him with a knife, only to be stopped by her pastor. “I wanted to cut his head off,” she recalled.

Now the two foes were at each other’s throats around school desegregation. After the hostile kickoff at the YWCA, Bill Riddick formed a steering committee to propose solutions to the school board. When Ann volunteered, C.P. signed up too—he wanted to sabotage the process. He pulled up to the first meeting with a weapon in his trunk. When he made a point to show his gun to Ann, she showed him her Bible.

The strife continued in the committee meetings. On multiple occasions, Bill had to physically stand between Ann and C.P. to stop them from throwing punches. He knew he needed to do something dramatic. Instead of defusing the tension between them, he decided to turn up the heat. His aim was to create “an intense reaction” to break the barriers between them overnight.

As I read about his plan, I was skeptical. When a vendetta runs as deep as theirs did, it would be naïve to expect a change of heart after months or even years of effort. Yet Bill believed that when people share emotionally charged experiences, interactions can change swiftly. If he could get Ann and C.P. on the same side of a high-stakes problem, maybe their vibe could shift. And several decades of evidence suggest that he was onto something.

Connection doesn't have to take a long time. It can happen rapidly when our energy is amplified and aligned. The more we feel together, the faster we bond together.

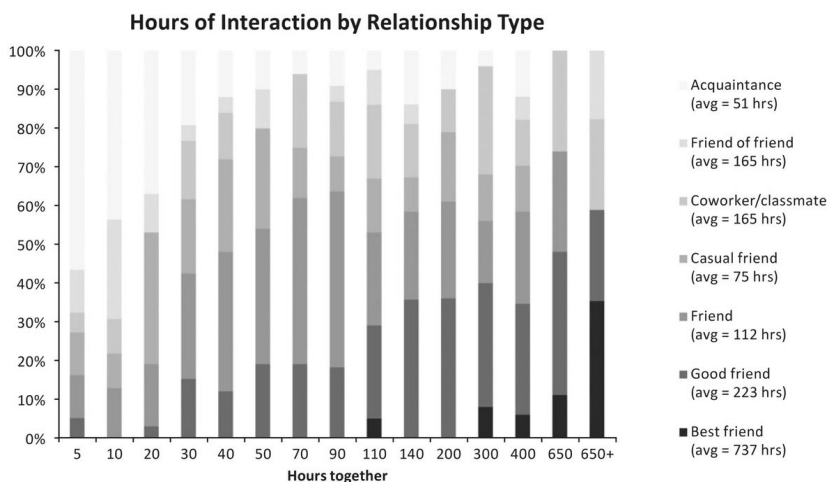
The Express Lane

How long does it typically take for two strangers to bond—at the very least, to become more than associates? To find out, communication expert Jeffrey Hall surveyed adults who had recently moved to a new city and students who had just started college about their new connections. He found that even though they were eager to make new friends, it didn't happen overnight. It took about 50 hours of interaction for a pair to advance from mere acquaintances to friends.

Getting close wasn't any quicker. To become good friends, on average it took freshmen over 100 hours together—and adults over 200 hours together. Bonding was a slow burn.

This made sense. It's often said that to cement a connection, there's no substitute for time. I started telling my students that they shouldn't expect instant friendship—they needed to build up the kind of history they have with their childhood pals. *Fifty hours to make a friend! A hundred hours to become close pals or companions!* The time commitment sounded overwhelming. Then I realized something important was missing.

These results were averages—the usual number of hours people needed to bond. When I looked more closely at the data, I saw a more nuanced picture. Underneath the averages was a striking range. Some people took much longer to vibe—and others were far faster. Nearly a quarter of adults turned an acquaintance into a friend within just *five* hours. Some even managed to make good friends that quickly.



With both adults and college students, the speed of connection depended on the duo, not the amount of time they spent talking. So what was happening that allowed some strangers to bond faster? You can find an illuminating answer in a Canadian rainforest.

In the early 1970s, various men were hiking near a Vancouver river when a woman approached them. She asked the men to fill out a survey about scenery. When they finished and handed the survey back to her, she tore off the corner of a page and started writing on it. “Here’s my number,” she said with a smile. “If you want to talk further, call me.”

This was all part of a classic experiment, but the psychologists behind it weren’t studying scenery. They were studying interpersonal attraction, and they’d designed two different encounters to see if they could spark it. When they sent a woman named Gloria to collect the surveys, half of the men ended up calling her. When they sent Donna instead, only one out of eight men did.

What made Gloria so much more intriguing than Donna?

The intuitive answer is physical attractiveness. That wasn’t it: Gloria wasn’t prettier than Donna. She wasn’t wearing more

flattering attire or more enticing perfume. She wasn't flirting more enthusiastically either. As she approached the hikers, she looked and acted exactly the same...because Gloria and Donna were the same woman. One research assistant played both characters.

What was the difference? The location. The psychologists had sent their research assistant to approach the men at two separate places in the rainforest—and to introduce herself with a different name in each. “Donna” approached the hikers on an ordinary bridge a mere ten feet above a stream. It was so sturdy and safe that they could cross it with their eyes closed. “Gloria,” on the other hand, met the hikers in a far more precarious place: a long, narrow suspension bridge that swayed 230 feet above rocky rapids. The men had the same conversations with the same woman. But when they happened to meet her in an emotionally intense situation, their odds of calling her quadrupled.¹



Since the original bridge experiments, the effect of emotional intensity on attraction has been demonstrated dozens of times. Intense emotions boost attraction among women as well

as men, and a scary bridge is just one way to activate them. We find strangers more attractive and likable when we're working out, startled by a loud noise, listening to a crime podcast, or even anticipating an electric shock. When people go to haunted houses together, the more fear they feel, the more they bond—as long as they process the experience together afterward. Under stress or pressure, we're more motivated to affiliate—we want to tend and befriend. When the stakes are high, we seek connection.

This is why reality TV shows like *The Bachelor* do extreme dates like skydiving and bungee jumping. They're not just creating drama to entertain the audience; they're accelerating bonds between the contestants. Yet faster connections don't require physical risk or a dangerous place; there are many ways to dial up the intensity of a situation. I've seen people quickly turn acquaintances into pals and allies by inviting them to a tough workout or race. Sweating together is social grease. *Running clubs are the new dating app...if you don't fall head over heels, at least you get to feel the burn.* And one of my closer friendships was formed when a colleague who shared my stage fright went to a public speaking class with me. You can expedite companionship by facing fears together.

It might sound like a trauma bond, but accelerating a vibe doesn't require pain or shared suffering. *Public service announcement to fraternities, sororities, and secret societies: No hazing necessary.* Connection springs from shared experiences that are emotional or transformational. The active ingredient is not adversity—it's intensity.

An intense situation is enough to get our hearts racing. But connection depends on getting our hearts to beat in unison. Under the right conditions, even people who aren't like-mind-

ed can swiftly become like-hearted. That's what Bill Riddick understood.

Behind Enemy Lines

After Ann Atwater and C.P. Ellis both volunteered to join the steering committee, it came time to appoint a leader. Bill Riddick had a wild idea: He recommended electing two people with diverging opinions to lead. The committee followed his guidance—and Ann and C.P. became co-chairs.

By putting Ann and C.P. in charge together, Bill set them up to become allies. Initially, C.P. only accepted his role to stymie progress, and Ann accepted hers to stop him. When Bill invited the pair to break bread together for the first time, C.P. refused to sit down at the dinner table. He didn't want to be seen eating with two Black people, so he placed his order standing up. When he eventually sat for the meal, he and Ann only communicated through Bill as a translator.

Bill knew that Durham's public schools were a mess. Facilities were outdated, fights were common, students were falling behind, and teachers were unprepared for desegregation. Bill urged Ann and C.P. to see that as leaders, they shared a larger purpose. "You have bought into something that is bigger than either of you," he stressed. "If you two can get together on this, it would change this community forever."

A few nights later, C.P. picked up the phone and dialed Ann's number:

C.P.: Look, I don't like you and you don't like me. But we got to do something 'cause our kids are suffering in school. If this thing is gonna be a success, you and I are gonna have to make it one. Can we lay aside some of those feelin's?

Ann: I'm willing if you are.

C.P.: Okay, then. I'll see you at the meeting tomorrow night.

Taking the reins as co-chairs put them on the same wavelength. Giving them a shared fate forced them to recognize that they were responsible for saving Durham's public schools. As C.P. concluded, the difference between success and failure "was in our hands."

Bill had a plan to bring them closer. He knew that to form a new bond, he needed to get Ann and C.P. away from their old attachments. He put the two in a bubble, away from other KKK members and civil rights activists, and gave them just a week and a half to work together.

Through isolation and time pressure, Bill was amping up the emotional intensity of their interaction. He had the perfect bubble: a local school building with air-conditioning sitting empty in the sweltering summer. For ten consecutive days in July, C.P. and Ann worked in that school from morning past midnight. Convening in a separate shared space removed C.P. from his KKK echo chamber and shifted Ann's attention from protesting to problem-solving. The ticking clock forced them to focus their full energy on the task. The meetings were so grueling that when they paused for a dinner break the second afternoon, C.P. collapsed into a seat beside Ann. " 'Bout wore *out*," she announced. "Me too," he said.

Bill hadn't tried to get Ann and C.P. to calm down or care less. Instead of attempting to neutralize their emotions, he had worked to align their emotions. As Ann and C.P. burned the midnight oil together, they were exhausted together—they didn't have the energy to put up a front. When they let their guard down, they stumbled onto some compatible goals. Ann was afraid that Black students would be attacked; C.P. was scared that White students would get hurt. They agreed they

needed to get in sync on strategies for preventing racial violence. They were both afraid that their own group would lack a voice in the school, so they united on expanding the school board to include an equal number of Black and White student representatives. They had gone from adversaries to begrudging associates, and now they were starting to talk like uneasy allies.

You may not want to vibe with your nemesis. In less charged circumstances, you don't need a master mediator to bring the intensity. You can create it yourself through showing vulnerability. I've seen it happen in my classroom.



Diving into the Deep End

I'm watching over a hundred students fidget nervously. It's the second week of class, and I've just paired each of them up with someone they've never met. They have one minute to see if they can vibe.

That's the only instruction I give them. When I shout, "Go!" no one says a word. They just sit there, frozen, until a brave soul finally pierces the uncomfortable silence with pleasantries. Then the voices swell into a cacophony. I can't make out any sounds or read their lips.

Later, I ask them to close their eyes and raise their hands if they've managed to form a strong connection. More than three quarters of the hands shoot up.

Since then, I've done this exercise with thousands of people. It doesn't matter where you live or how old you are. In just 60 seconds, the right ritual can light a spark.

This activity was created by my mentor Jane Dutton, a leading expert on high-quality connections. We've both run it with people of all ages, and they're usually stunned by their capacity to click with strangers in only one minute. They don't know they have an intuitive understanding of how to talk their way to different wavelengths.

Some pairs quickly find a path to becoming associates or allies: They look for compatible needs or goals. *What's your biggest challenge right now?* Others take a step toward being pals: They look for shared passions and hobbies. *What's your ideal way to spend a weekend?* It's nice to find common interests, but sometimes it's enough to take an interest in each other's interests. The most frequent and surprising approach, though, is to dive right into companionship. *What role does love play in your life?*

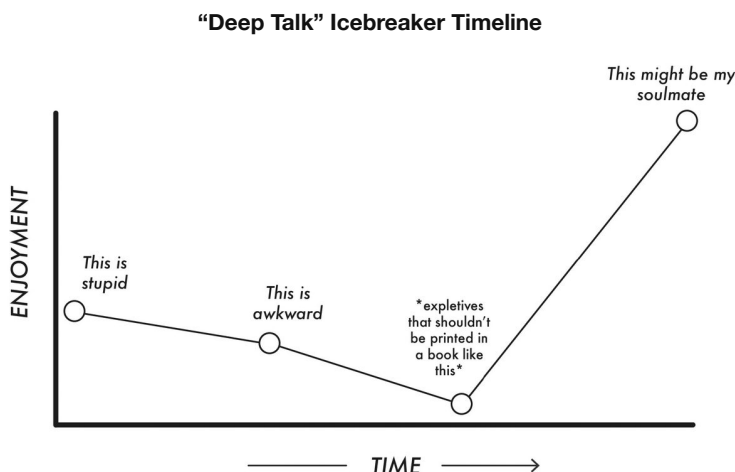
There have been many studies about how to accelerate closeness. In the most famous experiments, after just 45 minutes of conversation, strangers end up feeling a strong connection—and maybe even falling in love.² This “fast friends” procedure starts with fairly benign questions. *Would you like to be famous? How would you describe a perfect day?* Then the questions get increasingly personal and intense. *When did you last cry? How do you feel about your relationship with your mother?*

These studies show that short, emotionally intense conversations with strangers can foster strong connections. It takes less time than we expect to advance from small talk to deep talk. But it's possible to skip the small talk altogether. That's what my students have learned in the rapid high-quality con-

nection exercise. The short window of time—plus the knowledge that they share the motivation to bond—gives them permission to be vulnerable and go deep right away.

Sure enough, when strangers are randomly assigned to go straight to deep talk rather than small talk, they have a better vibe and end up feeling happier and closer than expected. Although extraverts and introverts get the same joy out of going deep, it gives introverts a bigger boost in connection.

Just nine minutes of getting real can be enough to click. And sometimes taking a risk makes it stick. After a great conversation, a new acquaintance solidified our bond by saying, “I hope this is the beginning of a real friendship.” Vulnerability builds companionship.

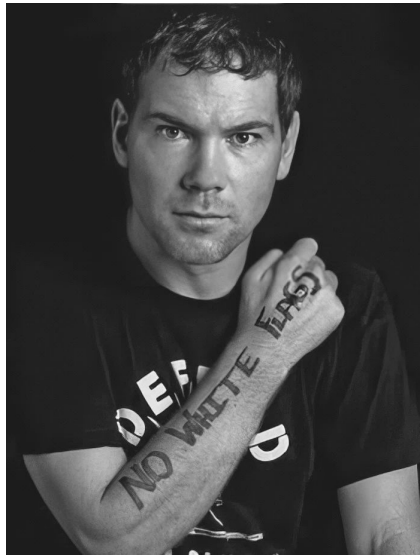


The Fast and the Curious

In 2014, the Duke basketball team welcomed four freshmen who had never played together. During orientation, the coaching staff invited Robert X. Fogarty, founder of the storytelling organization Dear World, to lead the team through his signature exercise. They were about to venture far outside their

comfort zones by writing something deeply personal on their skin.

Robert introduced the exercise by showing the team a portrait of a former football player who wrote three short words on his arm: *No White Flags*. Refusing to give up had always been core to his identity, but it stood for something larger now. He'd been diagnosed with ALS, and he wanted to make it clear to his family that he would fight even harder.



Steve Gleason

The Duke players were asked to write a phrase on their bodies that meant something to them, and then share it with their teammates. Each player received a black marker and started writing. *Master of my fate...Selfless and together...She's your wings*. Robert photographed them one at a time, and the next day he unveiled their portraits for them to discuss. The star freshman center told his teammates how his mother died when he was nine, and he can still feel her wings lift him up every day. Some of the players shared secrets they'd

never breathed to another person. It put them on a fast track to becoming allies and companions—the players said it made them feel like brothers instead of new teammates. They kept the framed photos on the wall, and during March Madness, their coach put them in their lockers. That year, they won the NCAA championship. “There can be no more trust than to tell someone something intimate,” Coach K said. “When a whole team does that...we did become so much closer as a group. It had nothing to do with basketball, but it had everything to do with basketball because it created a more trusting environment...They’re not holding anything back.”



Tyus Jones

The benefits of deep talk aren’t limited to the locker room. Dear World has been a potent bonding experience in settings ranging from a children’s hospital to tech and finance firms—and similar vulnerability exercises have even catalyzed connections between macho men on offshore oil rigs. But we’re usually too reluctant to share something personal about ourselves. *TMI!*

It's true that if you botch deep talk, you sometimes end up with no talk. Yet these fears are mostly misguided. An analysis of 57 experiments demonstrated that people actually like us better when we show some vulnerability—it displays our humanity and signals that we trust them. My own research has shown that when we disclose a flaw, admit a mistake, or reveal some genuine emotion, others tend to respond favorably. What moves the needle is a disruptive disclosure: an unexpected communication that leads us to rethink our assumptions about a relationship. By jolting us out of our existing rituals, it can alter the trajectory of our interactions.³

A disruptive disclosure is not a license to trauma dump. A trauma dump is when people pour out their pain without seeking consent or showing concern for the listener's boundaries and well-being. It's unfiltered and self-centered, and it can send the listener running in the opposite direction. A healthy disclosure is different. It involves bounded vulnerability. You're revealing your humanity without being dysregulated or demanding support. As psychologist Susan David captured it for me, "Share from your scars, not from your wounds."

One of the best disruptive disclosures I've ever seen was on a college tour with my daughter Joanna. We were trudging through muddy piles of melting snow, but she hardly noticed because she was absorbed in a conversation with our tour guide, Natalie. As they discussed the sense of community on campus, Natalie said she had a story that would bring it to life: "A few months ago, my grandma died. Don't worry—I'm okay. This isn't a story about me; I want to tell you how people here showed up for me." Natalie was amazed by the care that her friends displayed. For weeks, they reached out to her multiple times a day. They didn't tell her until much later, but they'd

created a group chat to coordinate their check-ins and let her know that she wasn't alone.

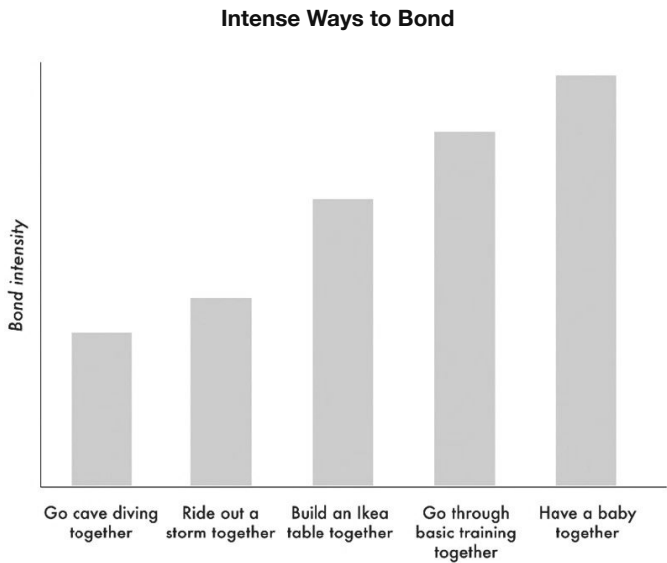
Natalie divulged something personal without seeming needy or burdening us. That's what made it a beautiful disruptive disclosure. The topic was intense and vulnerable, but she didn't burst into tears or pressure us to become her companions. She shared her experience and opened a door for us to choose our preferred wavelength, signaling to Joanna that she could be real too.

To launch a deeper conversation, my students often ask whether it's better to lead with a disclosure or a question. The answer depends on the context. Different cultures have different norms—personal questions from associates might be judged as rude in Russia or France but welcomed in Brazil or Ireland. What matters most is whether the other person reciprocates.

Healthy vulnerability invites responsiveness. Mutual candor is a building block of relationships: It develops rapport and bolsters bonds. In my work, I've found that in successful interactions, both people give and receive. In failed conversations, one person is consistently giving and the other is constantly taking. As psychologist Adam Mastroianni observes, "Givers think that conversations unfold as a series of invitations; takers think conversations unfold as a series of declarations."

If an interaction becomes a one-sided monologue, you've entered the zone of what sociologists call conversational narcissism. "Every experience that we collect is like a little novelty snow globe," comedian Mae Martin quips. "All human interaction is just basically taking turns showing each other our snow globes.... Someone will be showing you their snow globe...but the whole time your eyes are just darting to your own shelf." A

strong vibe develops when you're as interested in seeing their snow globe as you are in displaying yours.



On a Wing and a Prayer

For Ann and C.P., the intensity of their situation opened the door to more vulnerable conversation. After one particularly draining day of sessions, C.P. did something unexpected. He posed a personal question to Ann, asking how she was doing. She confided that her youngest daughter had been coming home from school in tears. Her teacher had called Ann a fool for working with a KKK leader, and her classmates berated her. C.P. sympathized: His kids had been bullied as well.

Ann opened up about how her family was so broke that as a child, she had to make her own dolls out of grass, using roots for hair. C.P. broke down into tears—and Ann cried with him. That led them to another shared struggle: Despite teaching their kids not to be embarrassed about being poor, they both felt ashamed of failing to provide for their families.

They hadn't planned on it, but they'd both made disruptive disclosures, and it challenged them to reevaluate their relationship. Although they were divided by race, they were united by class. "We were caught in this web together," Ann understood, and up until this point, "we couldn't see that." It dawned on C.P. that he and Ann were "two people from far ends of the fence, havin' identical problems.... From that moment on, I tell ya, that gal and I worked together good. I begin to love the girl, really."

Soon, Ann was going out on a limb to support C.P. When he confided that his disabled son was having problems with a roommate, Ann marched over to the care facility and got him moved to his own room. Seeing her stand up for him showed C.P. that she cared about him.

Another shared experience brought the former foes even closer together. They went to speak with children about what was wrong with their schools. As they listened, "the blinders came off and we both saw that our fighting one another wasn't doing anything to help the children," Ann noted. "And me and him cried at that time, and we began to melt down towards one another."

It's hard to imagine an attachment between Ann and C.P. forming today. If they were even willing to walk into the same room, their relationship might be written off as a lost cause. Instead of being nominated as co-chairs, Ann might be stereotyped as too angry and C.P. would probably be dismissed as downright toxic. Yet their story is proof that in the right circumstances, a bitter battle can evolve rapidly into an unbreakable bond.

By altering the terms of their interactions, Bill Riddick propelled a wavelength shift between adversaries. If the two hadn't been forced to rely on one another to lead an intense process in

an intense atmosphere, they might never have ended up becoming allies and companions. In the words of Studs Terkel and Osha Gray Davidson, the journalists who chronicled their relationship, “many small epiphanies” became “the psychological equivalent of a lightning strike.”

Lightning in a Bottle

When I came across Ann and C.P.’s story, I knew it would be a powerful example of how a vibe can change abruptly. As I compared their arc with the research evidence, though, I was left with an unanswered question. It was clear that the intensity of collaborating on a common wavelength played a vital role in their metamorphosis. But all the relevant experiments had strangers starting on a neutral or positive note, without any history of hostility. No one had put people like Ann and C.P. on a rickety bridge or paired vicious rivals for deep talk. Are these ingredients really enough to turn foes into fast friends?

I found my answer in a landmark study on forging friendships across divides. A team of psychologists went to Seeds of Peace, a summer camp in Maine designed to create connections between Palestinian and Israeli teenagers. They were investigating whether a brief, intense shared experience could foster enduring ties.

During camp, the teenagers played soccer and ate meals together. They also met in groups of 15 for two hours a day to talk about the Middle East conflict. At the end of their three weeks at camp, the researchers asked attendees to name their closest friends. A year later, they followed up to see if the bonds lasted.

Campers who happened to be in the same discussion group were 3.3 times more likely to become tight. That was for teenagers of the same nationality—two Palestinians or two

Israelis. What about bonds between two teenagers of different nationalities?

Deep talk was even more potent across boundaries. If a Palestinian and an Israeli were assigned to the same discussion group, they were 15.5 times more likely to become close friends after just three weeks. That's a staggering effect, and it wasn't temporary. Over the next year, they were also significantly more likely to stay close.

Discussing charged issues together was more powerful than simply socializing together. More than eating or bunking together, it was going deep on a common wavelength that built bonds across the divide. Within the intense bubble of camp, vulnerable conversation made their connections stronger.



My new favorite word is *sonder*. It's the profound awareness that every person you encounter has experienced a lifetime of hopes, fears, loves, and heartaches that you'll never know. When the writer John Koenig coined the term, he lamented that it made him sad to accept that there would always be some distance between other people's experiences and his understanding of them.

In my view, *sonder* is not a form of sorrow—it's a force for connection. Each moment of *sonder* is an exhilarating invitation to keep learning new things about our old pals and companions. It's also a sobering reminder to appreciate how little we truly grasp about the lives of our friends and foes.

At the ceremony to conclude their committee's efforts, Ann asked C.P. to dance. He refused, but agreed to give a toast instead. He stood up and announced to an audience of hundreds that he was supporting school desegregation. Then, shaking, he tore up his KKK membership card.

He wasn't alone. Ann ended up letting go of her prejudice too:

There's been a change in me like the change in C.P. I used to not talk to White people, now I talk to any of them.... At the end, C.P. and I could lock hands and say we won. I don't know of anything that could change us from being friends.

It didn't take decades to start moving past their hatred. During that summer of 1971, they went from adversaries to associates in a matter of weeks—and then became allies, pals, and companions in the span of just ten days. “I wasn't looking for a miracle,” Bill Riddick marveled, but “I got one.”

Ann and C.P. went on to campaign for civil rights together. They talked regularly and looked out for one another. Ann's granddaughter grew up calling him Uncle C.P. “They weren't just friends. They became brother and sister,” she reflected. “They never missed a beat, and sometimes it's as if they could finish each other's sentences.”

In 2001, the two participated in a documentary about their unlikely friendship. As they linked arms, their vibe was unmistakable:

Ann: We bonded and are still bonded. I feel he's part of my family.

C.P.: I really love this individual.

Ann: We need to go back out...and start slayin' and knockin' down things!

C.P.: If we can get back together again, some boots would be shakin' in Durham!

In 2005, when C.P. died, Ann gave a eulogy at his funeral.

A strong bond can last for years, but forming one doesn't have to take years. Sometimes a little heat is enough to build a blazing fire.

1. Some critics thought there were preexisting differences between the men who met “Gloria” and “Donna”—maybe the kinds of thrill-seekers who choose to cross a treacherous bridge are more likely to be daring enough to call a woman they'd just met. The psychologists ruled that out by running another experiment focusing only on men who crossed the rickety suspension bridge. This time, the intensity factor was whether “Gloria” approached while they were on the bridge versus ten minutes after they'd crossed it. The men were more than twice as likely to call if they met her on the bridge as after. The original explanation was that they were misattributing their adrenaline rush to the woman, but later studies suggest that this isn't the case. It doesn't work if you don't find the person appealing. Intensity doesn't manufacture false feelings; it amplifies our existing feelings.

2. The original fast friends experiment was led by Art Aron—the psychologist who coauthored the bridge study. Recent replications and extensions show that it works just as well by video chat as in person, it's effective in fostering friendships between kids as young as nine years old, and it may help create lasting bonds. (The research assistants who were guinea pigs for the first deep talk exercise in Aron's lab ended up getting married.) It works in groups and established relationships too. Swapping embarrassing stories before a brainstorming session is enough to boost the volume and variety of ideas you generate together. Opening up makes you less self-conscious, encouraging you to let your thoughts fly. And deep talk with another couple on a double date can bring you closer to your partner. Even if you don't plan on a lifelong connection, deep talk can still fuel more rewarding conversations. You may not want to be companions with your hairstylist, but you might find it easy to talk about your insecurities at the barbershop or beauty salon, because you don't have to worry about being reminded of them every day.

3. The other way to go deep faster is to ask more revealing questions. We're too hesitant to do that too. We're afraid that it will make others uncomfortable and hurt our reputation, but we're viewed just as positively when we pose sensitive questions as when we float mundane ones. Your standard script might be to ask strangers about their favorite music or their morning routine, but they'll like you just as much if you ask for their views on abortion or guns—or even if they've ever cheated on a partner or committed a crime. Micro-confessions can be liberating.

3

LOVE AT SECOND SIGHT

The Psychology of Shape-Shifting

Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive.

—Anaïs Nin

One day, two friends made a pact that would alter the course of their lives. After years of struggling as a poet, one lamented, “There is too little of what we really like in stories.” Then he posed a challenge to his pal, a word nerd: “I am afraid we shall have to try and write some ourselves.”

So began their double dare. They agreed to draft novels on space travel and time travel and flipped a coin to decide who would get each topic. That decision fueled two of the greatest fantasy series in history: *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings*.

When C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien met, they were unknown academics who wrote fiction on the side—one to find himself and his voice, the other to procrastinate. For the next decade, their novels floundered but their friendship flourished. The writing challenge they embraced put them on a new path together. Tolkien helped Lewis develop his space manuscript, which ultimately became his debut fantasy novel, paving the

way for the *Narnia* series. Lewis encouraged Tolkien not to abandon his time travel draft, which ended up becoming a vital part of his *Lord of the Rings* series. “We owed each a great debt to the other,” Tolkien reflected three decades later, “and that tie with the deep affection that it begot, remains.”

Many people idealize deep affection as the result of an immediate vibe. They fear that if there’s not a quick click, the relationship is a lost cause. But instant chemistry is not a prerequisite for closeness.

In fact, the people we end up liking the most are sometimes the ones we started out disliking. We have to work harder to rethink their vices and recognize their virtues—and convince ourselves that we misjudged them. That’s what happened with J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis.

When the two men first crossed paths in 1926 as new English faculty at Oxford, they promptly got off on the wrong foot. Tolkien expressed disdain for Lewis’s favorite works of literature, snubbing them as frivolous. That night, Lewis wrote in his diary that Tolkien “needs a smack or so.” They soon found more reasons to dislike each other: Tolkien was a devout Christian, and Lewis was an atheist.

In the months that followed, things didn’t improve. Their interactions were mostly limited to mandatory faculty meetings, where they were forced to associate and continued to clash. They were on opposite sides of a fierce rift in the department over what the English curriculum should prioritize. Lewis favored modern literature and scoffed at Tolkien’s preference for ancient languages. He wanted nothing to do with Tolkien’s traditional views and stubborn opinions. Yet when they left the confines of faculty meetings, Lewis started to see another side of Tolkien.

In the hopes of getting his colleagues on board with the idea of studying medieval texts, Tolkien formed a group to read and discuss forgotten Icelandic tales. Lewis decided to go—he had a longstanding passion for Norse mythology. Many months later, Lewis and Tolkien walked out of a meeting together and ended up rhapsodizing late into the night, like a pair of musicians jamming. “I was up till 2.30 on Monday talking to the Anglo Saxon professor Tolkien,” Lewis wrote, “discoursing on the gods & giants & Asgard for three hours.”

It took a shift in their interaction rituals to make their vibe possible. They didn’t have to change their personalities—they only needed to change their context. That set the stage for them to find a shared interest and bond around Thor.

Leading the Icelandic myth group put Tolkien in a different role. Instead of being formal and argumentative, he brought out his curious and whimsical side. He offered pebbles in the form of delightful forgotten words—he loved to introduce his colleagues to Norse terms like *Gandálf* (wand-elf). After that book club ran its course, Tolkien led another with Lewis, and they created norms that elicited more playfulness. In their weekly meetings, they read out loud to each other. They sometimes picked the worst novels of their time to see who could go the longest without bursting out laughing. By then Lewis had a nickname for Tolkien. “Tollers,” he said in 1936 as he introduced their bet, “there is too little of what we really like in stories...”

As their relationship changed, Tolkien and Lewis did too. Their animated discussions of literature led Tolkien to take fantasy seriously, motivating him to publish *Lord of the Rings*. And their lively debates about religion converted Lewis to Christianity, laying the foundation for *Narnia*. Their development didn’t just help them forge their masterpieces. It fortified

their connection, turning reluctant associates into the closest of pals, allies, and companions. If the two of them hadn't transformed their vibe, generations of children might have missed out on heroic hobbits and wise wizards and lions and magical portals through wardrobes.

The expectation that chemistry should come instantly cheats us out of connections. So does the assumption that our first impressions are final. We miss out on many potential bonds when we give up after false starts. Humans aren't static—we're dynamic. Our personalities shape-shift across situations and over time, and our strongest vibes emerge when we take on new shapes together.

Wrong at First Sight

In movies, couples fall head over heels the moment they lay eyes on each other and go on to live happily ever after. In real life, psychologists find that "love at first sight" is better described as "lust at first sight." It's an immediate physical attraction—not attachment, intimacy, or even passion. And couples who start off with that spark don't end up being more satisfied together than those who fall in love gradually.

Our snap judgments of people go far beyond physical attraction. It's well established that after seeing a stranger's face for just a tenth of a second, we've already formed views of how likable, trustworthy, competent, and aggressive they are. In job interviews, more than half of interviewers make up their minds in the first 15 minutes, and over a quarter take just 5 minutes to reach their verdicts.

These first impressions routinely miss the mark. When managers are left to their own devices to interview job candidates and predict how well they'll perform, on average they barely do better than chance. They apparently missed an im-

portant memo from Chris Rock: “When you meet somebody for the first time, you’re not meeting them. You’re meeting their representative.”

Even if people are being sincere, it’s a mistake to make strong assumptions based on small samples of behavior. A thin slice of a person fails to create a well-rounded picture of the prospects for your relationship. I learned this the hard way in the summer of 2016, when I accidentally got into a public fight with Brené Brown, the vulnerability expert and TED Talk superstar.

It started when I published a critique of authenticity in *The New York Times*. I argued that the cultural obsession with “being yourself” can be an excuse for being self-centered, over-sharing, and mistreating others. In the article, I quoted Brené’s definition of authenticity. At that point, we’d only met in passing at a conference or two; we were barely acquaintances, let alone associates. I was more familiar with her work, and her definition of authenticity was the most compelling one I’d seen.

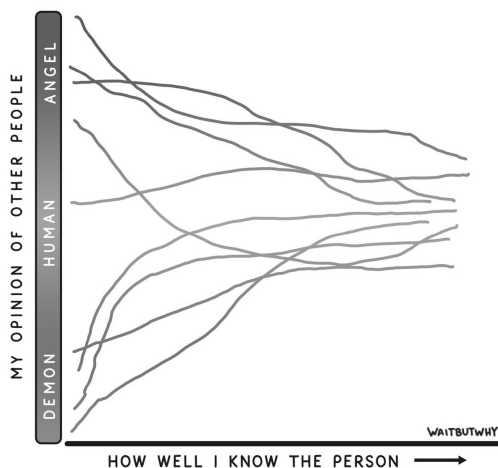
The next day, my phone blew up. I was surprised to see a reply to my article from Brené on LinkedIn. She wasn’t pleased. She argued that I was confusing being authentic with being unfiltered. She blasted my argument as “reductionist” and “faulty” and accused me of “misrepresenting and diminishing other people’s work” and “manipulating language to fit your agenda.”

Yikes.

My blood rarely boils. When others are fuming, I have enough equanimity that multiple people have suggested I might be 43 percent robot. But when I read the rebuttal from Brené (and saw thousands of likes and supportive comments), I was mildly outraged. My intent was to get people to think critically about what the unhealthy pursuit of authenticity

looks like. I thought I'd given Brené a shoutout, and I didn't expect a response—let alone a diatribe. I thought it was unprofessional of her to attack my motives and ignore the data that challenged her views. I concluded that Brené was a guru preaching gospel, not a scholar searching for truth. I swore I'd never talk to her again.

It took me too long to discover that I was very wrong about her. And I was wrong about us too.



I should've known better. One of the most robust findings in psychology is that we tend to blame people's worst behaviors on their personalities, not their situations. We do it so often that it's been called the fundamental attribution error. The driver who cuts you off on the freeway gets labeled as reckless and aggressive—never mind that he might be racing his pregnant wife to the hospital. The restaurant server who messes up your order gets branded as careless—you don't consider that it's her first day and they're short-staffed. The kid who punched me in the nose in second grade was a bully. I didn't realize until we ended up on the same soccer team years later that as the son of immigrants, he was sensitive to his name being mispro-

nounced. These premature judgments trap us in adversary or acquaintance territory. We don't even entertain the possibility that there could be times when we'd become associates, allies, pals, or companions.

It's easy to overemphasize character and overlook circumstances. The person is in the foreground, while the situation is usually in the background or invisible altogether.¹ We compare what someone just did to what *we* typically do...forgetting that we haven't seen what *they* typically do.

If we want to get an accurate read of people, we need to witness them across a range of situations. A team of psychologists did that at a summer camp. To figure out what was consistent about each kid's personality, they watched every camper for six weeks across a wide range of activities, from woodworking to the playground and meals to cabin meetings. This study was a beast: Each child was observed for an average of 167 hours over 6 weeks and assessed by at least 14 different adults.

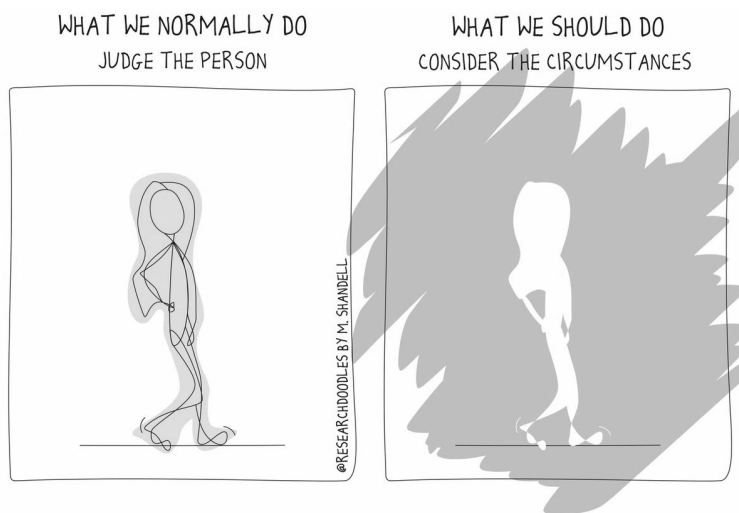
The psychologists were hoping to identify who tended toward aggression versus kindness. Sure enough, they were able to spot the meanest and friendliest kids. There was a wrinkle, though. The aggressive kids were sometimes kind, and vice versa.

