

## Highlights from “The Lost Art of Connecting” by Susan McPherson

“I see so many people today going about connection all wrong. Most people are so busy working for people that they fail to work with them, developing positive relationships through a thousand small touchpoints. They are adding more and more contacts, attending a zillion events, slogging through endless Zoom calls, and wondering why they feel depleted and lonely at the end of a long day. But in my eyes, people don’t stand alone. They aren’t a small isolated “dot,” but are instead an instrumental piece in something much more extensive, a part of a grander vision. People do business *with* people. And when you make a genuine connection, it sparks learning and knowledge sharing, reduces burnout, spurs innovation, and creates a sense of purpose and well-being.”

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“Any meaningful relationship starts with you—your vulnerable, real self. And therein lies the reason depth escapes us: we have to be flawed, we have to be real, we have to be human. What we want to be is perfect, successful, flawless—especially at work! But that doesn’t inspire real connection.”

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“Today, when we think of “building a network,” we tend to think of technology: LinkedIn, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook. These are brilliant tools that many of us use daily, often to significant effect. But the key is going beyond the transactional—the accepted friend request, the like, the retweet, the favor, or the forward. Relationships we cultivate with depth can impact our health and our career in unexpected ways. Here’s my challenge to you: before you send that LinkedIn request or write out that email to the person you want to connect with, brainstorm two or three ideas for ways that you could help them. Are they working on a project you know something about? Are they launching in a city you know well? Are they raising awareness for a cause that you could showcase on your social platforms? Most people will go into a coffee, lunch, or meeting laser-focused on what they can get from it.”

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“When you meet with someone, set a goal to understand their world and their circumstances, offer to help them with something they need, or invite them to something you both enjoy doing to foster a deeper connection that can help you in the future. It completely levels the playing field and makes everyone far more comfortable and open. If you can connect as a human (are you both middle children? love to travel? interested in environmental causes?), then you will have a cheerleader in your corner who can serve both of you in synergistic ways. Perhaps you’re not even the best contact for this person, but you could connect them with others who are. Connect with them on a human level: Where are they from? What is their family, heritage, or culture like? Knowing those details creates meaningful conversation. It creates the threads from which the ties of connection can be made. If you only talk about work,

then you miss the underlying attributes that make us human—our shared commonalities and who we truly are.

“A recent Cigna survey revealed that 46 percent of adults in the United States sometimes feel alone, and 54 percent said they always or sometimes feel that no one knows them well. Think about that for a moment: over half of the people in this country feel as though no one knows them. That is a staggering statistic. Not only is this bad for business, as people do business with people, but research shows that lonely feelings can take years off our lives. One study found that lonely people have a 26 percent higher risk of dying. Loneliness produces the stress hormone cortisol, which can lead to high blood pressure, increased inflammation, and a depressed immune system. And contrary to the common association between getting older and feeling alone, surprisingly, Gen Z (ages 18 to 22) and Millennials (ages 23 to 37) score the highest on the loneliness scale.

In contrast, research shows that a deep, authentic social network can add up to 15 years to your life. But most of us are so busy trying to do our jobs, pay the bills, and accomplish more, more, more that we end up depleted at the end “of the day, and our connections with others feel just as empty as we feel inside. If you simply make it a daily practice to listen, learn, and help each time you connect with someone, you will notice an instant change in how fulfilled you feel.”

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“According to a study conducted by Olivet Nazarene University, Americans, on average, recognize only 15 percent of their coworkers as “real friends.” Forty-one percent are just coworkers, and 22 percent are strangers.<sup>8</sup> (Strangers—no wonder people feel lonely.) There’s a sense that we have to keep our guard up at the office, to not appear weak or vulnerable. But I advocate for developing real friendships at work. You don’t have to wait to become friends with a colleague, and you never know where these friendships can lead.”

