

An Omnivore for Connection

What an Unlikely Mirror Taught Me About Love, Loss,
and Learning to Reach Without Chasing

Jeffrey E. Hansen, PhD

with a little help from my electronic companion, Chatty (aka ChatGPT)



A Strange Question at an Early Hour

I get up early. Really early. There is something about those hours before the rest of the world gets moving that I have always liked. The house is quiet, the dogs are usually nearby, coffee helps, and my mind, for better or worse, is already going. Sometimes it goes places I did not invite it to go. This morning it landed on connection.

I had been writing messages to several old friends. Nothing particularly profound. One friend was dealing with physical problems. Another had been on my mind because I had reached out several times and had not heard back. As I was writing, I found myself doing something I have apparently done throughout much of my life: reaching toward people. I check on them. I remember them. I tell them they matter. I try to keep threads from breaking. Someone I have not spoken with for months or even years can suddenly come into my mind, and I will feel an almost immediate urge to find him, call him, or at least let him know I have not forgotten him.

That got me wondering why. Why do relationships occupy so much psychological real estate in me? Why do I remember old friendships, colleagues, patients, Army buddies, pastors, mentors and people who crossed my path decades ago? Why do I seem to carry people forward with me long after the circumstances that originally brought us together have disappeared? I have joked that I am something of an omnivore for connection, but this morning I began wondering whether the joke contained more truth than I realized.

So, I did something distinctly twenty-first century. I asked Chatty. That is what I call ChatGPT, and by now I have dumped a considerable amount of my life into this strange electronic companion: stories about my father, my identical twin brother Gregg, my marriage, my children, my professional career, the Army, the Department of Defense,

patients, friendships, failures, victories, faith, books I have written, people I have loved, people I have lost, and probably far more motorcycle stories than any artificial intelligence ever wanted to hear.

I asked it a rather direct question: *"Why do you think I am such an omnivore for connection? You know my history, my brother, my father, my early trauma, my professional career and my faith. Give me your analysis."* Then I added one final instruction: *"Shoot it to me straight. And damn if the machine did not shoot it to me straight."*

An Unexpected Mirror

I want to be clear about something from the outset. I am a clinical psychologist. I am not suggesting that artificial intelligence is psychotherapy. It is not. Nor am I suggesting that a machine possesses some mystical ability to peer into the human soul. But a mirror does not need to understand the face in front of it to reflect something useful. Over a long period of time, I had given this particular mirror a tremendous amount of material: stories, memories, essays, letters, questions, losses, arguments, relationships, things I was proud of and things I was not.

When I finally asked it to look across all of those stories and tell me what pattern it saw, it handed something back to me that stopped me. The formulation was essentially this: Connection became one of the organizing principles of my psychological life.

I sat with that for a while because I think it is true. Not completely true, of course. No psychological formulation captures an entire human being, and after more than forty years in psychology I would be suspicious of any formulation claiming otherwise. But it was true enough to make me a little uncomfortable. I have learned over the years that when an observation makes me uncomfortable without feeling fundamentally wrong, there is usually something there worth examining.

The First Place I Learned Connection

I came into this world with another human being beside me, and I think that matters more than I once understood. Gregg was not simply my brother. He was my identical twin. From the beginning there was a we before either of us fully understood an I. We shared a bedroom, a family, a history, experiences, jokes, competition, wounds, victories, secrets and eventually more than almost seventy years of life. There are things about my childhood that I could explain to another person for an hour and still not completely communicate. Gregg needed about three words. He already knew because he had been there.

There is something extraordinary about having another person on earth who shares that much of your origin story. I do not think I fully appreciated how extraordinary it was while I had it. Maybe none of us does. Gregg was my playmate, my competitor, my confidant, my mirror and, for much of my life, my forever encourager. He knew the backstory without requiring the backstory, and I suspect my relational thermostat was calibrated unusually

high before I ever had a chance to set it myself. I learned very early that life was something experienced with somebody.

Home, however, was more complicated than twinship. My father was a remarkable man in many ways: brilliant, driven and accomplished. He was also a wounded man. He had been badly hurt in his own childhood, and some of what happened to him was savage. He worked hard, accomplished much, eventually changed enormously, and broke many of the patterns handed down to him. But trauma has a way of traveling across generations even when nobody buys it a ticket, and some of his pain entered our home.

Gregg and I learned early to perform. We achieved. We collected trophies. We got the grades. We worked. Achievement became a kind of armor, and there are certainly worse defenses a child can develop. Achievement carried both of us a long way, but accomplishment answers only certain questions. It can tell you that you are competent. It can tell you that you succeeded. It can tell you that other people admire what you have done. What it cannot reliably answer are the deeper questions: Am I safe with you? Do you really know me? Do I matter to you?