When they dug deeper, the psychologists realized these uncharacteristic behaviors weren't random events. The shifts happened in certain situations that differed from kid to kid. One camper was consistently friendly with peers in cabin meetings and woodworking—even when being teased—but consistently aggressive when punished by adults. Another kid lashed out the most after an adult issued a warning, even more than after ultimately being punished. There was also a kid who was regularly docile after adults scolded him and peers teased him

—but had the unusual habit of insulting peers who tried to befriend him.

Shape-shifting follows predictable patterns. In the words of psychologist Maria Konnikova, humans tend to be “consistent in our inconsistencies.” For most of the campers, there were specific situations that elicited verbal aggression, physical aggression, whining, compliance, or friendliness. If we only met them in one situation without knowing them in the others, we’d misjudge them.

Relying on our first impressions is shortsighted—it leads us to miss out on the habitual variations in people. As we get to know people more fully, we start to see these variations, which opens up new ways to bond with them.



Static Dynamics

We think of personality as something we carry with us from one context to another. Yet we don’t express the same traits in every situation—different tendencies are activated by different situations. Our idiosyncratic responses are called our if-then

signatures. They capture how we shape-shift and even sometimes reverse from one circumstance to another. If you send me a short email, then I'll usually respond rapidly. If you send me a long text, then I might never reply.

As soon as I learned about if-then signatures, I noticed them everywhere. I like to keep my desk neat but don't make my bed. As an elementary schooler, my son was timid at amusement parks with his siblings but fearless on ski slopes with his friends. In his office, Steve Jobs was enthusiastic when pitching his ideas but skeptical about others' ideas. On *The Office*, assistant to the regional manager Dwight Schrute is dominant with subordinates but submissive with superiors. (The technical term for that pattern is authoritarianism.) And if you hail from a region with a culture of honor—like Texas or Pakistan—you might be exceedingly gracious to guests in your home but turn nasty if a neighbor insults your family.²

Recognizing if-then fluctuations can help us find settings where we might connect. Many strong bonds have emerged between people who clashed in one context and then clicked in another. When they met on a Stanford orientation tour, Larry Page and Sergey Brin bickered about the best way to plan a city and found each other obnoxious and arrogant. But in the computer lab, they hit it off debating whether a full-sized building can be constructed out of lima beans. Eventually they discovered a shared passion for improving online search, and a few years later Google was born. On the tennis court, Serena Williams and Maria Sharapova had an icy rivalry. Post-retirement, with competition and media hype behind them, they've become such close companions that they say they're like sisters. And in classes at school, Bill Berry and Mike Mills despised each other; one was a straitlaced nerd and the other was a punk who did drugs. When they showed up at the same band

practice, though, they quickly became pals—and a few years later, they were allies in starting a rock band called R.E.M. Once they aligned on interests and goals, they were able to ride new wavelengths together.

Cars and car seats come with owner's manuals. They're filled with instructions to help us operate them correctly and avoid using them incorrectly. Humans are just as complex, but we don't come with instruction booklets. Some people have solved that by creating their own user manuals to share in new relationships. I've seen nonprofit and business leaders, consulting team managers, and journalists exchange one-pagers with new collaborators about how to work with them effectively. If-then information helps us see others' strengths and weaknesses in context. When you understand what activates people's virtues and vices, it's easier to vibe.³

It's particularly helpful to know people's emotional triggers—the trip-wires that annoy or offend them. *Mine include selfishness, arrogance, lacking integrity, and believing in astrology.* When psychologists asked friends to guess each other's triggers, the more accurate they were, the less they fought and the closer they felt. I've found that understanding others' triggers is helpful in professional relationships too. In an experiment at a Fortune 500 tech company, I randomly assigned some managers to host a discussion with their new teams about what brought out the worst in them. Over the next few months, they got along significantly better. Once people knew each other's triggers, they were able to steer clear of them. When there was a conflict or someone's mood soured, they were able to respond more productively. Instead of blaming unpleasant behavior on character, they realized it was an if-then dynamic in the relationship. *It's not you. It's not me. That version of you is a response to this side of me.*

Control-Alt-Delete

After our public feud about authenticity in 2016, Brené Brown and I didn't speak for four years. We reconnected in 2020, and today I'm proud (and surprised) to call her a good friend.

The turning point came during the COVID pandemic. I was advising an elite sports team on improving their vibe. I'd asked them to talk openly about the problems in their culture, but a few of the star players were resisting. In our initial sessions, several players had mentioned being big fans of Brené, so I decided to go out on a limb and asked if she might be willing to join me for a conversation with the team. Based on where we'd left things, I wasn't even sure if she would respond.

Brené didn't just step up—she showed up early and asked me how the project was going. Then she helped me get through to the team. She asked the players why they were wearing so much armor, and one said that toughness was about taking problems in stride, not complaining about them. Brené explained that showing vulnerability is not a sign of weakness—it's a source of strength. If you can't talk about what's broken, you can't fix it.

Seeing Brené in action with the team made it clear how grossly I had misjudged her. After our dustup, I'd jumped to a conclusion about her personality, ignored the situation entirely, and failed to recognize that I was observing an if-then signature. She told me later that one of her triggers is being quoted out of context—exactly what I'd done with her definition of authenticity.⁴ She wasn't dead set on being right; she wanted to get it right, and she was reacting to me getting her work wrong. It wasn't the best version of her, but it came in response to one of the worst sides of me.

Collaborating introduced me to the real Brené. When I was seeking her help instead of condemning a caricature of her

ideas, it was obvious that she had a big heart. I could've seen that if I'd paid attention to her pattern of kindness in stories from multiple people I trusted.⁵ She said she'd made a similar mistake—she'd judged my character based on false assumptions about a small sample of my behavior.

Once our roles changed, our relationship did too. The more we've learned about each other's if-then signatures, the stronger our tie has become. We know what to expect from each other during podcasts and fireside chats. If a question comes up, she draws on her deep interviews about people's life stories, whereas I'm more likely to cite experiments or surveys. If we disagree, she leads with curiosity; I tend to spar. When I argue like I'm right, I sometimes forget to make it clear that I'm listening like I'm wrong. I know that if I go into prosecutor mode, then she might bring her defense attorney to court. We've agreed that when experience and evidence clash, we both need to get curious and work through the puzzle together. *It's so interesting that we're seeing different things. How can we make sense of that?*

Different if-then patterns are important for different kinds of bonds. To become great companions with someone, it helps to figure out what kindles their compassion and what curbs their judgmental side. If you're looking to become allies with them, you need to find out how to activate their reliability and integrity—and prevent them from putting something off or just phoning it in. With pals, that's less important. You just need to know what makes them playful and what kills their joy.

Abraham Lincoln understood this well. When he was building his team of rivals, he recruited one of his toughest opponents, Edwin Stanton, as his war secretary. Although Stanton had insulted him in the past, Lincoln knew they shared a vision of saving the Union and that leadership roles activated

Stanton's tenacity. As they ended the Civil War together, they became so close that Stanton was at Lincoln's bedside when he died. But they didn't socialize or have conversations that veered beyond their jobs. Lincoln loved to kibbitz with his friends, and Stanton couldn't stand his humor. One time after Lincoln cracked a joke, Stanton shouted, "Damn it to hell...was there ever such nonsense?" Having seen his if-then patterns, Lincoln had the good sense to restrict their interactions to work. He knew Stanton was a dependable ally but not a fun pal.

Sometimes all it takes is small signals to produce a shape-shift. One morning at a retreat, I saw a shy attendee carrying a chess board between sessions. When I challenged him to a match, he came out of his shell. He won the first game after an instinctive move to capture my queen; I won the next by setting a trap to pin his king. We spent the next few days in pal mode, teasing each other about our battle of intuition vs. analysis. I had to wait in line for a rematch because others joined in on the ritual.

The more situations we put ourselves in with someone, the more possibilities we have to find compatible needs, interests, goals, and values. That doesn't mean we'll hit it off with everyone—some people will let us down. Occasional disappointment is a small price to pay for more chances at meaningful connection. And if we expect a subset of connections to fall flat, it hurts less when they do. It's like a store budgeting for stolen merchandise or a bank setting aside provisions for bad debt.

do you wanna be in cahoots with each other

i don't have a specific scheme in mind but i think it would be fun to be cahoots

For our part, Brené and I have come a long way. Our connection has grown as our wavelengths have multiplied. We became closer allies as we appeared on each other's podcasts, shared the stage, and supported each other's book launches. We started trading advice on writing and speaking—and set my personal record for longest text thread ever. Then we decided to launch a podcast together.

One day we became companions in midair when I reassured Brené that turbulence wasn't going to cause our flight to crash. I've been to her home and she's met my family, but I'm honestly not sure if we're pals yet. We're afraid to play ping-pong or pickleball together—we're both too competitive in that setting. Our friendship works because we've learned to manage our if-then clashes and focus on shared values. Principles of care, humility, integrity, and courage are meaningful common ground.

Common ground, like chemistry, isn't always something we just come across. It's often something we cultivate. That involves bigger acts of shape-shifting. If you want to see those shifts vividly, the best pairs to study might be couples falling in love.

Changed for the Better

One fall in California, a group of psychologists decided to find out what happens as people become smitten. They surveyed college freshmen and sophomores about their romantic status and campus experiences. They also posed a big open-ended question:

Who are you today?

The students had three minutes to write whatever they wanted—a word, a sentence, a sonnet. Most of them jotted down some of their social roles. *Student, tour guide, vegan*. Almost everyone mentioned something about their personality. *Neurotic, kind, hyper neurotic*. Many featured their likes and dislikes. *Hip-hop lover, Impressionist art hater*. Others included their assets. *Tall, blue eyes, trust fund*. And quite a few covered their future goals. *Pre-med, aspiring hand model*.

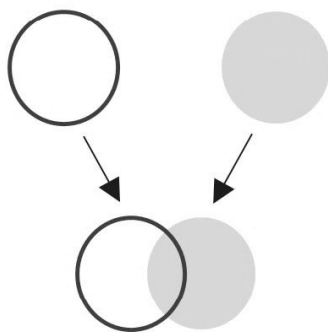
Every two weeks, students spent a few minutes answering that question about who they were. As the weeks passed, the responses revealed who'd fallen head over heels—and who hadn't. There were clear differences between the identities of the enamored and the unattached. The students who hadn't found love generally stayed the same: they described themselves in similar ways from October through November. They were still panicking about tests, avoiding French art museums, and moisturizing their hands.

The lovestruck students showed more change in their self-concepts. They didn't just see themselves more positively—they saw themselves differently. They'd become Beethoven fans who meditated before exams and played handball afterward. They hadn't lost their previous traits; they still listed those too. They weren't simply trading one identity for another; they'd broadened their sense of who they were. They'd experienced self-expansion.

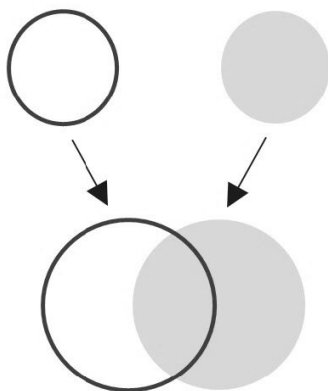
Ties can be formed through self-expression, but they're transformed by self-expansion. Self-expansion happens when a relationship widens your perspective, enhances your knowledge and skills, or makes you a better person. You're not merely sharing things about yourselves and getting to know each other; you're growing together. For example, there's evidence that we earn more money—and end up happier—if our spouses

are dependable, organized, and hardworking. Conscientious partners give more support and model better habits, helping us become more like them. And after children learn about nutrition in school, their parents often blossom into healthier eaters. We don't only benefit from our loved ones' strengths and interests; we absorb some of them too.

Self-Expression



Self-Expansion



Self-expansion is not just a consequence of a strong vibe—it's a cause too. Neuroscientists have discovered that the more self-expansion couples experience over half a year of interaction, the more their brains synchronize, and the closer they become. People are more satisfied and committed when they see

a relationship as having the potential to help them grow—and when their partners are actively helping them grow. “The very definition of love,” novelist Bonnie Garmus writes, is to “actually *want* to change for someone else.”

The bonding effects of self-expansion aren’t limited to romantic relationships. If you listen to how people talk about their closest allies and pals, the signature theme isn’t how much they like each other. It’s how much they’ve changed each other. Tina Fey waxes poetic about how Amy Poehler gave her the courage to take comedic risks. Paul McCartney remembers how John Lennon made him less sentimental and more versatile. Matt Damon and Ben Affleck reflect on how they grew together from actors into writers.

Bad relationships confine us to situations that activate our worst selves. Good relationships put us in situations that bring out our best selves. Great relationships introduce rituals that elevate us into better versions of ourselves.

Self-expansion is the most extreme form of shape-shifting. You’re not just adapting to a role—you’re evolving over time. It rarely happens in your first or second encounter with others. As you explore different situations together, instead of merely expressing your existing qualities, you try on new qualities. “Certain people draw out a version of you that didn’t exist before...They witness you, and thus, rearrange you,” writer Maja Wilbrink observes. “We all carry endless hidden selves and latent worlds, waiting for the right gaze to bring them to the surface.” Eliciting unseen sides of each other can shift our vibe to different wavelengths or bring us closer on existing wavelengths. Pals with different interests can introduce us to new hobbies. Companions with different principles can help us identify and express new values. Allies with different skills can turn our attention to new goals.

My friendship with Brené Brown has changed me. I used to default to data and shy away from personal anecdotes. *It's not about me!* But here I am, featuring our friendship in this chapter. She's taught me that my stories can be powerful vehicles for conveying my ideas. After all, I don't just study connection—I'm muddling my way through living it too, and there are lessons in my trials, tribulations, and occasional triumphs. I'm not promoting myself by shouting, "Look at me!" I'm aiming to offer insight by saying, "I have something to share." Brené has even persuaded me that every once in a while, I can express a little emotion. *For the record, I still have an intensely logical preference for research studies. Double-blind experiments and Venn diagrams are my love language.*

Expanding myself hasn't only brought me closer to Brené—it's helped me bond with others on new wavelengths too. Recently a pal I hadn't heard from in years reached out to confide that hearing me talk about my stumbles helped him feel he wasn't alone. I'm starting to like this shape.

Growing Pains

In elementary school, I devoured the *Narnia* books. They expanded my taste in novels to fantasy, and I remember being mesmerized by the image of a wardrobe leading to new worlds. I had no idea that relationships could be a portal to new selves—for better and for worse.

As our connections evolve and we expand, we keep encountering novel situations. We get a window into new versions of others, and they get to see new versions of us. Not all shape-shifts will appeal to everyone in our lives.

Within a year of their Thor bond, C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien became best friends. They went from nerding out on mythology to having deep conversations about their goals, val-

ues, and philosophies of life. As they went from associates to pals, allies, and companions, they stretched each other in fundamental ways.

Much of the self-expansion happened in their second book club, the Inklings. For 16 years, they met weekly to read literature, talk over food and drinks, and sharpen one another's work. There were no formal rules, but there were plenty of interaction rituals. "Out would come a manuscript and we would settle down to sit in judgement upon it. Real, unbiased judgement too, for about the Inklings there was nothing of a mutual admiration society," Lewis's older brother recalled.

As they exchanged ideas, Lewis and Tolkien grew together. As their views on religion and fantasy literature evolved and aligned, their writing capabilities expanded. Lewis "was for long my only audience," Tolkien noted. "Only from him did I ever get the idea that my 'stuff' could be more than a private hobby." They refined their early drafts of *Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* together, based characters on each other, and their budding careers took off.

After two decades of friendship, though, Lewis and Tolkien started to grow apart. Rather than applauding Tolkien's creativity and commitment, Lewis grumbled about his endless stream of ideas and his perfectionistic penchant for rewriting. Instead of appreciating Lewis's ability to connect with a broad audience, Tolkien looked down on Lewis's prose and parables—and deemed him too productive and not pious enough.

The Inklings had stopped gathering, and their rituals had changed. Their hours of exchanging pebbles, helping each other, and laughing together disappeared. Instead of looking for ways to recreate the playful, developmental spirit of the Inklings, Tolkien and Lewis mostly read one another's work from a distance, which elicited a different if-then dynamic. As

their tie became more transactional, they operated more like associates. They stopped supporting each other as allies, sharing joy as pals, and showing care as companions. As they began to drift apart, Lewis confided in a letter to Tolkien, “I miss you very much.”

Then a new relationship drove a bigger wedge between them. Lewis got married to a woman who’d been divorced. Tolkien viewed it as a betrayal of his faith, failing to appreciate how far Lewis had already come on religion. Their friendship fizzled due to a change in context and fractured due to a change in Lewis.

Tolkien thought he was being true to himself, but he failed to do right by his friend. Eventually, he came to regret the rupture too. After Lewis died, Tolkien wrote that whereas loss normally felt “like an old tree that is losing all its leaves one by one,” this felt “like an axe-blow near the roots. Very sad that we should have been so separated in the last years.”



Snap judgments prevent bonds from beginning and precipitate their ending. Like humans, vibes are complex and evolving, and they thrive when we treat them that way. We can gain chemistry as we change the situation and get closer as we change each other. We grow closest as we allow each other to change.

1. Some psychologists argue the bias toward character attributions only exists in Western cultures, where individualistic worldviews prevail. In Eastern cultures where collectivism is more pronounced, it may be more common to acknowledge context, as people are expected to change based on the norms of their groups. However, research has returned mixed results. It may be that character attributions are common around the world, but collectivistic cultures are more likely to consider the situation in tandem.

2. The most striking evidence on cultures of honor comes from a study in Major League Baseball. After their teammate was hit by a pitch, do pitchers retaliate aggressively by hitting an opposing batter? It turns out that pitchers are more likely to throw these retaliatory beanballs if they were raised in the Southern U.S.

3. My favorite way to find out what activates your virtues is to use a tool called the Reflected Best Self exercise, which is based on research by my colleagues at the University of Michigan. After collecting short stories from 10 to 20 people about times when you were at your best, you compose a portrait of your strengths in context. Think of it as your personal highlight reel, but the camera doesn't just zoom in on you as the main character—it zooms out to show the setting and the supporting cast. You get a mosaic of specific situations where you shine. Instead of just hearing that you're kind and considerate, you might learn that you're unusually thoughtful in picking out gifts for pals or showing up for companions in crisis. And if you want to figure out what brings out your vices too, classic research shows that it helps to describe the worst collaborator you've ever had. What bothered you most about them? If your least favorite colleague was incompetent, irrational, unreliable, or unmotivated, it's a sign that you lean task-oriented. If your dreaded coworker was disrespectful, selfish, arrogant, or rude, you might be more relationship-oriented. If your nightmare coworker was all of the above, you may be the victim of some very bad luck.

4. My view of authenticity has evolved. "Authenticity is the daily practice of letting go of who we think we're supposed to be and embracing who we are," Brené writes. It's the "choice to let our true selves be seen." To quote her in context this time, she found that it involves "the courage to be imperfect, to set boundaries, and to allow ourselves to be vulnerable" and "the compassion that comes from knowing that we are all made from strength and struggle." I agree. Authenticity without boundaries is careless. Authenticity without empathy is selfish. Being true to ourselves is not a justification for being unkind to others. As David Sedaris put it, "Be yourself. Unless yourself is an a**hole."

5. It's not enough to pay attention to how someone treats you across different situations. The test of character is how they treat different people across different situations. In eight studies with over 8,000 participants, people who consistently acted like a**holes online tended to act like a**holes in the real world too. Even if someone is kind to you, proceed with caution if they're consistently unkind to others—especially those they don't like or need. Trolls use aggression to get attention, and selective civility is a sign of deep-seated hostility.



PART 2 · SUSTAINING CONNECTION

The Rituals of Resilient Relationships

One of my favorite people on the internet is a man named Riley Enright. Well, he isn't technically on the internet; his daughter is the one who posts about him. Riley is in his sixties and lives in Wisconsin. He's a family man, a die-hard Packers fan, and a health insurance consultant. He loves to fish, and he's biked across the state and run a marathon to raise money for charity.

Every Friday at 4 p.m., Riley has a standing meeting on his calendar. It's with three friends he's known for three decades—a neighbor, a work ally, and a high school pal. They get together at a bar, but he calls it a board meeting. Because each week, Riley shows up with a typed agenda of topics to discuss, which have included:

- Packers Playoff Picture
- Jimmy H's mom says 70 yr old Jimmy is on the naughty list
- Elves are getting bigger
- Favorite Christmas song and movie
- Dream vacation
- China and Russia
- New head shaver
- General Discussion

Riley's daughter Kenzi started posting her dad's agendas online in 2022, and they immediately went viral. Hearts around the

world melted, and it wasn't just because people found Riley adorable and his topics endearing. They were moved by the energy he invests in staying close to his friends.

In a world where connections feel increasingly fleeting, we long for enduring bonds. For most of human history, it was easier to tend to relationships. For generations, people lived in tribes and villages with their associates, allies, pals, and companions nearby. As early towns and cities emerged, people still didn't have to put much thought into maintaining ties. They settled neighborhoods with their closest companions, worked with a consistent set of allies as farmers, carpenters, or bakers, and bumped into their old pals and associates in the marketplace.

In the modern world, that consistency of contact with a stable group of people is gone. Our hyperconnectivity is no match for our hypermobility. Young people are averaging only about a year of tenure before job-hopping. When we take a new role, we leave our old allies behind. When we pack up for a different city or country, we abandon many of our pals and companions. We don't even bother to tell our associates we're leaving. And the more frequently we relocate, the shallower and more disposable our connections become.

Think about your closest friends right now. They might be the companions you'd call for emotional support, or the pals you'd ask to help you move some furniture. Now imagine a decade has passed. Will you still have the same vibe with them?

According to the data, the odds are slimmer than we expect. Sociologists find that in seven years, only 30 percent of your pals and companions will be in that same role—and only half of them will be in your life at all.

Kids lose friends even faster. Of the friendships fourth and eighth graders have in September, a quarter are over by June.

Of course, not every relationship is meant to last. People come and go in our lives; connections serve different purposes, and a lapsed link isn't necessarily a failure. At work, it's common for temporary allies to revert to associates once deadlines pass or projects end. In our personal lives, some degree of drifting apart from pals and companions is reasonable too. Many studies demonstrate that we get more selective about relationships over time. Our happiness in our fifties is predicted by the number of interactions we have in our twenties, but it depends on the depth of interactions we have in our thirties.

Still, most of us wish we were better at staying connected. We have fewer strong ties than people did in the past, and more of our ties are limited to a single wavelength. Our daily routines increasingly drive us more toward isolation than connection, making it difficult to maintain rich relationships. Our commutes are longer and lonelier. We're not grilling with our neighbors next door; we're asking to borrow their grill using Nextdoor. Instead of having friendly conversations, they often make demands and pick fights:

Please help.

I'm out of butter.

please drop a stick at the corner of [redacted] and [redacted]
between 2 and 4 am today(Sunday)

I don't want to meet people, I don't want new friends, I just
need butter. Butter is important to me.

**Happy Thanksgiving to everyone except
Phil.**

Everyone one of you, except Phil, are wonderful
neighbors. I'm happy to be a part of this community.

Our inner circle is mostly out of range. Only a quarter of Americans live near most or all their closest friends, and nearly half are surrounded by few or none. Online social networks once promised to keep us connected. Yet instead of interacting with friends, people now spend the majority of their social media time watching videos created by strangers.



Between home and work, people used to keep relationships going at “third places.” They maintained meaningful connections at cafés and bars, libraries and bookstores, barbershops and beauty salons, parks and bowling alleys, or churches, synagogues, and mosques. Now our more consistent stops are the gym and coffee shop, where we block out the world with our devices.

In our frenetic lives, the contact we do have is often filled with distraction. A photographer illustrated it vividly by taking people’s devices out of their hands just before taking their pictures, showing them alone together:



Men in particular are struggling. In a survey across the U.S., the U.K., Canada, and Australia, over half of men had no companions for emotional support. Instead, they have more distant associates and allies. Men also have fewer close pals than in the past—it's been called the male friendship recession. And the burden typically falls to the women in their lives to nurture their bonds. Cue the *Saturday Night Live* sketch where women take their boyfriends and husbands to hang out at the man park.

We don't need a dog park for dudes. To maintain our vibes, we need to rethink our rituals. That's what Riley Enright has done so masterfully with his board meetings at the bar. But we don't have to mimic his Friday afternoon meetup or print out a plan for conversation. What matters is the intentionality, not the formality. There are countless ways to design our own habits for keeping ties alive.

Intentionality is especially important to sustaining connections through difficulties as well as distance. Over time, every bond faces strain. We don't just struggle to stay in touch; we're not sure how to get back in touch. We ruminate about whether to accept people's flaws. We get into fights and fail to resolve our differences. All these challenges are inherent to lasting relationships, and they aren't insurmountable. They call for different sets of strategies.

The rituals that spark, strengthen, and shift connections are rarely the same as the ones that sustain them. To build resilient relationships, we need to change our expectations about the cadence of contact, our techniques for handling complications, and our stances on conflict.

4

ABSENCE MAKES THE HEART GROW FONDER *Rethinking the Rhythm of Communication*

True friendship withstands time, distance, and silence.

—Isabel Allende

When Pat DeReamer was 12, her family moved to Indianapolis. As the new kid in school, she was tall and awkward. She felt like a misfit and struggled to make friends. Then she met a girl who lived a few blocks away. Mary Kroger was popular (she even had a coveted soda fountain at home), and she invited Pat into her house and into her life. “Mary kind of picked me up out of the gutter,” Pat says. They enjoyed being Girl Scouts together. They laughed about having to take a sewing class together. They celebrated each other’s birthdays throughout middle and high school. Then Pat went out of state for college.

That was only the beginning of the distance between them. Pat had the itch to see the world—she went on to live in multiple states and travel to 130 different countries. They both started big families: Mary had five kids and Pat had seven. When people are divided by distance and stretched in different directions, they often fall out of touch. Yet Pat and Mary have stayed close for more than 80 years. They’re now in their mid-90s.

Their friendship has endured 15 presidents and set a Guinness World Record.

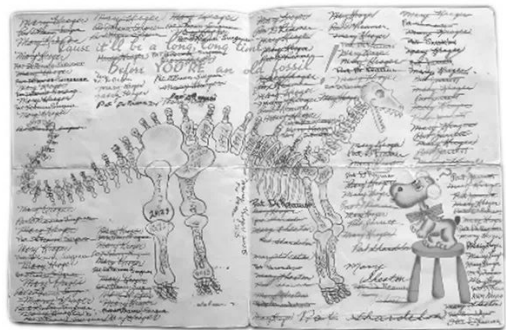


It's widely believed that the key to lasting connection is close and consistent interaction. Ideally, you live on the same street as your favorite family and friends—or at least in the same town. If not, you substitute with daily texts, weekly calls, monthly video chats, and quarterly get-togethers.

That's not what Pat and Mary have done. Since the late 1940s, their contact has been consistently intermittent. After high school, they didn't spend regular time together again until the 1990s, when they had vacation homes on the same Florida island. In 2025, when Pat traveled from Kentucky to Indiana to celebrate Mary's birthday, they hadn't seen each other in seven years. Their primary touchpoint throughout all the gaps has been a birthday card from 1944, the year they turned 14.

They don't remember who bought the card or how the tradition started. Every year for eight decades, they've sent the same card back and forth. Pat opens it on her birthday, April 1, signs and dates it, and ships it off to Mary, who opens it on May 20 and then mails it back the following year. *Here's wishing you a BIRTHDAY that really is COLOSSAL*, the card

reads. *Cause it'll be a long, long time before YOU'RE an old fossil!* Rereading the card, Mary laughs: “We *are* old fossils!” It’s the earliest memento of their bond, and it’s become the pebble that keeps them connected.



The card lifts their spirits and reminds them to call each other. It’s a hit with their families, who encouraged them to formalize their world record for the longest birthday card exchange. The two friends hope their children will continue the tradition.

When I first learned about the 80-year birthday card, I was touched, but also a bit skeptical. Although the tradition is clearly meaningful to Pat and Mary, does it apply to the rest of us? How much of a difference could sending a card really make? A series of experiments forced me to think again.

POSTCARD

[Date]

Dear [former patient’s name]:

It has been some time since you were here at the hospital, and we hope things are going well for you. If you wish to drop us a note, we would be glad to hear from you.

[Staff Member]

[patient’s address]

It started in San Francisco, with several thousand patients who had been hospitalized for depression or suicide risk. After patients were discharged, staff sent short notes to a random selection of those who declined ongoing care. Over the next two years, that small gesture cut suicide rates in half—from 3.5 percent in the control group down to 1.8 percent. Similar mailings significantly reduced suicide attempts in Iran and Australia.

The notes weren't elaborate. They featured simple messages of care. During the first year, patients received them every month at first, then every other month. Over the next few years, the notes only came quarterly. But they mattered a great deal. Look at the responses from two of the recipients:

- You will never know what your little notes mean to me. I always think someone cares about what happens to me, even if my family did kick me out. I am really grateful.
- You are the most persistent son of a b*tch I've ever encountered, so you must really be sincere in your interest in me.

To feel seen, people didn't need to interact often or have extended correspondence. They were able to stay connected through touchpoints that were significant despite being sporadic and short. That can be true for all of us, in all kinds of relationships. The central factor in sustaining closeness is not the frequency or duration of communication—it's the depth of connection.

Goodbye for Now

Many people associate meaningful connection with regular interaction. It's true that some ties require recurring conversation. If you only talk to your significant other once a month, you're on the path to having a decreasingly significant other. If you only talk to high school friends and college roommates

every five years at reunions, your relationships might become frozen in the past.

Yet daily and weekly catch-ups can quickly become mundane. *I didn't sleep well. I discovered a hole in my sock. I'm in the market for a new spatula!* And you've probably noticed that in many strong relationships, you can go months or even years without talking and resume as if you've never skipped a beat. Old allies slide quickly into their familiar rhythm of riffing on ideas. Close companions jump right into a heart-to-heart about love and the meaning of life. Good pals pick up where they left off, dishing on favorite songs, giggling at inside jokes, and discussing the exasperating conclusion of *Lost* where nothing was resolved.

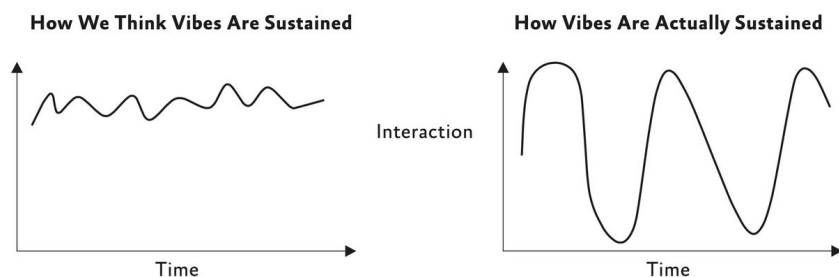
What you may not realize is that deep bonds don't just withstand separation. Distance can actually improve our vibes. Time apart is not only tolerable; it can be desirable. You can see it clearly in romantic couples. In one study, thousands of Americans felt more love for their partners after they'd spent the day apart. When they were out of sight, they started to miss each other—they felt more appreciative (and less annoyed).

Space can serve that purpose too. Surprisingly, couples in long-distance relationships sometimes have stronger ties than those who live together. They tend to have deeper conversations with more self-disclosure and mutual responsiveness. Something similar can happen with siblings when they leave for college: Despite talking less and being farther apart, they often get closer. With space, they're able to reset the terms of their relationship. Once they're not borrowing each other's clothes without asking, they fight less and have more meaningful discussions. When time together is scarce, you want to make the most of it.¹

Separation doesn't just help us stay companions and pals. It can strengthen our ties with allies too. Research reveals that the most resourceful sales teams and the most productive remote software teams don't interact in continuous streams. They alternate between periods of low communication and surges of high communication. In physics, there's a name for that pattern. It's called burstiness.

Burstiness exists when an interaction feels fizzy—energy rises and ideas bubble up. It's like the peak experience in improv jazz: One person plays a note, someone else jumps in to harmonize, and they wind up with a shared sound that no one expected. Burstiness isn't limited to professional allies—you've probably felt it on a great first date, a riveting chat with a pal about a favorite film, or a heart-to-heart with a companion about your future.

Although burstiness is visible when we're together, it incubates during phases of separation. With time apart, we can explore and learn independently. When we regroup, we have new ideas to revitalize our thinking and fresh energy to rejuvenate our motivation.



Bursting into Laughter

The most striking case of burstiness I've found is the group that's been called the Beatles of comedy. They were a major source of inspiration to the creators of *The Office*, *Seinfeld*, *The*

Simpsons, *South Park*, *Family Guy*, *Borat*, *Austin Powers*, and countless others. They started building their chemistry in college as a duo and a trio doing comedy shows at rival universities. In their late 20s, the five ended up writing for a TV satire together. Soon they added a sixth member and created their own show filled with irreverent wit and absurd humor.

Monty Python's Flying Circus revolutionized sketch comedy as a TV format. They paved the way for *Saturday Night Live*—Lorne Michaels used clips from their show in his pitch to NBC—and had a lasting impact on pop culture. If you call unwanted email “spam,” it’s thanks to Monty Python’s skit about a café where everything on the menu included spam. They even influenced politics: Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher referenced their bit about a customer trying to return a dead bird to a pet shop (“This is an ex-parrot”).

As they made their show, the Monty Python members were together more than they were apart. During production between 1969 and 1974, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Michael Palin, Graham Chapman, Terry Gilliam, and Terry Jones worked six days a week. They regularly pulled all-nighters to finish writing, rehearsing, and filming in time to deliver weekly episodes.

By the time the fourth and final season aired, Cleese had already jumped ship. One of the others called him a traitor, and they were all being courted for other opportunities. It seemed inevitable that they would disband like the Beatles, but they didn’t. Cleese rejoined them on a live tour and a new project on the silver screen. Their performances throughout the 1970s were huge hits, and their first original film—a mockery of King Arthur—debuted to rave reviews. *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* is now recognized as one of the greatest comedies ever made.

As a longtime Monty Python fan, I was fascinated by the troupe's ability to maintain their comedic chemistry for well over a decade and extend it across different formats. To get to the bottom of their bond, I combed through their archives and talked with insiders and experts. Their cadence of collaboration crystallized something powerful for me. Although they built their chemistry through an initial phase of intense interaction, they sustained it by intentionally splitting apart and going their separate ways for months. They weren't breaking up over "creative differences." They were treating temporary farewells as fertile soil for fresh starts. Their arc reveals that time apart allows us to rethink, refuel, retool, and reconnect.

On a *Holy Grail* publicity trip to Amsterdam in March 1975, Monty Python decided their second movie should spoof the Bible. At that point, they seemed destined for second album syndrome. They were all distracted by solo projects and budding fame, and they were in danger of running out of material and repeating old gags. That's when they put their film idea aside for more than a year.

In April 1976, they met up to discuss the project. They found themselves second-guessing their vision. "Are we or are we not going to do a life of Christ?" Palin ruminated in his diary that night. "All feel that we cannot just take the Bible story and parody."

The first upside of distance was rethinking. Away from the idea and each other, they realized it would be too complicated—and too controversial—to mock the Messiah himself. John Cleese suggested centering a different character, Brian, a bumbling contemporary of Jesus. The room lit up: What if they shot a scene where Brian is renting out a fishing boat, and turns around too late to see Jesus walk on water? They had "enough initial ideas to fill us all with a sort of enthusiasm

which has been missing in Python for at least a couple years,” Palin noted. It was peak burstiness. They hadn’t gotten rusty—they were renewed.

It wasn’t until another six months had passed, in fall 1976, that they reconvened for focused work together. They started writing in pairs on a Monday and reassembled on a Friday to read their first original content to one another in several years. “Things haven’t changed,” Palin journaled with a mix of relief and surprise, “in fact...I think they’ve improved.”

They worked for another month until they started to hit a wall in late December. Although some segments earned raves, others bombed—and they still didn’t have an ending for the film. Over their six weeks of bursty moments, various gripes had been simmering. Members got upset when their ideas were rejected and their identities were subordinated to the group. They took another spell of a few months apart, which offered a second advantage: refueling. As researchers Pier Vittorio Mannucci and Lorenzo Bertocchi put it after studying Monty Python’s arc, deliberately disintegrating and reintegrating allowed “a recharging of the emotional and motivational batteries that kept them together.”

Absence makes resentment grow fainter. Going their separate ways enabled Monty Python to let off steam. With distance, frustration waned and enthusiasm gained. Palin later captured the feeling in his journal: “Start of a Python writing fortnight. We tried such a session a year ago and it was not successful. Today, a year later, things feel very different.... without any bickering or grudging.... an amiable chat.”

In March 1977, Monty Python reunited for another burst of joint work. They had collected a series of funny pebbles to share with each other, and in their first meeting they laughed so hard they cried. By the end of the month, they had solved

the ending of the film. They owed much of their progress to a third benefit of separation: retooling. They came back with new talents and techniques.

Between the first two Monty Python films, every member worked on projects that stretched their skills. Most notably, John Cleese cowrote and starred in another show, *Fawlty Towers*, that went on to be voted the greatest British TV series of all time. The discipline of doing a dozen different drafts of each episode transformed him as a writer, helping the group transcend their sketch comedy instincts and deliver a more cohesive narrative.

