



Connection to Self, Others, and World - inquiry -

prepared by Root Cuthbertson 2020

This guide is intended as a starting point for conversations, to increase understanding for those who may have a different relationship with these topics than you do. The approaches mentioned in this guide can be part of an Inner Transition toward an understanding of human experience that will ideally foster deeper and more compassionate connections, for individuals, groups, and the entire world.

Why are Relational Connections Important?

Connections affect resilience.

Ideally an Inner Transition will involve increasing resilience in the face of disturbances and uncertainties, including what Henry Emmons calls 'creating deep connections'. Finding one's place of belonging, forming deep connections and meaningful relationships is a common and important challenge for most people. Individuals and groups can learn to form, tend to, and honour connections in ways that deepen and strengthen relationships, facilitating integrity and harmony, leading to breakthroughs rather than breakdowns.

Connections affect choices.

The human nervous system is designed for a variety of connective relationships, with a baseline of social engagement (see [Guide to the Nervous System](#)). As social animals, humans are typically born into a web of social and relational connections, and most are raised in a culture where some connections are given, and some can be chosen. Ideally an Inner Transition will empower individuals to make meaning of their relational connections, and to make choices with increasing awareness of how their choices affect both themselves and others.

Connections affect perception.

An individual's perception of the importance of connection affects how they see the world. Some people perceive relational connections as having primary importance. For others a deeply meaningful relationship with their Self is most important. Connections and relationships can be perceived along a spectrum – from supportive and helpful to prescriptive and burdensome.

Connections offer information.

Fragile or strong relational connections provide informative feedback about an individual's choices, circumstances, and relationships, and may encourage a re-appraisal of a situation. Such connections can help individuals to make different choices, or to re-frame their perceptions.

An Inner Transition will likely involve increasing awareness about the pain, suffering, and loss within human and natural communities. With increased awareness of pain, individuals may feel more loneliness and isolation, and may need to rely more on their strong connections and relationships. Even relationships they do not prefer can be helpful for coping with the overwhelm that often arises in response to the pain and suffering in the world.

Some relationships – with friends or family who reinforce one's worldview -- can be a source of empowerment and nourishment; others may seem to make everything impossible. For instance, continuing relationships that trigger sadness and grief about what has been lost may be extremely difficult at first. And, deeply connective relationships built on foundations of empathy and compassion can provide powerful inner resources, and help to find unexpected pathways forward.

Ideally an Inner Transition will cultivate courage for deepening connective relationships, including challenging ones, so that individuals and groups can begin embodying the societal Transition they envision.

Benefits of Relational Connections

- increased support to prevent burnout
- reducing isolation, loneliness, and depression
- opportunities to tolerate, accept, and respect differences
- role models for how to forgive oneself and others
- opportunities to navigate conflicts and increase conflict resilience
- increasing generosity and gratitude
- building empathy, compassion, and trust
- increasing individual meaning and purpose
- a context of supportive community and belonging.

Too Little or Too Much

Too little connection can lead to isolation, loneliness, and depression. Journalist Johann Hari, who has struggled with depression, describes lack of relational connection as the reason behind the 'loneliness epidemic' and the appointment of a UK Minister for Loneliness. Richard Louv proposes that 'Nature Deficit Disorder' results from a lack of nature connection, what he calls 'vitamin N.' Jon Young asserts that many western societies are based on dis-Connective strategies, legacies of imperial expansion and the systematic conquest of Connective cultures (see Re-connecting below). He is concerned by teen suicide rates, and proposes surrounding children with a supportive, relational, and Connective culture.

Too much connection can also be problematic. Many individuals benefit from time alone or in nature, away from other people. Part of social self-care is avoiding 'connection fatigue,' which can result from too many shallow relationships and not enough deep ones (see [Self-Care: Social](#)). Relationships can feel burdensome, especially when weighted with obligation and lack of appreciation. Some cultures prescribe roles so much that individuals may feel limited autonomy or choices beyond clearly defined social expectations.

There is a 'sweet spot' for relational connection – not too little or too much, but 'just right'. While this will vary by individual and by culture, individuals typically benefit from a good balance of relational connection, so they get enough time with themselves, with others, and with the wider world.

