

Connection: The Word That Lingers

Dr. Jeff's Sandbox



Beginning the Exploration

I have been thinking a lot about the word connection. It is a big word, maybe one of the biggest, and it is time to bring it into the Sandbox, to play with it, to turn it over, to sit with it, and honestly to struggle with it a little bit, because it is not an easy word for me. It never has been.

When I think about connection, I think about Johann Hari. For those who know my work, he shows up in just about everything I write, and I have even had the chance to correspond with him. I find him to be a thoughtful and courageous voice. He tells the story of his own depression, the disillusionment he felt with the care he received, the medications that did not ultimately help him in the way he hoped, and then he did something remarkable. He spent years traveling, asking a different question about depression, not just what is wrong inside a person, but what is missing around them. He came back to this word, disconnection, disconnection from meaningful people, from meaningful work and values, from nature, from hope. That framework had a profound impact on me, especially during times when I was struggling myself.

Where the Word First Took Shape

So yes, connection is one of my favorite words, and at the same time it is one of the most difficult, because my life has not been a simple story of connection. It has been a story of connection that comes close and then breaks.

I grew up with a father who, at his core, was a good man, a deeply good man, but he carried the weight of his own abuse. There were moments when he could be present, warm, connected, and in those moments something in me would settle. It felt safe. It felt like maybe this will hold. And then it would not. He would slip into depression or anger or rage, and the connection would fracture, not gradually but abruptly, and that does something to a child. It teaches you that connection is real, but not reliable.

My grandfather carried a similar story, and yet toward the end of both of their lives something beautiful happened. They both found connection with Jesus, and there was real healing there, real restoration, and it mattered. It still matters to me. And with my father, we found our way back to one another. After years of fracture, there was connection again, real connection, not perfect but present, conversations that had depth, a sense that something meaningful was being rebuilt between us, and for the first time in a long time it felt like it might actually hold.

And then, in his early seventies, at about the age I am now, he was mowed down by a speeding truck. He died in surgery. Just like that, the connection we were rebuilding, the conversations we were beginning to have, the sense that something had been restored, it was all cut off, not gradually, not with warning, not with time to say what needed to be said. It was simply gone, and that kind of loss does something different. It does not just wound, it interrupts, it leaves something unfinished that cannot be finished in the ordinary ways we think about repair.

The Wiring Beneath It

Healing at the end of a life, even moments of restoration, do not erase the wiring that was laid down in the beginning. Those patterns embed deeply. They become part of how you experience the world. They live somewhere in the nervous system, in what we might call the default mode network, in the quiet assumptions you carry about yourself and others. Maybe it shows up as a belief that connection is not safe, or not dependable, or maybe at times that you are not fully worthy of it, and yet somewhere inside me there was also a kind of wisdom. I knew I needed connection. I knew I had to pursue it, not withdraw from it.

So I did. I sought out relationships that were stable, meaningful, long-term, through childhood, through early adulthood, and even now I have continued to move toward people, not away from them, but no relationship is perfect, and along the way there have been wounds.

I think about my first business partner, Jim, another fundamentally decent man. We built something together, a practice, a vision, eventually multiple buildings and a team of over twenty professionals. It was meaningful work and shared life during a formative time, and then there was a rupture. Some of that was on me, some of that was tied to my own struggles at the time, some of it was the pressure of growth and leadership, but what followed was painful. His anger became intense and at times it echoed something familiar, something I had felt before, the kind of anger that does not just express itself but overwhelms the space. I left. I went back to the Department of Defense because I could not sustain what was happening internally or relationally. Years later, after my life had been rebuilt in many ways, I reached out to him, not defensively but with humility, owning my part and hoping for some form of repair, and his response was brief. He did not have the time or energy, and that was it. A connection that had once meant so much simply ended without repair.

And then my brother, my identical twin, my best friend in this life aside from my dear wife Leah, the one who knew me without explanation, the one who was always there. We shared everything, we grew up together, laughed together, cried together, and there was a depth of connection there that is hard to even put into words. And then, after his own long struggle, he gave up. He died alone, disconnected from life, from others, and from me, and that kind of loss leaves a cavity, not a surface wound but something deeper, something that changes how you experience connection itself.

Naming my Last Boss Honestly

And more recently, I find myself thinking about my last boss, and I say that intentionally because I will not work for anyone again. This one is more complicated because there was something there that I experienced as meaningful connection, at least at times. There were moments of alignment, moments of shared vision, moments where I felt seen in my work and in what I was trying to build, and that mattered to me. It felt like we were building something together that had depth, that had meaning, that could actually serve people in a real way.

