

The Phone, the Email, and the Interface

We Have Mistaken Access for Connection

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Some Things Were Worth Keeping

All right, let's get something out of the way right at the beginning. I'm getting old. There, I've said it. At 72, I figure I've earned the right to be a little nostalgic, occasionally sentimental, and perhaps even downright maudlin about the good old days. I can almost hear some of my younger colleagues rolling their eyes already. Fair enough. I've probably earned that, too. And yes, I realize that whenever someone my age begins a sentence with "Back in my day," there's a reasonable chance that a lecture is about to follow. Bear with me. I promise there is a point to all this.

Not everything about the old days was good. We had our share of foolishness, blind spots, and traditions that deserved to be challenged or abandoned. Some things needed to go, and good riddance. But other things were worth keeping, including the ordinary courtesies that communicated respect, consideration, and the simple recognition that another human being mattered. Somewhere in our enthusiastic rush toward technological progress, I wonder whether we misplaced a few of those treasures.

We live in an age of extraordinary accessibility. Our phones are rarely beyond arm's reach, messages arrive around the clock, and we can communicate with nearly anyone, anywhere, almost instantly. Yet I increasingly encounter people who feel unseen, emotionally disconnected, and uncertain whether the people in their lives are genuinely available to them. We have become

extraordinarily sophisticated at reaching one another while sometimes seeming remarkably reluctant to actually connect.

I rather like technology. I use it constantly, and I appreciate being able to communicate with my children, collaborate with colleagues, and maintain friendships across considerable distances. But convenience and connection are not synonyms. An electronic interface can transmit information with remarkable efficiency while communicating almost nothing about the warmth, interest, or emotional presence of the person on the other end.

And that distinction, I believe, is more important than we may realize.

The Neuroscience of Connection

One of the most fascinating developments in neuroscience has been our growing understanding of just how profoundly relationships shape the human brain. We tend to imagine ourselves as independent individuals, each equipped with a brain that manages our thoughts, emotions, and behavior. But human beings do not develop in isolation, nor do our nervous systems operate independently of the relationships in which we live.

Psychiatrist Daniel Siegel's work in interpersonal neurobiology has helped illuminate the intricate relationship among brain, body, mind, and interpersonal experience (Siegel, 2012). From infancy onward, our emotional lives are shaped through interactions with other people. A frightened baby settles in the arms of a familiar caregiver. A distressed child becomes calmer when a parent listens and responds with warmth. Adults continue to experience similar processes, although we may be less willing to acknowledge how deeply we need one another.

In a particularly fascinating study, Coan and colleagues (2006) demonstrated that holding the hand of a trusted spouse was associated with reduced neural responses to anticipated threat. The physical danger had not changed, yet the presence of someone trusted influenced how the brain responded to it. That finding captures something I have observed throughout my clinical career: another human being does not always have to solve our problem to help us experience it differently.

Social neuroscientist John Cacioppo devoted much of his distinguished career to studying loneliness and its implications for human health. His work helped clarify an important distinction: loneliness is not simply the absence of people, but the subjective experience of insufficient meaningful connection (Cacioppo et al., 2015). We can live alone and feel deeply connected, or we can be surrounded by colleagues, family members, and hundreds of digital contacts while experiencing profound loneliness.

The health implications are sobering. A major meta-analysis involving approximately 3.4 million participants found that loneliness and social isolation were associated with increased mortality risk (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015). These findings do not establish that loneliness directly causes

particular illnesses, but they underscore that social connection is not some sentimental luxury. It belongs in any serious discussion of human health and well-being.

What fascinates me is the contradiction between what we are discovering scientifically and what we sometimes practice culturally. We now possess extraordinary knowledge about attachment, emotional regulation, relational safety, and the therapeutic alliance. Yet it seems increasingly possible to move through an entire day surrounded by communication while experiencing remarkably little personal encounter.

As a psychologist, I find that paradox difficult to ignore.