After a few weeks of collaboration in March, they didn't resume their group work until July. In another concentrated burst, they reworked the middle of the film and generated quite a bit of new content. They agreed to do the final revisions to the script in early January in Barbados. That was the fourth perk of time away: reconnecting. They became more open to different rituals and wavelengths. Instead of sticking to the way they'd always done it, they were ready to shift their vibe.

Having downtime in paradise together gave Monty Python a chance to toggle from ally to pal mode. In between writing sessions in Barbados, they ate together and watched the sunset together. Some of them went running, swimming, and water-skiing together. They commiserated about the books they were reading and debated whether Shakespeare was funny. They celebrated a birthday and played charades. The spirit of playfulness between writing sessions improved their vibe. "Everyone is warm, comfortable...and therefore amazingly tolerant of any ideas, however devious, deadly or heretical," Palin reflected. "There's an all-embracing benevolence in the climate."

Monty Python's Life of Brian launched in 1979, four years after they first came up with the concept. It was the highest-

grossing British pic of the whole year in America, and in at least one poll, it beat out *American Pie*, *Austin Powers*, *Blazing Saddles*, and *There's Something About Mary* as the best comedy movie ever made. Cheers to rethinking, refueling, retooling, and reconnecting.

Sporadic bursts of collaboration elevated the film from saucy spoof to parody with purpose. The title character, Brian, grows up next door to Jesus and gets mistaken for the Messiah:

Brian: You don't need to follow me—you're all individuals!

Crowd [in unison]: Yes, we are all individuals!

Half a century later, the message about the dangers of group-think might be more relevant than ever. In our world of perpetual pings, their rhythm of intermittent interaction is increasingly appealing too.



"I'm assuming this coffee date covers an extension of our friendship for at least a year."

Low-Maintenance, High-Meaning

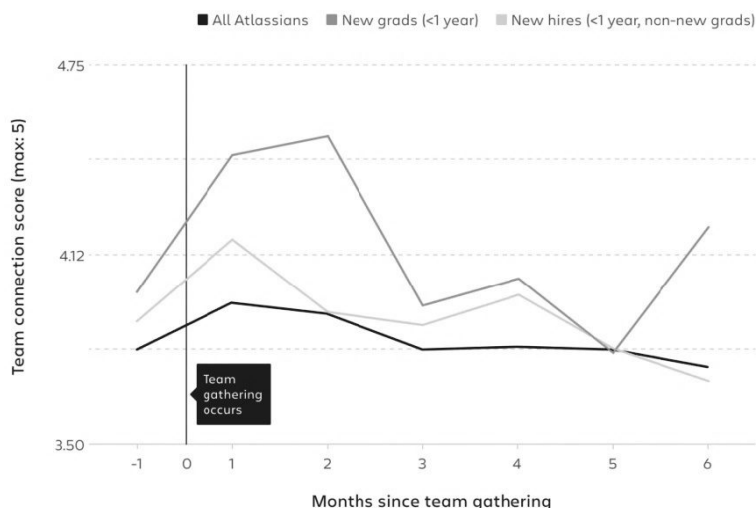
Sustaining connection doesn't have to be a heavy lift. Low-maintenance relationships get a bad rap. With the right interaction rituals, less effort can bring more connection.

As important as the quantity of time can be for building a vibe, quality time is what sustains it—and nourishes us. According to the data, most people can spend up to 75 percent of their time alone without feeling isolated. The best cure for loneliness is not more interaction; it's more meaningful interaction.

Meaning lies in experiences that reinforce our ties as pals, allies, or companions. Among romantic partners, spending more time together doesn't improve relationships. Doing novel and memorable activities does. What predicts feelings of closeness is not the number of vacations couples take—it's whether those vacations feature shared fun as pals, new challenges as allies, and physical and emotional intimacy as companions.

At work, too, meaningful intermittent interactions are better than daily touchpoints. I've spent some time advising the software company Atlassian, and their data show that how often people go to the office has no bearing on their vibe with their teams. What does strengthen team connections is attending quarterly gatherings—people spend three to five days together building their pal bonds over meals and their ally ties making progress on important projects. A single quarterly gathering is low-maintenance, and the right rituals can be enough to fortify relationships for multiple months.²

Connection boost and decay from team gatherings



What makes a ritual meaningful varies by wavelength. Whereas allies usually maintain connections by doing shared projects, companions are more likely to opt for conversation. But even with close companions, it's not enough to get up to speed on the past—relationships are more rewarding when they involve new shared experiences. They don't require massive amounts of time and energy. An annual weekend together can do more to sustain a bond than a monthly lunch or a quarterly dinner. And on their birthdays, some people solidify their bonds with companions by giving gifts instead of waiting to receive them. That ritual was dreamed up by J. R. R. Tolkien. "To celebrate your life means to celebrate the people who have formed, shaped and touched your life," a Tolkien scholar explains. "You mark that by giving presents."

Pals keep their ties strong with low-maintenance adventures, games, and pranks. There are friend groups that stay connected across continents by holding a New Year's Eve reunion party. My sister and I have an annual Scrabble match on her birthday. In college, my roommates and I stumbled across

a corny 1980s book called *Lifeplanning*, and since graduation we've kept in touch by hiding it in unexpected places. Over the years I've sneaked it into an envelope of wedding vows and planted it on a bookshelf where it went undetected for years.³

Anniversaries are a natural occasion for creating new rituals. I love a tradition created by a book reviewer named Becka Free. A friend told her that once their wedding festivities were finished and they'd opened all the gifts and cards, they were sad—they felt disconnected from their friends and family. At her wedding in 2018, Becka decided to solve that problem. She and her husband gave each guest an envelope with their table number on it. Inside was a blank card for guests to write a letter to the newlyweds. On their first anniversary, Becka and her husband read all ten cards from table 1. Every year since, they've opened the cards from the corresponding table number.

On their seventh anniversary, they read a letter from a family member who had since been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. It brought them to tears, and one line also made them laugh: "You probably haven't made out in a while. I insist you do some kissing on the couch."

The ritual makes each anniversary special for Becka and her husband. It gives them a unique moment together (and helps them remember their anniversary). It also helps them maintain relationships with friends and family who live far away. Becka occasionally sends photos of the cards back to guests after reading them—*remember this?*—and writes her own notes back. She told me it helps her rekindle relationships with old friends and long-lost cousins. That kind of time capsule is a moving way to get back in touch with people from our past. Our capacity to sustain connections depends on our comfort with reconnecting.

The Agony and Ecstasy of Reconnecting

We have hundreds or possibly thousands of dormant ties—people we used to know. We’re especially likely to miss our college roommates, favorite teachers and mentors, and childhood friends, since they were part of formative moments in our lives. And we hesitate to reach out to them even when we have a good reason.

In a series of studies, people were as reluctant to contact old friends as they were to write to strangers. After thousands of people drafted texts and emails to reconnect, less than a third ended up sending them. They wanted to...but worried their overtures would be awkward or unwelcome. *Some ties are dormant for a reason!* Yet most ties aren’t dormant for a good reason. We moved to a new city, changed jobs, started a family—we didn’t mean to fall out of touch. In 90 percent of cases, we end up finding it fun to reconnect.⁴

We put too much pressure on ourselves—and others—to live by arbitrary expectations of frequent contact. As a result, we think it’s harder to maintain relationships than it really is. What ultimately motivates us to reach out is knowing that friendships can survive and even thrive with time apart. That’s what the evidence shows: When we accept that strong bonds can exist without regular interaction, we no longer fret about whether it’s been too long. It turns out that even chimps and bonobos can recognize friends they haven’t seen in decades.

The most basic ritual for reconnecting is wishing someone a happy birthday. But I’ve noticed that it works better on some wavelengths than others. With allies, birthday messages are optional unless you’re close. *If you have a text thread that’s just “happy birthday” back and forth for seven years and you’re not putting in the effort to send a card, it might be time for that tie to become dormant.* It’s unnecessary for associates

to send salutations. *As much as I like my dentist, I'd rather not think of him on my day of festivities.* And if a pal misses your birthday, it's not the end of the world, but if a companion does, it could strike a blow to your relationship. *How could you forget? Do you not care about me at all?*

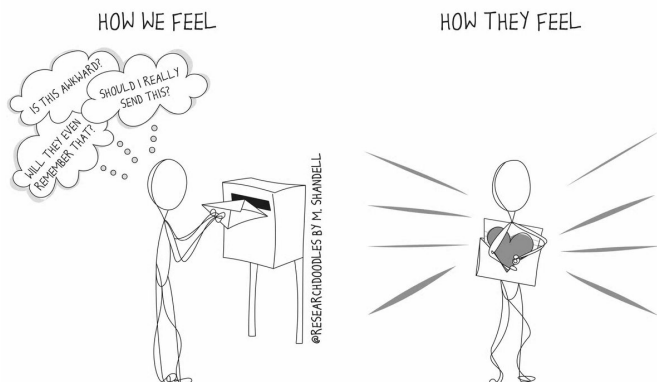
You don't have to wait for a birthday. One popular approach is to commemorate a moment—congratulate them on a job or a promotion, or tell them you revisited a place or activity you shared. When I reconnected with a college pal after a decade of distance, I was stunned that she remembered my favorite movie. The longer it's been since you were in touch, the more powerful a memory flex can be.

A second easy option is to send a pebble that signals *I thought of you* and *I care about you*. It could be a playlist to make a pal smile, an article to help an ally think, or a reel about bad in-laws to make a companion feel seen. If you want to put in more effort, I have a friend who blocks a Weekly Correspondence Hour in her calendar to check in with the people she misses. And we underestimate how much people appreciate it when we simply reach out to see how they're doing. Across a series of experiments, when college students wrote short notes to classmates they hadn't seen in a while ("just saying hi and checking in"), their classmates were more delighted and grateful to hear from them than they expected.

A third starting point is to go right to the heart. *I was thinking about how much you matter to me, and I miss having you in my life.* One December after college, I spent a week writing emails to dozens of people I'd lost contact with, telling them each what I appreciated about them. It didn't just reconnect us; it reinforced our vibe. More than two decades later some of them still reference how moved they were by what I wrote.

Despite our reluctance to do it, saying thanks turns out to be less uncomfortable—and more gratifying—than we anticipate.

EXPRESSING GRATITUDE



Of course, reaching out is a bid for connection, and it isn't always accepted. People are more enthusiastic about rekindling relationships when you're on the same wavelength. The longer it's been, the harder it is to guess what they'll want. If you try to pal around but they're only interested in being allies, they might think you're wasting their time. If you express a desire for companionship to someone who aims to stay associates, you might get a tepid response or none at all.

Even if you're on the same page about the purpose of reconnecting, it's helpful to make sure you have the same expectations about the cadence of communication. When waiting for a reply, many people confuse promptness with closeness. How quickly someone answers you is not a sign of how much they care about you. It's usually a reflection of how much they have on their plate. Delayed replies to emails, texts, and calls are common symptoms of being overwhelmed. Unless a message is urgent, what counts is not the speed of response but the quality of attention.

Most of us default to email or text to reconnect, assuming that a call out of the blue from a long-lost pal would be uncomfortable. Yet when people were randomly assigned to reconnect by phone or video call, their bonds got stronger than if they emailed or texted—and the interaction wasn't any more awkward. Other studies show that the care hormone oxytocin is released when we hear people's voices, but not when we read their messages. Personally, I still prefer email, but I'm coming around.⁵

When time is limited, there are still meaningful ways to connect and reconnect. A few years ago, I scheduled my first trip to Australia. I was hoping to reconnect with one of my closest childhood friends, one of my most important collaborators, my first psychology TA from college, a handful of colleagues, and a half dozen former students. I didn't know how to squeeze them into a whirlwind book tour: I'd be landing in Melbourne on Monday morning and leaving Sydney Thursday afternoon, with back-to-back speeches and interviews in between.

Instead of making a tough call about who to see, I scheduled one dinner in each city and invited everyone. Over the next few months, the updates poured in from different subsets of my Aussie allies and pals. They were hanging out together... without me. One pair who met at the dinner became allies and launched a project together. A trio of women became pals and started getting together monthly for meals and meditation.

The group catch-up began as a necessity of a book tour, but it's become my staple ritual for reconnecting and staying connected. When I travel, a bunch of people get the burstiness of a dinner and the sparks that grow into flames afterward. I don't know who will click or what will come from it, but the connections are brimming with possibility (and less exhausting for me

than individual meetings). People send recaps after they get together, and I smile every time a pebble arrives.⁶

In the two years since my Australia trip, the three women I introduced have become companions too. When one of them separated from her husband of two decades, another showed up to support her, even booking a massage to help get some of the physical knots out. Recently, the massage booker sent me a photo of the trio together, beaming, at her own wedding.

There's evidence that introducing others earns their trust and boosts our happiness. Building new bridges between people is even more energizing than deepening their existing bonds—there's something magical about watching the initial sparks fly. As long as you know them well and they've both opted in, introducing potential associates, allies, pals, and companions is much easier than romantic matchmaking, since physical attraction isn't required. And connecting others keeps us connected to them.

When I invite some dormant ties to a group meal, I make it clear that I'm not adding them out of convenience or as an afterthought. I'm excited to see them and bring some new people into their lives. At the end of a teaching semester, I tell my students that I look forward to staying in touch, but they shouldn't worry about how often—I'm a fan of staying open to reconnecting.



After *Life of Brian*, Monty Python did a handful of wildly popular live shows and released their third film in 1983. By that point, their ideas were getting stale, they were struggling to get along, and they were keen to pursue independent opportunities. They made the choice to part ways for good.

Once they split, they didn't hang out together as a troupe. They'd bonded as allies, not pals or companions. "Most of us are not natural best friends," John Cleese admitted. "We're just miles...apart in everything. I don't think Terry Gilliam has ever said anything that I agreed with." Eric Idle added, "We didn't have the slightest interest in each other as people."

For decades, fans speculated about a reunion, but Monty Python resisted. "I thought we had flogged this horse to death—way past death, in fact," Cleese said. In 2013, they changed their minds. The five surviving members reunited for a live show in London. They were all in their seventies and aligned on a goal: Don't embarrass themselves by doing anything humorless or hackneyed.

It had been three decades since they last collaborated as a group, and they felt nervous. "It's always dangerous when Python gets back together, because we've been separate for so long," Gilliam observed. Yet when they sat down to start testing material, they quickly discovered that they hadn't lost the vibe—the old burstiness was back. As Idle marveled, "It was like no time had passed." A filmmaker who attended their first table read noticed it too: "The length of time apart as a group seemed irrelevant, as their chemistry was just so fresh and vibrant."

The distance paved the way for Monty Python to reimagine their classic sketches and reinvent their act. Since they'd last collaborated, Idle had adapted their first film into a Broadway musical, *Spamalot*, garnering a Tony and a Grammy. Harnessing his expertise, the troupe delivered a three-hour musical. They sold out a 16,000-seat theater in 43 seconds... and had to add nine more performances in London alone. They had so much fun together that they struggled to keep straight faces in rehearsal, and Cleese announced that the first to giggle

during the show would owe £10,000 to charity. Fans loved it, and some critics even liked it too. When offers poured in for a world tour from America to Africa to Australia, Monty Python declined—they were proud of their work and ready to say good-bye. Again.

1. After leaving for college, kids also tend to get along better with their parents. The less they interact face-to-face—and the more they talk by phone—the closer they feel. Even when their kids are grown, some parents have a hard time relaxing the expectation of frequent communication. *Parents, if you want your adult children to call more, you might try making it more pleasant.*

2. This is what the debate about remote and hybrid work misses. Once you're co-located half the week, more time together has diminishing returns—five days in the office doesn't build stronger relationships than three, and people who spend half their time in the office actually feel less isolated from their colleagues than those who are there more. When people are in the office full time, frequent interaction leads their thoughts to converge, crowding out divergent ideas and increasing the risk of groupthink. Overall, the best evidence to date shows that when people are randomly assigned to work from home one or two days a week, they perform just as well and are just as likely to get promoted over the next two years—and their odds of quitting drop by a third. And as long as they're committed, worrying about losing relationships in hybrid work motivates them to reach out and help their colleagues more.

3. There are some gender differences in interaction frequencies and wavelengths. On average, women tend to have more frequent interactions with friends—and expect more companionship. Men are more likely to connect sporadically with pals. *Saturday Night Live* captured it hilariously in their sketch “Straight Male Friend”: “Does straight male friend know my last name? No. That's kind of the beauty of it,” Bowen Yang deadpans, turning to his pal to share some news: “Hey, I might be moving to Europe for seven years.” His pal is unfazed: “Dope. Just hit me when you're back.”

4. Reconnecting is not only enjoyable. If you're hunting for a job or searching for advice, it can be unexpectedly useful too. Experiments show that dormant ties offer more original ideas and better guidance than current contacts, who tend to share redundant knowledge—they travel in similar circles and are exposed to similar information. Meanwhile, your former friends have learned new things and met new people since you last interacted. Current acquaintances can bring novel perspectives too, but it's easier to reach out to someone you used to know than someone you hardly know. You don't have to do it strategically; picking dormant ties at random still gives you a good chance at finding someone who's willing and able to help.

5. If you do send a text, typing “how r u” is not a smart way to save time. It signals that the receiver isn’t worth your time. Eight studies have shown that when people use text abbreviations, recipients are less responsive. Shortcuts seem insincere, reducing their interest in engaging. A little effort really does go a long way.

6. If you’re asking someone to make an introduction for you, you can make it easy by writing what investor Chris Fralic calls a self-contained forwardable email. It’s a brief note that your mutual contact can pass along with minimal effort. *Hi Pam, I was wondering if you might be able to forward this note to your pal Dwight...Dear Dwight, I’m an aspiring paper salesman, and I wondered if you might be willing to meet with me to discuss how you became assistant (to the) regional manager. I’m a fellow fan of bears, beets, and Battlestar Galactica, and to make it worth your time, I stand ready to refer you to some potential clients, introduce you to my home remedy for hot dog fingers, and teach you how to remove a stapler from Jello.*

5

IT'S COMPLICATED

Maintaining Messy Connections

The opposite of love is not hate, but indifference.

—Wilhelm Stekel

You're about to participate in a study of stress during public speaking. You're going to give a few impromptu speeches—you don't get the topics in advance. After each speech, a friend in the audience will write you a note to tell you how you're doing. You'll have a blood pressure cuff around your arm the whole time to monitor your stress.

You've just finished your first speech on whether uniforms should be required in schools when your friend passes you a critical note:

I think you can do better.

After the next speech, the message sounds slightly more reassuring:

I would have gone about it differently, but you're doing fine.

Which note would stress you out more?

You don't know it, but the psychologists running the experiment predetermined what your friend would write. They randomly assigned some participants to receive critical comments like the first one—and others to get mixed feedback like the second. Surprisingly, their blood pressure didn't climb after getting negative notes, but it spiked if they got mixed messages.

I'd always assumed that in an interaction, any positivity was helpful. But if the person who cuts you down starts cheering for you, it doesn't buffer the bad feelings. It amplifies them.

Our most hurtful ties aren't the purely negative ones—they're the complicated ones. When we have both positive and negative feelings toward a person, our vibe is ambivalent. Extensive evidence indicates that ambivalent relationships take an even bigger toll on our mental and physical health than bad relationships. In the public speaking experiment, if you had mixed feelings about the friend who came with you, your blood pressure and heart rate were higher before and after they gave feedback—regardless of what they wrote.

Feedback is only the tip of the iceberg. A five-minute conversation with a friend, family member, or colleague who evokes mixed feelings is enough to raise your blood pressure more than one who elicits bad feelings. If your boss is sometimes supportive and sometimes demeaning, you wind up with more health problems and more missed work than if your boss is only demeaning. And the more ambivalent relationships you have in your life, the more depressed you feel—and the more your heart rate and blood pressure climb under stress.

Ambivalent relationships are unpleasant because the vibe is unpredictable. We fret about them beforehand, uncertain about what to expect. *Should I lean in for a hug or brace myself for a brawl?* We tense up as they start, unclear on what to

do. *Should I share a secret or keep it safe?* We stay on high alert as they unfold, with our fight-or-flight response on a hair trigger. *How dare you judge my cooking?* We agonize about ambiguous comments, unsure what to make of them and whether to trust the people who make them. *She said nice shirt...did she really like it or was she making fun of me?*

Even if we're not stuck with ambivalent ties, their positives give us compelling reasons not to abandon them. The in-laws who sometimes make snide comments about your parenting are always available to watch your kids. The mentor who fails to respect your boundaries goes above and beyond to help you get promoted. The buddy who imposes on you to borrow your car happens to be your favorite dinner party guest. The partner who's nasty when drunk is the picture of caring when sober.

Improving complicated connections is not about raising our tolerance. It's not about ignoring their vices. It's about confining their vices and unlocking their virtues.

On the Fence

Everyone has both pleasant and unpleasant qualities. Psychologists have discovered that when we look at people's pluses and minuses together, we end up with four possible reactions to them: positive, negative, indifferent, and ambivalent.

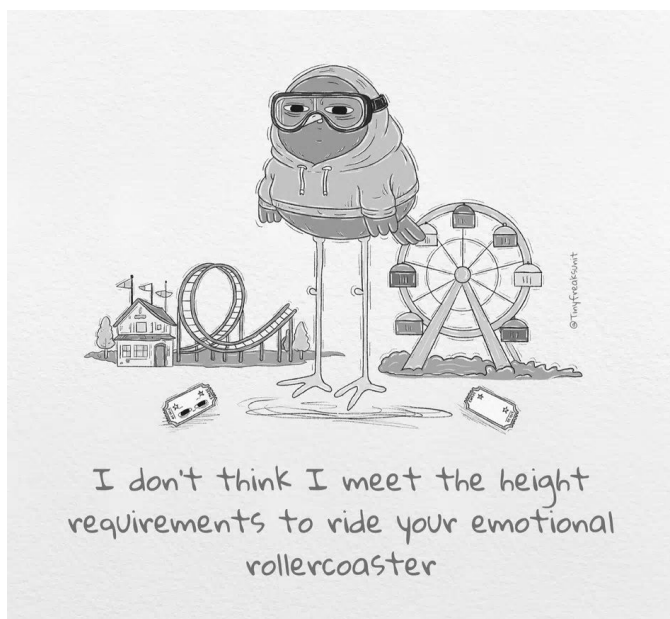
		Their Top Vices	
		Tolerable	Intolerable
Their Top Virtues	Underwhelming	Indifferent <i>Acquaintance or associate</i>	Negative <i>Enemy</i>
	Uplifting	Positive <i>Pal, ally, or companion</i>	Ambivalent <i>Frenemy</i>

We're usually clear on what to do with indifferent ties. If we have minimal reactions to their pros and their cons, they're natural acquaintances or associates. We know what to do with positive connections too: If we adore someone's strengths and don't mind their weaknesses, they're ideal pals, allies, or companions. And we try to escape negative relationships. Of course, we don't always have the luxury of abandoning our most unpleasant relatives, coworkers, and neighbors. We do what we can to minimize our interactions—and not take their actions too personally.

Ironically, we're often torn about how to handle our ambivalent ties. Compared to enemies, it's harder to decide what to do with our frenemies. We appreciate their upsides, but we object to their downsides. Contending with mixed feelings is not an occasional challenge. Empirically, we have about as many ambivalent ties as positive ones. And we don't seem to get better at handling them with experience.

As we interact with people across situations and over time, we inevitably discover that they have flaws that annoy us and if-then tendencies that offend us. When their drawbacks get under our skin, the vibe becomes ambivalent. We develop mixed feelings about pals when they kill our joy, allies when they interfere with our goals, and companions when they violate our values. *This may explain why many people see pets as such good companions (and sometimes even soulmates). Our cats never lack integrity.*

When ambivalence persists, it's tempting to demote people to distant associates or avoid them altogether. Unfollow, unfriend, and hope they don't notice. But there are alternatives to drifting apart and cutting our ties that most of us overlook. I learned about them recently from one of my childhood role models.



Out of Bounds

In 2004, my hometown Detroit Pistons were poised for a run in the NBA playoffs when they made a controversial move. They decided to acquire Rasheed Wallace, the most volatile player in the game. Rasheed was a powerhouse—a big man who could swish three-pointers and block shots. Unfortunately, he was also a loose cannon. He'd already racked up multiple NBA records for misbehavior: He'd been ejected from more games than any other player and broken his own record for the most technical fouls in a season. He'd been suspended by the league for threatening a referee and by his own team for an altercation with a teammate.

As a lifelong Pistons fan, I was ambivalent about Rasheed. So were many insiders in the league—they recognized his strengths but questioned whether his baggage was too heavy. A legendary executive called the Pistons to warn them: "That guy's gonna f*ck up your team."

The gamble was the brainchild of Joe Dumars, a former All-Star player who was now the Pistons' president. Growing up, Joe was my favorite player—when the Pistons won back-to-back championships, he was the good guy on the Bad Boys. He won the inaugural NBA Sportsmanship Award, and it's now named after him: the Joe Dumars Trophy goes to the one player each year who best “exemplifies the ideals of sportsmanship on the court with ethical behavior, fair play, and integrity.” When he made the trade to bring Rasheed Wallace to Detroit, the explanation seemed obvious: Joe was forgiving to a fault. The poor guy could see the best in players even when they didn't deserve it. He must have been ignoring Rasheed's vices.

Four months later, the headline in the news was “Rasheed Left His Problems in Portland.” He'd been booted from five games the previous season, yet as a Piston he didn't get ejected once. His suspensions fell from seven games to none, and his technical foul rate dropped as well. Rasheed didn't just avoid trouble—he transformed the team. The Pistons went from winning 61 percent of their games without him to 77 percent with him. I underestimated him, and I underestimated Joe Dumars too.

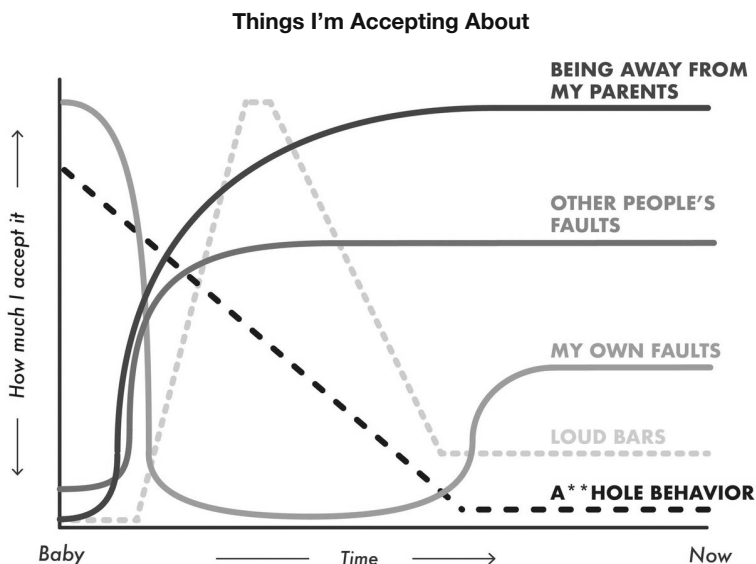
Going in, Joe knew Rasheed had a long history of eliciting mixed feelings from his coaches and teammates. They loved his unselfish hustle but hated his selfish outbursts. Joe wasn't oblivious to that ambivalence. He had a strategy for shifting the vibe.

I first met Joe years ago when we were guests on a podcast together, and I couldn't wait to find out what his secret sauce was. Since then, we've become occasional allies in our shared quest to understand how to bring out the best in people. Joe told me Rasheed wasn't the first difficult player he managed.

He started honing his technique during his playing days with a hot-tempered teammate named Dennis Rodman.

Although Dennis was the best rebounder in basketball, he was a ticking time bomb. He was fined and suspended multiple times for headbutting opponents and skipping training camp, practice, and road games. For his coaches and teammates, it was the ultimate ambivalent relationship: *I need you, I hate you*. When I asked what he learned from playing with Dennis, Joe caught me off guard. “You have to be accepting,” Joe said. “He’s just an eccentric person, and so you have to accept that from him.”

I was incredulous. Accept?! How can you possibly accept headbutts and blowing off practice and games? Yet psychologists have found that Joe was onto something. They’ve discovered it in the birthplace of many ambivalent relationships: marriage.



Accept and Contain

Renowned marriage psychologists Julie and John Gottman find that 69 percent of relationship conflicts revolve around perpetual problems. *I can't believe you left dirty dishes in the sink...again! I can't believe you're overreacting...again!*

For a long time, many therapists concentrated on change. The goal was to help people recognize and eliminate their vices. Yet that's not always possible. Some traits are too ingrained; some preferences are set in stone. In the past few decades, couples therapy has undergone a revolution. Instead of just demanding change, partners learn to accept some of one another's shortcomings.

Acceptance is an antidote to ambivalence. In one experiment, when acceptance was added to therapeutic approaches that emphasized change, couples blamed and lashed out at each other less. When couples therapy included a focus on acceptance, across 17 experiments, marital satisfaction and relationship quality improved.

Of course, not all behaviors should be accepted. There's a big difference between temporary a**holes and certified a**holes, as organizational psychologist Bob Sutton describes them. A temporary a**hole is someone who's responding poorly to a bad day. A certified a**hole is someone who repeatedly ruins your day. If people consistently treat others like dirt—and rationalize it rather than showing the desire and capacity for change—they've crossed the line into abusive territory.

My advice: Don't feed the hand that bites you.

Acceptance is not about justifying or excusing abuse. It's about granting others leeway to engage in behaviors that fall within our zone of appropriate action. *It's okay that you sometimes forget to put the toilet seat down. I won't judge you for driving slow—you're cautious.* Accepting others' limitations doesn't always reduce or resolve conflict, but it does make forgiveness easier. And it makes them feel better too. Neuroscientists find that feeling understood is enough to light up the reward centers in our brains.

Validating	Invalidating
I understand why that affected you so much	What's wrong with you?
I can imagine that was difficult	That sounds like a nothingburger
I see why you responded like that	I don't get why you flew off the handle
That would bother me too	Don't be a man-baby

A perpetual problem in my relationships is that I run late...a lot. I have a chronic inability to disengage from a task or conversation until it's done—and a chronic tendency to pack too much into my days. My wife, Allison, considers tardiness a mortal sin, so she gets upset if I'm even 37 seconds behind our agreed time to leave for a dinner party (even though she's al-

ready built in 37 minutes of buffer time, and we generally dislike dinner parties). Here's a typical argument between us:

Me: I know you wanted to leave earlier, but flow states are precious.

Allison: You're assuming that your time is more valuable than other people's.

Me: No! I love it when people are late—it gives me time to catch up on emails (and an excuse to play word games).

Allison: But other people think it's rude!

Me: They should think again. Punctuality was invented in an era when people didn't carry supercomputers in their pockets. If someone didn't show up, you had nothing to do—and you couldn't reach them to find out if they were running behind or needed to reschedule. No longer relevant!

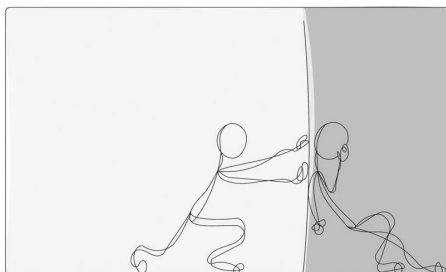
Allison: What about when someone is late to a dinner we're hosting, and the lasagna is either burned or so cold it needs to be reheated?

In 20 years, neither of us has budged on our views, and this dispute could've been a real vibe killer. Allison figured out how to prevent that. She tells me she knows I have a lot on my plate, and there are events where no one is affected if we're a little late, but there are others when our arrival time is important, because people will be waiting for us to eat. I prioritize being on time in those situations, and it makes her less ambivalent about our relationship. *I think/hope*. It works with allies too: My colleagues have low tolerance for tardiness when an audience is waiting but grant a five-minute grace period for small meetings with flexible start times.

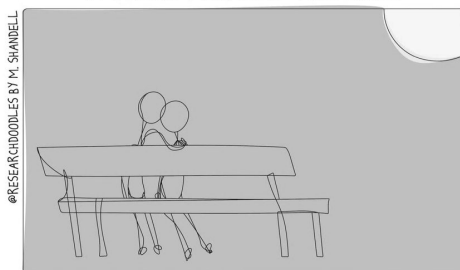
In healthy relationships, acceptance is a two-way street. One of Allison's ongoing challenges is anxiety, and she's taught me a ritual to help her confine her nerves. When she's feeling especially stressed, we set aside a dedicated slot for "worry time" to discuss her concerns later.¹ Instead of trying to change one another's so-called vices, we've learned to accept the vices and contain their impact.

Acceptance is about validating others' preferences. We're expressing that it's okay for them to have thoughts and emotions that differ from ours. Containment is about setting our boundaries, so they know what actions we'll tolerate. We're conveying what conduct we dislike—and when we will or won't accept it. As developmental psychologist Aliza Pressman says, "All feelings are welcome, all behaviors are not."

"LOOK ON THE BRIGHT SIDE!"



"I'M HERE FOR ALL THE SIDES"



Securing the Perimeter

In the 1990s on *SportsCenter*, when Michael Jordan made a spectacular shot, the hosts loved to declare, “You can’t stop him—you can only hope to contain him!” Jordan said the toughest defender he ever faced was Joe Dumars, and Joe’s strategy was containment. He couldn’t stifle Jordan’s scoring altogether, but he could force him to take more contested shots from more difficult spots. Joe adopted a similar philosophy to avoid ambivalence with Dennis Rodman.

Joe knew he wasn’t going to erase Dennis’s vices, so he worked to contain them. He acknowledged that Dennis had strong reactions and tried to coax him toward better ways of channeling his emotions. Dennis responded well to the acceptance—sometimes he’d look over and wink at Joe. But there was only so much Joe could do as a young player to limit the blast radius of a teammate. Years later at the helm of the Pistons, when Joe acquired another star with a short fuse, he was ready to accept the emotions and contain the damage.

When Rasheed Wallace landed in Detroit, Joe picked him up from the airport. In the car, he told Rasheed he understood he was passionate, and he didn’t expect him to change that. He just expected him to limit when he lost his cool. Joe set a boundary: no ejections, no suspensions.

Joe: Hey, Rasheed, listen. There’s a line we have to draw. You can dance on that line, you can stand on it—just don’t cross it. One technical foul, you’re standing on the line. Two technical fouls, you’ve crossed it. Don’t get thrown out of games and don’t get suspended.

Rasheed: That’s cool, Joe D.

Joe was avoiding a common mistake. When people disappoint us, it's rarely due to their actions alone. It's usually because their actions fell short of our expectations. And in many cases, they had no idea, because we didn't bother to tell them what was acceptable and unacceptable. Not Joe—he made his expectations crystal clear. After establishing that he accepted Rasheed's personality, he spelled out the situations where a meltdown would be a big problem:

Joe: I know you're gonna blow up at these officials. I'm not going to overreact to that, Rasheed. In the first three quarters, have at it, man. That being the case, I can't have you having these techs in crunch time when the game's on the line. The team can't have that. Then I have an issue with that.

Rasheed: Oh, I can do that. By the time the first three quarters go by, Joe D, I promise you, I will have said everything I need to say to those referees by then.

Joe: As long as you get it out of your system in the first three quarters, just don't screw the game up in the fourth quarter.

Rasheed: I understand, Joe D. I got you.

Instead of reacting in the heat of the moment, the boundary allowed Rasheed to exercise proactive self-control. Joe encouraged him to reflect on his rituals in the fourth quarter. Rasheed knew his primary trigger was unfairness, and he needed a better script to handle it. His emotions didn't have to change, but his behavior did.

When referees called questionable fouls, instead of screaming at them, Rasheed would wait for his opponents to shoot their first free throw. If they missed, Rasheed would shout, *Ball*

don't lie! It was his way of saying that the basketball gods were restoring justice. When the game was on the line, Joe reminded Rasheed to follow the script. If he started getting distracted, the coaches called plays that required his full attention.

In that holding container, Rasheed helped power the Pistons all the way to the NBA finals. They were clear underdogs against Kobe Bryant and Shaquille O'Neal on the star-studded Lakers. The Pistons had surged to a shocking 2–1 lead when Rasheed started to unravel in game 4. He shot his headband into the stands and yelled at referees. In the third quarter, he got into a shouting and shoving match with a Laker and had to be physically restrained by teammates.

Later in the game, Rasheed's if-then response was dramatically different. He didn't get ejected or commit any technical fouls—he dominated the fourth quarter. “Rasheed Keeps His Head,” one headline boasted; another journalist marveled that “one of the NBA's most volatile players had the cool of a champion.” He led the Pistons with 26 points and 13 rebounds, and they went on to trounce the heavily favored Lakers 4–1. Rasheed was the missing puzzle piece in their victory, and his teammates were no longer ambivalent about him. He'd become their ideal ally.

Expectations don't carry equal weight in all relationships. It's easier to motivate people to live up to our standards when they respect and care about us. *Can you please make sure you don't leave the toilet seat up when we have guests? If we're taking multiple cars somewhere, can you agree to drive the speed limit?* It's also easier to enforce our boundaries when we're in a position of power or status. It's much harder to contain the behaviors of our superiors.