Re-Connecting

(Jon Young)

Naturalist and anthropologist Jon Young's work is focused on re-connecting children and adults with themselves, each other, and with nature. He has researched what he calls universal 'cultural elements' within several indigenous cultures, particularly those that prioritise relational connections with people and with nature. 'Cultural elements' are common themes rather than specific practices. For instance, greeting customs for welcoming newcomers may vary widely between cultures; and they are consistently present within all the cultures Young studied. He describes a process of 'growing ropes of connection'. Relationships often start small, like a thread connecting two beings. Over time they can grow into larger cords, and eventually into strong ropes. Young proposes this is the basis for creating relational connections between self, others, and the natural world.

Young's 'Connection Modelling' is informed by occupational therapy and neurobiology. He refers to the nervous system's baseline of social engagement, and symptoms and problems that can develop when, during their formative years, children do not receive enough relational connection; including time with nature and with caregiving adults. Impressionable children can develop beliefs that the world around them, and the adults they rely on, may not be able to meet their needs for relational connection.

Young likens this to a nerve cell blindly extending toward another in the hope of connecting – only to discover that there is no one to connect with. This can lead to a number of defensive postures based on the belief that dis-Connection is normal. Young proposes that one of the primary functions of culture is to provide ways for children to make strong relational connections with themselves, with others, and with nature. Many modern grown-ups who did not have such an experience may feel their 'culture has failed them,' and may carry unresolved grief and anger about what they missed as a child. He has said many modern societies face a 'Connection challenge' and a 'separation epidemic.' Young finds hope in the fact that the human nervous system is 'hard-wired for connection,' quoting Brené Brown.

Interpersonal Neurobiology

(Daniel Siegel, Darcia Narvaez)

Neurobiologist Dan Siegel's research supports these ideas. Relational connections help to shape the neural pathways affecting an individual's worldview, memory, identity, narrative, and sense of coherence or meaning. Interpersonal relationships affect the maturation of the human nervous system, especially brain development. During the first year of life, an infant's brain grows rapidly, gaining about 50% of its mature size. Largely responsible for this growth are mirror neurons, which stimulate internal responses to whatever external actions or emotions a child witnesses someone else experiencing.

Siegel suggests that mirror neurons are the basis of empathy, since they literally serve as a mirror for how one individual relates to another's emotional or behavioural responses. Since neurons that 'fire together wire together,' over time habitual neural pathways can form based on such relational connections. These can either strengthen or weaken a child's ability to empathize and relate with others, depending on the care they receive. Children learn from their caregiving adults' attitudes, postures, emotional responses, and behaviours. Children also develop many of their core beliefs about the world, like what is considered culturally appropriate, what to expect, and what is 'normal'.

Siegel emphasises that relational connection during early childhood development can provide a good foundation for sensory integration, emotional regulation, and social engagement. Cultures that invest time in ensuring that children have strong relational connections are less likely to produce adults who seek therapy for disorders, dysfunctions, or maladaptive coping strategies. Siegel adds that the brain's plasticity means there are many effective therapies for adults who did not have optimal conditions as children.

Neurobiologist Darcia Narvaez has a similar view. She proposes that neglect of infants and children, especially when their brains are developing, can lead to a cycle of relational poverty, ill health, and failure to develop morality. Those who grow up in a culture which does not prioritise relational connections may learn insecurity, low self-esteem, egotism, and lack of trust in self or others.

She adds that it is possible to counteract the misorganized neurobiology which can result from under caring for children. Children benefit from adult role models who can be emotionally present, share in their experiences, and provide a foundation where both child and adult can grow their trust and respect for each other. It helps when both adult and child can see each other as being on similar journeys of self-discovery, and when the adult can allow the child's individuation and self-development, rather than simply trying to fashion the child into a copy of their adult caregiver.

Connection, Empathy, and Vulnerability

(Brené Brown)

Researcher Brené Brown defines relational connection as "the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship." Brown has said empathy fuels connection, while sympathy drives dis-Connection, and gets in the way of empathy (see [Guide to Empathy & Compassion](#)).

She describes empathy as a skill that aids in developing relational connections. With practice, mutually meaningful relationships can develop from giving and receiving empathetic support. Empathy is cultivated by courage and compassion, and is a powerful antidote to shame, which can result in fear, blame of self or others, and dis-Connection. Brown describes empathy and shame as opposite ends of a continuum. In 2006 she developed *Shame Resilience Theory* (SRT), asserting that the most isolating experiences are also the most universal. When individuals recognize that they are not defective, or alone in their experiences, they normalize what had previously caused them shame.