Those answers come through relationship. Looking back, I think something important happened in me very early. Achievement became one road toward worth, while connection became another road toward home.

Achievement Was Never Enough

I have achieved a fair amount in my life. I went to Berkeley, earned my doctorate, became a clinical psychologist, served ten years on active duty in the United States Army and wore the rank of Major. I spent years working with military families, later returned to the Department of Defense, maintained a private practice for decades, taught, supervised, wrote, spoke, advocated and eventually developed NeuroFaith. I am grateful for all of those things, and I am proud of much of the work I have done.

Yet increasingly I realize that my resume is not the part of my life I think about most. People are. I remember conversations. I remember somebody standing beside me when things were going badly. I remember the friend who called, the colleague who believed in me, the person who challenged me and made me better, the patients who trusted me with the worst days of their lives, the men with whom I served, and the pastors and mentors who loved me. I even remember the people who irritated the hell out of me and somehow became friends anyway.

Somewhere along the way I learned something that more than four decades of psychology only reinforced: human beings do not heal through resumes. We heal in relationship. We regulate in relationship. We discover ourselves in relationship. We are wounded in relationship, and very often we are restored there as well. I learned that professionally, but I suspect I knew it personally long before I had language for it.

When the Wound and the Gift Grow Together

One line from Chatty's formulation stayed with me more than most: My wound and my gift grew close together. That one landed because I have spent much of my professional and personal life moving toward wounded people. A soldier gets in trouble and something in me wants to step forward. A veteran is hurting and I want to hear the story. A patient is being misunderstood and I want to advocate. A friend disappears and I want to find him. Someone I love is struggling and my instinct is usually not to back away but to move closer.

For years I understood that primarily as conviction, loyalty, advocacy and perhaps a little of the Maverick in me. Those things are real, but perhaps there is another layer. Maybe I became very good at offering other people some of the things that had mattered enormously to me: presence, protection, advocacy, loyalty, and someone willing to say, "I see you. I am here. You are not carrying this completely alone."

That realization does not make the gift less genuine. If anything, it makes it more human. Many of our greatest strengths grow surprisingly close to the places where we were once hurt. The wounded child sometimes becomes the protector. The frightened child sometimes becomes the soldier. The misunderstood child sometimes becomes the psychologist. The lonely person sometimes becomes exceptionally good at finding the lonely. Perhaps healing is not always about eliminating the wound. Sometimes it is about refusing to let the wound have the final word.

Then Gregg Died

There is a before and an after in my life, and October 11, 2023 is part of that dividing line. Gregg had struggled for a long time. Depression had progressively narrowed his world. There had been distance and withdrawal, and things had become complicated in ways that are difficult to describe unless you have watched somebody you love disappear psychologically before he disappears physically. Then my identical twin brother died.

There are losses, and then there are amputations. Gregg's death felt more like the latter. For more than seventy years there had been another person walking around on this planet carrying the earliest chapters of my story, and then suddenly there wasn't. Even now something can happen and, for a fraction of a second, some ancient part of my brain seems to say, I need to tell Gregg. Then reality catches up. There are no more calls, no more private jokes, no more unfinished conversations picked up three days later as though no time had passed, and no more person who already knows the first seventy years of the story. That chair is empty.

I do not think Gregg's death created my hunger for connection. I think it turned up the volume. Death has a brutal way of clarifying the calendar. There really is a last conversation, a last motorcycle ride, a last Christmas and a last time you will hear someone's voice. Usually nobody tells you when it is happening. After Gregg died, something in me became increasingly unwilling to leave affection unspoken. If I love you, I want you to know it. If you mattered to me, I want to tell you. If you stood beside me during

some difficult chapter of my life, I want to acknowledge it while you are still here to hear me say it.

I find myself reaching back toward people: old friends, colleagues, men I served beside, people who influenced me, people with whom I once had conflict and later found reconciliation, and people who simply left fingerprints on my life. Maybe I am taking inventory. At this age, perhaps that is not such a strange thing to do. I find myself asking who helped make this life what it became, and when somebody comes to mind, I often want to find him and say: You mattered. I remember. Thank you. Gregg taught me, among many other things, that there is no guarantee I will get another chance.