Say your boss has a habit of dumping “urgent” tasks on you at the last minute. Research points to a few options for how to

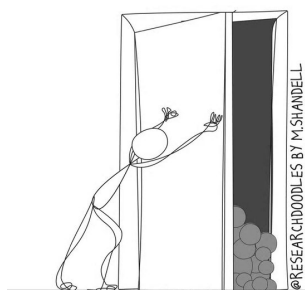
respond. One is to explain how it's in their interests to address your interests. *I know you want our best work, and our team does our worst work when a deadline is sprung on us.* Another is to frame suggestions as questions. *What do you think about announcing deadlines earlier?* Advocacy can be threatening; inquiry is empowering, particularly if the boss has a big ego. It can also be effective to seek advice. *Our team consistently struggles in crunch time. Do you have any guidance on how to get more advance notice?*

When peer relationships are ambivalent, it's possible to relegate them to a specific wavelength. That might involve keeping people in the pal zone if they're fun but unreliable, or the associate zone if they're unpleasant or unreliable. Years ago, when a work associate invited my family over for dinner, I wasn't interested. He had a reputation for being brilliant and selfish. The overlap in our interests was minimal at best, and we were at very different life stages—I had three kids at home while his were grown. I gently explained that I was glad to have him as a colleague but overwhelmed with responsibilities as a parent. After he kept pushing, I found a playful way to be more direct: *I'm trying to get better at saying no. Thank you for the practice.* He laughed and said he understood, and we've maintained a distant cordial connection for over a decade.

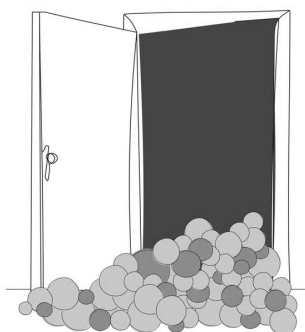
Not all people will respect our boundaries, and not all vices can be easily contained. But managing vices is only half the strategy. It's also possible to reduce ambivalence by finding and fostering the virtues in others.

HOW TO SEE THE GOOD IN PEOPLE

WHAT WE NORMALLY DO
SHUT OUT THEIR FLAWS



WHAT WE CAN DO INSTEAD
SEE THEIR FLAWS IN THE
CONTEXT OF THEIR STRENGTHS



Clash of the Titans

For the 2011 term, no Supreme Court justices disagreed more than Ruth Bader Ginsburg and Antonin Scalia. He was a conservative Catholic who defended originalist interpretations of the Constitution; she was a liberal Jew who believed the Constitution should evolve as a living document. They held contrasting views on guns, gay marriage, abortion, affirmative action, and the death penalty. When the Court was split 5–4, Ginsburg and Scalia were on opposite sides 93 percent of the time.

Before serving on the Supreme Court together, the two judges had been close friends. They first vibed as pals in the early 1980s, when they both served on the U.S. Court of Appeals as judges for the D.C. Circuit. They bonded around their love of the opera and discovered that they made one another laugh. Their pal connection deepened as their spouses hit it off: They both loved to cook. It became a tradition for the Ginsburg and Scalia families to celebrate New Year's together. They even took vacations together—on one trip to India, they

rode an elephant together. “That was a rather bumpy ride,” Ginsburg said. She could’ve said the same thing about their relationship.

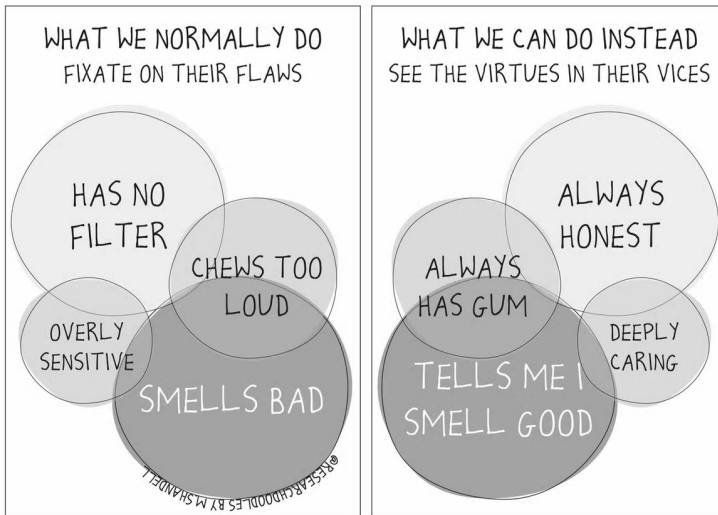
For a while, the two judges avoided ambivalence by sticking to the pal zone and steering clear of politics. When Ginsburg joined Scalia on the Supreme Court in 1993, that was no longer an option. They clashed on nearly every issue, and there was no way to reconcile their differences. With Scalia sitting right next to her, Ginsburg once admitted: “I love him, but sometimes I’d like to strangle him.” It seemed like a textbook ambivalent relationship. Remarkably, though, their ideological divide didn’t interfere with their bond. There’s a study that explains how.

Young adults answered a series of questions about their partners’ faults. A year later, the researchers followed up to see if the couples were still together. Surprisingly, people who saw more severe flaws in their partners weren’t less likely to stick with them. It came down to something else: whether they managed to maintain high opinions of their partners *despite* their flaws.

People used two different techniques for staying positive about their partners. One was emphasizing their partners’ virtues. *She’s the person I want to talk to before I go to sleep at night.* The other was finding virtues in their vices. *The fact that she’s so blunt means I never have to wonder how she really feels.*

These strategies aren’t only relevant in romantic relationships. Seeing the good in others is not about denying their shortcomings—it’s about appreciating their strengths. You’re not ignoring their bad qualities; you’re taking them in context of their best qualities. That’s what happened with Scalia and Ginsburg.

HOW TO FIND THE SILVER LINING IN PEOPLE



In the late 1970s, Ginsburg heard Scalia speak for the first time at a conference. Although she objected to the content of his presentation, she downplayed that reaction: “I disagreed with most of what he said, but I loved the way he said it.” She emphasized his many strengths, expressing admiration for his knowledge, wit, and charm. Many years later when they were on the Supreme Court together, Scalia did the same. He accepted their differences and accentuated her strengths:

Scalia: She’s a very nice person. What’s not to like? Except her views on the law....

We agree on a whole lot of stuff. We do. Ruth is really bad only on the knee-jerk stuff. She’s a really good textualist.... She’s obviously very smart.

Both justices appreciated that distasteful beliefs can come from worthy principles. They managed to find a master virtue in the very vices they found most objectionable in one another.

One June morning in 1996, Ginsburg was walking out the door for a trip when Scalia showed up with a stack of papers. It was the near-final draft of his dissenting opinion on a case, and he was delivering it to her in advance. “I want to give you as much time as I can to answer it,” he said. He was conveying that although he vehemently disagreed with her, he still cared about her.

Scalia’s dissent “was a zinger,” Ginsburg said. “I was glad to have the extra days to adjust the Court’s opinion. My final draft was much improved thanks to Justice Scalia’s searing criticism.” Although they had opposing ideological goals, they recognized a compatible professional goal of growth. It prevented ambivalence by uniting them as allies. As Scalia put it, “Ruth and I had developed something of a mutual improvement society.”²

It’s probably not a coincidence that Ginsburg and Scalia kindled their pal vibe first. Psychologists find that when building a relationship, it’s easier to start with similarities than differences. If people are on opposing sides first and are then asked to collaborate, they often slip into a nasty routine of cut-throat cooperation. They might pretend to be supportive and stab one another in the back. If people identify a common interest first, they’re more likely to develop a healthy pattern of friendly competition.³

The two justices knew from their early connection that they shared some foundational principles. After Scalia died, Ginsburg gave a eulogy. “He was a jurist of captivating brilliance and wit...his pungent opinions so clearly stated that his words never slipped from the reader’s grasp,” she quipped. She honored their connection by quoting from an opera about their relationship: “Different in our interpretation of written texts,

one in our reverence for the Constitution and the institution we serve.”

This is the ultimate test of whether an ambivalent relationship is salvageable—and worth saving. At the end of the day, does the person exemplify or violate your most important values?



When he was vetting Rasheed Wallace, Joe Dumars asked himself that question. Joe’s core value was unselfishness; he wanted players who used their skills to elevate the team. For several seasons, Joe had watched Rasheed put his team’s success above his own. He’d given up his starting spot on a roster without complaining. His teammates said he might’ve been *too* unselfish—he routinely dove for loose balls and passed the ball when he could’ve kept it for himself and padded his stats. Joe recognized a virtue in his vice. “To be a contender, you need a guy who’s a live wire,” he told me:

Before I acquired Rasheed, everything was predictable about my team. I needed a fire-starter. I played with one, I traded for one, and won championships with both of them, and I see how valuable those guys are. Dennis would start the fire every night. Rasheed would start the fire every night. They would not only start the fire—it’s when they were at their best. I knew they weren’t ever going to start a fire to burn the team down.

We can find redeeming qualities in many people. The test of whether a relationship is worth continuing is not whether people have vices. It’s whether their worst vices can be contained or harnessed as virtues.

It's up to us to decide where our boundaries lie. What's bearable and unbearable. Where we can bend and how far. When people refuse to respect those boundaries, they start to detract from our lives. They drain our energy, deter our goals, and diminish our ideals.

The connections to maintain are net positive forces in our lives. They enhance our well-being, enable our growth, and enrich our values. I feel no ambivalence about that.

1. Allison knew what she was doing. Experiments have shown that saving anxiety for worry time later reduces both the frequency and duration of daily stress. With time comes perspective to set aside minor concerns and tackle major ones.

2. As an Old Testament proverb states, "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another." I don't want to throw shade on the Bible, but a clarification is in order. Although friction between two swords can lead sparks to fly, technically it's very difficult for iron to sharpen itself. You normally need a harder material—typically a stone like quartz or diamond.

3. Both work teams and sports teams are more effective when leaders and coaches are enthusiastic and supportive early on—and then express disappointment and frustration later. This is the finding of research by my former students and colleagues Jacob Levitt, Constantinos Coutifaris, Paul Green Jr., and Sigal Barsade. When a relationship starts positive, showing negative emotions doesn't signal disrespect; it signals an opportunity to gain respect. As you know from earlier chapters, starting negative occasionally has high returns, but it's a much higher-risk strategy.

6

GOOD VIBRATIONS

Creating Harmony from Disharmony

Before you criticize someone, you should walk a mile in their shoes.

That way, you'll be a mile from them, and you'll have their shoes.

—Jack Handey

In 2001 an iconic rock band was in crisis. They were preparing to record their eighth album while their bassist was on the verge of quitting. In a desperate attempt to keep their vibe alive, they did something few rock stars would consider. They went to group therapy.

The conflict had been brewing for a long time. Early on, in the heat of an argument about which encore song to play, the frontman punched the drummer in the stomach. They clashed about who was in charge and what kind of music to make. Their producer said working with them felt like “going to war,” with the lead guitarist stepping in “to keep the peace.” Now their fate was in the hands of a mild-mannered therapist in his early sixties named Phil Towle.

After working as a marriage counselor and a gang counselor, Phil had transitioned to performance coaching. His specialty was helping sports teams improve their relationships, and he'd recently started working with bands too. When he showed up to meet the four rockers for the first time in room 627 of the San Francisco Ritz-Carlton, he knew he'd have his work cut out for him. The bassist made it clear that he had no patience for psychobabble. He asked Phil to leave and told the others that bringing in a therapist was "f*cking lame and weak." Then he announced that he was done with the band.

From out in the hallway, Phil heard the bandmates yelling and decided to poke his head back in the room. Taking in their icy glares, he suggested that the three remaining members start working through their issues with him. Reluctantly, they agreed. They started holding regular sessions with Phil—multiple hours a day, multiple days a week. They ended up putting him on retainer to be on call 24/7. He told them they needed to rethink their instincts about how to salvage relationships.

Phil didn't encourage the band members to fight less. He challenged them to fight more—and more openly: "The purpose of conflict is to bring people closer."

We tend to romanticize strong vibes as natural, seamless, and easy to maintain. Conflict feels like a threat, so we often go to great lengths to avoid it. But the real threat is the act of avoidance itself. Sustaining connections is not about steering clear of confrontation—it's about summoning the courage to embrace it. The road to maintaining connection is rarely smooth, and sometimes the best way to stabilize a bond is to shake the ground beneath it. Once it resettles, it's possible to build a stronger foundation.

Under Phil's guidance, the band started having more arguments, and they got more heated. In spring 2002, they finally

reached a boiling point. After several days of jabbing and bickering, the drummer's temper flared. He started to unload on the frontman for being self-centered and controlling:

Drummer: I want to say “f*ck” a lot to you. When I was running this morning, and thinking about seeing you today...the word “f*ck” comes up so much.... I just think you're so f*cking self-absorbed.... All these rules and sh*t—man, this is a f*cking rock & roll band, I don't want f*cking rules.... I'm somewhere around the halfway point of my life...and it's just not f*cking worth it.

Then the drummer stood up, got in the frontman's face, and screamed: “F*ck. F*ck. F*CK!!!”

Although the band had expressed plenty of rage through their music, in conversation the drummer was normally more stoic. In twenty years together, it was the most explosive confrontation they'd ever had. Multiple people in the room felt that it was the last straw—the band was doomed.

The following year, they ended up releasing their eighth album. It debuted at number one on the *Billboard* chart, topped the charts in 30 countries, and won a Grammy.

“It's the vibe,” the frontman said.

“We've grown a lot,” the drummer concurred. “Because of Phil, we have the best relationship we've ever had.... he saved the band.”

The guitarist even said, “If Lennon and McCartney had Phil, the Beatles would never have broken up.”

Since then, the band has released three more albums, won two more Grammy awards, landed rock artist and rock album of the year, and made the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame. You probably know them as the most successful heavy metal band of all time: Metallica.

Some perpetual problems can be solved. Friction is not a bug; it's a feature of sustaining relationships. Conflict is necessary and even useful for maintaining ties over time. *Ideally before we start shouting expletives.* To find our greatest harmony, we need moments of disharmony.

You Can Handle the Truth

The summer we started dating, Allison and I got tickets to see the Gin Blossoms perform outdoors. Concerts aren't my thing; I'd been to a grand total of one ever. But I'd heard their music playing in her car, so I figured it would be a fun pal activity. After several hours of sitting on the grass—as far as possible from the speakers, clouds of smoke, and other humans—Allison admitted that she wasn't a big fan of concerts either. We would've both been happier watching a movie at home, but neither of us mentioned it. We didn't want to introduce any awkwardness or cause any problems so early in the relationship. We failed to uncover our real preferences because we were avoiding friction.

Interpersonal friction is the tension that exists when people discover conflicting preferences, interests, goals, or values. Friction takes different forms on different wavelengths. Associates face friction when homeowners don't see eye to eye with a painter or landscaper on a bill. Pals run into friction when they disagree on whether to do karaoke or see a rom-com and whether it's okay to date each other's exes. Allies face friction when they're divided on whether to meet in the morning or at night, and whether to keep working on their startup or shut it down. Companions encounter friction when one person wants to resolve a conflict right away and the other wants to cool off first—or when one person offers solutions when the other is just seeking support. If friction recurs or escalates, we

might reach the point of questioning whether we want to stay associates, pals, allies, or companions at all.

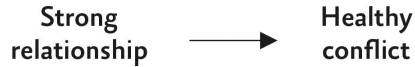
In physics, friction is a force of resistance, but it's also a source of motion. In a car, the friction between your tires and the road enables you to change directions when you turn the steering wheel and accelerate when you step on the gas. On a violin, friction with the bow allows the strings to oscillate and produce a sound. Without friction, a pair of sticks can't generate a chemical reaction to start a fire, and a pair of people don't have neurochemical reactions to each other. Friction is a source of intensity. It can help us get unstuck and move forward together.

Think about someone in your life who does something that bothers you. In a few minutes, you're going to tell them how you'd like them to change. How do you think it will go?

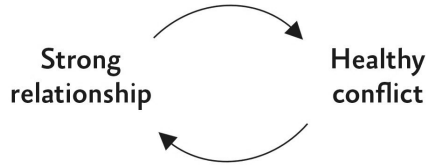
People were sent to do exactly that in a series of experiments, and they weren't optimistic. They feared that the tension would be uncomfortable, the recipients would react negatively, and it would damage their relationships. But when they spoke their minds, the opposite happened. Two weeks after delivering the honest feedback, they felt significantly closer to the recipients. Remarkably, the recipients felt the same way.

In *Think Again*, I wrote about the value of friction for opening minds. I highlighted how building a strong relationship enables people to have healthy conflict. What I didn't realize is that the reverse is also true: Healthy conflict can strengthen relationships.

How We Think Conflict Works



How Conflict Actually Works

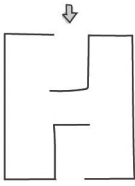


Friction is rarely as destructive as we fear. Across more than a dozen studies, people were too pessimistic about the consequences of being direct with friends, roommates, relatives, coworkers, and partners. They fixated on what could go wrong and overlooked what might go right. They didn't realize how much others would appreciate the chance to improve—and how their vibe could improve as a result. They missed out on repairing relationships because they underestimated their shared capacity to handle friction.

The discussions we dodge are more likely to deepen our bonds than destroy them. If we can't be honest, what we're maintaining is less of a relationship than a charade. Connections stagnate in silence. Candor opens the door to growth.

DEALING WITH CONFLICT

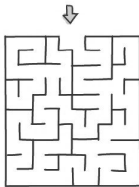
IN PERSON



VIDEO CALL



EMAIL



SAYING IT'S FINE
WHEN IT'S NOT



LIZ FOSSLIE

We Need to Talk

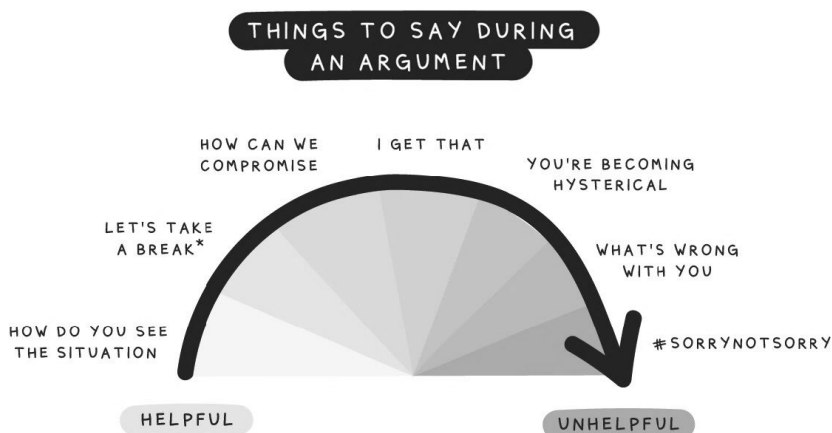
Recognizing the upsides of friction can motivate us to confront it head-on. In one experiment, married couples who were asked to spend just 21 minutes reflecting on the good that could come from their biggest fight were more likely to stay satisfied with their relationship over the next year. In another experiment, students and adults were instructed to either downplay disagreement (“it’s no big deal”) or consider the benefits of disagreement (“it helps our relationship grow”). Although minimizing conflict felt better, it left people less inclined to tackle disputes head-on. When people saw the value of arguing, they gained confidence in their carrying capacity for conflict. They knew they could not only tolerate it but grow closer through it—and became determined to face it.¹ That’s what Phil Towle pressed Metallica to do.

When I reached out to Phil to understand his therapeutic approach, I asked how he knew where to start. I'd already seen him in action thanks to a documentary, *Some Kind of Monster*, which captured Metallica making their eighth album—including some of their coaching sessions with Phil. As I watched him with the band, read about their work, and talked with him, I recognized his core framework, tools, and process. His first step was getting the band to stop fearing confrontation.

For years, Metallica had done everything in their power to avoid conflict. When disagreements arose, they suppressed them in hopes of getting back to the good old days. When the bassist quit, the foundation shook, and they needed Phil's help to keep the band from collapsing. Frontman James Hetfield and drummer Lars Ulrich were supposed to be allies, but their visions collided so often that they weren't even pals anymore—they were barely hanging on by an associate thread. The tension was so severe that James and Lars were refusing to say a critical word about one another's work altogether, fearing that one comment could cause an earthquake. In their eyes, friction was bad—it signaled disharmony and threatened their future.

As Phil coaxed the band to stop tiptoeing around conflict, they started speaking up during jam sessions. One day James admitted he was unhappy with the drumming—the beat was clever but confusing. Lars explained that he thought James's guitar segment sounded unoriginal. They were starting to get more candid, but the tone was passive-aggressive, and it escalated quickly into a shouting match filled with name-calling and cursing. James stood up, stormed out, and slammed the door hard. The next day, he didn't come back. The rest of the band wasn't sure if he would ever return—and if Metallica would survive.

The band was finally having necessary conflict, but it was the destructive kind. Phil wasn't daunted. He knew that getting into the ring is only the first step. The next phase of growth is learning how to have a good fight.



* HELPFUL UNLESS YOU'RE DATING

LIZ FOSSLIE

Saying the Magic Words

In response to honest feedback, people frequently get angry and defensive. It's possible to shift the vibe with 19 words that open people up.

In a pair of powerful experiments, middle schoolers drafted essays, and their teachers wrote suggestions for improvement. The students were much more receptive to criticism if their teachers included a note: *I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them.*

This simple preamble was a game changer. It transformed the meaning of the interaction. The 19 words communicated supportive intentions, signaling that teachers weren't attacking

or judging, but coaching. That motivated students to make more revisions to their essays and submit better final drafts.

It wasn't a mixed message; the teachers didn't express ambivalence about the essays. They separated what they were saying (their critiques) from why they were saying it (their desire to help). Students opened up to criticism because they understood that it came from care—a small communication that can make or break all kinds of conflicts. How a confrontation goes depends less on the message itself than the motives we convey.

I've learned to introduce friction with a similar preface: *I'm sharing this because I care about you and our relationship*. If it doesn't land, it's a signal that I haven't done enough to establish my desire to help the other person and bolster our bond. It's surprisingly easy to hear a hard truth from someone who's trying to make you better—and your vibe better. When commitment is clear, candor shows care.

This is not an endorsement of the compliment sandwich, as Stewie Griffin called it on *Family Guy*. The popular approach is to stick the meat of your critique between two slices of praise, but the available evidence suggests that the sandwich doesn't taste as good as it sounds. We tend to remember what happens first and last in a conversation, glossing over the middle. When you start and end with positives, it's all too easy for the constructive criticism to get buried or discounted (especially if you're talking to a narcissist). Even if that doesn't happen, the positives might not be believed. People know you're trying to butter them up and soften the blow, so they don't take your compliments seriously. A more effective approach is to ditch the second slice of praise and serve an open-faced sandwich that separates the positive and the negative. *I have notes on strengths and areas for growth—which would you prefer to hear first?* Another option is to just deliver the growth message

with supportive language: *You know what would make you even more effective?*



Once we've communicated our concern, healthy conflict rests on being frank and kind. Even if we're ending a relationship, candor is often more welcome than we realize. After early dates, ghosting is common; people just stop responding rather than breaking it off. Research reveals that ghosting rarely reflects a lack of care—it's usually a misguided effort to shield others from pain. In a pair of experiments, after people exchanged texts with a confederate for a few days, they were either ghosted or directly told "I am not interested in talking with you anymore." The two groups felt equally bad at first, but over the next few days, people felt worse if they'd been ghosted than dumped. Being ignored hurts more than being rejected; ending a relationship without explanation is a blow to our self-esteem, belonging, and sense of clarity, closure, and control. Even just writing "I don't think we're a romantic match, but I

enjoyed meeting you” elicits positive responses from many recipients (and leaves senders feeling better too). The truth may sting briefly, but silence leaves an open wound.

The objective is not brutal honesty. As author Bob Burg cautions, “Those who take pride in being ‘brutally honest’ are typically more interested in being brutal than they are in being honest.” The goal is to be as clear as possible in what we say and as caring as possible in how we say it.

In unhealthy relationships, we’re forced to choose between honesty and loyalty. We bite our tongues to preserve fragile ties. In healthy relationships, honesty is an act of loyalty. We speak our minds to improve our vibes.

Making Waves

Constructive conflict is easier on some wavelengths than others. With allies, the need to rely on each other to achieve a shared goal is a strong source of motivation to get in sync. With pals, the arguments are typically shallower, which makes it natural to keep things light and defuse tension. Laughing during and after disagreements is one of the most effective ways to maintain a healthy bond.

With companions, it can be more complicated. Paradoxically, when our bonds are built around care, we sometimes bring our worst selves to arguments. It often unfolds in three steps:

1. Avoid confrontation. I don’t want to make a big deal out of taking out the garbage.
2. Watch resentment build. Does he think the garbage is going to take itself out?!
3. Blow up. “YOU DON’T DO ANYTHING AROUND HERE!”

We care so much that we avoid confronting our companions, and when we finally do it, we take that care for granted. *He loves me, so he'll forgive me.* But if we're not careful, a feud about who takes out the garbage can leave us feeling that we just can't take it anymore.

Across wavelengths, the culprit behind many failed arguments is not what we're arguing about—it's how. Phil Towle told me that in conflict, the biggest mistake people make is demanding that the other person change. "I come in wanting *you* to solve *my* unhappiness," he explained. Instead, we should recognize that we're stuck in a pattern that isn't working anymore and evolve our rituals to become happier together.

It's possible to invent healthier rituals for confrontations themselves. One of my favorite Instagram posts asked people to share their wildest marriage hacks, and the responses were full of creative ways to fight like pals. There's a family that wears party hats during arguments and one that holds weekly "beef sessions." There's a couple that acts like sports fans by playfully booing each other's misbehaviors. One pair presents their squabbles for friends to judge in a Supreme High Court of Petty Grievances. It started on a Saturday morning after the husband offered his wife breakfast in bed, and she was mad that he woke her up. "I lost that case but that's the judicial system for you," he lamented. One day my kids were bickering in the car, and I was tired of pleading with them to stop fighting, so I told them they could keep arguing as long as they were all smiling. It became a game they play from time to time. *Pal mode activated.*

Good friction rituals don't just lighten the mood—they reinforce that we're on a shared wavelength. One couple solidifies companion status by holding hands during arguments. Another goes into associate mode, charging each other small

fees for minor inconveniences (there might be a five-cent fine for leaving hair on the sink and a ten-cent fine for forgetting to close the garage again). Some blend ally and pal mindsets by building block towers or Lego sets together during conflict. There's even a couple who came up with a clever way to lock in as allies before long car trips: "We have a pep talk to remind ourselves we are not enemies—the children are our enemies." And I'll never forget the couple who kept the peace while working from home during the pandemic by blaming their problems on their imaginary coworker Ryan: "Ryan was a real piece of work and left trash everywhere and lights on. He was an HR nightmare."

Heated conflicts benefit from distance. I used to believe in resolving issues right away, but I've learned that's a mistake. *Never go to bed angry* leaves us fighting when we're angry—and tired. There's wisdom in saving some of our disagreements for later or designating a specific time for them. Some couples swear by weekly meetings to work through their issues. And sometimes it's easier to raise what's on our mind after taking a step back and looking at other people's relationships.

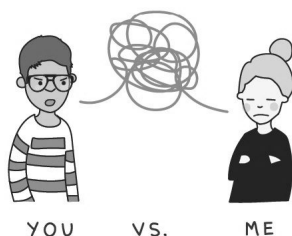
In an experiment, newlyweds were randomly assigned to watch and discuss movies together. It was a light commitment—only one film a week for a month, followed by an hour-long conversation. Yet it had a lasting effect. Three years later, they were about half as likely to get separated or divorced as the control group.

Movie night wasn't just a form of couples therapy. It was as effective as receiving extensive training in empathetic communication or conflict resolution skills. Although more research is needed to replicate that finding and unpack why, my hunch is that movie night made it fun and productive to work on their marriages. Instead of diving right into their thorny issues, they

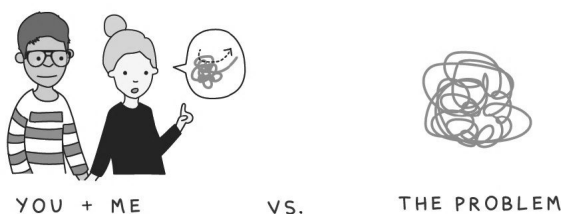
were able to temporarily put their baggage aside and connect on a shared wavelength. Laughing at romantic comedies like *Fools Rush In* and *As Good As It Gets* put them in pal mode; tearjerkers like *Love Story* and *Steel Magnolias* activated companionship. Analyzing dramatized examples of what couples did right and wrong—and what they could learn—made them allies.

It helps to be on the same page during discord. Too often, friction pits us against each other. The right rituals remind us that we're on the same side against Ryan.

UNHEALTHY CONFLICT



HEALTHY CONFLICT



LIZ FOSSLIEN

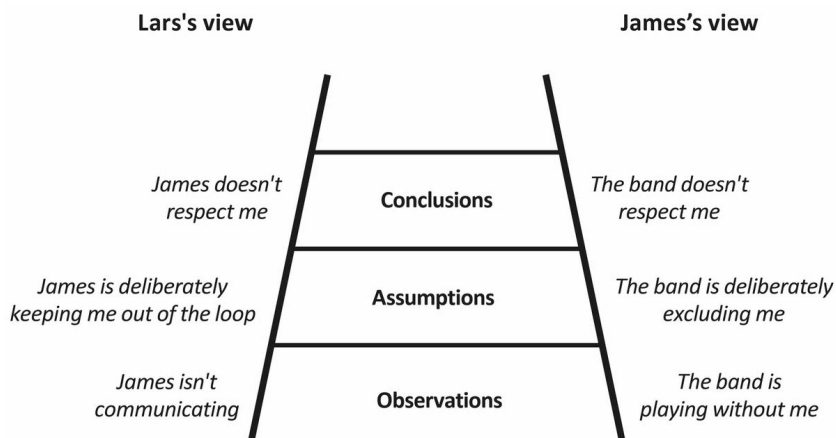
Jumping to Conclusions

When Metallica's frontman James Hetfield stormed out in 2001, he didn't come back. After a long battle with substance abuse, he'd ended up checking himself into rehab. For many

months, he had limited contact with the rest of the band, leaving them largely in the dark about his progress. Drummer Lars Ulrich confided to his bandmates that he felt disrespected—and feared that if he didn’t bite his tongue, James would never return.

After nine months away, James finally rejoined the band. His outpatient recovery plan limited him to working four hours a day. To avoid being excluded, he insisted that the band only record when he was with them from 12 to 4 p.m. One day when he found out that they broke his rule, he slammed the door and walked out again.

In organizational psychology, there’s a model that illuminates why this happens and helps us harness friction productively. It’s called the ladder of inference. The core idea is that conflict is rarely caused directly by other people’s actions. It’s usually the result of how we interpret them. When people do something that bothers us, we climb up a ladder from observations to assumptions to conclusions.



This isn’t unique to heavy metal bands. We do it in all kinds of relationships. Observation: *You didn’t rinse your dish off af-*

ter dinner. Assumption: You were only thinking of yourself. Conclusion: You don't care about me.

The longer frustration festers, the more time we give those false conclusions to build and burn. We talk past each other. We attack each other. We create caricatures that exaggerate one another's worst qualities.

We're remarkably bad at mind reading. We don't know other people's motives or reasoning, and we're too quick to invent our own. Faulty assumptions lead us to jump to unfair conclusions, and the confrontation goes off the rails. *How could you possibly think that? Do you have any idea how stressful my day was?*

Many people recommend avoiding these misunderstandings by making more charitable interpretations: "Assume good intent." But not everyone has earned the benefit of the doubt, and we rarely know other people's intentions. Most of the time, we're just guessing. The point of the ladder is to remind us to stop making assumptions altogether. It's not enough to try to *take* their perspective, because we're likely to guess wrong. A better remedy is to start a dialogue with open questions to *get* their perspective. *I must be missing something—can you tell me how you saw the situation and help me understand what's really going on? I know I can't read your mind, so would you be willing to read it to me?*

Remembering to ask rather than accuse requires humility—and it's the responsibility of the listener, not just the speaker. The ladder only works if both sides are willing to acknowledge their flawed assumptions. If you can't admit you were wrong, you can't make it right.²

I'm often surprised at how useful the ladder of inference is. Last year, one of my allies was taking a long time to reply to emails. I assumed our project had fallen down her list of priori-

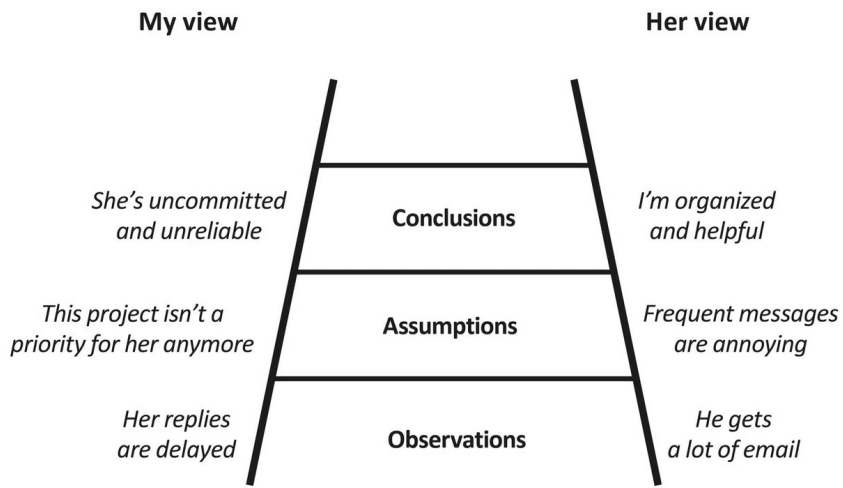
ties, but I didn't say anything, because I'm a chicken. After drafting this chapter, I realized I was failing to practice what I teach—which was stalling our progress and hurting our vibe. I took the leap and called her to raise it:

Me: You're extremely conscientious, so I'm mystified by the fact that you sometimes go radio silent for a week at a time. Can you help me understand the disappearing act?

Her: I don't want to spam you with little daily emails, so I wait until I have everything compiled into a big update. Would you rather hear from me more regularly?

Me: Definitely! I'll be less worried about things falling through the cracks, and I respond faster to short notes than long ones.

That phone call shattered my false assumption—what I took for unreliability was actually an expression of thoughtfulness and thoroughness. It helped us align on a cadence of communication that worked for both of us and made us better allies. Now we have a simple ritual that helps us raise friction directly: *Can we walk down the ladder?*



That ritual doesn't always lead us to identical conclusions, but it does help us see each other's intentions more clearly. The highest compliment from someone who disagrees with you is not *You were right*. It's *I never thought of it that way*. Conflict doesn't have to produce consensus; it only needs to promote understanding. To paraphrase William H. Whyte, the greatest barrier to communication is the illusion that it has occurred.

A Walk to Remember

I first learned about the ladder of inference in my early twenties, when I trained as a conflict mediator. I had no idea that two decades later, I'd end up using my training to mediate a marital conflict in front of a live audience.

During the pandemic, I was in the middle of a virtual book event with author Glennon Doyle when she sought my advice on a recurring conflict with her wife, soccer star Abby Wambach:

Glennon: When Abby orders pizza, we have five people in our family...she might come home with five pizzas. And then I will judge her, and then I will be annoyed, and then she will feel sad...So, this is an issue for us. Too much food, not enough food. Over-ordering, under-ordering. I think we fight about it once a week.

They were gridlocked. Abby had given up hope on solving the dispute. She'd said it was exhausting—they should just agree to disagree.



It was time to get Glennon and Abby to walk down their ladders. Even if it didn't fix the issue, it might help them unpack each other's views. I'd known Abby for a few years, so I asked if she was home. When Glennon shouted for her to come in, Abby had no clue what was about to go down.

Me: Abby, we wanted to put you onstage to resolve a conflict in your marriage. Are you cool with it?

Abby: Yeah, totally. Which conflict?

Me: I heard a rumor that sometimes you might order 17 extra pizzas. What's going on here?

Abby: I grew up in a big family.... Sometimes you'd finished everything on your plate and then all the food was gone. So, in me, I have a total fear of scarcity—like there will not be enough. And to be the person that is in charge of our entire family's intake, I don't want anybody to experience that feeling of scarcity. So those two things smushed together force me to order more than we probably need.

Me: What an inexpensive way to feel secure. Most people pay thousands of dollars for therapy when they're dealing with those kinds of demons, right? And here you can order some extra pizzas. I feel like that's a good deal.

Glennon's observation was that Abby ordered too much pizza. She walked up a step and made assumptions: "Abby doesn't care about conserving food or saving money." As it happened repeatedly, the conflict escalated, and Glennon found herself at the top of the ladder with a conclusion: "Abby is wasteful." From then on, any time Abby over-ordered anything, Glennon fell victim to confirmation bias: "That's so Abby. She always does this."

Once Glennon saw that Abby wanted to shield their family from the fear of food scarcity, she reached a new conclusion: Abby was being caring, not careless. And Abby realized Glennon was trying to be careful, not controlling.

Having understood each other's priorities, most couples would compromise by ordering three pizzas.³ The risk is that they'd both end up unhappy—or the more accommodating person would always give in to the more stubborn one. A work-around would be to discuss how important the issue is to each of them and defer to the one who cares more. But our discussion led Glennon and Abby to a better alternative: They would commit to eating the leftovers.

Agreeing to disagree avoids conflict. Disagreeing more agreeably makes it possible to resolve conflict. Yet developing rituals for friendlier arguments is not always a smooth transition. It's like tuning a radio: To find a better frequency, you have to put up with a little static interference.

Ambiguous Feedback Translator

Feedback:	Translation:
Think outside the box	That was a very bad idea
This is almost there	I don't know what I'm looking for
What in the hell were you thinking?	My nervous system is dysregulated
We need to be smarted about this	You need to be smarter about this
That was an interesting choice	You screwed that up
Great job this quarter	I just remembered I was supposed to give you feedback

Master of Puppets

After slamming the door on Metallica for leaving him out of recording sessions, James came back the next day. A few days later, they were in a session with Phil when James announced that he didn't trust Lars and didn't enjoy making music with him. Lars stood up and walked out. His bandmates went to see where he was and found him walking in circles around a ping-pong table in the next room.