“Shame is the intensely painful feeling or belief that we are flawed and unworthy – something we’ve experienced, done, or failed to do, makes us unworthy of love, acceptance, belonging, or connection. If others see or know it, we have fear of disconnection. It is related to perfectionism - 'if I do it perfectly, then I will be accepted and loved.' “ – Brené Brown

Brown sees vulnerability as a path to joy, love, and trust; to finding the way back to connection with each other. Connection depends on allowing oneself to be vulnerably seen.

Courageously sharing vulnerability is one way to build connections between people. This can be like building a bridge – a slender path spanning a divide, creating connection instead of separation. At first, such bridges may be fragile; they can grow stronger over time. This can take practice, especially for those from a background where vulnerability, empathy, and relational connection were not encouraged.

True Belonging

(Brené Brown)

“True belonging does not require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.” – Brené Brown

Brené Brown describes 'true belonging' as “belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world.” Individuals can at the same time be connected to something larger than themselves and stand on their own. According to Brown, 'true belonging' requires being present with vulnerability and discomfort while learning to connect with others, without sacrificing one's own identity or individuality. A societal Transition will likely involve individuals learning to interact with, connect with, and be in relationship with people who are different from them. Such a Transition will benefit from true dialogues: both listening and sharing, replacing ambition with curiosity, lowering defenses, and building bridges across differences.

Brown says 'True Belonging' will require courage and a strong belief in relational connection. Without this belief, which can be shaken or tested, it is easy to become dis-Connected and polarised into factions. She likens the fear of being isolated to being stranded alone 'in the wilderness,' far from meaningful relational connection with other humans.

Connecting to Self, Place, and World (Bill Plotkin)

Psychologist and wilderness guide Bill Plotkin has a different view of the wilderness. For him, it is a place where humans in Connective cultures can undergo a profound Inner Transition, which can ultimately connect them with their deepest Self and strengthen relationships with the natural world. Plotkin expands Brown's idea of 'true belonging' to include both Self and world; while agreeing that finding one's place in the world requires courage. He links the deeper human Self with wild nature; connecting with one invariably leads to connecting with both. He adds that humans are members of a larger community which includes all of nature.

Plotkin sees maladaptive coping strategies – common in many western societies – as symptoms of a kind of arrested development. He diagnoses many people as being stuck in adolescence, since they have not made a transformative Inner Transition, nor been supported by their culture. This results in societies where many people do not take on the responsibilities or meaningful relational connections that come with 'true adulthood.'

Plotkin posits that individuals can find purpose, meaning, and relational connection by undergoing a series of Inner Transitions, or rites of passage, throughout their life. In Connective cultures, these rites of passage traditionally included aspects that reinforced both relationships with nature and with a human community. He divides the human life span into 8 life stages, and describes general aspects of the kinds of Inner Transitions that can happen at each stage. In Connective cultures, the first half of an individual's life culminates in the discovery of one's life purpose – what you are “blessed and burdened to contribute” – with a preliminary understanding of deep connection to Self, others, and nature. The second half of life involves fulfilling one's purpose or role – a “hazardous and joyous embodiment” – offering one's gifts to the world, and continuing to make meaningful relational connections with Self, others, and nature.

Plotkin emphasises the Inner Transition between late adolescence and early adulthood. This is how many individuals gain clarity about their life path, and how they begin to contribute meaningfully to their community, honouring relational connections with both humans and nature. According to Plotkin, adults in a Connective culture have undergone some kind of transformative Inner Transition at least once. He defines 'true adults' as individuals who:

- view themselves as belonging to several nested communities: primarily to the Earth; secondarily to a family, ethnicity or culture, region or nation.
- understand their unique place in their communities, due to one or more Inner Transitions or rites of passage.
- are embodying their unique place in their communities as a gift to both their own Self and to their people.
- view their role as one of service to something larger than themselves, both their human community and the larger web of life.

Plotkin believes that when individuals learn to value relational connections, they want to

- contribute to and create regenerative and life-enhancing human communities,
- appreciate all the creatures and habitats within the web of life,
- promote responsible environmental behaviour (REB) to protect and enhance natural environments,
- belong to an Earth community, of which humans are also members.

He adds that embodying one's life purpose is “the greatest gift we can offer the world,” and “the greatest generator of life-enhancing cultural change.”

“Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.” —Dr. Howard Thurman (1899-1981), theologian and civil rights leader.

Related Inner Transition Resources

Guide to the Human Nervous System

Self-Care: Emotional & Social

Inquiry: Empathy & Compassion

From Behaviours to Beliefs

<https://transitionnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/From-behaviours-to-beliefs.pdf>

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