

Connections: Giving Our Lives Meaning

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What is it that makes our lives worth living? What brings us joy and fulfillment? What gets us up in the morning? No, it's not the amount of "stuff" we have. I believe it is the connections we make in our lives that give us a zest for living. Connections with family (love), connections with friends (community), connections with ideas (lifelong learning), connections with meaning (spirituality), connections with work (career), connections through service (volunteerism), connections with nature (interdependence)—these are some of the ways connections serve us.

This paper is intended to emphasize the importance of connections as we grow older. However, most of the information is relevant to people of any age, from childhood to old age.

Connections represent the interfaces between us and the rest of the world. Connections take us outside of ourselves, help us to learn and to grow, and ultimately help us to see the meaning and purpose of our lives. The alternative to nurturing the connections in our lives is to be isolated and self-absorbed, conditions that may lead to loneliness, depression, suffering and premature death.

Can you imagine a world without human connections? Humans are some of the most social animals there are on earth. Very few of us could live happily without our human connections. Think of the worst punishment that prison inmates typically suffer—solitary confinement. Only a few days of solitary confinement can be very disturbing. Consider a monk in an extended silent retreat (my son, a Buddhist monk, is currently in a three-year-plus silent retreat in Nepal). Most of us can't imagine participating in such a retreat ourselves, and correctly attribute great mental discipline to the monk. And yet, some of us, especially as we grow older, allow ourselves to live in increasing isolation as our friends and families either move away or die. To prevent this isolation, we may need consciously to seek to maintain our connections with family members, even if they live at a distance. Further, it will enhance our lives if we continue to make new friends, including persons who are younger than we. My wife (who is my best friend and intimate partner) and I spend time visiting our children and grandchildren, who all live far away from us. We also actively maintain our friendships and connections with our living community; two couples' groups; and our (respective) women's

and men's groups, as well as various other special interest groups, personal or professional, that we are each part of.

It's not always easy to make new friends, especially for those of us who tend to be shy. Often, creating friendships around shared interests is a way to facilitate this. Community associations, dance groups, hiking groups, book clubs, bridge groups, tennis or golf associations, volunteer work and political action are only a few of the possibilities for meaningful interactions that can lead to friendship.

Some of the most important connections we make are with our four-legged friends. Dogs and cats (and many other furry, feathered and finned friends) can be invaluable sources of love, joy and companionship, especially if we do not or cannot access human friends. Specially-trained dogs create much joy for persons in nursing homes and hospitals, and research has shown that we who have pets live longer (and happier) than those without.

Connections may not only affect our outer lives, but may be important parts of our inner lives as well. For many of us, our sense of connection with a higher power brings feelings of hope, meaning, love and comfort. This feeling of connection with a higher power may be based on a knowing; on prayer; on study; or on some other practice or activity that brings us regularly into contact with that higher power. Some of us may make connections in a dream, a meditative state or other altered state of consciousness with a wisdom figure. This might be a shaman, a priestess, a crone, an energy field, a bear, an eagle, or some other entity. These wisdom figures can sometimes help us to gain insight into perplexing issues.

I recently had a very powerful dream in which a female wisdom figure brought me to the shore of a lake, and pointed out a woman at the far shore. As I watched, I saw an arc of light shoot from the woman to me, and a great energy began to move between us. It seemed clear to me at that moment that I was being shown the way that our human race must live in the future if we are to survive—by sharing energy and leadership between man and woman, and by using a partnership of the best characteristics of each to lead us forward. I woke up feeling very excited and grateful for the insights of this dream—another form of connection.

Not all connections are with people or other sentient beings. What about our connections with ideas? Not long ago, it was believed that we largely lost our ability to learn later in life, and that our mental capabilities inevitably went

downhill as we aged. However, it is now understood that, in the absence of medical conditions such as stroke or Alzheimer's, we can be life-long learners. We thrive on new ideas and new learning. Learning becomes, if anything, even more exciting as we grow older and gain in wisdom. So the connections we make through reading, through viewing documentaries, through discussions, and through taking (or giving) classes and workshops can provide excitement and new understanding throughout our lives. I find this time of my life the most exciting yet. This is true to a considerable degree because I am enjoying so much the learning, the teaching and the creation of learning environments I am doing now.

Of course, for a good share of our lives, our careers provide important connections for us—connections with others we work with and connections with the ideas and skills that relate to our work. Here, I include homemaking and parenting in the category of career. Many of us spend more hours at our career than at any other activity in our lives. For this reason, leaving the work world or facing an empty nest can be traumatic, as we leave many of our connections behind. It is thus important not to leave our primary career without having established some other interests that are exciting to us. I left my career as a scientist nearly 10 years ago, because I was ready for a new challenge and for new learning opportunities. That was the right decision and the right time for me, but each person must weigh his/her own situation before making this decision.

Yet another form of connection is found through serving others. Volunteer opportunities of all kinds are available, and the volunteer work done by elders is indispensable to countless organizations. Being a volunteer can bring a great sense of fulfillment if you feel that your work has impact. You create connections with causes as well as with people, both those served and those with whom you work. I have served as a hospice volunteer for the past five years, and I get great satisfaction from spending time with both the patient and the family of the patient in this difficult and important time of transition. I also feel a real kinship with the other volunteers with whom I serve. I also am a computer teacher at a local library, and enjoy helping others develop their computer skills, while I learn a few things myself.

Another connection that impacts many people is that with nature. We humans are as much a part of nature as any other animal, and our connections with the earth and its myriad inhabitants are profound. We see the beauty and glory of the world and the natural order of things and we feel joy and give thanks. For many of us, this is an important spiritual connection. Then as we

look at the major destructive impact that our human activities are having on this world, we may feel sadness and perhaps guilt. This may lead us to work to heal some of the wounds to our world, through social change and social activism, another form of connection with a cause.

I'd like to describe a recent event in my life that profoundly affected me through the various connections I made. I took a two-week trip to Tanzania last spring with fourteen older men. We went to experience the natural beauty of Africa, including the animals and birds, and to sit with tribal elders in various native groups. I made very close friendships with some of the men on the trip, as I had expected I might. We had serious talks every day about our own lives and our purpose on this earth—connections. I felt a kinship with many of the animals we saw and shared space with, and with the great natural beauty of the country—connections. We visited Olduvai Gorge, where some of our most ancient human ancestors lived millions of years ago—connections. And we sat down with elders from a Hunter-Gatherer tribe, the Hadza, who have lived sustainably on this land for ten thousand years or more—connections. When I came back and began to integrate the meaning of this experience in my life, I found I had been profoundly affected by all these connections. A year later, I am still studying and thinking and talking with others about the lessons of the trip. I am trying to understand how I can work with others to create a world where the Hadza and the rest of us humans can live in harmony with each other and with the other, non-human inhabitants of this beautiful Mother Earth.

As elders, we may have more time and resources to explore and to make new connections. These connections give us an opportunity to reach out beyond ourselves, and to invite new experiences, new learning and new understanding. Connections will give us joy and a reason for living. They will help to keep us engaged, vital and alive. Enjoy your connections!

For more opportunities to explore connections and other elder issues, contact Gary at cannmgary@aol.com or visit the www.can-nm.org web site.