But alongside that, there was a different pattern that began to emerge, and it became harder and harder to ignore. There was inconsistency, a kind of relational presence that would show up and then disappear. There were moments when we would be in conversation and it would feel engaged and meaningful, and then suddenly it would be interrupted, a phone, an email, attention pulled elsewhere, and I would find myself dropped in the middle of something that felt important. There were decisions made that undercut my authority, ways in which I was positioned that did not align with what I thought we had agreed to, and over time that erodes something. It erodes trust. It erodes the sense that the connection is mutual and respected.

There were deeper layers to it as well, decisions that impacted my role, my work, my intellectual property, and the trajectory of what I was building, decisions that I experienced as not being fully owned or addressed. There were moments where I felt used, where what I brought had value when it served the system, but when tension arose or when things became more complicated, I was not protected in the way I had expected. And I have to say this clearly and without defensiveness, there are always two parts in any conflict, in any tension, in any breakdown of relationship, and I have to own my part in that. In fact, I prayed with him about this, acknowledging that the aforementioned wounds that have shaped how I experience connection likely made the struggles in our relationship, and the ways he handled leadership and related to me as his clinical director, have a huge impact on me, perhaps more impact than they should have, amplified through the filter of my own pain. That part is on me. That is not on my last boss. I need to own that.

At the same time, I want to be equally clear. He is a good man, but he sees the world and he connects in ways that simply do not work for me. There is a kind of inconsistency, that on and off switch, a relational rhythm that feels at times like connection and then suddenly like dismissal, almost a kind of *je ne sais quoi* of disconnection, something hard to name but unmistakable when you feel it. That pattern matters. It has impact. And it shapes what is and is not possible in a sustained relationship.

And so I find myself sitting with that, not in a simplistic way of making him all bad or myself all right, but in a more complicated truth, that someone can be decent and still violate something important in the connection, that someone can believe they are doing well and yet not see the impact of their actions, that connection can feel real in moments and still not be something that can be relied upon over time.

What Connection Is Becoming

So here I am, sitting with this word, connection, and asking some hard questions, when do I hold on, when do I let go, how much do I persevere. Because I do believe in perseverance, I believe in working through things, I believe in repair, I believe in not walking away too quickly, but I am also beginning to understand something else, that not every connection is meant to be sustained, not every rupture is meant to be repaired, and not every person has the depth to meet you in the places where connection actually lives.

That does not make them evil. It does not erase the good in them, but it does mean I have to be honest about what is, not just what I hope could be, and I have to own something here too. These wounds are not my fault, but they are now my responsibility, which means I have to learn not just to seek connection, but to discern it, to recognize where there is responsiveness, where there is capacity for repair, where there is depth, and also to recognize where there is a pattern of disconnection that is unlikely to change.

Connection remains essential. I will not give up on it, but I cannot pursue it blindly. I have to pursue it wisely, and maybe that is what I am learning here in the Sandbox.

The Truest Anchor

And yet, even as I sit with all of this, I am aware that I do not fully understand connection. Not yet. There is more here. More to learn. More to uncover. More to refine in how I live it, how I discern it, how I hold it, and how I release it.

Because if I am honest, part of what has made this so difficult is that I have looked to connection with people to do something it was never fully designed to do. People matter. They matter profoundly. Relationships matter. They are essential. They are part of how we are wired, part of how we heal, part of how we grow. I will never diminish that. Not for a second.

But people, no matter how good they are, no matter how well-intended, no matter how deeply they try to love, are not ultimately stable. They cannot be. They are human. They are limited. They are wounded. They are inconsistent. Just like me.

And so if I look to them to be the place where my soul finally rests, where connection is perfectly secure, I will be disappointed. Not because they are bad, but because I am asking them to carry something they were never meant to carry.

And this is where I have had to come back, again and again, sometimes gently, sometimes through loss, sometimes through rupture, to something deeper.

The ultimate connection, the only truly safe and stable connection, is not found in people.

It is found in Jesus Christ.

The one who does not waver. The one who does not turn away. The one who does not get distracted, does not dismiss, does not abandon. The one who enters into our pain, into our disconnection, into our brokenness, and does not leave.

“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”

That is not just a theological idea. That is the answer to something deep in the human heart. The cry for a connection that holds. The longing for something that cannot be taken, cannot be interrupted, cannot be lost in the same way everything else in this life can be lost.

That is where the wound in the soul ultimately finds its answer.

And when that connection becomes primary, not in a way that replaces people, but in a way that rightly orders them, something shifts. I can still pursue connection with others.

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- Jeffrey E. Hansen, Ph.D.

I can still value it deeply. I can still grieve when it breaks. But I am no longer asking it to be my foundation.

It becomes a gift, not a god.

And maybe that is where this is leading me.

To continue pursuing connection with people, but with clearer eyes. With wiser discernment. With healthier boundaries. And with a deeper anchoring in the only place where connection is truly secure.

I am not there yet.

But I am learning.

And maybe that is what this word, connection, is beginning to mean to me now.