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“There is a plethora of research now that shows the role that dopamine, serotonin, oxytocin, and other “feel-good chemicals” in the brain are connected to positive social interaction. She also knew that having a successful career is as much a matter of relationships, personal and professional, as it is the work itself. Cross’s research has shown that thriving—being at the top of your game in terms of your well-being—doesn’t have anything to do with the actual specifics of your work, believe it or not. It’s not dependent on your role or the amount of stress you feel, or the demands of your job. Instead, he found that it has everything to do with the quality and depth of your relationships, how you engage and interact with the people in your workplace, and even those in your personal life. This is an important finding to take into consideration the next time you’re feeling burnout, stress, or job dissatisfaction. When you’re feeling overwhelmed at work, maybe what you need isn’t less—or different—work, but better relationships.”

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“Hosting—rather than waiting to be invited—makes connecting easier.

The genius of this strategy is that it elevates you from a position of weakness—wondering what fabulous networking events are transpiring without you—to a position of power and strength. Instead of being a follower, waiting for permission, you become a leader: hosting, connecting, and building relationships, one gathering or call at a time.”

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“In-person gatherings are by far the most real, intimate, and meaningful. I would never recommend that anything replace the pure joy and magic of real connection and trust that takes place when individuals gather together. Science backs this up: in many cases, face-to-face meetings are ideal because they build trust in a way that digital communication cannot. In 2015, Fast Company shared research from researchers at the University of Chicago and Harvard in an article called “The Science of When You Need In-Person Communication.” The researchers illuminated the significance of the small ways that people touch in face-to-face meetings to build trust—shaking hands, opening a door for each other, ceremoniously exchanging business cards, or giving a business-like pat on the arm at the end of a meeting. While these small acts of touch might seem insignificant, they are quite powerful signals of warmth and a shared sense of connection. You may not consciously think, “hey, I trust this person,” when someone pats you on the arm. But an unspoken connection is established. Your brain reacts in a positive way. When you shake hands with someone, that human touch lights up the reward center in your brain, causing you to feel a surge of good feelings.”

“Researchers have also found that when negotiators shake hands with each other, they are more honest and open, and reach better outcomes. The takeaway: meeting in person makes it more likely that you will come to a cooperative agreement or build trust. Consider, too, the message it sends to a client when you fly across the country—or even just across town—to appear in person for a meeting or event. That sacrifice of valuable time and effort sends a powerful message: this relationship is important.”

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“It sounds obvious to the point of absurdity. But human beings are notoriously bad at listening. Not only do we stink at it—we’re not interested in it either! Dr. Julian Treasure is a sound and communication expert whose mission is to help people and organizations listen better and create healthier and more effective sound, including speaking. His five TED Talks have been watched more than 100 million times. His TED Talk “How to speak so that people want to listen” is in the top 10 TED Talks of all time. But his TED Talk on how to listen received only about 10 percent as many views. (Ah ha! We want people to listen to us—but we’re not so interested in listening to them.) We may not want to listen, but it’s a crucial key to forming

genuine connections! Whether you're discussing a new venture face-to-face or advocating for an issue online—your aptitude for listening will greatly impact your ability to connect. If you can improve your listening skills, you will stand out—people want to be heard, and they will notice.

“A key distinction that most people overlook: listening and hearing are not the same thing. Hearing is connected to the old reptilian—Is that a tiger I hear?—part of the brain. Hearing works faster than vision and is a very different thing than listening. Listening is the mental process of selecting things to pay attention to and then ascribing meaning to them. It's a skill.

Ever heard of selective listening? Like when you ask someone to take out the trash but they claim, “I didn't hear you!” In truth, all listening is selective: we each retain sounds differently. We can walk out of the same conference with 500 other people with a diverging interpretation of what was shared. Each individual's listening is unique—as unique as their fingerprints. Human beings listen through a set of filters, meaning that we ascribe different meaning to what we hear.”

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“You cannot truly listen to another human being and do anything else at the same time.” ~  
Scott Peck

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“Leading with “how can I help?” is effective because most people hesitate to lead from a position of weakness. But offering your help obliterates the notion of weakness altogether; it brings you and a potential client, colleague, or friend one step closer together. This conversation starter equalizes the room by reminding everyone: we all can benefit from assistance, care, and support. It also asserts your intentions: I have something to offer.”

“Asking “how can I help?” is an invitation for synergy. It sends the message: I am interested in what you do and who you are.”