What the Nervous System Remembers

Much of my clinical work has involved helping people understand how earlier experiences shape their present emotional lives. Through NeuroFaith®, I integrate polyvagal-informed therapy, HeartMath® and neurocardiology, Internal Family Systems, and spirituality or faith. These are distinct perspectives with differing levels of research support, and NeuroFaith® is certainly not the only integrative approach to deeper transformational healing. But the model reflects a conviction that has grown stronger throughout my career: we cannot adequately understand psychological suffering without considering the relationship among bodily responses, emotional

defenses, core beliefs, and the ways people experience themselves in relationship to others.

Consider someone who grew up feeling unwanted or emotionally abandoned. As an adult, that person may intellectually understand that a spouse or close friend loves them, yet an unanswered telephone call or an ambiguous text message can activate an



old and painful expectation: *I don't matter. I'm being rejected. Something is wrong with me.*

The rational mind may recognize that the other person is probably busy, but the body has already begun preparing for abandonment. Breathing changes, anxiety rises, and a familiar emotional narrative takes hold. The immediate situation may be relatively insignificant, but it has touched something much older.

This is one reason I distinguish between incremental and transformational therapeutic change. Coping strategies can help people manage distress, often quite effectively, but when suffering is organized around deeply established negative beliefs about the self, meaningful healing may require helping those beliefs and emotional expectations change. A relationship marked by consistency, appropriate boundaries, and genuine responsiveness can provide experiences that challenge old assumptions about being unwanted, unsafe, or unworthy of care.

None of this means that people must remain constantly available to one another or that an unanswered message constitutes emotional abandonment. Such an expectation would be unrealistic and psychologically unhealthy. But it does suggest that the quality of our everyday interactions can carry emotional significance far beyond the literal words exchanged.

Our nervous systems are exquisitely sensitive to the difference between feeling received and feeling dismissed. Technology has not eliminated that sensitivity. It has simply given us new ways to encounter it.

When Communication Loses Its Humanity

Perhaps this is why I find some of our changing communication habits so curious. I call someone's telephone and hear nothing but a recorded sequence of numbers, leaving me uncertain whether I've even reached the correct person. I send a thoughtful professional email and occasionally receive no acknowledgment whatsoever. I participate in group discussions where people have supposedly gathered around a shared purpose, only to discover that getting an actual exchange of ideas underway can feel like trying to start a conversation with the furniture.

And yes, I confess that this sometimes drives me nuts.

I appreciate that people are busy. I certainly am, and I have undoubtedly overlooked calls and messages myself. Nobody owes us unlimited access to their time or attention. Healthy boundaries matter, particularly in a world where electronic communication can intrude upon nearly every waking hour. But I do wonder whether the convenience of digital communication has made it easier to avoid some of the ordinary relational responsibilities we once took for granted.

This becomes especially interesting among those of us in the helping professions. We teach attachment theory, discuss emotional attunement, and emphasize the therapeutic importance of feeling understood and valued. Then we occasionally communicate with our own colleagues with all the interpersonal warmth of a parking meter. There is something wonderfully absurd about that contradiction, although I'm not sure it's entirely funny.

My concern is not that electronic communication is inherently shallow. Research has long demonstrated that meaningful relationships can develop through computer-mediated interaction (Walther, 1996). Technology can sustain friendships, bridge enormous distances, and