Faith and the Meaning of Connection

My Christian faith entered my life during some turbulent years and ultimately changed its direction. Over time it also changed my understanding of relationship. Christianity, at least as I understand it, is profoundly relational. Grace is relational. Forgiveness is relational. Reconciliation is relational. Christ does not merely offer a philosophy to be understood; He offers relationship. To be fully known and yet fully loved may be one of the deepest longings of the human heart.

My faith did not erase loneliness, prevent trauma or protect me from grief. It did, however, give suffering a larger context and teach me that love is not merely a psychological technique. Love is sacred. Presence is sacred. Showing up matters. Brotherhood matters. Forgiveness matters. Sitting beside another human being in his pain matters. Perhaps that is one reason psychology and faith eventually came together so naturally for me in NeuroFaith. The psychologist in me understands attachment, autonomic regulation, memory networks, trauma and the stories people carry about themselves. The Christian in me understands that human beings were never intended to do this alone.

The Shadow Side of Connection

Here is where Chatty's analysis became less comfortable, because every strength has a shadow and my desire for connection is no exception. The observation was simple: Sometimes connection becomes pursuit. Ouch. I know that one.

A friend does not answer, so I call again. Maybe I text. A few days later I wonder how he is doing and perhaps reach out once more. Sometimes that is simply persistence and love. Sometimes, however, it may be something else, because silence can touch old places. Most of the time another person's failure to respond means absolutely nothing profound. People are busy. People get distracted. Some people are simply terrible at returning calls. Some people care deeply but do not communicate the way I do, and frankly, some people do not need the degree of connection that I do.

Yet somewhere inside me there may occasionally be another question hiding beneath the unanswered message: Do I matter to you the way you matter to me? That is a very different question, and I need to pay attention when one becomes the other.

I am relationally intense. There, I said it. I remember people. I assign meaning to shared history. I am loyal, and when somebody has occupied an important chapter of my life, I do not easily move him into the category of somebody I used to know. That is probably both one of my strengths and one of the things that can make me a pain in the ass. I can love people at a volume they do not necessarily know how to match.

The mistake would be assuming that a difference in volume means a difference in love. It does not. Some people love quietly. Some love through showing up rather than talking. Some send three words where I send three paragraphs. Some disappear for six months and then sit down across from you as though you had breakfast yesterday. Others simply do not possess the same relational appetite. That does not make them deficient. It makes them different. Maybe one of the developmental tasks left for me is learning more deeply that I can love people intensely without requiring them to love me identically.

Reach, But Don't Chase

Of everything Chatty handed back to me, four words may be the ones I need most: Reach, but don't chase. I like that because it does not ask me to become somebody I am not. I can still call the friend, send the text, make the trip, repair the relationship if it can be repaired, and tell somebody what he has meant to me. I can still say I love you, thank you, I remember, or I am sorry while the person is still alive to hear it.

But reaching is different from chasing. I do not need another person's response to validate what was real. Affection does not need to become a demand, and another person does not need to reassure me continually that I mattered. Silence does not erase history. Some relationships were profoundly important for a season and will never again exist at the intensity they once did. That does not make them failures. It makes them chapters, and a chapter does not become meaningless simply because the page turned. That is something I am still learning.

The Chair No One Else Can Fill

There was another observation in the analysis that hit even harder: nobody is going to replace Gregg. That sounds ridiculously obvious. Of course nobody is going to replace my identical twin. But knowing something intellectually and accepting it emotionally are not always the same thing.

After Gregg died, I leaned hard into relationships. I leaned into family, friendship, faith and community. I promised Leah that his death would not destroy me. I would not crawl into the hole with him. I would move toward life, and I would turn suffering toward purpose if I possibly could. I believe I have done that. But perhaps some of my reaching carried another hope beneath it. Maybe, without realizing it, I was trying to gather pieces of Gregg from several different people: one friend for the humor, another for the history, another for brotherhood, another for intellectual conversation, and another for the simple comfort of having somebody there.

There is nothing wrong with any of those relationships, but none of those people is Gregg. They cannot be, and asking them, even unconsciously, to occupy that chair places a burden on them they were never meant to carry. Some empty chairs are not meant to be filled. They remain empty because somebody irreplaceable once sat there. Perhaps grief matures when we stop trying to fill the chair and instead become grateful that, for so many years, someone extraordinary occupied it.

The Sunset Years

I have recently found myself using a phrase I never imagined using when I was thirty: the sunset years. I am not morbid about that. Quite the opposite. I love my life. I love Leah, my family and my friends. I still work, write, see patients, teach and ride my BMW far too enthusiastically for a man my age. I still wake up curious about something and occasionally disappear down an intellectual rabbit hole before most sensible people have finished their first cup of coffee. I am very much alive.