“I often ask people where they're from. Since I've lived so many places, it truly helps in finding a point of connection. But if we haven't lived in a similar place, I would ask, “I've always wanted to go there—what's it like?” (and then listen to the answer). I also often pause the conversation to make sure I've understood everything that person shared because learning more about our world is actually a gift. “Oh my gosh, can you repeat that?”

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“Connection is as much a learned skill as playing the violin or scoring a goal in soccer. We all have the ability to connect around humanity and the experience of being alive. But it is important to note that some people do this more naturally. For those who don't, I prefer to say they don't yet.”

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“Telling someone you’ll do something (and then taking action) is one way for you to demonstrate your trustworthiness as well as a means for helping that person feel seen. But what’s less often recognized is the importance of taking action on advice or tips that other people suggest to you. It takes only a few minutes of your time. If a new connection suggests you order the hummus at the restaurant down the street from your apartment—try it. Then you have the perfect opportunity to reconnect with them over email. “Loved the hummus—great call!” Sending that quick email can transform that relationship from one of emotional distance into one of closeness.

Did you meet someone new who suggested a book you should read? Pick it up from your local library or the bookstore—and then write them to say you did so and to thank them for the tip. Did the person mention that they were just on a podcast? Listen to the episode and send a brief note or better yet, promote the podcast on Instagram or Twitter. Not only will these actions provide context into their work and their personality, you will also have another “reason to connect. After you listen to the podcast you can write: “Fascinating podcast about impact direct-to-consumer marketing—I have some friends in this space I’d love to connect you to, if you’d like?” And just like that, you’re starting to further weave the connection. Or if you chose to promote on social platforms, most likely your contact will see and reap the benefits.

As you build contacts and relationships, people will give you advice. You will get myriad unsolicited tips, suggestions, and recommendations. In many cases, these tips fall on deaf ears. But as much as you can, especially in a relationship that you would like to find meaningful, you should heed the advice that you get. In fact, there’s research showing that if you don’t follow the advice a colleague or a contact gives you, it can have negative consequences. We ignore people’s advice all of the time. But it pays to know that when we do, there can be negative ramifications. Don’t ask a colleague or a new connection for their advice or tips (no matter how trivial) if you don’t plan on taking it. Doing so is another great way to deepen a connection and to make someone feel seen”

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“Consider this question: How are you? Now consider this one: What two words best describe how you are feeling today?

Brené Brown, author of *Dare to Lead* and the famous researcher who made vulnerability a household name, used this trick to check in with her colleagues during the coronavirus lockdown. On Zoom, her teammates were asked to simply type two words that best described how they were feeling. Instead of getting a chorus of “fine” or “good” in response to the question “How are you?” she received words like exhausted, terrified, depressed, numb, or anxious. But she also saw words like hopeful, optimistic, and grateful. The key here lies in how the question was asked. Brown went deeper by asking the right question. On her podcast *Unlocking Us*, she said, “What I’m seeing right now are these weird paradoxical feelings and

emotions.” And that’s often the case. We love our family and they make us frustrated. Deep love and intense frustration can happen at the same time. We can feel both passionate about and exhausted by our work. Communicating in that way with your team—and making space for that kind of dialogue—will no doubt deepen your connection.”

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“Curiosity is linked to psychological, physical, and emotional health. Recent research shows that it may also play a critical role in our social relationships. It makes sense that curious people may have an easier time bonding with a diverse range of people, simply because they are interested in learning about what people from different walks of life have to offer.”

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“Another study found that people who are more curious might be more skilled at “reading” other people. Studies have also found that people who are curious are better able to navigate negative situations in relationships, too, looking at them as a puzzle to figure out rather than a reason to be offended. Curious people tend to be less aggressive, too, perhaps for the same reasons. When you are open to the possibility of considering different viewpoints, there is not as much potential hostility. With each relationship you develop, ask yourself: What is there to be learned? If you’re sitting across from someone vying for a new job, even if they ultimately say no, ask yourself: What other new knowledge could I walk away with? What viewpoint had I been missing? If you’re just spewing information about yourself, not only have you not learned anything about the other person, but you haven’t deepened the relationship, either.”