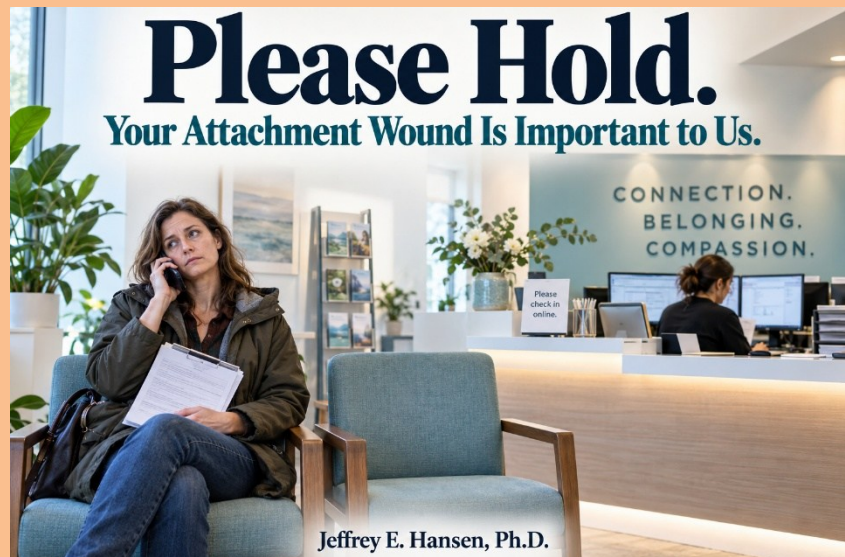
provide connection that might otherwise be impossible. The question is whether we are using these remarkable tools to deepen our relationships or gradually allowing them to become substitutes for relationships themselves.

There is a difference between exchanging messages and experiencing another person's presence, and I worry that we sometimes forget it.

Please Hold. Your Attachment Wound Is Important to Us.

This gets under my skin in behavioral health care, particularly in the substance use treatment community where I have spent considerable time. People arrive after years of neglect, betrayal, and relationships in which needing something made them a nuisance. Some have finally scraped together enough hope to ask for help. Then they enter a program that advertises connection, belonging, and compassionate care, and discover that getting someone to return a call requires the persistence of a bill collector.

We assess their attachment wounds. We document their fear of abandonment. We explain how repeated experiences of emotional unavailability shaped their expectations of others. Then we fail to follow through on something we promised. Well, hell. The patient has supplied the history, and we are apparently volunteering to help with the sequel.



I have worked alongside wonderful people in these settings. I have also watched administrative machinery swallow enough of their time and attention to make genuine engagement feel like an extracurricular activity. Everybody is busy. Everybody is charting. Somewhere, a dashboard is turning green. Meanwhile, a frightened person is sitting in the lobby wondering whether coming here was a mistake. But the record will show that services were delivered.

I understand boundaries. I have spent forty years trying to maintain them, occasionally while answering a question that arrived just as I was reaching for the doorknob. Nobody owes patients unlimited availability. But if I say I will call, I ought to call. If I cannot, somebody ought to explain. We do not need to become surrogate parents or hand out our personal numbers like party favors. We do need to notice when our behavior starts resembling the indifference we are being paid to help people recover from.

The research on therapeutic relationships gives us good reason to take connection seriously (Norcross & Lambert, 2018). I have seen its importance in moments that would look thoroughly unimpressive in a training video. A patient stops mid-sentence, looks at me, and says, “You actually get it.” Sometimes that moment follows a thoughtful intervention. Sometimes I have simply managed to keep my mouth shut long enough to hear something important. A humbling return on four decades of professional education.

What bothers me is the distance between the language and the experience. Put “We treat you like family” on a website, and I immediately want to know which family we are talking about. Some of our patients have already survived one. They need people who mean what they say, make room for difficult conversations, and follow through often enough for trust to become a reasonable risk. Before paying somebody to refresh the compassionate branding, I would call the program, leave a message, and see whether the compassion knows how to work a telephone.

And Then There Are Our Kids – and They Are Watching US

Being a pediatric psychologist at heart, I cannot leave this essay without turning to the people I have spent decades treating and care so deeply about: our children and adolescents. Those reading this who know me, knew I would get around to the kids eventually. Spend enough years sitting on the floor with children and trying to persuade teenagers that you are worth talking to, and they tend to follow you into whatever you write.