Phil wanted them to recognize that they were taking steps to show that they cared about each other. When James had stomped out the previous week, Lars had followed him to make sure he was okay. Now James had gotten up to check on him. James announced that there was one form of communication that was off-limits for Lars:

James: Not slamming doors. That's mine.

Lars: You got the market cornered on that one.... You and my wife should have a contest.

They all burst out laughing. They'd started to rekindle their pal vibe. Phil challenged them to talk about how to be better allies and companions:

James: I want to feel some trust. [to Lars] I just feel static all the time from you.

Phil: What would it take for you to trust him?

James: I have no idea.... [to Lars] Do you believe in trust? Do you think it's important?

James and Lars were starting to tune the dial on their relationship. By acknowledging the friction between them, James was inviting Lars to share his perspective. Lars recognized that James was on a different ladder and asked him to walk down it:

Lars: Part of my problem with you is that I don't understand...Okay, I have a reality, he has a reality, we all have our different realities. I have never in my life felt as disconnected from you as I do at this moment. So part of getting more connected to you is me understanding your realities.... I'm trying to get closer to you by finding out what these things mean to you.

James: I felt like it was an agreement. We were gonna work from twelve to four, and then we would not work.

At that point, their producer and temporary bassist, Bob Rock, stepped in to show James their ladder. He told James he was making the wrong assumption. They weren't trying to leave him out—they were trying to help move the album forward in his absence.

Bob: We love you, we care about you.... it's not because we want to do something behind your back. It's for you.

Lars [to James]: I know the hardest thing about you leaving at 4 o'clock is that you don't really want to leave...I know you want to stay past four and keep jamming...and that's what makes me hang on, 'cause I know we want the same thing.

James: I'd like to play. What do you think, Lars? I would just like to put out there that whatever it is that you want to tell me, I will open my heart as big as I can.

That invitation was the moment when Lars launched into his f*ck rant, berating James for being selfish and overbearing. James's first impulse was to punch Lars, but he didn't escalate the conflict. Instead, he made a move toward reconciliation:

James: Thanks for sharing that.... there was a lot of good stuff I got out of that—a lot of insight into you.... it showed a vulnerable side.... And that was the way it was meant to be.

James and Lars had come to see that their friction wasn't about diverging goals. It was about the best way to achieve a shared goal. They were ultimately allies—they wanted to make great music together. They didn't say sorry, but they didn't have to. They'd already proven their commitment to repairing the relationship through their words and actions. They'd expressed desires to feel trust and get closer. They'd shown care by seeking to understand each other and checking on each other. As the saying goes, the best apology is changed behavior.

After walking down the ladder and working through their friction in therapy for months on end, Metallica was finally ready to start handling conflicts on their own. When they told Phil they wanted to scale back his sessions, he resisted. In his

efforts to help the band, he'd become so enmeshed with them that he struggled to let go. In the documentary, you can see Phil become something of a common enemy—the band ends up uniting against him. But over the years, many musicians have found it transformative to see Metallica learn to disagree more agreeably. James hopes there's "acceptance in the world for Phil and his role and what he's done for us, 'cause he did take us to the place that we were afraid to go to. He did walk us into the fire, and walked us onto the other side."⁴

It didn't happen overnight, and it didn't happen alone, but learning how to have constructive confrontation ended up saving the band—and strengthening their bond.

Over the next two decades, James and Lars continued to evolve their rituals. They still disagree constantly, but they no longer avoid it. They know that just as great music progresses from dissonance to consonance, relationships evolve through tension and resolution. By embracing friction, they've gained insight into each other's ladders—and each other's triggers too.

Lars: We know much more about who each other is, and we know how far we can push each other...there's much more of a partnership going on than there used to be. Now we're not fighting to win an argument...We will fight for each other.

They've become stronger allies, doubling down on their mission to push the boundaries of heavy metal. They've also connected on new wavelengths, becoming real companions as they've learned to lead with care, and even occasionally apologize on the way to repair:

James: What works for me with Lars is we just sit down and just start talking about our kids...a completely loving

place to start...and then all of a sudden it's like...I'm sorry I did this and...now you can move on.... It's lasted longer than all the marriages in the band...we hate each other, and we love each other, and it morphs, it changes, but at the end of the day we realize, this works. And we're a good team.

The strength of a vibe is not determined by whether we fight. The question is whether fighting drives us apart or brings us closer together. In the moment, constructive confrontations disrupt harmony. Over time, they expand our capacity for harmony. The purpose of friction is not to ruin relationships—it's to reset, rebuild, and reinforce relationships.

1. Many people assume that the more difficult the discussion, the more important it is to talk in person. But my former student Andrew Brodsky published a series of studies showing that it's sometimes better to pick up the phone. Although face-to-face conversation shows the most authenticity, it also runs the risk of leaking unwanted emotions. People might catch your nostrils flaring in anger or your lip curling in contempt—or misinterpret your furrowed brow for defensiveness instead of confusion. Sending an email or text shields against that problem but creates its own challenges. A long message feels like a one-sided onslaught, a short one seems like an afterthought, and it's difficult to convey the right tone. Making time for a call has the advantage of concealing our facial expressions while still signaling that we care.

2. Research reveals that apologies tend to be more effective for failures of competence (I made a mistake) than failures of character (I was uncaring or dishonest). Interestingly, the most important element of an apology is not saying sorry. It's taking responsibility for your failures and taking action to correct them. Although it's nice to show remorse for yesterday's mistakes, what counts more is whether you recognize them today and repair them tomorrow.

3. There's plenty of evidence for gender and culture differences in conflict resolution styles. Women are more inclined toward compromise—so are people from collectivistic cultures. Men are more likely to try to impose their way on others, especially if they're from individualistic cultures. In disagreements, people tend to be nonconfrontational in Japan, Korea, and Sweden; direct and emotionally expressive in Spain, France, Israel, and Russia; and equally direct but more stoic in Germany and the Netherlands. The U.S. leans more toward politeness, which is why a Dutch psychologist once wrote an article called “Americans Are Fake and the Dutch Are Rude!” Of course there are regional differences as well, with the most

cooperative norms in Midwestern and Southern states like North Dakota, Minnesota, North Carolina, and Georgia. You can find more confrontational tendencies in Western states like Nevada and Wyoming as well as Northeastern areas like D.C., Connecticut, and—you guessed it—New York.

4. Conflicts don't have to be mediated by professionals; many workplaces and schools have successfully trained peers as mediators. Across more than 4,000 peer-mediated disputes in schools, the resolution rate was 93 percent—and the satisfaction rate was 88 percent. Mediators are more successful when they're instructed to try to understand people's concerns, rather than just restating them. Although conventional wisdom suggests that conflict mediators should be neutral, there's a time and place to express emotion. In an experiment with people in a dispute, when they hit an impasse, their rates of reaching a resolution increased from 59 to 85 percent if a mediator retorted, "Now that the two of you have sufficiently wasted my time, I'm relieved I don't have to hear more about your problems again." That display of hostility led adversaries to unite against the mediator as a common enemy. Across four more experiments, a disagreeable mediator fueled better agreements—adversaries were more likely to expand the pie instead of just dividing it, and they ended up with more balanced terms too. If the mediator directed anger toward only one party, it didn't help; it was only getting mad at both parties that brought them closer together.



PART 3 · SCALING CONNECTION

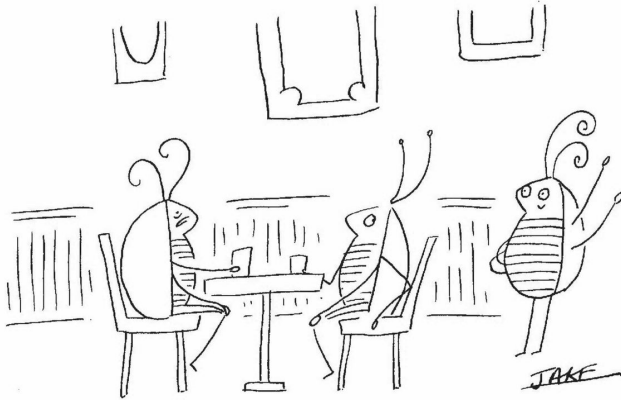
The Roots of Group Solidarity

When our third child was on the way, friends warned us that the biggest hurdle would be zone defense. We soon learned that the real issue wasn't being outnumbered; it was that the number of arguments between our kids tripled. With two kids, there was only one sibling relationship to manage. With a third kid, all three pairs could be fighting at the same time. As my daughter Elena said when she was nine, "I have a brother...a sister...and a pet. That's a *lot*."

We weren't alone. In many settings, going from a duo to a trio can be enough to cause chaos. Compared to dyads, in triads people get less airtime and are more reluctant to share secrets with potential pals and companions. Whereas pairs can't gang up on each other or gossip behind each other's backs, when a third person joins, factions can form and kill the vibe. In a study of Harvard freshmen who were randomly assigned to be roommates, 45 percent of doubles decided to stay together sophomore year, but only 29 percent of triples stuck it out. And yes, there's some evidence that on average, sibling duos are closer than trios. Two's company, but three's a crowd.

Groups don't just frustrate friends and families; they trouble teammates too. Trios of allies and associates are less satisfied, efficient, and cohesive than duos. It's true across all kinds of projects—writing together, making decisions together, changing a tire together, and solving big problems together. In a massive analysis of 65 million patent, software development,

and science publications, triads of innovators were less likely than dyads to generate major breakthroughs. *When Sartre wrote, “Hell is—other people!” he must’ve meant at least two other people.*



*“Sorry, Jeff. Two’s company,
three’s an infestation.”*

The challenge isn’t just going from two to three. The bigger the group, the bigger the problems. Adding a fourth member further reduces satisfaction, motivation, and creativity in teams—and cohesion among roommates. As group size continues to grow, so do coordination and motivation challenges. People struggle to get in sync and feel less personally responsible for the result.

Bonding within a group can be as tough as bonding as a group. We get lost in the crowd, unsure about who to approach or what to say. We fear that if we put ourselves out there, we’ll be judged or rejected. In the words of philosopher Hannah Arendt, “Loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others.”

The trials and tribulations are only half the story of group-ing, though. Group bonds are fundamental to being human—and they’re an essential part of our lives. Sociologists have long

highlighted that even when we have individual companions, we can still feel isolated without community. Over and above our individual ties with friends, relatives, and colleagues, belonging to a group plays a central role in our well-being.

In one experiment, adolescents and adults struggling with mental health were randomly assigned to spend six hours coming up with ways to strengthen their sense of group belonging. A year later they were significantly less lonely and depressed—and their well-being improved at least as much as if they'd undergone cognitive behavioral therapy. That's a remarkable effect given that all they did was make plans to join new groups and get more involved in the existing groups that were important to them.

The more groups we belong to, the better off we are. The more different groups kids and adults identify with, the higher their self-esteem and the better their mental health. Participating in a wide range of social groups—a book club, a sports league, a religious community, a neighborhood association, a school board—predicts gains in happiness and declines in depression over the next few years. At first I thought this was because people who join lots of groups (extraverts) are also the kinds of people who experience rushes of exuberance. But the evidence is clear that even introverts get a happiness boost from participating in groups and going to parties.

What makes groups unique is their ability to offer a sense of belonging and meaning. More than individual relationships, they link us to something larger than ourselves. The founding father of sociology, Émile Durkheim, coined a term for the peak experience of being in a group: collective effervescence. It's the energy and harmony we find in group interaction rituals with a shared purpose. It's the electricity we feel when we cheer for our favorite sports team in a stadium—and when we

slide into synchrony with associates in a chorus, march alongside allies at a rally, pray with companions at a religious service, or flow with pals during a walk, run, or yoga or karate class. It's what millions of fans felt on the Eras Tour, wristbands flashing, as they shook it off together.

Collective effervescence is powerful because it fills us with joy and hope. That's the conclusion of 50 studies spanning more than 180,000 people. When we're in rhythm together, endorphins and oxytocin flood our brains, our heart rates synchronize, and our sense of self melts into a feeling of oneness with the group, as I once learned accidentally.

I'd agreed to speak at Strive, a weeklong endurance event for charity. When the host mentioned that we'd be biking, hiking, and swimming, I figured I'd be fine—I work out six days a week and a guy twice my age was doing it. I didn't realize the event would culminate in a 70 km bike ride up a mountain, and I arrived to discover I was the only one who hadn't trained or brought toe clips. The night before, I could hardly sleep. *What was I thinking? I'm not going to make it.* To my surprise, I ended up riding in harmony with a group of four. As we pedaled for seven hours, hearing them cheering kept me going when I was tempted to quit, and the euphoria of crossing the finish line together solidified our bond. We'd been strangers just a few days earlier, but we quickly became closer pals and allies than many people I'd known for decades. As cohost Noah Devereux told us, "Growth happens when you step outside your comfort zone. Magic happens when you do it with others."

A strong group vibe makes us feel valued. Vibing with multiple groups offers more wavelengths for connection and more avenues for contribution. And the web of connections we build in groups brings stronger support networks than individual ties can. Research shows that when we belong to clubs and reli-

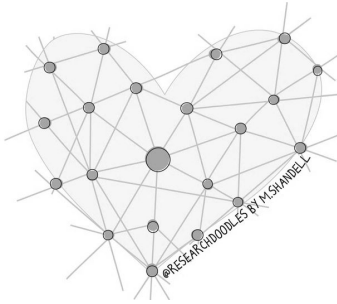
gious communities, we gain more acquaintances and associates who can help us when we need it. And when our people are connected to each other, they can look out for us together. In a cohesive group of friends, it's easier to count on help from allies and support from companions.

Yet solidarity is an endangered species in the U.S. Historically, women and girls tended to bond in pairs, whereas men and boys favored groups. Now they're all increasingly opting for solo activities like gaming alone. Over the past few decades, groups have become increasingly small parts of American life. The trend was first documented in *Bowling Alone*, and it's not just club sports that have vanished. Since 2000, about 40 million Americans have stopped going to church. Over several decades, membership in parent-teacher associations has plummeted. And in my home city of Philly, block parties are in "mad decline"—there were three times as many in 2008 as in 2023. As writer Josh Lora observes, "People are desperately lonely while also saying their favorite hobby is...staying home."

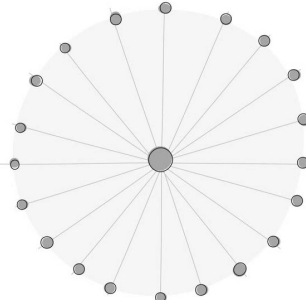
Our social circles used to look like interwoven webs. Now they look more like bicycle wheels with a hub and spokes—many of the people in our lives don't know each other.

OUR SOCIAL NETWORKS

PAST



PRESENT



Most Americans don't have a friend group. It's no surprise that over two thirds of people report missing out on daily collective effervescence and nearly a quarter fail to find it even once a week. The supply of shared joy runs especially short in the U.S. because we tend to see happiness as an individual pursuit, which appears to be a risk factor for loneliness. In East Asian cultures, where people typically view joy as a collective experience, they're more likely to find happiness when they seek it.

Collective effervescence doesn't just enhance our well-being. Groups serve a vital role in the social order: They outlast pair bonds. "Damage to a single relationship is enough to make a dyad dissolve," psychologist Richard Moreland reminds us. "If only one relationship in a group is damaged, then the group can still survive."

When groups are vibrant, individuals and societies thrive. Yet many of the strategies for building solidarity aren't intuitive. You'll see that it's possible to unite communities by dividing them and build great teams of people who don't get along. And that the most serendipitous connections can be carefully planned—and the most durable traditions are the most flexible.

We need our groups back. They bring joie de vivre and strengthen our social institutions. One of my mentors, Richard Hackman, pointed out that groups are like amplifiers: whatever you put in comes out louder. To build better collective vibes, we need to improve the signals in our gatherings, communities, collaborations, and families.

7

PLANNED SERENDIPITY

How to Choreograph a Gathering

I am all in favour of spontaneity, providing it is carefully planned.

—John Gielgud

One summer in middle school, I went to a neighborhood barbecue next door. The chitchat wasn't engaging and there wasn't anyone my age, so I ended up shooting baskets on my driveway. A few minutes later, I heard a voice challenging me to a game of H-O-R-S-E.

It was a new neighbor named Jeff Zaslow, who was also bored by the BBQ small talk. He'd just moved in across the street with his wife and young daughters. I immediately recognized a fellow nerd—he mostly missed the rim but was full of factoids about my favorite athletes. He asked about my hobbies and lit up when I mentioned magic tricks. Years later, I was flabbergasted to find out that hundreds of people owed their most important bond to him. Jeff was responsible for at least 78 marriages.

He wasn't your typical matchmaker; he didn't fix people up on dates. His specialty was hosting gatherings where strangers found love. As a newspaper reporter, Jeff didn't set out to play

Cupid. In his late 20s, *The Wall Street Journal* assigned him to cover the nationwide search for a new advice columnist to replace the beloved Ann Landers. To get a fresh angle on the story, he entered the contest himself. When an interviewer questioned his qualifications, Jeff retorted: “I may be 28, but I have the wisdom of a 29-year-old.” He got the gig.

Readers loved his wit and candor. When a man sought advice on convincing his girlfriend Julie to get breast implants, Jeff fired back:

Julie deserves someone who loves her for who she is, not how she looks in a sweater. If you can’t do that for her, she won’t need implants anyway because she will already have a big boob in her life. You.

Many readers were looking for love, and Jeff wasn’t content to just dole out tips. He wanted to help. He invited his readers to Zazz Bash, a singles party at a restaurant in Chicago, and donated the proceeds to charity. Over 1,300 people poured in—not just from Illinois but also from Iowa, Minnesota, Indiana, Wisconsin, and even Texas. In a room that big, how could anyone expect to vibe?

People were counting on serendipity. Whenever we walk into a group, we cross our fingers for good fortune. We hope we’ll meet a new friend at a party, have a creative collision at the watercooler, and bump into the love of our lives at the bar. But the truth is that behind the scenes, the best gatherings aren’t the product of random chance. They’re carefully choreographed.

At his singles event, Jeff Zaslow didn’t leave people to their own devices to meet. He spent three months orchestrating structures and rituals to spark connection. To create a range of shared experiences, he arranged live music and dancing along

with stand-up comedy, a magician, and a psychic. As an ice-breaker, he handed out charts showing how much Elvis would weigh on different planets (97 pounds on Mercury, 648 on Jupiter). To lower the barrier to approaching strangers, he asked everyone to wear nametags and write a favorite word on them.

Jeff worried the nametags would be corny, but they made it easy for guests to connect around common ground. A woman named Laurene was on her way out the door when a guy saw “dancing” on her nametag and convinced her to stay. She ended up falling for his shy friend. Less than a year later, they were the first Zazz Bash couple to get engaged.

The planning paid off. Most of the attendees didn’t find love, but they had so much fun that they were eager to come again the following year—and bring their friends. A few weeks later, Jeff wrote to his readers asking for criticism of the event and suggestions on “non-nerdy activities” to create a warmer vibe. *One lesson: Never serve garlic bread again.*

Zazz Bash became an annual event sponsored by Jeff’s employer, the *Chicago Sun-Times*. To spark connections, Jeff introduced games like shoe-matching: Guests met by throwing one of their shoes onto the floor, grabbing one from the pile, and holding it up for the owner to claim. To introduce novel ways to bond, he surveyed his readers in advance on their interests and arranged relevant activities. When *Seinfeld* was the theme, people bonded through a cereal-eating competition, lookalike contests, and a Kramer dance. Jeff encouraged everyone to have a good time—and to “help someone else have a good time.” They even did that with their exes. At least two couples who’d broken up reconnected at a later Zazz Bash and ended up getting married.

Over the 12 years that Jeff hosted his Zazz Bash, it blossomed into one of the country's biggest singles parties, drawing over 7,000 people. The bonds went beyond love—people exchanged business cards and made friends too. After two guys, Yomi and Rob, hit it off in the men's room, Yomi ended up hiring Rob as his lawyer and setting him up with a colleague, who became his wife.

Great gatherings are the foundation of collective connection. Yet they rarely work if they're haphazardly thrown together. They're facilitated through deliberate design. A clear vision can coordinate separate individuals into a dazzling ensemble.



Lighting Up the Room

Gatherings are events where people assemble in groups. They include social events like parties, dinners, hangouts, and club get-togethers, as well as work events like meetings, orientations, huddles, conferences, forums, seminars, and retreats.

Even our carpools and kids' soccer games are gatherings. Yet too many events are poorly conceived. They fill us with dread, drag us down, and drive us apart.

Effective meetups bring us closer through choreography. Skilled hosts arrange a sequence of movements that enable connection. That's not about social engineering—it's about creating the conditions in which serendipity is more likely. The interactions aren't scripted, but the stage is set.

The most basic problem with gatherings is that we're unclear about the purpose and the plan. *Why are we even here?* On Saturday you arrive at a party where everyone is too busy watching the game to have conversation. On Sunday you show up for a book club and discover you're the only one who bothered to read the book. On Monday you head-bob through another pointless meeting that could've been an email.

Useless Meeting Water Bottle Timeline



At work, nearly a third of meetings may be unnecessary. For every thousand people in a workplace, that's \$25 million a

year of wasted time. *Not accounted for: ideas lost, energy drained, souls crushed.* At one software company, people saved about an hour a week by auditing their calendars to see which meetings were worthwhile—and saved an average of 11 hours a month when teams deleted all recurring meetings and built their schedules from scratch.¹ As Amber Naslund, a sales director, advises, “Stop calling meetings so you can simply organize your own thoughts with witnesses.” There are only four reasons to meet: to bond, learn, create, and decide. If we’re not gathering to achieve at least one of those goals, we don’t need to gather.





Once we've cut what's simply unnecessary, we can focus on the purpose and the plan. On the speaking circuit, I kept hearing rave reviews of a gathering guru named Priya Parker, who specializes in renovating cliched celebrations and rejuvenating monotonous meetings. She recommends creating a bold vision that appeals to your ideal attendees and stirring up excitement by announcing an event they'd rearrange their schedules to attend.

In one of Priya's workshops, a leader was planning a team meeting on "Listening to Customer Feedback." It sounded boring and passive, so Priya challenged him to signal a punchier vibe. He came back with "Why Do Our Customers Hate Our Product? A Roundtable." Now it was obvious that they were going to be allies solving a problem together—and they could have a little pal fun along the way.

Great gatherings connect us on common wavelengths. They transport us into a different world as a group, so we find ourselves in a bubble together as pals, allies, or companions. The

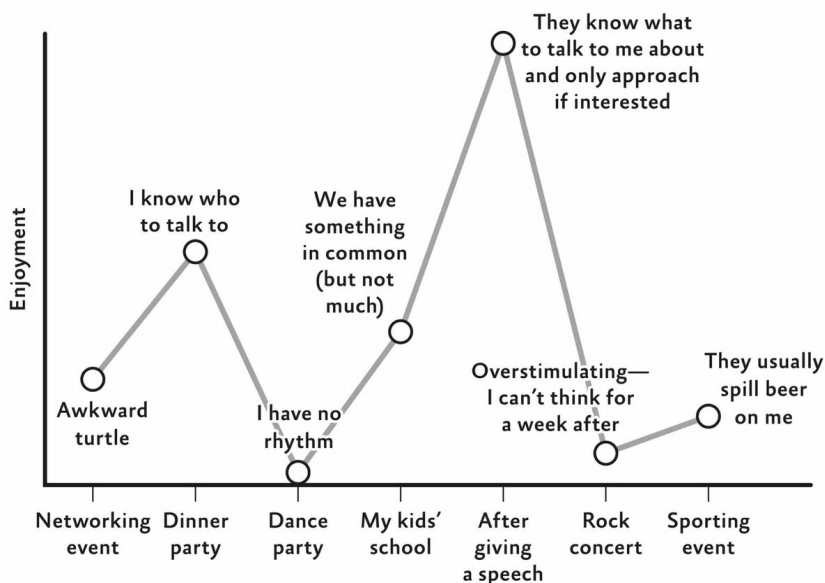
purpose comes to life when rituals are designed to address shared needs, goals, interests, or values.

One of the best examples I've seen is Admin Night. It was conceived by a journalist named Chris Colin, who invites a bunch of friends over to power through their most tedious administrative tasks together. As they pay bills, request refunds, unsubscribe from streaming services, and adjust retirement plans, they entertain each other and exchange advice. A group "getterdone" is more fun than tackling a to-do list alone. Colin reports that "it turns our private drudgery into communal solidarity."

Steve Martin, Martin Short, and Tom Hanks have their own version of transforming individual discomfort into shared fun: Colonoscopy Parties. They schedule their procedures back-to-back on the same day. The night before, they gather at 5 p.m. to inhale liquids, eat Jell-O, watch comedy, and play poker to determine who has to go last.

When people already know each other, designing rituals around a common purpose is enough to bring them closer together. But in gatherings of strangers or acquaintances, it takes structure to build bridges between them.

Where I Like Meeting Strangers



Mixing It Up

At mixers, the purpose is clear: Meet people. Yet they're rarely designed with enough intentionality and structure to motivate people to mingle. Imagine it's Friday night at 7 p.m., and you've just walked into a cocktail party in New York City. Nearly 100 leaders across a range of fields are milling around, munching on hors d'oeuvres and pizza while drinking wine, beer, or soda. Instead of making new connections, over the next hour, you mostly end up hanging out with your old friends.

This scene is not a hypothetical; it's an actual study where researchers electronically tagged cocktail party attendees to track their movements. Beforehand, 95 percent of the guests said they were going to network with new contacts. The room was mostly filled with strangers. Yet attendees were twice as likely to talk with people they already knew—and more than

three times as likely to talk with those they knew well. They had the longest conversations with their closest friends.

People rarely mix at mixers. At social and professional events, instead of braving the anxiety and awkwardness of approaching someone unfamiliar, we cling to the comfort of chatting with our existing crew. It starts before we even arrive: The fear of walking into a room alone leads us to recruit people to join us. Having a buddy by our side may be soothing, but it stops us from branching out. At the New York cocktail party, the more friends people had in the room, the fewer new ties they made.

This is why social events—not just work meetings—need structure. In rooms of strangers and acquaintances, a little choreography can go a long way toward expanding our circles. You can see it in studies of events that are specifically designed to foster connection.

As nearly a thousand people got ready to attend an IT conference, researchers decided not to leave them to fend for themselves. They randomly assigned some of the attendees to receive an email recommending 16 potential contacts in the room to network with—and prompting them to introduce themselves.

That direction made a big difference in turning strangers into associates and allies, but the impact depended on gender. It didn't matter much for men: In a room full of tech bros, they had an easy time striking up conversations with new contacts. For women, who were in the minority, it was transformative. Compared to the control group, women who got the list of people to meet ended up connecting with 57 percent more new people—and spent 90 percent more time talking to new people. Five months later, they had 29 percent more LinkedIn connec-

tions. And over the next year, those links paid off: Women were 60 percent more likely to get a new job.²

In a room of thousands, curating connections for each individual sounds like a lot of work. It wasn't. The attendees didn't know it, but the 16 recommended contacts were picked at random. To broaden their circles, they just needed to go in with a plan to meet a handful of people...any people. It put some scaffolding around the free-for-all, turning interaction into an assignment. Choreography doesn't have to be complicated.

Gentle direction on who to meet is part of good design. It also helps to give guidance on how to communicate and even where to sit. A bit of structure can open the door to something deeper than small talk.



Prompt and Circumstance

Thomas Jefferson wasn't a big fan of small talk. At his famous dinner parties, he typically had eight to fourteen people sitting at a table, and he facilitated group discussion on philosophical,

artistic, and scientific issues. To level the playing field, he ditched rectangular tables and had people sit in a circle, like the Knights of the Round Table.

Jefferson was onto something. In experiments on table shapes, corners activate a desire to stand out while circles shift the focus toward belonging. At a rectangular table, there's a clear hierarchy. The people at the ends are in the power seats, while those in the middle are stuck turning their heads back and forth. As Larry David said on *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, not everyone can middle! At a round table, you don't need to middle. Everyone is an equal participant.

Seating is a form of structure, and it can be designed to expand connection. Many studies show that in classrooms, assigned seats help students widen their spheres. When seating charts are randomized, elementary and middle schoolers are more likely to make new friends. In retirement communities, over 90 percent of senior citizens choose the same seat at meals, confining themselves to a few connections. If tables are rearranged to form T shapes instead of rows, they have more collective conversations. When chairs in the lounge are arranged in groups, seniors interact more between meals—and become happier.

When we chat in pairs, it's natural to riff. Even conversations about boring topics turn out to be more interesting than we expect, because participation is frequent and dynamic. In groups, people who lack status are often shy about speaking up. Research suggests that to motivate them to participate, all it takes is for the person in charge to make eye contact with them. *They literally feel seen.*

Without structure, too many group discussions go off the rails. It's common for one person to hog the mic, talk over others, and go on tangents that lose the rest of the room. The per-

son dominating and interrupting is likely to be a man—especially if a woman is talking. It's been documented in a wide range of group discussions, as well as speeches on the Senate floor and oral arguments at the Supreme Court. Due to gender stereotypes that persist despite their injustice, men who run their mouths are seen as confident experts, whereas women who engage in identical behavior tend to be judged as rude and cold. It's long past time to shatter this double standard, and structure can help. When women are in the minority, requiring unanimous consensus rather than just a majority vote has been shown to balance the conversation. Announcing a round robin where everyone talks also works well. Giving feedback or even displaying a timer can be enough to equalize speaking time and put an end to bloviating.³

To prevent people from hijacking his dinner parties, Thomas Jefferson set strong norms. He kept conversation focused by prompting people to debate major issues of the day, ranging from the French Revolution and Aaron Burr to the legal system and international diplomacy. He banned chitchat and side conversations. He also forbade people from making toasts and taking partisan positions on politics.

Clear norms don't just keep people from veering off topic. They also take unwanted rituals off the table, enabling people to vibe on different wavelengths. Priya Parker once coached an exhausted journalist to shake up a ladies' night by planning the Worn-Out Moms Hootenanny. She only needed one rule: If you talk about your kids, you have to take a shot of tequila. It was a fun consequence that kept the pal energy light.⁴

The right norms and rituals can even bring strangers closer together. Between 2010 and 2026, over 20,000 young adults shared some of their deepest emotions with people they'd just met. The goal of The Dinner Party was to give people in their

a temporary city, making art installations, and partying. The event is designed to move people past associate transactions and toward genuine ally, pal, and companion bonds. Once they've bought a ticket and brought what they need to survive, no money is exchanged. Everything else is gifted, ranging from handmade jewelry to homemade food. Careful tests show that after participating in these gifting rituals, people go on to behave more generously toward others—even six months after the event. The collective effervescence of gifting as well as dancing leaves them with a stronger sense of community and a deeper connection to something larger than themselves.

It isn't only the burst of activities that brings people closer at Burning Man. Throughout the week, people visit a large wooden temple to leave mementos and inscribe messages about loss and trauma. At a ceremony on the final night, they burn the temple as a symbol of catharsis. Bonds are bolstered as people sit together in silence.

When Silence Is Golden

For a long time in groups, I did everything I could to prevent silence. I saw pauses as a sign that I'd lost the room, so I'd rush to fill the void. Then I came across evidence that although strangers and acquaintances find a lull in conversation awkward, friends aren't fazed by it. In fact, in many East Asian cultures, silence is a regular feature of group interaction: People are expected to collect their thoughts before jumping in. I'm more accustomed to the American norm of treating conversations like a game of ping-pong—as soon as the ball comes to you, you hit it back. Yet I've started to appreciate that pauses can actually be catalysts for connection.

When I had to teach over Zoom during the pandemic, I was worried no one would jump in. *The first law of thermodynam-*

ics says that energy cannot be destroyed, but the authors of that law never attended a virtual meeting. That fall, my classes had the most electric discussions of my career. I'd asked them to type their questions, comments, and challenges in the chat window, and set a norm of stopping every few minutes to review. As we all sat reading quietly together, I realized that group silence can add to the vibe in a gathering.

There's extensive evidence that if people have quiet time to write down their reflections, groups have more creative chemistry. After all, our first idea is rarely our best idea. At Amazon, at the start of important decision meetings, everyone sits in silence reading a six-page structured memo. When they kick off the conversation, they're better prepared to disagree thoughtfully and then commit to a common direction.

Silence can help people connect on different wavelengths at social events too. One day the author-artist Suleika Jaouad told me her favorite way to build bonds is hosting journaling clubs. To skip small talk, she kicks off her gatherings by asking participants to reflect and write before they share. She brings people together as pals with a lighthearted prompt, like *Draw a giraffe with your eyes closed*. Hilarity ensues as people show pictures of flying horses with enormous spot-covered teeth. To unite allies, she invites people to write about something they have to offer. *What's your secret talent?* People sometimes join forces around shared passions, from providing a dog-finding service to building a wedding photography business. To make way for companionship, she uses more emotional prompts. *What's on your to-feel list? What's the self you've abandoned that might be worth revisiting?*

I didn't give journaling clubs much more thought until I went to a retreat with two dozen people—mostly strangers and a handful of acquaintances. The invitation mentioned that it

would be intimate, and I assumed it was a reference to the group being much smaller than a typical conference. When the host announced the daily warm-up activity, I froze.

Each morning, we would receive a prompt, spend 15 minutes journaling about a profound personal experience, and then read what we wrote out loud to the whole room. You'd think a psychologist would love this stuff, but I am not that kind of psychologist.

The first morning, the prompt was *Share a time when you followed your intuition*. The idea of talking about my feelings with a bunch of strangers made me queasy, so I played it safe and went with a story I'd told plenty of times. *Whew...one down, two to go*. But other people got real, and I was...moved. One participant talked about how he trusted his instinct to abandon his budding career as a trial lawyer after he vomited before his opening statement. *He took "follow your gut" literally*.

The second morning, the prompt was *Write about a time when you bounced back from adversity*. Suddenly the words started pouring out of me. I was surprised to find my eyes welling up as I shared how my wife Allison had overcome childhood medical trauma and rewrote her story as a novel, *I Am the Cage*, and was now writing a poetic memoir about her experience with breast cancer, *Lump*. In a matter of minutes, I had new companions and allies—one attendee had undergone a similar procedure, and another had already downloaded the novel.

The last morning brought the most revealing prompt. *Draw a picture of your childhood home, circle a room, and share a memory from it*. The stories were remarkable, and I found myself wishing we had more time for them all. One participant chose her father's library. He'd passed away years earlier, and

she still goes there to immerse herself in the scent of his books. An acquaintance of mine circled her attic. A couple had been subletting it, and one day they were gone. Her parents never explained why, and it was only years later that she learned they died of AIDS. Later that day on a hike, she told me that the experience led her to decide that in her future relationships, she would never leave anything important unspoken—even if it meant hurting feelings in the moment. She reached out after the retreat to say that although we'd known each other casually for nearly a decade, she regretted not going deeper sooner. "I like the beginning of our friendship," she texted.

If we were in pairs, I could have imagined going quickly to deep talk. In a group, though, we needed quiet reflection to prepare something vulnerable that we felt comfortable sharing out loud. Silence was a key feature of the carefully choreographed ritual. The titrated increase in the intensity of the prompts eased the transition from strangers and associates to potential companions. A year and a half later the whole crew was still sharing pebbles in a group text and meeting up for reunion dinners.

INTROVERT BINGO

I let that phone call go to voicemail.	I read 3+ books last month.	My house is my favorite place.	I actively avoided someone today.
I'm the King of good excuses.	I've had a crush on a fictional character.	I took a nap today.	I often think about thinking.
My best friend is literally an animal.	I'm better at writing than talking.	I'm adorably awkward.	I'm a good listener.
I'm much cooler on the internet.	I fangirl over artists + authors.	People make me tired.	I do most of my shopping online.

@introvertdoodles

Taking the Plunge

I've learned to gauge the lasting vibe of a gathering by looking for two emotions afterward. One is whether attendees feel FOMO—the fear of missing out on the next one.⁵ The other is whether people who declined the invitation feel what I call ROMO—the regret of missing out on the last one.

As an introvert, I didn't expect to like gatherings, let alone feel FOMO or ROMO. Yet I've come to love retreats...as long as they're curated. I spend a few days making connections and then escape back into my cave. Going to the same gathering annually becomes a reunion—a ritual to reconnect with dormant ties.

For too long, past hauntings of shyness and social exclusion stopped me from planning my own retreat. *What if no one wants to come? What if everyone hates it?* Recently, I decided it was time to face my fear and try to apply the knowledge I've

gained. I invited about a hundred people from different walks of life to spend a weekend together. Some I knew well; others I was excited to get to know better. We discussed how to build better lives and a better world—topics ranged from raising resilient kids to maintaining our humanity in the age of AI.

When I collected feedback immediately afterward, the overwhelming theme was *too little choreography*. The purpose and plan weren't clear enough at the outset; people were nervous about approaching strangers. Coordinating group discussions was challenging—many participants chimed in with tangential points rather than advancing the collective conversation. One attendee said it felt like watching toddlers in parallel play.

The following year, I designed a new event. To clarify the purpose and encourage attendees to interact as curious allies and playful pals, I described the event as “nerd camp” for adults. To minimize social anxiety, instead of hiding the guest list, I sent out a bio book in advance. To go beyond professional resumes and promote pal connections, I asked people to list their dream dinner guests as well as their favorite book, movie, or show.