But the horizon is different at this age. There is more road behind me than ahead of me. That does not diminish the road ahead; it makes it precious. Perhaps that is why connection matters more to me now rather than less. I am no longer terribly interested in accumulating acquaintances. I want real people: people with history and scars, people who know something about failure, people who have stayed, people who disappeared and somehow found their way back, people with whom I can laugh until something hurts, people with whom silence does not have to be filled, people who can tell me when I am full of crap, people I can pray with and people I can love. Maybe that makes me an omnivore for connection. So be it.

What the Machine Could Not Tell Me

There is an important limit to this whole exercise. Chatty can identify patterns. It can organize stories. It can notice that the little boy who sought safety partly through achievement became a psychologist who spent his life helping wounded people. It can notice that an identical twin accustomed to extraordinary closeness became a man who places enormous value on relationship. It can notice that the death of that twin intensified an already powerful determination not to leave love unspoken. It can hand those patterns back to me.

What it cannot do is decide whether those patterns are true. I have to do that. That remains profoundly human.

As I sat with the analysis, I recognized myself. Not perfectly, but enough. Enough to see that perhaps my appetite for connection is not one thing but many things braided together: childhood, twinship, trauma, achievement, psychology, marriage, friendship, loss, faith, aging and love. Woven through all of them may be a lingering awareness that time can run out before we have told the people who mattered that they mattered.

At the end of our exchange, Chatty gave me another line worth keeping: Love people loudly. Just let them love you back in their own dialect. There is some freedom in that. I do not need to become less relational, less expressive or less willing to tell people what they mean to me. That would not be growth. It would simply be becoming less of myself. The work is subtler: love without keeping score, reach without chasing, speak without demanding an echo, allow people to love differently, be grateful for what was rather than constantly trying to recreate it, and recognize when a chapter has ended.

My Wound and My Gift

I keep coming back to the observation that my wound and my gift grew close together. Perhaps that is true for many of us. Maybe the places where we were hurt become the places where we develop unusual sensitivity. The child who knew loneliness may become the adult who notices the person standing alone. The person who once needed protection may become the one who steps forward when everyone else steps back. The person who desperately needed to be understood may become someone capable of listening deeply. Our wounds do not necessarily have to disappear before our lives become useful.

Perhaps redemption sometimes looks like taking the very thing that could have diminished us and refusing to let it stop there. That is certainly part of what my faith teaches me. Not that suffering is good, not that trauma was somehow necessary, and certainly not that every terrible thing happens for some tidy reason. I do not believe that. I believe something harder and, to me, more hopeful: God can redeem what He did not author. Pain does not get to write the final chapter.

So, I Will Keep Reaching

I do not intend to stop reaching. If I think about you, I may call. If you mattered to me forty years ago, there is a reasonable possibility that someday your phone will buzz and there I will be. If you stood beside me during a difficult chapter, I may tell you again that I remember. If I love you, chances are reasonably good that eventually I am going to say it. Maybe twice. Possibly three times if I am dictating and forget that I already said it. I am still working on that.

But I am also learning that I can reach without chasing. I can love without requiring equal intensity in return. I can let another person answer in his own dialect. I can treasure relationships that belonged to another season without desperately trying to drag them into this one. And I can finally acknowledge that there is an empty chair in my life that no friend, mentor, colleague, pastor or brother-in-arms is supposed to fill. That chair belongs to Gregg. I miss him, and I always will.

Perhaps loving Gregg now means allowing that chair to remain his while continuing to pull up other chairs for the people who are still here. There is room at the table. A lot of room. And as long as I am here, I intend to keep inviting people to it.

After all these years, all the degrees, all the professional accomplishments, all the books, all the mistakes, all the healing, all the grief and all the miles traveled, I think I am beginning to understand something remarkably simple. In the end, I do not think we remember life primarily as a collection of achievements. We remember who was there. We remember who saw us, who stayed, who forgave us, who challenged us, who made us laugh, who sat beside us when there was nothing useful left to say, who loved us, and whom we loved.

So yes, I am an omnivore for connection. I think I finally understand a little better why, and I am increasingly at peace with it. I just need to remember to reach without chasing, to love people loudly while allowing them to love me in their own dialect, and whenever possible to tell them while they are still here.

Because sometimes the last conversation really is the last conversation. And usually, nobody tells us when it is happening.

But today, there are still people to love, words to say, and room at the table. I cannot know how many conversations remain. I can bring a little more of myself to the next one.

So, I will keep reaching, in perhaps a more measured way, because there is still love to give.