I find myself wondering what we are teaching them about connection. They are growing up with the ability to reach almost anyone instantly, yet calling someone, leaving a voicemail, or having an uncomfortable conversation can feel like an unreasonable expedition into the wilderness. I have known teenagers whose kindness and relational maturity would put plenty of adults to shame. But I have also met young people who can maintain twelve text exchanges at once and look at a ringing telephone as though it has just threatened their lives.

Before we get too pleased with ourselves, however, we might examine who taught them.



Children watch how we speak to one another, whether we listen, and what happens when a notification arrives in the middle of their sentence. We can deliver a magnificent lecture about courtesy while checking our messages, but I would not expect a standing ovation. Teenagers have a particularly irritating gift for noticing when the sermon and the demonstration have wandered off in different directions. They have a **superpower for hypocrisy detection** in us.

Texting certainly has its place in family life. “Practice ends at five.” “Please pick up milk.” “Where are you?” followed by the timeless parental sequel, “I can see that you read this.” It helps us

manage busy lives and send affection across an ordinary day. But a family can become remarkably efficient at coordinating transportation while gradually losing track of how anyone is actually doing. Everybody gets delivered to the correct location. Whether anybody feels known when they arrive is another question.

There is something precious about hearing your child's voice. Parents learn the hesitation before an answer, the unusual flatness, the effort required to make "I'm fine" sound convincing. A familiar voice can prompt us to ask another question or stay on the line a little longer. Our children need to hear us, too: the pleasure in our greeting, the reassurance that we have time, the warmth that can be difficult to squeeze into a hurried message. Sometimes a conversation begins with absolutely nothing important and takes ten minutes to find what needed saying.

So yes, I think we should teach children how to use the telephone for an actual conversation. Radical stuff. A friendly voicemail greeting, returning a call, introducing yourself, and recognizing when something deserves more than a text are reasonable things to learn. If I am paying for the phone, I also think I can expect a call from home to be answered when circumstances permit or returned within a reasonable time. School, work, driving, and a life of their own all deserve consideration. I simply question the arrangement in which the device works beautifully for everyone on earth except the people financing it.

What matters most is helping our children become comfortable with the ordinary vulnerability of conversation. Apologizing while someone can hear the sincerity in your voice. Disagreeing and staying present long enough to work something through. Listening without immediately preparing your defense. Telling someone you love them and allowing the words a moment to land. Those things can feel awkward, especially while learning them. That is a good reason to practice at home, where an imperfect attempt can be met with patience rather than a performance review.

And we owe them that same willingness. Sometimes our children will want to talk when we are tired, distracted, or halfway through something we would dearly love to finish. We will miss opportunities. I certainly have. But we can put the phone down, turn back, and say, "I'm sorry. Tell me again." They get to watch us repair the very thing we hope they will learn to repair.

After all these years, I still love the moment when a child or teenager realizes an adult is interested in what they have to say. The rehearsed answer gives way to something more honest, and the conversation finally gets somewhere. I would like our children to have plenty of those moments at home. Eventually, the phone we bought them will be obsolete. Knowing how to reach another person, and how to let someone reach them, will still come in handy.

The Older I Get, the Less Patience I Have for Empty Water Troughs

There's something wonderfully liberating about turning 72. For one thing, you can say almost anything and people aren't entirely sure whether you're dispensing wisdom or just becoming a cranky old man. I've decided there's a certain advantage in keeping them guessing.