When I noticed that two participants did improv comedy as a hobby, I invited them to lead a workshop on the spot. *It would've been ironic if they weren't willing to improvise*. We all laughed as we pretended the first few people we met were our long-lost twins—and gave minimally offensive insults to the next few. *I once disliked someone with your first name*. It was the ultimate speed dating for new pals—and collaborating to make our partners look good with “yes, and” kicked off an ally vibe. *Yes, my shoelaces are ugly...and so are the bottoms of your shoes!*

The hurdles to connection were high. When strangers interact, the more people they have in common, the more easily

they vibe. It's the transitive property of friendship. If we like the same people (or dislike the same people) we can trust each other. But I'd deliberately recruited people from varied backgrounds. To build more bridges, I set some norms:

1. Avoid talking to people you already know—and people from your field.
2. Be a circle opener. If you see someone hovering outside a group, invite them in.
3. No devices in group sessions or meals. If you need to use a phone, step outside.

When I saw old friends chatting, I chided them with a smile. *You already know each other! Separate immediately!* To model circle opening, I introduced people with specific reasons to connect on different wavelengths. For pals, I flagged similar interests. *You love crossword puzzles—how are you not hanging out already?* For potential allies, I highlighted shared goals. *You're fellow crusaders for critical thinking—you should compare notes.*

After catching a few people violating the phone rule, I added a creative punishment. Moving forward, anyone caught scrolling or texting during a session or meal would have to play Russian roulette with Bertie Bott's jelly beans. If you haven't tried them, they're truly disgusting—regular jelly beans are mixed in with foul flavors from *Harry Potter*, including barf, rotten eggs, boogers, and earwax.

To foster new connections, I assigned people to different seats for each dinner. To choreograph novel conversations, I wrote questions for each round table. *Which fictional character would you elect president? Is the greatest sitcom ever Seinfeld, Friends, or The Office? Adam did the dinner groupings—why do you think he put you together?*

At dessert time, I prompted people to play musical chairs. The next two nights, we progressed toward richer and deeper topics, encouraging people to move toward becoming companions as well as pals and allies. *What's considered acceptable today that will be seen as morally wrong in the future? Who has it tougher right now: boys in school or women at work? If you were redesigning this gathering, what's the biggest change that you'd make?*

In the months that followed, a steady stream of emails, calls, and texts poured in from attendees sharing that they'd formed stronger bonds that weekend than anywhere they'd been since college. One wrote that it "wins the world record for me making meaningful connections over a short period to people who could become lifelong friends." Another noted, "I feel lucky to have made connections that so oddly already feel like lifelong friendships." Those reflections inspired me to write this chapter—and reminded me of the magic of singles finding love at the Zazz Bash.



Looking back, everything I've learned about successful gatherings comes back to Jeff Zaslow. He showed me that you don't have to be a social butterfly to run a great event—you just have to be a thoughtful host, in both senses of the word. He considered every detail in advance, and he was unflinchingly considerate toward countless strangers who opened their hearts to him.

Jeff went out of his way to connect people even when he wasn't the host. At my wedding, multiple people commented that they loved meeting the witty journalist who opened circles for them. At a birthday party a few years later, Jeff told me that if I ever wanted to write a book about my research on generosi-

ty, I should give him a call. In 2011, I took him up on it. He offered sage advice, welcomed me with open arms into the publishing community, and offered consistent encouragement. “Here’s to hoping you’re the next Malcolm Gladwell,” he wrote one day, teasing me. “The little schnitzel across the street is going to be famous!”

In 2012, I was finishing the book when tragedy struck. Jeff died in a car accident. He was heading home from a gathering in northern Michigan. He’d driven four hours all the way upstate, through the snow, to greet readers and sign his latest book.

As I grieved by reading every eulogy I could find, I kept coming back to the joy Jeff took in bringing people together. “Of all the things he did, I think he loved that most of all—it made his day to hear from couples who met at Zazz Bash when they’d had kids,” his wife, Sherry, tells me. “It didn’t happen spontaneously. It took a lot of planning. It was a social event with a purpose, and the purpose was clearly stated: to meet each other and hopefully find love. He would be beaming at all the Zazz Bash babies.” His family estimates that his events brought more than 170 children into the world.

I’ve worked to pay it forward by hosting more gatherings, but I’ve realized that it’s even more important to share his principles and help people broaden and deepen their bonds. Jeff’s philosophy of gatherings was simple but profound. To paraphrase Thomas Jefferson, he understood that when you light another’s candle, it doesn’t darken yours—it can brighten yours too.

“I miss the light Jeff added to the world,” a mutual friend wrote me one day. “But I can see the glow from countless candles he lit.” That’s the purpose of gathering: to light as many candles as we can.

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1. Timing matters. We multitask less in afternoon meetings. We're less distracted after we've made progress in the morning on creative and analytical tasks, and the energy of a group rescues us from post-lunch food coma. But the simplest way to set up more efficient meetings might be to just stand up. In one experiment, standing meetings were 25 percent shorter than sitting meetings—with no cost to the quality of decisions. *There's no better cure for rambling than sore feet.* Outside meetings, creative collisions can be choreographed too. When Bank of America let colleagues in a call center take their coffee breaks at the same time, their group bonds got tighter and they got faster at handling calls, saving an estimated \$15 million in three months.
 2. Interestingly, if the email mentioned that the 16 people had also been given their name, it was less effective. Instead of taking initiative to introduce themselves, people waited for others to walk up to them. Extensive research shows that women are less likely to network than men. Unfairly, whereas men who build strategic connections are seen as savvy, women are more likely to be stigmatized for the same behavior. They're at risk of being stereotyped as calculating, selfish social climbers—or even misjudged as flirtatious.
 3. That doesn't necessarily mean we should never talk over each other. Linguists find that in high-politeness cultures like Japan and Finland, interruptions are considered rude—people wait for others to finish before talking. Yet in high-involvement cultures from Latin America to Italy to Greece to Pakistan, it's common for people to view interruptions as a sign of engagement. The key is to make sure it isn't the same (kinds of) people doing the interrupting—or being silenced.
 4. For minor offenses, both observers and perpetrators prefer creative punishments. That's what studies led by my former student Tim Kundro demonstrate. People love the judge who's sentenced defendants to a 30-mile walk for failing to pay for a 30-mile cab ride—and to shoveling manure for knocking over a porta-potty.
 5. Some people prefer JOMO, the joy of missing out. I'm all for rejoicing at all the bad events I was lucky to skip. But psychologists find that FOMO serves an important function: It protects our social bonds. By activating anxiety about losing our attachment to a group, FOMO can motivate us to show up at gatherings.

8

UNITY THROUGH DIVISION

Crafting Communities Within Communities

A house divided against itself cannot stand.

—Abraham Lincoln

Hormones raged, social anxiety soared, and friendships fell apart. It sounds like a typical week in middle school. But for about 900 seventh and eighth graders on the coast of Southern California, there were much bigger problems.

In 2003, the student community at Goleta Valley Junior High was splintering. Bullying was on the rise. Test scores were sinking. Fistfights were breaking out and students were getting suspended. They'd always had cliques, but there'd been a spike in prejudice between Hispanic and White students. It was so hard to fit in at school that students were turning to local gangs for belonging.

The new principal, Paul Turnbull, had his hands full. He was in his early thirties, and it was his first time running a school. Raised in Canada by a single mother who worked tirelessly to get out of public housing, Paul had to change schools every year of elementary and middle school as they moved. He felt like an outcast every time, and he went on to become a teacher because he wanted to help students belong. Now as

principal, he knew he needed to act quickly to unify the Goleta Valley community.

When we confront rifts in communities, our natural instinct is to build bridges. Neighborhoods create associations to strengthen solidarity. Religious institutions host meals and service days to cultivate cohesion. Workplaces design team-building activities and cross-functional collaborations to connect disparate departments.

Paul Turnbull decided to do the opposite with the students at Goleta Valley. Instead of pushing 900 students together, his first move was to pull them apart. At an assembly, he announced his separation strategy: He was turning the school into Hogwarts.

He split Goleta Valley into four houses, with about 230 students each. Just like in *Harry Potter*, every teacher and staff member belonged to a house too. The excitement was palpable as the students christened each house with a name. After collecting suggestions, they voted in favor of the Red Sea Monkeys, Blue Pirates, White Buccaneers, and Golden Vikings.

Paul recruited an energetic young social studies teacher, Dan Green, to lead the initiative. Dan and his colleagues did everything they could think of to instill house belonging. Students got to pick their house logo, which was emblazoned on everything. They donned house T-shirts, carried house ID cards, and took a house photo. They plastered house posters around campus and waved house flags at events.

The four houses were competing for the entire school year to win the Mariner Cup. Students could score points through individual excellence and citizenship as well as weekly competitions and service activities. Every Tuesday at lunch, each house united to try to win trivia, dodgeball, musical chairs, tug-of-war, apple-bobbing, balloon-popping, and dance contests.

Each season, the houses teamed up to collect donations for clothing and book drives. Many teachers used the house affiliations to motivate class participation and collaboration, giving students the chance to crush grammar bingo, history Jeopardy, and science scavenger hunts for their houses. Students started spotting daily opportunities to elevate their houses—asking a thoughtful question in class, picking up trash in the cafeteria, staying quiet in the library.

Two years later, Goleta Valley had a different vibe. Rates of bullying and fighting had dropped. Suspensions were down by nearly 50 percent. And with better interactions came better results. Average test scores climbed by 35 points—a fourfold increase over the prior year. Students and teachers reported that the house system had strengthened their bonds. Teachers watched the community change before their eyes. “Students enthusiastically represent their houses and participate in activities that they might otherwise ignore,” Dan Green noted. “In the process, they build connections and friendships with people outside their normal peer groups.” Instead of one fragmented community, Goleta Valley became four tight-knit subcommunities.

The best way to unite people is not always to combine them into one group. It’s often to divide them into distinct groups with shared goals. The lifeblood of belonging is finding our niche.



Wouldn't It Be Niche

A community is a group of people with a common place or purpose. Throughout our lives, we become part of many different communities. At home, we affiliate with religious, recreational, neighborhood, and volunteer groups. In education, we enter school and alumni communities. At work, we join organizations and professional associations. But the fact that we belong to a community doesn't guarantee that we'll feel belonging.

In life, we have competing motives to fit in and stand out. We want to affiliate with others, but we also want to differentiate ourselves. We resolve that tension by joining groups that offer a niche—a simultaneous feeling of inclusion and individuality. That niche is called optimal distinctiveness.

We derive a sense of identity from belonging to unique groups. They integrate us with people who are similar to us, while separating us from the norm in our town, school, or workplace. *These are my people, and we're not like other people.* Different kinds of distinctive groups enable us to vibe on different wavelengths. You can see it when college students rush sororities or fraternities—they're seeking a community of companions and pals that builds sisterhood or brotherhood

around idiosyncratic traditions and values. It's also visible when animal lovers become PETA or Humane Society volunteers and athletes train for Ironman or CrossFit competitions together—they're pushing themselves with allies who share uncommon goals. And it's apparent when motorcycle fans join the Harley Owners Group and Trekkies go to Comic-Con—they're expressing themselves with pals who stand apart on the road and among nerds.

It's well-established that we typically identify with qualities and interests that are rare rather than common. We prefer to be part of groups that represent 20 percent rather than 45 percent of a community. That allows us to fit into the group and stand out within the community. Many experiments have shown that people quickly develop affinities for groups that are distinguished by trivial attributes—like having similar reactions to abstract paintings or being the kind of person who overestimates things. Even when people know the group categories are arbitrary, their first instinct is to flock to one. As comedian Mitch Hedberg quipped:

I like my sandwiches with three pieces of bread.

So do I!

Well let's form a club then!

The quest for optimal distinctiveness illuminates why people are attracted to exclusive groups, like Mensa (the high-IQ society) and YPO (Young Presidents' Organization). They're not just looking to network with like-minded peers—they're hoping to belong to a group that shares something rare and confers status. Optimal distinctiveness also sheds light on why it's so common for groups to carve out a niche within the mainstream. Think of hardcore gamers contrasting themselves with casual players, or vegans distinguishing themselves from vege-

tarians. The more people fit into a community, the more they want to stand out as part of a subcommunity.

Optimal distinctiveness helped me understand why people tend to identify more strongly with their city than their neighborhood. Cities stand for something—Cambridge is intellectual, Denver is outdoorsy, Paris is romantic, Rio is exuberant, Philly is gritty. Some villages within big cities have their own personalities too; in New York, the East Village is artsy while the Upper East Side is sophisticated. There aren't many local neighborhoods that offer such clear, singular identities.¹ But good design can solve that.

If I were judging a neighborhood optimal distinctiveness contest, my winner would be a community outside Atlanta. Serenbe is divided into four villages, known as hamlets. To help over 1,000 residents fit in and stand out, each hamlet has its own distinct identity. People gravitate toward the hamlet that represents their individuality. Selborne is the arts and culture hub, with restaurants, shops, art galleries, and an outdoor theater. Grange and Spela are the agricultural and play centers, built around an organic farm and a Victorian park. Mado is the health and wellness mecca, with a gym, spa, inn, and Montessori school. To bring people together in their subcommunity, the hamlets have their own festivals. Mado hosts a street fair with live music, games, and a scavenger hunt.

If you take a stroll through Serenbe, you'll notice that something is conspicuously missing from the streets. There are no mailboxes in front of the homes. Each hamlet has its own postal pavilion—a central gathering space where people pick up their mail. The pavilions have benches, a community bulletin board, and an events calendar. There's a running joke that it can take an hour or two to get your mail, because you run

into neighbors at the mail house and on the walk there and back.

Imagine if every community subdivided into distinct villages that offered a sense of belonging. In schools, that's the promise of the Hogwarts model.

No Place Like House

The house system has a rich history; it dates back centuries in England, where students were divided into houses for sports competitions—and to enhance learning and leadership opportunities. I loved belonging to a house in college, but it never crossed my mind that the system would work in primary or secondary school—and that it could have benefits for adults as well as students. Paul Turnbull understood that intuitively when he became the principal at Goleta Valley Junior High.

I stumbled across Paul's work while reading research about house systems in schools. On a Sunday morning, I reached him on a video call in Hawaii, where he's led an independent K–12 school for over a decade. A few minutes into our conversation, I saw his eyes well up with tears.

It broke Paul's heart to watch students become so disaffected at school that they were joining gangs. He'd seen the house system in some Canadian schools as a kid, and his own kids were reading *Harry Potter*. When the seventh graders voted on their house names, the first question back from his leadership team was "What's a Sea Monkey?" They wondered if they should encourage the kids to replace it with something real. "Only junior high kids would pick it," Paul told me. "But that's the point. We wanted students to feel *I'm part of something special. I'm part of something bigger. And I'm an architect of it.*"

Dividing into subcommunities gave students a niche. As they wore their swag, waved their flag, and made their posters, students became part of a house that was optimally distinct from the other three. Before, seventh and eighth graders had been strangers or distant associates. Now, they had the chance to vibe as pals, allies, and companions as they cheered together, competed together, and hung out at house events together.

My instinct would've been to create more than four houses. That way, students could be divided into smaller groups. The reality, though, is that in schools, smaller cohorts don't bring tighter bonds. In fact, they can make it harder for students to find affinity and acceptance. You can see it in research on classroom bullying.

It seems logical that bigger classes would have more bullying. More kids means more potential targets, more potential bullies, and more people for bullies to hide behind. But in studies of more than 25,000 elementary and middle schoolers, bullying didn't diminish when there were fewer students in a room. Surprisingly, bullying was *more* common in smaller classes.²

Yes, bullies really do wreak more havoc when there are fewer students. These findings have been replicated in Finland, China, Austria, and the Netherlands. Specifically, classes of 15 to 20 students usually have more bullying than those of 25 to 30. Experts are still trying to figure out why, but preliminary evidence points to two possible factors. In small classes, bullies are more popular—it's easier for them to wield power over the whole room. And victims are less popular—it's harder for them to find allies to defend them, pals to hang out with them, and companions to support them.

This research helps to explain why bullying plunged after Goleta Valley introduced the house system. With hundreds of

kids in each house, potential targets had immediate allies and strength in numbers. Bullies didn't just have less power—as they made more friends, they had fewer reasons to bully too. Clinical psychologist Jennifer Greif Green, a leading expert on bullying, told me that the most effective interventions don't just aim to curb bullying directly—they focus on building community. “The best way to prevent bullying,” she said, “is to connect students to adults who care about them and students who become their friends and protect them as bystanders.” That's what the Goleta Valley house system did, and Jen would know—after studying it she ended up marrying Dan Green, the social studies teacher who led the effort and wrote the seminal article that put the Sea Monkeys on my radar. Dan told me that as students became happier and more connected to their house communities, they stopped lashing out.

The impact of the houses stretched beyond the school. When I asked Paul about it, a forgotten memory came flooding back. Before the house system was in place, students were often assaulted by gangs after school at the mall down the street. In hopes of giving them a place to escape, Paul and some parents convinced store owners to put the house logos in their windows. If the stores had displayed the Goleta Valley school logo, it might've meant nothing to the students. Seeing their house logo was enough to draw them in and keep them safe. They recognized a symbol that represented them.

As schools experiment with house systems, researchers have parachuted in to study them, and the early evidence is encouraging. It might seem like splitting schools into subgroups risks fragmenting students into warring factions, but with good design, the outcome is the opposite. When two Australian schools divided into houses, belonging to a house gave students a stronger sense of belonging to their school. As several

public high schools in New York City divided students, teachers, and staff into houses, students reported a stronger sense of community and unique identity when their house was a bigger part of their school experience. After a Catholic school in Phoenix divided into four houses, surveys showed significant increases in perceptions of community. The house system fashioned bridges and bonds across the school. Students reported more connections with peers who weren't in their classes and with past and future teachers. They gained a sense that school-wide activities strengthened community—and that they belonged to the school, not just their classroom.

Teachers got a belonging bump too. Three months after organizing into houses, teachers felt less isolated and more connected to the community. They got to know students they hadn't taught and stayed in better touch with former students who would've otherwise become dormant ties. Their interactions with colleagues had largely been limited to faculty meetings and lunch chats. In a house they felt like allies collaborating as a team, and they felt more valued by their peers. The vibe reminds me of color war at summer camp.

Carving Out a Place

Optimal distinctiveness is not only about belonging to a special community. It's also about having a special place within that community. People feel both included and individuated when they have a unique role to play.

A classic demonstration took place in Texas. When Austin's schools began desegregation in the early 1970s, Hispanic students who spoke English as a second language were treated like outsiders by their White classmates. Instead of trying to unite the students all at once, psychologist Elliot Aronson divided them. He split them into groups of five to six with a com-

mon goal and unique roles. To prepare for an upcoming test, each student was responsible for teaching one part of a lesson to the others. It was like working on a jigsaw puzzle: They needed a piece of information from every member to put it together.

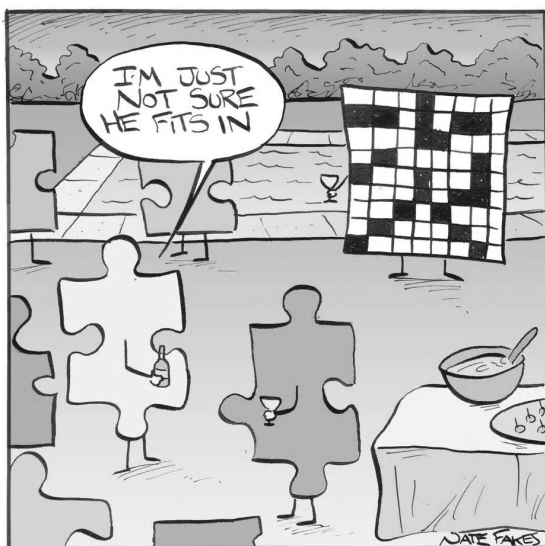
The jigsaw classroom succeeded in reducing prejudice and building bonds. Having unique roles in a group bolsters belonging; it's been replicated multiple times.³ In an experiment across 15 middle schools, cooperative learning activities strengthened connections—and reduced bullying for marginalized students. As students rely on one another as allies, they gain an appreciation of one another's strengths.

Being needed builds belonging faster than merely being included. That's not limited to schools; it holds in workplaces too. The best example I've seen is at the world's biggest tomato processing plant, Morning Star. If you eat spaghetti, pizza, or ketchup, you've probably had their tomatoes. And they've run successfully for several decades without a single boss. To find out how they build a productive community without traditional hierarchy, I went to their San Jose headquarters to study them. They do plenty of idiosyncratic things that wouldn't fit most organizations. Yet they have a strategy for building optimal distinctiveness that I think every organization should try.

When you join their tomato paste plant, you're hired to do the work of the person you're replacing. At the end of your first year, you're invited to rewrite your job description. For example, a salesperson who loves doing digital art wanted to add graphic design to her role, and a mechanic who cared about developing people aimed to spend part of his time training new hires. To make those dreams a reality, you have to clear two hurdles. One: explain how it will better advance the mission than what you did last year. Two: convince the five to ten peo-

ple who work closely with you that it's a good idea. That means you don't just stand out; you fit in too. The unique job you've crafted is connected to the mission, and it plays a distinct role in your team. They've agreed that you're bringing some special sauce.⁴

It sometimes takes a while to find a niche, but we don't have to wait a year to open the door. With the right rituals, we can build belonging from the very beginning.



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The Early Bird Gets to Belong

Arriving in a new neighborhood, school, or workplace can be nerve-racking. About 85 percent of incoming college students report that they worry about being accepted by other students. And in one poll, over half of respondents found starting a new job more frightening than holding a snake or going skydiving.

It's normal to feel anxious about fitting in. To reduce that uncertainty, many communities have welcome rituals. Schools

plan orientations to help new students start finding their place and their people. Sororities and fraternities hold initiation ceremonies for pledges to take oaths of loyalty and learn secret traditions. Companies run onboarding programs to socialize new hires into the culture. Yet even when they're well-meaning, these rituals kill the vibe if they're done in the wrong way at the wrong time.

When you take a new job, the honeymoon often ends the moment you show up at orientation. You get a stack of paperwork from Toby in HR. A compliance manager reads the employee handbook out loud to make sure you know how not to get fired. A leader who's had one too many sips of company Kool-Aid gives a stump speech. *Congratulations! You just joined the world's most boring cult.*

We can shift the vibe with welcome rituals that help people fit in and stand out. But which is a better onboarding strategy: emphasizing what's unique about the existing community, or focusing on what's unique about the individuals joining?

In a pair of experiments led by my colleague Dan Cable, the clear winner was the latter. Highlighting what made the team or the organization special failed to create space for newcomers to express themselves. But when they got to share their personal career highlight reels with their new colleagues, six months later they had higher performance ratings—and were about half as likely to quit. Since their teams recognized their strengths right off the bat, they were able to add value and feel valued. Sharing their unique skills allowed them to fit in by standing out.

HOW MOST ONBOARDING WORKS SELLING WHAT MAKES THE PLACE UNIQUE



@RESEARCHDOODLES BY M. SHANDELL

WHAT WORKS BETTER LEARNING WHAT MAKES THE PERSON UNIQUE



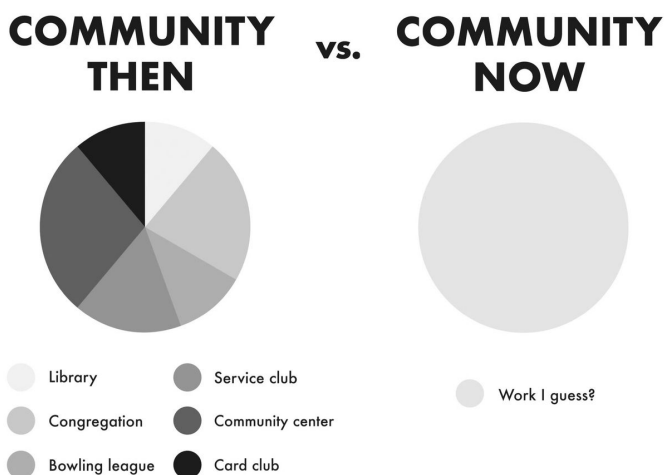
There's no reason why we can't start carving out that niche on day one—or even earlier. Most companies run exit interviews to find out why people decided to leave. *If only we had a time machine, we could go back to the past and use that information to convince you to stay.* For years, I've advised them to reverse that process and run entry interviews. Along with sharing their highlight reels, new hires describe their best and worst boss and their goals for growth and impact. They often report back that the conversation helps them find a niche that they wouldn't want to leave. And we don't have to wait until people arrive—my former student Constantinos Coutifaris found that it's possible to jump-start belonging during the waiting period before people join a new community. Managers “preboarded” newcomers by describing the culture and inviting

them to share their highlight reels two weeks before their start dates. Afterward, newcomers understood the culture better, performed better in their first couple months on the job, and were more likely to stay with the company over the next year. Early onboarding was particularly powerful for newcomers who were uncertain about belonging. It signaled that they had a place and a purpose.

Early rituals don't always help people find their niche right away. That's a message newcomers benefit from hearing. In education, more than a dozen experiments have shown that it's possible to boost belonging throughout college simply by having freshmen spend an hour reading letters from older students about how they felt like outsiders before they found their home. It normalizes social struggles as common and temporary, motivating students to reach out rather than withdraw. After Black freshmen read notes from older peers about belonging struggles, they achieved better grades and higher well-being throughout college—and a decade later, they had greater career success, satisfaction, and community involvement and leadership. Knowing that they weren't alone in feeling alone inspired them to be more proactive in seeking out mentors, joining student groups, and making friends. Reading about their peers overcoming belonging hurdles has also helped first-generation college students find friends and mentors and women in engineering make friends and integrate into male-dominated communities. But the messages only have a real impact if schools create opportunities to connect.

The more physical spaces and social groups available to students in dorms, clubs, and classrooms, the more likely they are to find a community. It's true at home too: The more parks, playgrounds, cafés, bookstores, and bars nearby, the more people interact with their neighbors and feel that their neighbor-

hood is close-knit. When there are these kinds of third places to gather, it's easier to vibe with new people and find our niche.



The Missing Peace

Strong rituals help people fit in and stand out in a group. Yet human history is full of evidence that when different groups interact, they frequently exclude and look down on one another. When that happens, instead of a community, we end up with cliques or tribes. As one of my kids blurted out during a Michigan football game, “Ohio State players are ugly.”

In communities, people feel solidarity with insiders but no animosity toward outsiders. In cliques and tribes, people are antagonistic toward outsiders. Psychologists find that opposition to outgroups is so visceral that even infants show it. Before they’ve learned to talk, nine-month-olds don’t just prefer puppets that help their ingroup—they pick puppets that hurt outgroups too. In that case, they’re favoring puppets that share their preference for graham crackers over green beans. Sadly, they often fail to outgrow that tendency as they mature...as every sports fan knows.

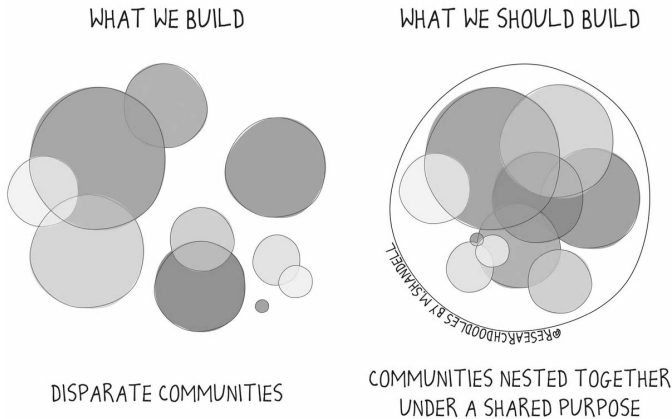
Take the Olympics. The mission is not just to elevate excellence—it's to promote solidarity between people and peace between countries through a shared love of sports. Yet research reveals that during the Olympics, people actually become more hostile toward other countries. It happened in Beijing in 2008 and again in Rio in 2016. According to this Olympic paradox, elite competition activates national pride and international contempt. But in Paris in 2024, it became clear that those studies were missing something important.

It was my first time at the Olympics. At the basketball semifinals against Serbia, the moment an American player stepped on the court, the arena erupted in unison: “BOOOOOOOOO!” I thought it was general contempt for Team USA. It turned out it was just French fans—they had a specific beef against Joel Embiid, a dual citizen who had betrayed them by playing for us. Although they jeered at him, they celebrated America's success. When LeBron James passed the ball to Steph Curry, who swished a three-pointer, they roared with delight. In the third quarter down 17 points to Serbia, as we made a miraculous comeback to win, the stadium pulsed with collective effervescence. Even the French fans shouted with joy for Embiid—and even the Serbian fans sitting near us applauded the awesome feat of American athleticism.

I realized that the research on international Olympic hostility has focused on people watching at home on TV, isolated from other countries. Attending the festivities in person was dramatically different. People still wore their country gear and waved their country flags and belted out their country anthems. They were passionately patriotic—they were proud of their countries. They weren't nationalistic—they weren't looking down on other countries. Ingroup solidarity doesn't require outgroup prejudice.

When you attend the Olympics live, there are rituals to help foreigners vibe. Many countries set up public houses, inviting fans from around the world to eat, socialize, and enjoy music together. At events in Paris, announcers encouraged the crowd to cheer for every athlete, and it created esprit de corps across borders. At the pool, after an American and Mexican diver each failed a dive, the whole audience rooted for them to bounce back in the next round. On the track, when a pair of high jumpers faced the crowd and clapped above their heads, 80,000 fans from around the world joined in to pump them up. I understood why the crowds in Paris weren't hostile toward outgroups like spectators on the couch might be. Our allegiance to our countries was nested within a broader sense of ourselves as part of a global community of sports fans. We were more invested in celebrating greatness than victory.

BELONGING



Simply the Nest

Attachments to a part and the whole don't have to be mutually exclusive. Strengthening our connection to a group can enhance our connection to the community, rather than diluting

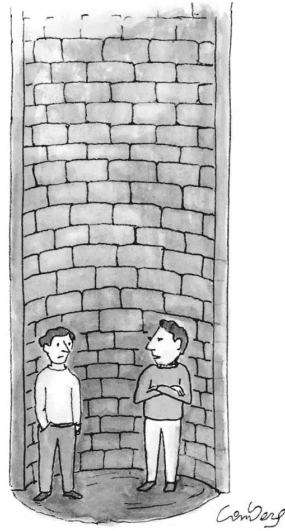
it. Belonging to a subcommunity personalizes the larger community. It makes an abstract, amorphous collection of people feel more intimate and vibrant. Studies demonstrate that when students feel accepted in their classrooms, they have a stronger sense of belonging in their school, and when volunteers engage with local chapters and clubs, they identify more strongly with global nonprofits.

Common interests can unite subcommunities into a larger nest. If you haven't used Reddit, it's an online discussion forum where users create topic communities. Some of the biggest communities are for humor, advice, and world news, but there's also Confession (spill your secrets to strangers) and AmITheA**hole (get honest feedback about whether you're being a jerk in a conflict). Within each community, engaged users often create subcommunities to explore more specialized topics, like when the Swiftie community spun off TrueSwifties and SwiftlyNeutral channels. It turns out that after participating in these subcommunities, people usually become more active—not less—in the broader community. Whether you're engaging with obsessed fans or jaded critics, you're strengthening your tie to a community of potential pals who love to talk Taylor. You fit into your subcommunity, and you stand out in the larger community.

Common goals and unique roles don't just connect individuals within a group; they link groups together too. When different groups share the same objectives, they're more likely to vibe as allies—they need each other. That nests them in a larger community. Hundreds of studies have demonstrated that when employees identify with their workgroups, they don't become alienated from their workplaces. Affinity for their groups and departments intensifies their attachment to their organizations.

I saw it up close when I studied U.S. Air Force officers. Belonging in their squadrons didn't detract from fidelity to their branch or their country—they saw their squadrons as a microcosm of the Air Force. It gave them a niche where they belonged, and they worked hard to distinguish themselves from other squadrons. Different squadrons took pride in their distinctive reputations; some stood out for speed or accuracy, others for grit or selflessness. And once they stepped into my classroom for a joint session with Army leaders, I could see that each branch had a united ethos. When I asked how they were different, an Air Force general called out, "We're the smart branch!" The whole room laughed as an Army general clapped back: "How smart will you be after we beat you up?" When the conversation turned to a threat from Iran, they were in lockstep about their respective roles in the mission of protecting America.⁵ It was clear that their subcommunities made up one community.

Thriving communities are made of strong nests. They come together when subcommunities feel special, not superior. The goal is to highlight how they're different—not how they're better. That's what *Harry Potter* got wrong.



"Before we band together to figure a way out of here, I want to take a second to blame you."

CartoonStock.com

Hats Off

At Hogwarts, the Sorting Hat assigns students to houses based on their talents and penchants. The bravest students go to Gryffindor, the smartest to Ravenclaw, the most loyal to Hufflepuff, and the most ambitious to Slytherin. Although that creates strong nests, it doesn't weave them together. Grouping students based on similarity maximizes unity within houses... but also antipathy between them. They become tribes.⁶

To create unity, it helps to make sure nests are cross-sections of the community. That way, people belong to a group that's prototypical of the collective. That's how Paul Turnbull succeeded where Hogwarts failed. Before becoming a school principal, he taught English, and one of his favorite concepts in the poetry unit was metonymy: "The part represents the whole."

At Goleta Valley, the goal of the house system was to build a community of subcommunities from the beginning. Instead of waiting until students turned up on campus, the Goleta Valley team got a head start with onboarding them into their new houses. Over the summer, all the rising seventh graders got a house welcome letter in the mail. When they showed up for school, they wore their house shirts with pride. “It made a difference right away—they had ownership,” Paul explains. “It’s so fundamental to belonging. To stand out, while also acknowledging that I couldn’t stand out if it wasn’t for this student over here—it’s the golden ticket.”

To nest the houses within a broader school community, Paul and Dan rejected the Sorting Hat model. Instead of grouping similar students into houses, they optimized for variety to minimize cliques. Along with balancing the houses on demographics, they made sure jocks, theater kids, and student government reps were spread out. Students were thrust into houses with peers outside their usual circles. Everywhere they went, they had a piece to contribute to their house jigsaw puzzle. “I used to hate lunch until the house activities started,” one student said. “Now I can participate in fun events, get points for my house, and make new friends instead of being bored.”

To signal unity, all four houses had an ocean theme. To amp up the sense of community, the eighth graders got to join forces across houses to compete against the staff in a kickball match and a talent show. The house representatives took leadership seminars together and coordinated the lunch competitions together. The houses collaborated to arrange the school dance, an international festival, and community service. Students saw that they represented their house, and their house represented their school. They belonged to one larger puzzle.



After dreaming up and implementing the house system in 2003, Paul Turnbull and Dan Green both left Goleta Valley by 2006. Over the next two decades, without their passion and commitment, the system faded away. But as other schools have drawn inspiration from their model, the legacy continues.

In 2024 Dan became the principal of a middle school in the Boston area, and in his second year he decided to bring things full circle by launching a house system. The staff and students had no idea he'd done it two decades earlier—he wanted them to build their own vision first.

The week after I connected with Paul, his wife ran into Rico Ochoa, a graduate of the original cohort of Sea Monkeys. Rico still vividly remembers the exhilaration of winning the Mariner Cup and celebrating with root beer floats: “It was a big deal! It was such a good feeling to be involved in the school.”

Belonging is not only about fitting in—it's also about standing out. That happens when we find our place in a distinct group, which has a distinct purpose in a community. The heart of unity is knowing that our collective puzzle would be incomplete without each piece.

1. Sociologists find that neighborhood associations can help to build bonds and bridges among renters and tenants. Interestingly, they don't seem to have that benefit among homeowners, who tend to engage with the goal of protecting property values rather than creating community. A better option might be America's National Night Out in August—or an annual Australian ritual called Neighbor Day. To build community, people organize barbecues, picnics, parties, games, and movie nights on their streets, and it has a causal impact: For every 100 lonely people who attend a neighborhood event for a couple hours in March, there will be at least 8 or 9 fewer lonely people in October and November. Joining the festivities leaves them with new connections, a stronger affinity with their neighborhood, and a deeper sense of community cohesion. There's evidence that loneliness declines when we know even six of our neighbors, when we walk around our neighborhood, and when we're randomly assigned to do just one act of kindness for our neighbors per week.

2. To rigorously measure bullying, psychologists survey peers. Those are the studies I've focused on. Self-reports tend to be less reliable, as both bullies and victims can be reluctant to recognize or admit what they've dished out or received. But victim reports do point to more bullying in smaller classes in British and Finnish elementary schools, Irish and Austrian middle schools, and Indonesian high schools—and at least as much in smaller classes at various levels across Italy, Sweden, Germany, Portugal, China, Finland, and England (though the reverse was true in Israel). Overall, the pattern is clear that smaller classes pose a bigger risk of bullying—especially if they have a lot of boys. Beyond schools, smaller isn't always better for communities either. Analyzing data from over 20,000 people in Canada, psychologists concluded, "There is little evidence for a relationship of loneliness to community size." It's true that on average, people are less generous in big cities, but it's a myth that they're kinder in small towns. Across 52 tests, people were actually more likely to help others in cities of 60,000 to 300,000 than in smaller or bigger communities.

3. When the jigsaw model fails, it's usually because students lack the knowledge, skills, or motivation to teach one another—or the assignments accentuate ability differences rather than bridging between them. In the original experiment, students had the chance to practice their teaching with peers in other groups who were assigned the same puzzle piece.

4. With my colleagues Justin Berg and Amy Wrzesniewski, I've published multiple experiments showing that after people make a plan to craft their jobs, they become happier six weeks later—and the gains can last at least six months, with no cost to individual performance. It's sometimes been a struggle to get organizations to adopt this idea; leaders worry that if everyone starts doing their own thing, the puzzle pieces won't fit together. I didn't know how to solve that problem until I was knee-deep in tomatoes.

5. It's true that a common enemy can build bridges between distinct groups, but it also reinforces the habit of defining ourselves by what we're not. We're more motivated to act when we stand together for ideals we cherish than against ideas we reject. And if subcommunities are competing, it's best to keep the stakes low, which promotes motivation while preventing hostility.

6. Instead of letting people self-select into groups, there are advantages of randomly assigning them. When roommates are randomly matched, students are more likely to have cross-race roommates—and end up with a more diverse group of friends. And when they're randomly sorted into project groups, they're just as cohesive—and wind up sharing more knowledge outside their groups. Although they might prefer to pick their teammates, they often do better work when they're grouped randomly.

9

ALL FOR ONE

Getting Squads in Sync

To be trusted is a greater compliment than to be loved.

—George MacDonald

As my host passes me the microphone, I can see my hands shaking. I don't usually get nervous before speeches anymore, but I'm about to confront an unusually tough crowd. The general manager of the U.S. Women's National Soccer Team has called me in to training camp to improve their culture. Some of the world's most accomplished athletes are staring me down, wondering why a psychologist is standing in front of them and whether I'm going to make them sit on a couch.

It's spring 2020, and the squad has been crushing it—they're coming off their second straight World Cup championship. Things aren't as great as they seem, though. They've replaced their polarizing coach, and as they gear up for the Olympics, the players are competing for limited roster spots and time on the field. My charge is to help unify them, so I start talking about the importance of building a group of givers rather than takers. When I ask how they can make the shift, not a single hand goes up.

After the speech, I interview the players one by one. I realize their challenge isn't the selfishness of *me* over *we*. It's the bitterness of *us* vs. *them*.

Throughout the conversations, one issue keeps coming up. A few veterans feel that the newbies aren't paying their dues or showing enough respect. Meanwhile, the junior athletes feel like second-class citizens. "There is definitely a divide," one confides. "Newer players feel it." After finishing my interviews, I send the players a report and ask for their anonymous reactions. One comment in particular jumps out:

I was surprised by how honest it was about the division between the older and younger players. I think, as a team, it is a subject we tend to skate around and not address. So, to see it in writing made me nervous because I don't think we've ever had it out in the open like that. With that being said, I think it is obviously a necessary step if we want to better the situation and get the best out of the team.

One veteran says it's a ticking time bomb. Some of the others are skeptical that the rift is real, though. When I sit down with Megan Rapinoe, the decorated co-captain, she isn't buying it. "That's bullsh*t," she tells me plainly. "Of course younger players have a voice!" She thinks the problem lies with them: They need to toughen up and take more initiative. "If you want the space, step into the space," she urges. Other veterans tell me straight up that culture is a waste of time. The squad should be focusing on their skills on the field, not their interactions off the field. Some people might want to describe a team as friends or family, one notes, but "that is not the reality of having 25 adults who all work together."

I actually agreed with them on that last point. I wasn't going to ask them to sing kumbaya or do trust falls, and I didn't

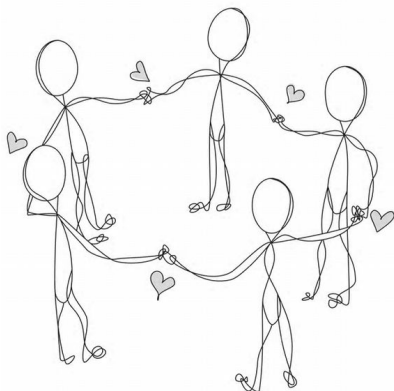
care whether they felt warm and fuzzy. I just had to show them how a vibe wasn't what they expected—and why it mattered. What I shared next convinced some of the doubters that I might be able to help them.

Many people assume that to succeed together, we need to like each other. But a massive study of studies—195 of them in total—shows that being fond of our collaborators isn't a major factor in collective performance. When researchers analyzed the success of more than 12,000 sports and work teams, social cohesion was less important than commitment to the purpose and pride in the team. And across a series of team-building experiments, focusing on relationships between members was less effective than clarifying group objectives.

Team cohesion doesn't require affection between individuals. A collective vibe emerges when people have an affinity toward the goal and the group. They don't have to bond *as* a squad—they just need to bond *to* the squad.

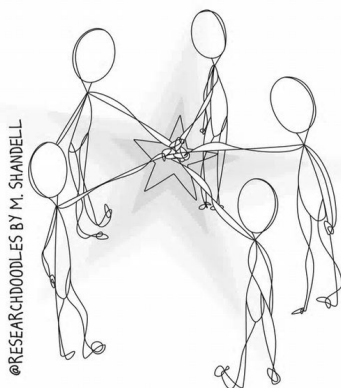
BUILDING SUCCESSFUL COLLABORATIONS

WHAT WE OFTEN PRIORITIZE
SOCIAL COHESION



BONDING WITH YOUR TEAM

WHAT MATTERS MORE
TASK COHESION



BONDING OVER A SHARED DREAM

Avengers, Assemble

A squad is a group of people assembled for their ability to achieve a mission. Think of a SWAT team, a flight crew, a surgical unit, or DC's Justice League of superheroes. Each member was handpicked for specialized skills. Their vibe is usually an afterthought. It's up to them—or their leaders—to figure out how to get in sync.

Many organizations try to help squads bond by tearing down office walls, hosting social events, and planning retreats. Yet the evidence is clear that these efforts tend to fall flat. In experiments at two Fortune 500 companies, after they introduced open workspaces, face-to-face collaboration fell by 70 percent. The cacophony was so overwhelming that people opted to email colleagues who were sitting right near them. It's time to close the door on open offices.¹ Company parties don't always deliver the intended benefits either: Instead of connect-

ing across differences, people mostly get closer to those who are similar to them. And many team-building activities smack of forced fun, which doesn't turn people into pals, and mandatory vulnerability, which alienates them instead of fostering companionship.

Even when we succeed in building personal bonds, they can be a double-edged sword for squads. On the one hand, friends tend to have high levels of trust and commitment, so they help each other more, work harder for each other, and get more done. On the other hand, friends don't do higher-quality work together on average, because they sometimes put their relationships above their task. I've seen it happen many times with friends who launch startups together. They tiptoe around conflict to protect the friendship until the business flops...and the resulting shock waves end up destroying the friendship.

A team doesn't have to be a bunch of friends. A company is not a family.² A squad doesn't need to be companions or pals; they need to be allies. To vibe, they don't have to be in agreement—they only need to be in alignment. Agreement is holding similar opinions; alignment is upholding shared goals or ideals. Some of the most interesting evidence on this comes from musical theater.

Long before they made it to Broadway, musicals like *Hamilton*, *Rent*, and *Dear Evan Hansen* got their starts in nonprofit theaters. When squads come together to run a theater, they have to decide on their priorities. They can focus on an artistic vision around promoting creative expression and pushing boundaries, a prosocial vision of involving and educating the community, an entertainment vision of creating shows that audiences love, or a vision of excellence in producing plays that win awards. Which vision do you think is best suited to securing survival?

To find out, researchers surveyed leaders of over 100 non-profit theaters on their attachment to each vision, and tracked their ticket revenue and income over time. I expected the entertainment and excellence visions to win out—the surest path to sustainability should be to delight customers and critics with great performances. But there wasn't one purpose that proved more successful than another.

The content of the mission was a red herring. It didn't really matter which identity they chose. What differentiated thriving from struggling theaters was whether their leaders aligned on their identity. If the people in charge didn't see eye to eye on the *raison d'être*, theaters tended to flounder. They needed to get on the same page about their purpose and build a culture around it.

Culture is a codebook for how a squad pursues its purpose. Building a strong culture begins with aligning around core values. To be frank, most corporate values are bullsh*t. They're empty slogans and cliches plastered on a wall. Values make a difference when they meet three conditions: express the principles we hold dear, translate into specific behaviors, and come with accountability for living them. That's where I started with the U.S. women's soccer team.

From Storming to Norming

After training camp, I sent a survey to all the players inviting them to articulate their shared values in their own words. I made a word cloud of the principles they submitted, sized by frequency of mention:



I analyzed whether the values differed between veterans and newcomers. They didn't. The two groups largely wanted the same things...but too many things. My colleague Drew Carton has found that a compelling purpose only unifies people if it's paired with a small number of values. When groups have more than four guiding principles, collaboration suffers—and so does performance. The longer the list of values, the less likely people are to remember them, see them the same way, and prioritize them.

For the U.S. women's team, the proposed principles were also too bland. It felt like they were playing buzzword bingo. In my field, we look for values to be distinctive, central, and enduring. They aren't drafted using a thesaurus; they're crafted around narratives. For years, I've taught my students to understand teams and workplaces by asking people to tell stories about their cultures. *What's something that happens here but wouldn't anywhere else? When did you feel most proud of your team? What does it take to get fired?*

When I invited the soccer team to share those anecdotes, their principles suddenly came to life. I heard about highlight moments when athletes bled for their squad and lowlight moments when they embarrassed their teammates in public. I challenged the players to identify the four themes that were most vital to achieving their mission and anchor their principles on those stories. Since values are supposed to help us make hard choices between competing priorities, I also asked

them to rank their principles. A small group volunteered to identify their top four principles and bring a ranked list back to the team. They rose to the occasion:

1. Leave it better: Build a legacy for the future.
2. Bloodbath mentality: Leave nothing on the field.
3. Do your sh*t: Take ownership over your actions and be accountable for your inactions.
4. Don't be an a**hole: Be a respectful teammate.³

Under each value, we identified specific behaviors. What does it mean to live each principle? What does it look like to undermine that principle?

Leave it better featured major responsibilities like mentoring young players as well as minor gestures like cleaning up your popcorn kernels in the snack room. *Bloodbath mentality* was about giving your all—not just in competitions but in practice too. *Do your sh*t* involved taking care of your body, studying film and stats, and testing your pee. *Yes, this is the first time I've seen "pee-testing" on a list of valued behaviors.* It also included making an effort to solve problems, not just complain or sulk.

Their highest value was *don't be an a**hole*. I told the players I didn't expect them to be besties or even buddies, but real allies treat each other with dignity as human beings. Some of the younger players felt they hadn't earned respect—they should stay silent about team dynamics until they'd gained more experience. Several veterans objected; one insisted, "There are no junior players on this team!" They were starting to align around the principle that although some voices might carry more weight than others, everyone had the right to speak up. How else could they get better?

Then I kicked off the dialogue about what it looked like to violate the value of respect. I'd heard that despite several years on the squad together, a veteran had apparently never said a word to one of the younger players. Most of the players hadn't noticed, and they were appalled to hear it. It wasn't just demotivating; it was dehumanizing. The team concluded it was unacceptable. I encouraged them to broaden their focus beyond one athlete and establish a standard for the whole squad. *"Acknowledge each other's existence" is a low bar for an interaction ritual.* They aligned on senior players welcoming junior players rather than ignoring them and taking the time to show appreciation to staff as well as teammates.

Regardless of how teammates feel about each other, how they treat each other matters. Disrespect is corrosive to collaboration. That's the conclusion of over 400 studies, and some of the most striking demonstrations are in sports teams and medical squads. After NBA players had abusive coaches, they were less effective teammates. Even six years later on a new team, they added less value on the court and got charged with more technical fouls.⁴ And after hospital units were briefly insulted by an expert, they were about 15 percent less accurate in their diagnoses and procedures.

Respect is a non-negotiable value for being good allies. But there's a time and a place for a squad to become pals and companions too.

Feeling the Love

In the early days of Airbnb, the founders called it a family. They abandoned that language when they realized it was breeding unconditional loyalty, making it hard to hold people accountable for achieving excellence and living their values. As CEO, Brian Chesky started describing the company as a mis-

sion-driven organization, like a high-performing sports team. I assumed that meant they'd focus on becoming allies, not pals or companions. Then the pandemic happened.

In spring 2020 when travel came to a halt, Airbnb lost most of its business. In early May, Brian wrote a letter to the company announcing that they were laying off 1,900 employees (about a quarter of the staff). I've railed against downsizings for years—the evidence is clear that they're usually a mistake—but this one was inevitable, and Airbnb took the most compassionate approach I've ever seen.⁵

Airbnb launched an alumni talent directory, inviting those who lost their jobs to display their profiles, resumes, and samples of their work. They kept many of their recruiters on staff and turned them into an alumni placement team—instead of looking for people to fill roles at Airbnb, they were charged with helping former colleagues find new roles at other companies. They also offered four months of free career services, a full year of health insurance, and generous severance and equity in the company.

Still, there was one word in Brian's letter that didn't sit right with me. It was *love*. "We will have to part with teammates that we love and value," he wrote. "I have a deep feeling of love for all of you." How could he love them all? He didn't even know them all personally! And why did he want love in a company that wasn't a family?

When I met Brian, I pushed back on it. He acknowledged that their top core value—*champion the mission*—revolved around being good allies. Then he told me their second value was *be a host*. People are expected to care about their colleagues, treating them like guests in their home. That's companionship. Airbnb's two other company values signal pal bonds. They're *embrace the adventure* and *be a cereal en-*

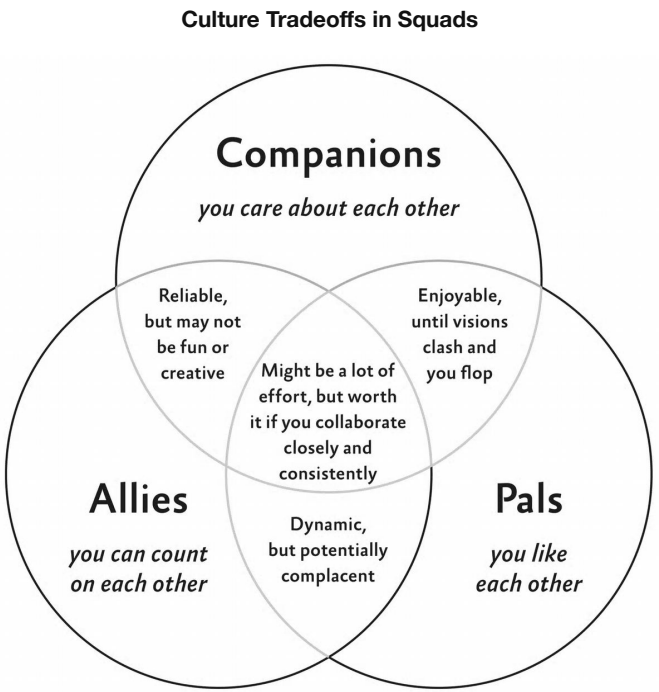
trepreneur, which is about being as bold and creative as the founders were when they saved their fledging company from bankruptcy by selling politically themed cereal (Cap'n McCain's and Obama O's). They have plenty of pal fun.

There's a case for fostering that kind of team spirit—in the right measure and on the right wavelength. Personal bonds aren't necessary to build strong squads, but in certain cases they can be beneficial. How much emphasis to put on them depends on the nature of the squad and their mission.

Early in my career, I studied what motivates firefighters. It was clear that the mission of saving lives made them strong allies. As I visited fire stations and rode along with crews, I noticed that they had different vibes—some joked around a lot while others bear-hugged. I didn't think much about it until my colleague Nancy Rothbard coauthored a study comparing pal and companion cultures among firefighters. In pal squads, rituals revolved around joy and amusement. They joked around to handle grief, defused tension by telling stories about unusual calls and ribbing each other with playful nicknames like Shrek and Horsehead, and pulled pranks to socialize rookies. *Highlights: swapping their baby powder out for flour and convincing them that the only way to wash off rare bacteria was to shower with salt.* Companion squads organized more rituals around fondness and empathy. When their colleagues were dealing with trauma, they responded with compassion and sometimes called in counselors. They showed care with little pebbles, remembering each other's birthdays and stocking the kitchen with each other's favorite treats. They even helped one another resolve marital conflicts and raised money for one of their least liked colleagues to save his house.

The data revealed that the two types of squads excelled on contrasting metrics. Pal squads were quicker: They responded

more rapidly to calls. Companion squads were safer: They got into fewer accidents. Joy is good for creativity and velocity—it fuels flexible thought and fast action. Care is better for vigilance and reliability—concern makes people cautious.⁶



The longer a squad is together, the more worthwhile it is for allies to become pals or companions too. There’s extensive evidence that in temporary teams, personal connections aren’t a major priority for performance. When people are rotating in and out of squads or working in shifts—like sports teams and restaurant staff—it’s fine to focus on being allies. Personal bonds become more important in stable squads, where people expect to have more meaningful connections. Since the fire-fighters worked in crews with consistent members, being pals or companions made them stronger allies.

Airbnb is in a similar position: They build intact teams. Pal bonds make them more innovative and companion connections make them more dependable. They take their four core values so seriously that they've built an entire accountability system around them. In performance reviews, employees are evaluated both on what they accomplish and on how they accomplish it. In hiring, job candidates aren't just vetted on their skills—they're assessed on their potential to live the values.

In an ideal world, we'd screen out bad apples to prevent them from spoiling the barrel. I have a few favorite ways to spot people who might detract from a squad. I'm told they also come in handy in dating:

- Look at how they treat the restaurant server and the make-up artist. Selfish takers are great fakers when kissing up to influential people, but they kick down when dealing with those who can't seemingly do them any good. In interviews, I've learned to ask candidates to name a few people whose careers they've advanced. It's a red flag if they name-drop or only mention people with higher power and status.
- Find out who their role models are. If they respect others primarily based on money, power, fame, or beauty, it's a clue that they're more extrinsically than intrinsically motivated. If the people they admire wouldn't be ideal for your squad, they probably won't be either.
- Beware of those who always play the victim. When people are constantly airing their grievances like every day is Festivus, it's a warning sign of narcissism, Machiavellianism, psychopathy, and entitlement. When I'm vetting candidates, I like to ask them to explain their setbacks and shortcomings. If they consistently throw

blame rather than taking responsibility, proceed with caution.

We don't always have the luxury of choosing our squad. Sometimes, like the Avengers, they're picked for us. It might be hard to imagine aligning with people who don't share our goals—let alone violate our values. But squads can turn adversaries into allies. The transition requires a key ingredient: accountability. And building accountability demands new rituals. To see what I mean, look no further than a video game.

Mirror, Mirror, in the Brawl

The most popular video game in esports is League of Legends. Over 100 million people play in rotating squads every year, working together to destroy their enemy's base. It's famous for epic online battles of friends and strangers—and for toxic behaviors like sexist, racist, and homophobic comments. After years of strife, the game's creators wanted to see if they could use science to weed out disrespect. They launched some experiments, starting with some basic accountability. When players were reported for bad behavior, other players volunteered to form a tribunal, reviewing and voting on whether to ban them. But when offenders were allowed to return after a ban, they often slipped back into their repugnant rituals.

In the next iteration, the researchers added different kinds of feedback to the accountability. When offenders were kicked out, they received reform cards explaining how they'd violated the community's code of values. If the card simply listed the category of behavior that got them booted, over the next few months, half of the players stopped being nasty. If the card displayed the specific chat logs that got them banned, 70 percent reformed. And if players got the specific feedback immediately

—within five to ten minutes after their offenses—a whopping 92 percent turned over a new leaf.

Disrespect often persists because people rationalize aggression. *I was under a lot of pressure—they shouldn't take it personally. I had to do something to get them to listen.* They see it as an isolated circumstance, not a reflection of their character. Holding up a mirror jolts them out of self-justification. They can't deny or deflect; they're forced to confront their consistent pattern of bad behavior. *Whoa...am I the a**hole?* It motivates them to take responsibility for their choices and start changing their rituals.

The mirror worked for the players in the game because it provided specific and immediate feedback. It interrupted their old if-then patterns in real time. The team wanted to see if these learnings could translate from the screen to their headquarters. Would the same approach make a difference for employees in the office where League of Legends was made?

The fact that the employees were avid gamers gave the researchers access to tons of data. They were able to track the abusive patterns of their own workforce inside the game. They identified the 30 people with the highest toxicity rates and then scheduled individual meetings with them to review their chat logs. Seeing how they'd violated shared values was a catalyzing moment for becoming better allies. “Pretty much everyone we spoke with was appalled at their own behavior,” one insider said. “We actually received some essays from employees vowing to change their ways and become not just more considerate gamers but better people.”

To create accountability, feedback needs to come with consequences. I once got a call from a law firm that had a major problem with senior partners hazing junior associates. Some lawyers made partner solely by generating revenue and ruled

by insult and intimidation. They overloaded newly minted attorneys with pointless tasks, lambasted them for tiny typos, and threatened to fire them if they didn't work hundred-hour weeks. Partners had no accountability for their behavior.



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The young attorneys had little power, and since the firm was a partnership, no one had the authority to fire the worst offenders. I proposed an unusual incentive instead. We had the junior associates independently and anonymously rank the senior partners from best to worst. When the new class of young attorneys arrived, the top-ranked partners got the first pick of talent. The cruelest partners were stuck with the weakest squads.

I didn't see any Mr. Hydes turn into Dr. Jekylls overnight. My aim was more modest: I wanted to give partners a reason to adjust their rituals. If they wanted talented squads, then they needed to be kinder to the people below them—or at least less callous. Some of them started to shape-shift, and instances of incivility dropped.

Reputations need to have repercussions. When you don't have control over incentives, there are other ways to create

consequences for bad actors. A while back I was advising a financial services company when a woman named Kathy was promoted to lead a new squad with a colleague named Colin. They hadn't met before, and four different people warned her not to trust him—he was going to steal credit for her ideas and dump unwanted tasks on her. In their first one-on-one, Kathy shared the reputational feedback: “I don't know whether it's true or not. But if this is who you are, you are *not* going to like working with me.” She was making it clear that his old rituals would be counterproductive with her. Over the year and a half that they collaborated, Colin went out of his way to share credit, volunteer for grunt work, and mentor junior people on the squad. He hadn't liked his reflection and decided to make a concerted effort to change his image.

Ultimately, accountability starts at the top. You can judge a squad's vibe by how people with power and status treat those who lack it. In too many squads, influential people fail to walk the talk. Merely hearing stories about leaders violating values can be enough to discourage newcomers from being good teammates.

In toxic cultures, stars get rewarded for results even if they wreck relationships. Abuse is seen as a price to pay for high performance. In healthy cultures, no level of individual excellence justifies undermining people. You're not a high performer if you don't elevate others. As organizational psychologist John Amaechi put it to me, “Culture is defined by the worst behavior tolerated.”

What Leaders Say	What They Mean
"Work hard, play hard"	You'll work 100-hour weeks, but occasionally you'll be forced to party instead of sleeping
"The customer is always right"	The employee is f***ed
"Our culture requires us to be in the office together every day"	Our leaders require you to worship them at the office altar every day
"We only hire winners"	The only people who make it here are sociopaths

Double Standards

The U.S. women's soccer squad was aligned on their values and behavioral standards. They still needed a system for holding teammates accountable. I heard a lot of grumbling about hypocrisy—some stars expected their teammates to show up on time and wear team gear but didn't always follow suit themselves. The squad had sometimes given their best players a pass, regardless of whether they upheld their principles. Certain stars had an implicit license to become *prima donnas*, deviate from core values, and dismiss young voices. As a co-captain, Megan Rapinoe decided to break that norm. She told me that as she reflected on the feedback from junior players, her attitude changed from "Whatever, we can just show up and play" to "The culture is not working for everyone." She told her teammates she could be so task-focused that she came across as self-focused, and she was working on being less of a bulldozer so that she could hear their perspectives.

The most effective leaders are prototypical of the group and prosocial toward the group. Prototypicality is about exemplifying the squad's core principles, and prosociality is about putting the collective purpose above personal interests. The net effect is often a team identity shift from *us vs. them* to *all for one*.

When I asked the players to name their most prototypical and most prosocial teammates, one name consistently rose to the top. Becky Sauerbrunn had been a captain before, but she didn't think she was qualified to be a leader—she wasn't the biggest star or the loudest voice, and she'd never aspired to take the reins. I told her that the ideal leader is not the candidate who covets the role; it's the person who's earned the respect of the group.⁷ A few months later, the coach elevated her back to captain.

Becky started holding veterans accountable by gently ribbing them when they failed to live up to the principles. *I see your popcorn in the break room...if it happens again, I'm calling your mom.* She singled out young players who were going above and beyond to leave it better and do their sh*t. *Love your devotion to the data, Moneyball.* The message came through quiet and clear: If you want to be a valued member of this squad, you need to respect our values.

There was a noticeable shift in their vibe. In summer 2020, the general manager reached out to share that the younger players were speaking up when veterans failed to uphold their values. “The fear of angering the loud minority,” the manager said, “was null.” And they had eradicated much of the nastiness—not just toward teammates but toward others as well. “You held up a mirror,” she noted, and “the staff is commenting that players are so much nicer to them than they have ever been. **LITTLE WINS!**”

They continued to change their rituals. The players made a commitment to give each other feedback about whether they were living up to the team's principles. In 2021, Becky wrote me to say that they had an unusual number of athletes open up at training camp. They had spirited debates about how to evolve their behavioral standards and hold each other account-

able—and the disagreements weren't primarily between veterans and newcomers.

At the 2021 Olympics in Tokyo, the team ended up with a bronze medal. They knew they'd have to make some changes to get their performance—and culture—where it needed to be. Following the Olympics, some seasoned veterans retired and younger players stepped up. But before things could get better, they would get worse.

The team reached a new low at the 2023 World Cup, losing in the round of sixteen—their earliest exit ever. They continued making changes to put culture front and center. They brought in a new coach, Emma Hayes, who placed a strong emphasis on shared values and high standards. “To be a great head coach, you better be a great psychologist,” she said. The players doubled down on accountability, respect, and ownership, giving candid feedback and addressing tensions directly instead of avoiding them. In 2024, they came home from Paris with the Olympic gold medal.

How much of a difference did our work together make? It's possible that it didn't move the needle at all. Along with a coaching change, they had a fresh squad; of the 18 players who won in Paris, only 8 were on the team in Tokyo. But I hope it helped. Over the past five years, a number of players have reached out to tell me that they continue to reference the values and behaviors that we created and hold one another accountable for them. Improving their culture shifted their vibe, and their vibe lifted their game.

Building a great squad is not about minimizing the differences between people. It's about channeling their differences toward a higher purpose.

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1. People are also more likely to get bullied in open offices—there’s more tension and it’s harder to escape. A wealth of evidence demonstrates that the costs go beyond connection. In open offices, people take 27 percent more sick days and achieve 14 percent worse cognitive performance. For the sake of productivity, health, and collaboration, everyone deserves access to a space with a door.
 2. Calling a workplace a family creates unrealistic expectations of unconditional love. Research suggests that it can set people up to feel disenchanting and betrayed. Parents don’t fire their kids for poor performance or furlough them in hard times. They don’t cut them if they get injured or start to slow down. Also, since many families are dysfunctional, the metaphor often evokes mixed feelings. And love can be a smoke screen for exploitation—if your organization is your family, people might expect you to sacrifice sleep, leisure, and health for them.
 3. The colorful language may not have been a coincidence. Swearing can make us stronger—after people are randomly assigned to curse out loud rather than using a neutral word, their grip strength increases by 8 percent, their cycling power climbs by 4.5 percent, and they persist as much as 10 percent longer in planks, wall sits, and push-ups. A little profanity disinhibits us, helping us to marshal more of our mental and physical resources. It’s also a mark of authenticity—it signals a willingness to put candor above courtesy. And it reveals something about the vibe in a squad. In a study of over ten million emails at a tech company, people who cursed at significantly different rates than their colleagues were more likely to quit. The profanity mismatch was a sign that they weren’t fitting in.
 4. What about the coach who gives the angry halftime speech? The best evidence suggests that it only works if the coach isn’t too mad—and isn’t usually mad. Screaming at the top of your lungs isn’t motivation; it’s a meltdown. Coaches who constantly berate people cross the line from demanding to demeaning. That doesn’t give squads a tailwind; it takes the wind out of their sails. Even for members who aren’t the target, merely witnessing disrespect is enough to disrupt focus and discourage teamwork.
 5. Hundreds of studies show that when companies do mass layoffs, they end up being less profitable than similar firms that find other ways to lower costs—like executive pay cuts and unpaid employee leaves. Layoffs bleed talent and breed guilt and anxiety. They should be the last resort.
 6. Some squads combined pal and companion cultures. That didn’t have consistent implications for squad speed or safety, but it did seem to discourage firefighters from taking unnecessary risks outside work—presumably because they knew their colleagues were counting on them.
 7. As Socrates observed in Plato’s *Republic*, “The State in which the rulers are most reluctant to govern is always the best and most quietly governed, and the State in which they are most eager, the worst.” Or as Douglas Adams put it in *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* series, “It is a well-known fact that those people who most *want* to rule people are, ipso facto, those least suited to do it.” As a social scientist, I wouldn’t normally bet against the consensus of one of the great ancient

Greek philosophers and one of the great modern British sci-fi writers. But technically it's feeling a little reluctance—not extreme hesitations—that predicts empowering and effective leadership.

10

EVERYTHING IS RELATIVE

Forming and Reforming Family Traditions

Tradition is a guide and not a jailer.

—W. Somerset Maugham

The month before I left for college, my parents announced that they were getting divorced. I was devastated to abandon my 11-year-old sister to a broken family. But I was also secretly relieved to escape halfway across the country. When Thanksgiving came around, my roommates traveled to be with their relatives. I decided to stay on campus alone. I was afraid my hometown would no longer feel like home.

Families are supposed to be our closest ties, yet they can also be the source of our deepest angst. We expect them to be there for us through our highest highs and our lowest lows. Yet not everyone is lucky enough to be born with relatives who make good pals and allies, let alone companions. Some families are estranged to the point that they no longer even associate. And many families fall apart, like mine did.

As soon as my parents separated, our family rituals disintegrated. We never took another family vacation. We never played another board game together. We never reunited for a holiday dinner with everyone. Every Thanksgiving, the empti-

ness gnawed at me. There was a gaping hole where my family was supposed to be. I wish I could tell my younger self that even though I couldn't undo the divorce, there were things I could do to fill the void. Instead, I spent the next decade waiting impatiently. I hoped that one day when I had kids of my own, I would get the holiday—and the feeling—back. Eventually I did.

These days, Thanksgiving has special significance for me. It's filled with family rituals. By the first day of November I'm already anticipating the sweet smell of Allison's cornbread soufflé, the pure joy of playing with our kids, the friendly rivalry of family trivia, and the stubborn solidarity of holding out hope for the Detroit Lions. When I wake up on Thanksgiving morning, the first thing I do is check up on a family I've never met.

The matriarch of that family is a grandmother named Wanda Dench. Every Thanksgiving, she hosts her extended family in Arizona. They watch parades and football, eat turkey and green bean casserole, and do a modified gratitude circle, sharing what they're thankful for and what they're hopeful for. Those family occasions have been filled with bonding moments for Wanda and her grandchildren.

Jamal Hinton is the model grandson. During the pandemic, when Wanda lost someone close to her, he drove 45 minutes to drop off a gift basket and videos of people wishing her well. When she was diagnosed with cancer, he texted and called regularly to check in, and offered to run errands and bring her food. "I know I can count on him for anything," Wanda says.

As I've watched them from afar, I've realized I had a narrow view of who makes up a family and how they interact. I didn't need to wait until I had a family of my own to find what I was craving. I could have created new rituals with both sides of my

existing family—or created a chosen family to form new rituals together. That’s how Jamal and Wanda fortified their bond.

Jamal and Wanda aren’t blood relatives. They met by accident in November 2016, when Jamal was in high school. He got a text inviting him to Thanksgiving dinner and didn’t recognize the number, so he asked who sent it. When the sender said she was his grandma, Jamal asked for proof. What came back was a picture of a complete stranger.

Wanda was trying to reach her grandsons. She didn’t realize one of their numbers had changed. Jamal was a proud class clown, so he couldn’t resist making a joke. He told her that she wasn’t his grandma and asked, “Can I still get a plate tho?” Instead of laughing it off or ignoring it, Wanda invited him over: “Of course you can. That’s what grandmas do...feed everyone.” Jamal posted the exchange on Twitter, where it went viral.

It could’ve easily ended there. Wanda already had six grandchildren, and Jamal already had a grandma. Wanda had her annual Thanksgiving tradition, and Jamal had his own. But they were both open to change. Jamal’s mom encouraged him to go even though that meant missing their own dinner. He took a leap of faith and accepted the invite to spend the holiday with a group of strangers.

When Jamal walked in the door, Wanda’s husband, Lonnie, welcomed him with a big hug. They laughed about the fact that Jamal forgot to bring the pumpkin pie he promised. They exchanged life stories, and Jamal sought Wanda’s advice on his future. “I just got a vibe from her that made me feel at home,” Jamal explained.

They decided to make their accidental Thanksgiving meal an annual tradition. For the past decade, every time they go around the table to share what they’re grateful for, Wanda says

family—which includes Jamal. He shares that sentiment: “I consider her my grandma.”

Every November, seeing their latest updates warms my heart. After ten years of following their posts, I finally reached out to them. I couldn’t stop smiling as they told me about all the traditions they’ve created together. They don’t just see each other in November—they’ve done family game nights as well as parties for the Fourth of July, Halloween, and the Super Bowl. Each Thanksgiving, their dinner looks different. The dishes and activities vary, and so does the cast of relatives, friends, and neighbors in their makeshift family unit.

Sadly, in April 2020, Wanda’s husband, Lonnie, passed away. That Thanksgiving the family put an empty plate in front of Lonnie’s seat, lighting a candle in his honor. Then in 2024, Wanda was diagnosed with breast cancer. They had to FaceTime instead of gathering in person for Thanksgiving. The next year, Jamal’s aunt hosted Wanda’s family, and for 2026 he vowed to learn to cook so he could host both of their families and some friends. “Traditions keep love alive, but we keep getting curveballs,” Jamal reflected. “We’re ready for anything.”

Jamal is living the lesson I failed to learn in my twenties. We don’t always have the power to keep our families the same. But there are things we can do to keep our families close even when they change.

What makes families tight is not the consistency of their routines. It’s their commitment to forming and reforming meaningful rituals. Families vibe when they strike a balance between preserving old traditions and inventing new ones. A key to strong bonds is finding an equilibrium between continuity and change.

Unconventional Conventions

Traditions are recurring rituals imbued with meaning. We might practice them frequently or at regular intervals, but they're anything but routine. Routines are fixed; they often constrain our connections. *Toys must be cleaned up before bedtime* destroys a fort and short-circuits fun with friends. *Dinner is always at six sharp* is a recipe for teen rebellion. Traditions are flexible; they expand our sense of closeness. Whereas routines are organized around "this is what needs to be done," psychologist Barbara Fiese explains, traditions communicate "this is who we are."

Along with forging a family identity, traditions offer stability. They make memories that link us to the past and rituals that keep us connected in the future. Many families invent traditions around big annual events. For wedding anniversaries, some couples opt for companionship by redoing their speeches and re-creating the meal as a reward. For birthdays, I know one family that goes into pal mode by eating cake for breakfast and another that does an ice cream crawl instead of lunch...*pal a la mode*. Families get closer around more frequent traditions too. Some families become allies by holding weekly or monthly "family council" meetings, giving the kids a say in setting goals and planning activities. And for sporadic activities like airport pickups, most families default to the companion tradition of hugging, but some add a pal dimension. The best one I've seen is the video of two brothers, Owen and Ethan, who decided to prank their grandma by showing up in enormous inflatable tyrannosaurus rex costumes...but she got word of the plan and surprised them by walking up in a T. rex costume of her own.

Multiple studies have demonstrated that when families gather for holidays, the more traditions they have, the closer they feel. Holiday traditions can even have a bonding effect in

families that don't get along well. It doesn't matter whether they're opening presents, decorating trees, or going to church on Christmas, saying prayers at Shabbat dinner, worshipping ancestors at spring or fall festivals, or setting off fireworks, watching the ball drop, and sharing resolutions around New Year's.

Strong traditions connect families on multiple wavelengths. On Thanksgiving, for example, families act like allies when they walk or run the turkey trot together, pals when they play pin-the-waddle-on-the-turkey, and companions when they read notes from an appreciation jar that's been collecting messages all year. These kinds of rituals can prevent hostility and promote harmony by placing people in cooperative roles. When Grandpa takes his treasured turkey-carving post, he's less likely to turn the knives on Uncle Leonard.

Traditions don't just bring families together in the moment—they link us before and afterward too. In a study of Diwali rituals, it wasn't just during the holiday festival itself that families vibed. As they cleaned and decorated together to prepare for the event, they felt more connected. The bond outlives the tradition: Nostalgia motivates families to reminisce, which brings them closer and motivates the next generation to continue traditions, augmenting their significance. Anticipating, participating in, and remembering traditions together signals and strengthens our sense of family as an important, unique unit.

As long as we agree on the symbolic significance of family traditions, they unite us. Yet if one person's revered ritual is another's tedious routine, that disconnect can drive us apart. As kids become teenagers, they aren't always into matching pajamas, morning sunrises, or mandatory attendance at religious services. There's evidence that college students feel less belonging in their families when they don't find meaning in the

holiday, vacation, or cultural traditions that their mothers hold dear.