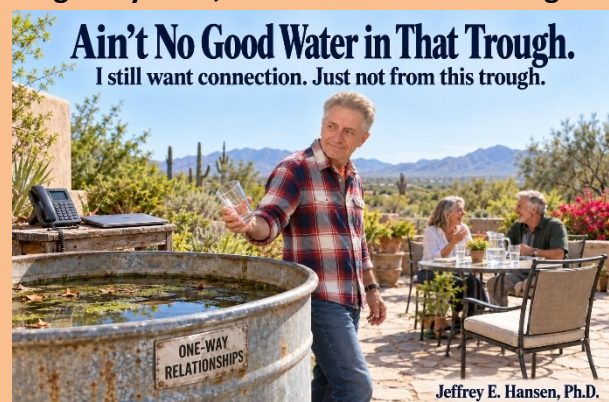
But aging does bring a rather fascinating change in perspective. Time, which once seemed to stretch endlessly ahead, begins looking a bit more like a limited-edition commodity. I don't find that depressing. Quite the opposite. It has made me considerably more selective about how I spend it, whom I spend it with, and how much nonsense I'm willing to entertain along the way. And believe me, I've entertained plenty.

After decades in military service, medicine, psychology, private practice, and more committees and professional collaborations than any reasonable human being should endure, I've discovered something rather remarkable: impressive credentials do not necessarily produce impressive human beings. I've known people with enough letters behind their names to exhaust the alphabet who couldn't manage the simple courtesy of returning a phone call. Conversely, I've known people without a single professional credential whose warmth, integrity, and faithfulness could teach the rest of us a graduate seminar in being human.

I've also learned that some relationships are wonderfully reciprocal, while others seem to require the emotional equivalent of jump-starting a dead battery every time you want to connect. You initiate the conversation, send the message, follow up, encourage, organize, and occasionally wonder whether the other person is still alive. Eventually, even a reasonably enthusiastic fellow begins to suspect he's doing all the rowing while everyone else is enjoying the scenery.

And that's where an old rural image comes to mind. If you keep walking up to the same water trough and finding nothing worth drinking, perhaps the problem isn't that you haven't waited long enough. Perhaps it's time to find another trough.

I'm not interested in drinking from that water trough anymore, because there ain't no good water in it. Now, I say that with a grin, not a grudge. I've been on both sides of that equation, and I'm sure I've disappointed my share of people along the way. Nor do I expect friends or colleagues to be perpetually available. Good grief, I wouldn't want to be perpetually available myself. There are motorcycles to ride, dogs to love, books to write, and a beautiful bride with whom I'd much rather spend an evening than chase down another unanswered email.



What I want more of these days is wonderfully uncomplicated: people who enjoy one another, who can argue without becoming enemies, laugh at themselves, challenge each other to grow, and occasionally call for no other reason than to hear a familiar voice. Relationships that don't require elaborate maintenance schedules or the intervention of a search-and-rescue team.

Perhaps growing older isn't so much about learning to let go as it is about becoming clearer on what deserves to be held close. I've been blessed with some extraordinary people in my life, and I would rather give them the best of what remains of mine than keep knocking on doors where nobody seems particularly interested in answering.

Besides, at 72, I've got better things to do than spend another afternoon trying to teach a water trough how to hold water.

The Presence That Matters

I don't miss rotary phones. By the time you finished dialing somebody with three nines in their number, you had reconsidered the friendship. Nor do I believe earlier generations had perfected human relationships. We managed to ignore one another quite successfully before anybody invented airplane mode.



What I value is the pleasure of reaching someone who is glad to hear from you. A colleague who follows up. A friend who calls without needing anything. A conversation that wanders somewhere interesting because neither person is trying to dispose of it. Sometimes you solve a problem. Sometimes you laugh at

something you probably shouldn't. Sometimes you discover what has been bothering you halfway through telling somebody about your otherwise perfectly ordinary day.

I enjoy the convenience of these devices as much as anybody. But I have spent enough time chasing communication to appreciate the people with whom it comes easily. We make the effort, forgive the occasional lapse, and pick up where we left off. Nobody needs to issue a tracking number.

I have no idea what technology will offer us twenty years from now. I hope it's wonderful. In the meantime, if you call and I can answer, I'd like you to hear that I'm pleased it's you. We might even have a conversation neither of us planned.

Unless I'm on the motorcycle. Then leave a message. I finally found something worth being unavailable for.

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