Aligning on important traditions can protect families from adversity. It's well-documented that the more meaning teens find in their family rituals, the more connected they feel—and the less depressed and anxious they are. When families struggle with alcoholism, if they maintain meaningful dinner, weekend, holiday, and vacation rituals, parents are less likely to pass alcoholism down to the next generation. When divorced parents maintain cooperative relationships and rituals, kids do better in school. And during the pandemic, families that sustained or adjusted shared mealtime, exercise, and bedtime rituals were more resilient, less lonely, and more cohesive. We don't know if these are causal effects—families that already operated as allies, pals, and companions might have been more committed and creative around their traditions. But we do know that traditions confront chaos with structure and disrupt discord with solidarity. They communicate that even in the face of problems, we can still gain control and connection.

As families go through life cycles, some lose grandparents, aunts, or uncles, while others gain stepparents and stepsiblings or half-siblings. Kids gain independence, grow up, move out, and get married. New people enter our lives as in-laws and grandchildren arrive. New people might enter the family unit as our friends become like sisters or brothers to us—and aunts or uncles to our kids.

Close families are complex adaptive systems. To strengthen and sustain their bonds, they don't just build traditions. They transform their traditions through times of transition. They often begin with small moments—and there's nowhere better to start shifting the vibe than the dinner table.

Beyond Food Fights

As our kids started elementary school, I noticed our dinner conversations veering toward achievement. *What grade did you get on the test? Did you score a goal in soccer?*

Most parents say that one of their top priorities is to raise kids who are caring and kind. Yet most kids believe that their parents value their success above all else. Kids don't learn what matters to adults by listening to what we say. They discover our values by observing what captures our attention. If we want our kids to be kind, we need to show them it's important to us.

I decided it was time to introduce a new family tradition. Every Friday at dinner, we started asking our kids, "Who did you help this week?"

At first, they struggled to come up with even trivial examples and cracked jokes instead. *I helped my teacher by not hiding another stuffed rat in her drawer.* But after a few weeks, they weren't just remembering daily moments of kindness. They were recognizing and looking for opportunities to help—and volunteering to share them before we even asked. *Today I helped Frank the Tank find food! She's our class turtle and I think she likes me.* Our dinner conversations were suddenly bursting with energy, and we felt closer than ever.

A few weeks later, Allison suggested expanding the tradition by asking our kids another question: "Who helped you?"

I didn't get it. *I want to raise givers, not takers!* She explained that she wanted our kids to choose their friends wisely. Instead of gravitating to classmates who were popular, they might start hanging out with peers who were caring. It made a mark. A decade later, Joanna ended up writing one of her college essays about how our Friday dinner tradition taught her to seek out friends who shared our family value of kindness.

Most families spend more time having meals together than any other activity. Although a typical family dinner is only about 18 minutes, many studies have demonstrated that the more often families eat together, the tighter their bonds and the higher their well-being. The sensation of food is amplified when it's shared, and connection grows as we share it. When my son Henry eats something delicious, he turns to us and says with a big grin, "You have to try this! It's *so good!*" There's no better bid for connection than conveying that you want someone else to experience your joy.¹ During meals, we also concoct our own family dialects—custom vocabularies of slang and inside jokes that no one else understands. I've come across families that refer to butter as *toast lotion*, Parmesan cheese as *spaghetti sprinkles*, and tongs as *snappy snap grabbers*. Communicating in a secret language binds us as a special group.

Eating as a family can also buffer against the emotional costs of conflict. Sharing a family meal doesn't stop teenagers from fighting with their parents and siblings, but it does contain the fallout. Even if teens still resent having Instagram blocked for finishing homework late, dinnertime together helps reconnect them with family, restoring their sense of structure and solidarity. Teenage children become slightly less depressed after their families start having dinner together more frequently.

That said, regular meals aren't a panacea. For parents with young kids, they're a common source of chaos. As with other connections, quality is more important than quantity. Even one enjoyable family meal a week can be enough to prevent relationship problems. Eating together more often is less beneficial for families that aren't close. It's possible to reset the vibe, though, by turning meals into more meaningful traditions.

A ritual without meaning becomes a mind-numbing routine. Kids don't want to recount the minutiae of their day. They don't want to talk about what they're grateful for every night either. *I'm thankful that my sister didn't bite me today.* Psychologists have shown that gratitude exercises are more powerful when we only do them once a week. Spacing it out makes it less of a chore. It prevents the ritual from becoming a stale routine—and gives us time to find new reasons to be thankful. And my own research has shown that it's more motivating to reflect on kindness than gratitude. Counting our blessings can leave us feeling like passive receivers; counting our contributions reminds us that we actively make a difference.

The Friday kindness questions were a powerful tradition when our kids were in elementary and middle school. Research suggests that an ideal time to reinforce values is between ages six to twelve—that's a formative period when many kids are crystallizing a strong sense of self (and a few are starting to rebel). As our kids became teenagers, we evolved our rituals. To reinforce kindness, we started giving them more responsibilities for taking care of their younger siblings and our cats.² To encourage our kids to be kinder to themselves, we started doing occasional failure dinners, going around the table to share our recent mistakes and what they taught us. We also invited our kids to contribute their own topics to dinner discussions. *Where in the world do you most want to travel? Do you hear the words in your head when you read? Do you think books should ever be banned? What careers do you think each of your siblings will choose?*

Revamping our conversation rituals can revive family dinner traditions—and creative questions can spark joy and build bonds. The Family Dinner Project is a nonprofit that offers a

whole library of novel conversation starters for meals. Instead of *How was school?* they recommend *If you were the principal, what would you change?* To build curiosity and empathy, they propose *What makes someone a good friend?* and *If your pets could talk, what do you think they'd say?* For fun, there's *What's your favorite silly face to make?* To identify possible traditions, they suggest *What's your favorite thing to do as a family?*

Some of the most evocative questions revolve around family history. Do you know how your parents met—and how they chose your name? What about where your grandparents grew up? And who in your family do you look and act most like?

In a series of studies, psychologists asked kids these kinds of questions. The more family stories they knew, the higher their well-being, both individually and collectively. The kids had higher self-esteem, lower anxiety, and fewer behavior problems. And their families were closer—they had stronger emotional bonds. Family stories create a secure base for kids, showing them that they belong to a group that existed in the past and will continue in the future.

But chatterboxes beware. Kids might not always be excited to listen as their elders drone on. My daughter Elena coined a term for it: *oldwashed*. It's when getting older brainwashes you into the most boring conversationalist ever. We've added pal energy by turning family history into a trivia game. *Which family member got stuck behind a manure truck on a drive to Florida?* And we've brought companionship by swapping embarrassing stories. *Did I ever tell you about the time I sprinted through an airport with yesterday's underwear in my pant leg? How about when I dyed my hair maize and blue for the Michigan game, but it melted in the sun and turned green,*

and the crowd around me booed because they thought I was rooting for our rival Michigan State?

Families are more cohesive and adaptable when they balance dreaming about tomorrow with reminiscing about yesterday. The most helpful family stories also aren't solely uplifting or depressing; they feature both highlights and hardships. Balancing successes with setbacks conveys that life has ups and downs, and we can face them together. And one of the best ways to develop resilience is to renovate our traditions beyond the dinner table.



"Don't bother Daddy -
he's busy thinking up traditions."

CartoonStock.com

Breaking with Tradition

How many of your family traditions today can be traced back to your childhood, or to your ancestors? In a survey, 81 percent of people reported continuing an old family tradition with their own kids. Nearly as many—74 percent—introduced new family traditions. Restoring or devising traditions together can bring joy and build strength.

Many families launch traditions that foster companionship to cope during tough times. After losing loved ones, some fami-

lies keep their memories alive on their birthday by doing activities they loved or cooking their favorite meal. In one family, when his wife was halfway through chemotherapy, a man celebrated with half a cake, saving the whole cake for the end of treatment.

Different cultures offer inspiration for new traditions. When I travel abroad, the pal traditions jump out right away. In Brazil, I learned that some families host surprise parties the day before or after a birthday. In the Netherlands, families pick names out of a hat for winter holiday gift exchanges and write silly poems about each other to read out loud. In Australia, when the song “Nutbush City Limits” plays, families are expected to burst out into a synchronized line dance. In Venezuela on Christmas Eve, many families roller-skate to church.

I’m a fan of bringing creativity to weddings. Some of the most entertaining traditions blend pal and ally rituals. In Slovenia, the bride’s family might block the groom’s road to the wedding with wooden logs, demanding that he prove his worth by sawing through them. At some Indian weddings, the bride’s family is expected to steal the groom’s shoes as he walks up to the altar, while his relatives fend them off. If the bride’s family succeeds, they get to announce a ransom to return them.

Every time someone new joins our family, it’s an opportunity to ask about their favorite traditions. Fiancés, in-laws, step-parents, and stepsiblings are all potential sources of fresh rituals. We can also look to the past to identify traditions that have been lost in the present. After watching *Stranger Things*, my kids said they wished they’d grown up in the 1980s. They felt nostalgic for an era they’d never experienced, when kids coordinated plans by walkie-talkie and rode their bikes to the arcade. When we asked our kids how they’d change one of our

existing traditions to make our lives more like Hawkins, Indiana, they unanimously voted to ban phones from the table.

The evidence is clear that digital devices interfere with family communication and connection. Several dozen experiments have demonstrated that banning screens from meals increases conversation quality, enjoyment, and closeness. (It also reduces mindless overeating, making sure we don't ignore the feeling that we're full.) But let's not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Screens only kill our vibe when they suck us into separate worlds and lead us to snub each other. Devices don't have to breed detachment. Looking at the same screen can actually bring us closer. Several studies show that when families watch TV and movies together, they feel more connected—particularly if they don't have the same social circles. Co-viewing creates shared experiences, signals shared interests, and can even lower our heart rates.

When it comes to screens, active engagement is better than passive consumption. One of our favorite family traditions is watching *Survivor* together. We've activated pal and ally energy by competing against each other in one fantasy league and playing as a team in another, where the winner gets a gold crown to keep until the next season. Our kids also decided we should play our own family *Survivor* game—they designed the challenges, and I got voted out in a blindside orchestrated by Elena. We videoed key moments and the kids teamed up to make a highlight reel afterward. They had so much fun that they started making their own short films together, and watching them has become another family tradition. The best traditions breed new ones.

During the pandemic, our kids were cooped up in online school for a full year. To give them something to look forward to, we started a daily tradition of playing Mario Kart online

with my sister and brother-in-law. We FaceTimed during each match so we could talk (read: trash talk). Research indicates that online games are a form of “digital glue” that can help to strengthen and sustain ties with family members who don’t live nearby. When families play video games together, they feel closer—especially if they usually have poor communication.³

My sister had twins later that year. As soon as they were old enough, we brought them into the Mario Kart tradition. I’ve loved watching my kids bond with their aunt, uncle, and cousins as they throw banana peels in their path.

Special Relativity

The bonding options multiply when family gatherings go from on-screen to in-person. Connecting with extended family can expand our sense of belonging. But many family reunions are sadly short on banana peels. Too often, instead of having fun together, you have a mess. A baby cousin poops on the carpet. A nephew brings his brother’s ex as a date. Uncle Leonard slashes Grandpa’s tires.

Family reunions are very different for Melanie and Wayne Fischer’s grandkids. Their annual gathering in South Dakota is one of the highlights of their childhood. They call it Cousin Camp. Every summer, the Fischers invite all their grandkids five and older to their farm. As many as a dozen grandkids stay from Thursday to Sunday. There are two big rules: no parents, no screens.

At Cousin Camp, bedrooms are converted into cabins. Each morning, the cousins wait for the bell to ring, then leap out of bed for the flag-raising ceremony and stretches. The days are packed with arts and crafts, music, swimming, sports, and a talent show. They go on field trips, do kitchen duty, and hold campfires at night. It formally ends with a Sunday picnic, ball-

game, and performance—the cousins sing songs, do cheers, and present their personal highlight reels. Throughout the year, the cousins love reminiscing about last summer and counting the days until the next one.



When I came across Cousin Camp online, I thought it was one of a kind. It turns out that a number of people do their own versions of it, either with relatives or chosen families. It's a natural venue for face-to-face conversations over meals as well as side-by-side activities like board games, which are ideal for ally and pal bonding across generations.⁴

Part of the power of the tradition is that it's not a constant. Cousin Camp has to evolve over time. To keep the pal activities fresh, there are grandparents who vary the theme from year to year, from a nature camp centered on hiking, fishing, and rocks and gems to a creative camp focused on making tie-dye shirts, designing puzzles, and building model airplanes. To keep teenagers engaged, some families run separate camps for older and younger cousins—or transform the tradition from camp to an annual trip to the mountains. Other families have older cousins graduate from campers to counselors, where they become allies, pals, and companions to their younger cousins.

Cousin Camp gives kids a chance to bond with their cousins and grandparents, away from their parents. We all know the importance of grandparents in instilling values and providing

stability. Yet we overlook the unique roles that cousins can play. This is another ingredient in Cousin Camp's success: a wide-open field of wavelengths.

Other than our sisters and brothers, cousins are the only blood relatives we get at similar ages and life stages, and there's no sibling rivalry—we don't have to fight with them for parental attention or resources. That makes them natural pals. They offer familiarity without friction and bonds without baggage.

Not everyone wins the cousin lottery. But at different phases of our lives, it's common to vibe with cousins on different wavelengths. As we move into adulthood, they evolve from playmates to allies. The family tie offers a basic level of built-in trust.⁵ When Allison and I were ready to buy a house, we knew our mortgage broker wouldn't screw us over, because she's my cousin. *No one would dare risk the wrath of Grandma.* When we face crises, we frequently turn to cousins as companions. It's common for cousins to provide emotional support and become closer after losing a parent, grandparent, aunt, or uncle. And as they start families of their own, cousins frequently become the "kinkeepers" who hold extended families together through planning holiday meals, hosting reunions, and sending pebbles on group texts.

Relatively speaking, cousin connections are usually low-maintenance relationships. They tend to occupy a sweet spot of togetherness—neither disengaged nor enmeshed. As one pair of social scientists put it, cousins are "close but not too close." The obligation to stay in regular touch is minimal, and reconnecting can be seamless. My cousin Mike taught me the rules of football when I was six ("I don't know what a line of scrimmage is, but you need one") and introduced me to Allison when I was 23. In between, I only remember seeing him outside fam-

ily gatherings once, when he took me to a Lions game. It doesn't matter how long the tie has been dormant; when they reconnect over a meal, at a reunion, or on a trip, cousins can often skip past associates and interact as allies, pals, or companions.

Dynamic Duos

I used to think family activities should happen together as one unit. Now I understand that not all family traditions need to involve the whole family. Close families derive strength from the sum of their parts—they're built on strong pair bonds. For connection, there's nothing like one-on-one time. I stumbled into this realization at the end of the pandemic.

To make up for lost travel, I started inviting my kids to join me on work trips. Henry picked L.A., where we went to an amusement park with a second cousin once removed—and another amusement park with one of my closest childhood friends and his kids. Henry bonded with them as they faced their fear of roller coasters together.

Each trip has brought us closer to blood relatives and chosen family—and each other. It's also given us new memories to savor and laugh about...which mostly involve my kids laughing at me. On one trip Joanna decided we should go whitewater rafting in class 4 rapids. I was the only one to fall out, and a photographer managed to capture it. Whenever Joanna sees extended family, she asks if they've seen my worst backflip.



Taking each of my kids on a trip has become an annual tradition. When their siblings aren't there, kids tend to be on their best behavior—they have a way of rising or sinking to the maturity of the people around them. And the one-on-one time gives our rituals a chance to evolve and improve. If a trip is too time-consuming or expensive, we can get the same benefit without going anywhere. Even small one-on-one traditions at home can strengthen bonds—which strengthen the whole family.

Neuroscientists find that when a parent and a child focus their undivided attention on a book together, their brains synchronize. The same neural coupling happens when a parent and an infant play together, and it's usually the infant's interests that guide the adult's focus. This is true for parents of any gender and families of any size. Historically, mothers carried most of the load, but today dads are spending about triple the time with their kids that their dads did with them. When father figures are engaged, kids show better cognitive development, boys have fewer behavioral problems, and young women have fewer emotional problems.

When parents have multiple kids, equity is essential. Nearly half of adults believe their parents had a favorite child. One

journalist deadpans that the rest of the parents “may simply be doing a better job of concealing things.”⁶ Parental favoritism is a major culprit behind sibling rivalry, and spending separate one-on-one time with each kid is a tradition that helps parents treat siblings fairly.

Pair bonding is important for siblings too. For toddlers, pretend play isn’t just pal fun; using their imaginations together helps them understand each other’s thoughts and feelings. When siblings spend quality time together without their parents, they can come up with their own traditions—from invented games to secret languages and inside jokes. There’s often a turning point toward becoming closer allies and companions when siblings are in their early twenties. With maturity and space, siblings are able to rebuild their rituals and reset their relationships. Some sisters and brothers become stronger allies by working together professionally or closer companions by raising their own families together. Others sustain their pal bonds by doing an annual Sibling Olympics or an April Fool’s prank contest. *I recommend Hide Justin. In that game, siblings hid a postcard of Justin Timberlake in hilarious places—they found it in cereal boxes and even frozen into ice.*

Of all the pair bonds in a family, one has an outsized influence on the overall family bond. It’s the connection between parents. It forms the foundation of the other family connections, and in Western cultures, it’s evolved dramatically over time. In the early days of America, marriages were pragmatic partnerships. Most people didn’t expect to be companions with their spouses; they saw them first and foremost as allies in raising a family. As we’ve evolved our ideals, we’ve opened the door to more fulfilling bonds. Yet we’ve also placed a heavy burden on our closest connections. As therapist Esther Perel puts it, “We turn to one person to provide what an entire vil-

lage once did.” There’s evidence that when people describe their significant other as their best friend, they feel more companionship but receive less support than if they have a separate best friend. Ultimately, too many marriages fail (or fail to happen in the first place) because people expect to rely on one partner for everything.

You can vibe with your partner on every wavelength, but they shouldn’t be your *only* associate, pal, ally, or companion. And it’s not possible to be in sync all the time. It puts a lot of strain on a marriage to demand a partner who’s perfect at fixing the printer and cleaning the cat litter and knowing that you don’t really want socks for Valentine’s Day and disciplining the kids and picking movies and hosting guests and listening to all your complaints and quickly admitting that socks were a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad gift.

Families cope with these challenges more effectively if parents work on their own bond together before kids enter the picture. In a course called Family Foundations, expecting parents learn to resolve conflicts together as allies, support each other as companions, and develop morning, mealtime, and bedtime rituals for daily connection. Remarkably, when couples are randomly assigned to take the course before their first child arrives, their families are closer a decade later. There’s more connection and less conflict between parents as well as siblings. The course proves especially helpful for expecting parents with rocky relationships. If you already have kids, have no fear. Traditions are not tasks to check off on a to-do list; we can introduce them into our interactions anytime. It’s never too late to start hiding Justin.



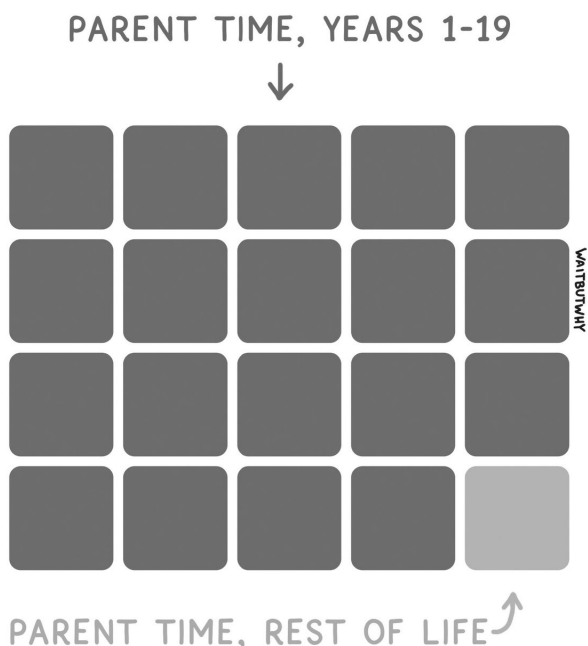
As life expectancies trend upward and birth rates trend downward, our family trees look increasingly like beanstalks. They may be tall, but they're narrow. Shrinking immediate families leave us with much smaller extended families. If our parents have two kids instead of three, and so do we, our kids will miss out on one brother or sister—but they'll have five fewer first cousins.

However many relatives we have, there's no guarantee that we'll vibe with them. Some relatives make great pals but poor companions. Some relationships will always be ambivalent, and some conflicts will never be resolved. Instead of having a closed family circle, we're better off staying open. Welcoming new members into a chosen family allows us to build our own village. That's what Jamal Hinton and Wanda Dench have realized.

In 2022, Wanda was missing her husband and her mother and father. She decided to keep them close by getting a tattoo of three shooting stars on her arm to remind her of the courage, integrity, and love they taught her. Jamal has a tattoo of a lion, and when she called him at the last minute before her appointment, he dropped everything to accompany her.

The following year, Wanda moved to the Arizona mountains, two hours from Jamal. He made the drive to join her family for Thanksgiving, and not long after that he moved to Florida for a job. But they both found themselves craving more time with the families they'd built by blood and by choice. Jamal moved back to the Phoenix area...and Wanda decided to do the same. She beams as she tells me their homes are only five minutes apart. Jamal says the drive only takes him four minutes. They're looking forward to regular game nights and dinners, and—if Jamal has his way—matching Thanksgiving tattoos.

If we live far away from the friends and relatives we see as family, the majority of our gatherings may already be behind us. Establishing and evolving traditions is how we stay connected in our scarce time together.



1. You can even see it in studies of monkeys. Chimps release more of the bonding chemical oxytocin after sharing food with relatives and partners than grooming them or eating alone.
2. Teenagers develop stronger bonds with their families when they're given chores that involve caring for family members and pets. The act of helping strengthens feelings of companionship, and having meaningful responsibilities builds character and discipline. And in one study of nearly 10,000 kids, those who did regular chores in kindergarten got better math scores in third grade—and had stronger peer relationships too.
3. The dangers of video games have been vastly exaggerated. In a meta-analysis of over 100 studies with over 100,000 kids and teens, video games had negligible impact on grades, depression, and aggression. Of course violent games are an exception: They do appear to increase aggression, but the effects are small. And only 3.1 percent of kids show addictive or problematic gaming patterns—which are more likely symptoms of mental health issues than causes. Most experts recommend

limiting play to about three hours a day, but the warning sign of serious issues isn't time; it's playing compulsively and struggling to control usage. Of course it's better if kids are gaming with friends, but even individual play has some neglected upsides. On average, across dozens of experiments and longitudinal studies, video games boosted kids' attention, working memory, and impulse control. There are some cognitive benefits for older adults too. "The things that video games do are actually things we would love for education to do," responsible gaming expert Ash Brandin told me: They can nurture the intrinsic motivation and grit to work toward mastery. "If a kid were that motivated to play the cello, we wouldn't be like, 'Ugh. All they want to do is play the cello for four hours a day.'"

4. Our family favorite is Telestrations. It's like Pictionary meets a game of telephone, and it makes us laugh so hard we can hardly breathe.

5. A few studies have looked at which cousins tend to vibe. On average, Americans are closest to their mother's sister's kids—and least close to their father's brother's kids. The researchers do some evolutionary hand-waving about paternal uncertainty, but I think the proximal explanation is that since sisters tend to be closer than brothers, their kids tend to be too. Koreans are closest to their mother's sister's kids too, but their father's brother's kids are next, likely because it's a more patrilineal culture. And in Finland, women interacted more with their maternal than paternal cousins, but men didn't.

6. Favoritism can be a two-way street. When Elena was in third grade, she asked what makes students a teacher's favorite. "My job is to care about all my students," I told her. "I wouldn't have a favorite student...just like you wouldn't have a favorite parent." Grinning mischievously, she replied, "Or would I?"

Epilogue

In the mid-1800s, Nathaniel Hawthorne worried that a new technology would ruin our face-to-face connections. It wasn't the telegraph—it was the iron stove. He feared that without the warmth of gathering around an open fire, we'd lose our sense of family, friendship, and community. But abandoning the hearth didn't kill our vibe. It changed where and how we connect.

Many of the most important inventions in human history were made for connection. Writing tools from sticks and papyrus to quills and ink to the printing press allowed us to record our thoughts and share them with others. Transportation vehicles from ships to cars to planes accelerated our ability to cross vast distances to meet new people and reunite with old friends. Communication tools from landlines to smartphones enabled us to interact instantaneously with people around the globe. Computers, the internet, and social media opened the door for billions to exchange information.

These advances have taught us that all solutions introduce new problems. To paraphrase philosopher Paul Virilio, inventing the car also invented the car crash. Inventing the internet and social media also invented cyberbullying, cybertheft, digital surveillance, and digital disinformation. Whether the upsides of new technologies outweigh the downsides doesn't just

depend on how we design them. It hinges on how we adapt to them...especially in the age of artificial intelligence.

AI tools are changing how we interact. A slew of studies show that chatbots can help us build connections. They assist us in communicating our thoughts more clearly, particularly if writing is hard for us. We can turn to them for ideas on planning a surprise party for a pal, an engaging icebreaker for new allies, a thoughtful thank-you gift for an associate who went above and beyond, or a sympathetic message to a companion who's grieving. They can offer unlimited suggestions for establishing, evolving, resetting, and repairing connections. Conversations with chatbots can shield elderly people from the loneliness of isolation and adolescents from the pain of depression and anxiety. They allow teens to be vulnerable in seeking emotional support—and homework help—around the clock without feeling embarrassed or burdening others.

At the same time, AI has unintended consequences for interaction. When my son Henry was 11, his school started introducing AI tools. One day I asked how he expected them to affect our well-being:

Me: Do you think AI will make people happier or unhappier?

Henry: I think they'll be less happy, because they don't have to work for answers.

Me: Does working for answers make you happy?

Henry: It makes me happy when I challenge myself.

If we're not careful, AI will become a crutch that removes the challenges from our interactions. More and more people are relying on machines to do the hard work of communicating for them. It's easy to ask a chatbot for advice, but it's a missed op-

portunity to reach out to friends, family, and colleagues who could have counseled us. It's easy to ask an AI agent to draft a script for a first date or a second interview, an email to a frenemy, or a text to an ex, but it deprives us of the chance to figure out how to have hard conversations ourselves.

The more we delegate our interactions to machines, the less equipped we become to deal with uncertainty, complexity, and conflict. "What happens when an entire generation forgets how to hold hard conversations, navigate rejection, or build trust with another human being?" education expert Mandy McLean asks. "We told ourselves AI would give us more time to be human. Offloading dinner reservations might do that, but offloading empathy will not.... We are not just outsourcing cognition, we are teaching a generation to offload connection."

I've sat down with many of the AI pioneers who created tools like ChatGPT, Claude, and Gemini—including the founders of OpenAI, Anthropic, and Google DeepMind. When I ask about their biggest fears, the most consistent theme is not a far-off doomsday scenario where AI eliminates humans. It's a foreseeable future where AI eliminates human bonds.

After chatbots burst on the scene in 2022, it took them less than a year to surpass the average person in expressing empathy. Dozens of experiments have already shown that when people receive compassion by text, they feel more supported if it comes from a large language model than a human. Chatbots consistently outperform trained professionals in showing concern—including therapists and crisis counselors, doctors and nurses, and teachers. Busy humans tend to give shorter, less personalized, more judgmental, less caring responses than bots.

Fortunately, when most people find out a message was AI-generated, they no longer prefer it...for now. And to reduce

loneliness among college freshmen, daily texts are more effective with a randomly selected peer than a chatbot. We don't know how long that will last. Critics have sounded the alarm about chatbots becoming sycophantic servants that shower us with praise and validation. When receiving frictionless flattery becomes our dominant interaction ritual, human communication starts to feel like a slap in the face. Rising numbers of young and older adults are forgoing friendships and even romantic relationships for conversations with chatbots. There are growing concerns that much like social media hijacked our attention, AI is hijacking our attachments.

AI companions are imaginary friends. No matter how sophisticated they become, they can't substitute for real relationships. Chatbots can help us meet our needs, explore our interests, achieve our goals, and clarify our values. But there's no compatibility, because the interactions are one-sided—it's impossible to be on the same wavelength with machines. They can't be associates or allies, because they don't have needs or goals. They can't be pals or companions, because they can't feel joy or care.

Genuine interaction may be the only thing that robots will never replace. Computers can be programmed to simulate a vibe, but they can't experience it. They'll never know the guilt of letting a partner down or the grief of unexpressed love after losing a parent. They can't conceive of the thrill of teaching their kids to ride a bike or the awe of watching them become wise beyond their years.

Henry was right. In the long run, happiness lies in embracing challenges, not avoiding them. Interacting with machines is easy, and it's only getting easier. Interacting with people is hard, but it doesn't have to get harder. Friction is a fact of life, and it's a desirable difficulty—every social stumble is a teach-

able moment. An awkward conversation is a tutorial on how to do a stop-and-chat. A difficult collaboration is a seminar on building trust. A fizzled friendship is a crash course on staying in touch. A bad breakup is a master class on handling conflict.

Trial and error is how we learn to shape-shift. It's how we've turned some of the people we disliked in the past into our close pals, allies, or companions in the present. What makes those relationships so rewarding is that they didn't just fall in our laps—or out of our laptops. The most meaningful bonds are earned.

Any interaction can fail. Yet every interaction has the potential to educate, expand, energize, and elevate us. Long live human connection.

Actions for Impact

To take a quiz about your vibes, visit adamgrant.net.

This is an idea book, not a self-help book, but I still hope it's helpful. If you're looking to bridge from insight to action, here are my top 40 practical takeaways.

I. Spark Connection

1. **Rethink your potential to vibe.** Recognizing people as possible associates, allies, pals, and companions opens new possibilities for connection. Fun pals aren't necessarily the most compassionate companions, and caring companions aren't always the most productive allies.

A. Build Compatibility

2. **Find the right wavelength.** Don't worry about whether you have compatible traits—look for compatible interests, needs, goals, and values. A vibe is not the energy someone gives off; it's the energy you create together when your expectations are aligned.
3. **Choose the right interaction ritual.** Face-to-face conversations are most useful for becoming associates and companions. Side-by-side activities are better for becoming allies and pals.

4. **Exchange origin stories.** Sharing past experiences builds more meaningful bonds than discussing future goals. Personal histories reveal common ground.

B. Master Shape-Shifting

5. **Second-guess your first impressions.** Beware of making strong assumptions based on small samples of behavior. Conclusions often overemphasize character and underemphasize circumstances.
6. **Observe people across a range of settings.** People don't express the same traits in every situation—different if-then signatures are activated by different situations. By paying attention to the patterns behind their shape-shifts, you can find contexts where you click.
7. **Trade user manuals.** Tell people what brings out the best in you—and the worst. Ask them about their if-then tendencies too. When you understand what activates each other's virtues and vices, it's easier to vibe.
8. **Seek out people who help you evolve.** Self-expansion fuels greater closeness than self-expression. Pursue pals with different interests to discover new hobbies, allies with different skills to develop new goals, and companions with different principles to identify new values.

C. Accelerate Attachment

9. **Intensify your interactions.** The more you feel together, the faster you bond together. Whether it's a scary bridge, a haunted house, a tough workout, or an improv comedy class, shared emotional experiences get your hearts racing—and your connection growing.

10. **Dive into the deep end.** Skipping small talk can speed up connection. Ditch *What do you do?* in favor of *What do you love to do?* if you're looking for pals, *What's your biggest challenge?* if you're searching for allies, and *What's one of your regrets?* if you're seeking companions.
11. **Show bounded vulnerability.** Admitting a mistake, disclosing a flaw, and revealing genuine emotion can display humanity and signal trust. To avoid a trauma dump, start by sharing from your scars, not your wounds.

II. Sustain Connection

12. **Send pebbles to stay in touch.** Sharing personalized articles, links, and videos is not a trivial gesture. A little memory flex shows that you listened—and cared enough to remember. Pebbling is a bid for connection and an act of care. *I'm thinking of you* is a message people appreciate receiving (and sending).

A. Initiate Intermittent Interaction

13. **Welcome low-maintenance relationships.** Relax your expectations of regular contact—absence makes the heart grow fonder. Replace mundane catch-ups with interactions that are less frequent but more worthwhile, like a monthly game, sporadic pranks, an annual trip, or reunion parties.
14. **Unleash burstiness.** Get fresh starts through temporary farewells. Time apart allows you to rethink, refuel, retool, and reconnect.
15. **Rekindle lost connections.** Reconnecting with dormant ties is surprisingly enjoyable and beneficial. You can revive old bonds by sharing gratitude for a past shared experi-

ence, joy about a current milestone, or an invitation to a future group dinner.

B. Address Mixed Feelings

16. **Accept the acceptable.** It's better to tolerate minor vices than demand change. By validating others' preferences, you convey that it's okay for them to have thoughts, emotions, and habits that differ from yours.
17. **Contain the unacceptable.** Clear boundaries tell people what conduct won't be tolerated. It's not enough to describe the behaviors—you also need to specify the situations in which they're more and less problematic.
18. **Weigh the good against the bad.** The test of whether a relationship is worth maintaining is not whether people have vices. It's whether their vices can be contained or have hidden virtues.

C. Embrace Respectful Conflict

19. **Fight on the right wavelength.** Healthy conflict is not you against them—it's you and them against the problem.
20. **Lead with your intention to help.** Be direct in what you say and kind in how and why you say it. Preface your feedback with your version of *I'm sharing this because I care about you and our relationship* or *I'm giving you these comments because I have very high expectations and I know that you can reach them.*
21. **Abandon the feedback sandwich.** Ditch the second slice of praise and serve an open-faced sandwich that clearly separates the positive and the negative. *I have notes on strengths and areas for growth—which would you prefer*

to hear first? Or go straight to the growth message: You know what would make you even more effective?

22. **Walk down the ladder of inference.** Instead of jumping to conclusions about people's intentions, ask them to explain their reasoning. *Can you help me understand how you saw the situation? I know I can't read your mind, so would you be willing to read it to me?*

III. Scale Connection

23. **Bring community back.** Be a circle opener by introducing your favorite people to each other. Collective effervescence floods us with joy and hope, and groups build belonging in ways that individual bonds don't.

A. Design Great Gatherings

24. **Create a compelling purpose around a common wavelength.** Invite people to interact as pals through Admin Night or a Colonoscopy Party, companions through a Dinner Party for people grieving, or allies through the Reciprocity Ring, a "Why Do Our Customers Hate Our Product?" roundtable, or a Jeffersonian dinner.
25. **Do a meeting audit.** Delete recurring meetings and ask which ones are really necessary. If you're not gathering to bond, learn, create, or decide, you don't need to gather.
26. **Plan for serendipity.** Choreograph social events to foster connection. Give guests a list of recommended people to meet. Set the stage for them to become pals and allies through interactive exercises. Assign them to seats at round tables and move toward companionship with deeper questions.

27. **Enforce clear norms.** Clarify what behaviors are off-limits—and announce a fun penalty if people break the rules. *Don't talk to people you already know* expands circles; *no devices* focuses attention; *no advising, fixing, or solving* encourages listening and support; and the fear of eating jelly beans that taste like barf and boogers can be enough to motivate compliance.

B. Create Distinctive Communities

28. **Divide into unique groups.** Offer people a niche where they can fit in and stand out within a larger community. Try splitting schools into houses like Hogwarts or neighborhoods into hamlets with mailboxes clustered together.
29. **Build belonging from the beginning.** Jump-start the vibe by welcoming people in advance. For new students, reduce belonging uncertainty by sharing letters from current students about how they worried early on about fitting in—and how they found their people. For new teammates, offer early onboarding by sending notes a few weeks before they arrive about your culture and their contribution. Then have them share their personal highlight reels with their new colleagues.
30. **Give people distinctive roles.** Make people feel needed—not just included—by giving them a place and a purpose. Put students in a jigsaw classroom where each student is responsible for a puzzle piece in group projects. Invite employees to revise their own job descriptions and seek buy-in from their teams.
31. **Nest groups together under a collective goal or interest.** Ditch the Sorting Hat and unite groups around a shared mission. Highlight what makes each group special,

not superior. They don't need a common enemy; they only need a common cause.

C. Get Squads in Sync

32. **Identify core values.** Discover shared values by asking people to tell stories about defining moments in the squad. Rank your top four values together.
33. **Map values to behaviors.** Achieve clarity by aligning on the specific actions that uphold each of your values—and what it looks like to violate them. Show respect by testing your pee and cleaning up popcorn in the break room.
34. **Establish accountability.** Create consequences for living the values, not only performing tasks and roles. Give immediate feedback when people violate shared principles—and make the costs clear and consistent.
35. **Screen out bad apples.** Don't let toxic people onto the team. Beware of people who kiss up and kick down, play the victim, or admire people who violate your values.

D. Form and Reform Family Traditions

36. **Spice up family dinners.** Nurture values by asking kids to count their contributions as well as their blessings. *Who did you help this week, and who helped you?* Build belonging and resilience by telling stories about family struggles and successes. Family history doesn't have to be a chore; you can turn family history into a trivia game or even use a timer to keep it light.
37. **Invent new traditions.** Enhance closeness by creating and sustaining traditions together. Strengthen pal bonds over birthday cake breakfasts, T. rex costumes for airport pickups, or hiding Justin. Become better allies and com-

panions by holding weekly or monthly family council meetings.

38. **Broaden the family unit.** Create rituals with extended and chosen families. Shared experiences like Cousin Camp with grandparents or weekends with friends' families can expand connection.
39. **Prioritize pair bonding.** Carve out one-on-one time for parents without kids, each parent with each kid, and siblings without parents. Pair traditions build family foundations.
40. **Normalize failure.** Some interactions will inevitably fall flat. Trial and error is how you learn to vibe with more of the people more of the time.