

HEALING FOR OURSELVES AND OUR RELATIONSHIPS

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A Radical New Vision

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INTRODUCTION:

A Shift in My Thinking

Writing this book feels more like a surprising adventure than a predictable “next effort” in my literary career. It is not a book that I intended to write five years ago.

But what I am now writing reflects some fuzzy thinking that has been hanging around the corners of my mind for a long time, thinking that has recently climbed to center stage and gained a compellingly clear focus. After a quarter century of puzzling over people’s problems and wondering how a psychologist could help, I have been captured by an idea that is moving me away from familiar ground toward large fields of uncharted territory.

The idea is this: When two people *connect*, when their beings intersect as closely as two bodies during intercourse, something is poured out of one and into the other that has the power to heal the soul of its deepest wounds and restore it to health. The one who receives experiences the joy of being healed. The one who gives knows the even greater joy of being used to heal. Something good is in the heart of each of God’s children that is more powerful than everything bad. It’s there, waiting to be released, to work its magic. But it rarely happens.

For a surgeon to abandon a practice in order to study nutrition would, at first glance, seem an unreasonable thing to do. Why not continue with the legitimate work of surgery, a proven means of doing considerable good that only a select group of highly trained professionals can perform? The shift would make little sense, *unless* the doctor had strong reason to suspect that improved eating habits could actually reverse disease more powerfully and quickly than surgery. Then, by studying nutrition, the surgeon would be working toward the day when invasive, hard-to-schedule operations would no longer be necessary, when vegetables, not scalpels, would do the job.

In recent days, I have made a shift. I am now working toward the day when communities of God’s people, ordinary Christians whose lives regularly intersect, will accomplish most of the good that we now depend on mental health professionals to provide. And they will do it by *connecting* with each other in ways that only the gospel makes possible.

Imagine what could happen if God were to place within his people intangible nutrients that had the power to both prevent and reverse soul disease and then told us to share those nutrients with each other in a special kind of intimate relating called connection. Imagine what could happen if that were true, if we believed it, and if we devoted ourselves to understanding what those nutrients were and how we could give them away.

I hope to demonstrate that that is exactly what God has done. He has deposited within us an energy that can heal soul disease, a power that is released to do its miraculous work as we relate in certain ways with each other. Our difficulty is that we don't believe it and therefore haven't thought much about it. But that could change.

I envision a community of people who intentionally mingle in settings where these nutrients are passed back and forth, where I pour into you the healing resources within me and you pour into me what God has put in you. Like spiritual gifts, these nutrients only nourish our own souls as we give them away for the blessing of others.

But what are they? What do I have within me that could deeply impact your life? How do I get them into you? And what is required of me to receive them from you and of you to give them to me? What does it mean to connect with other people in a way that forms healing community?

For the last twenty-five years, I have been practicing a form of surgery. As a professional therapist, I have removed the diagnosed patient from his or her natural setting; I have offered myself as a credentialed specialist to do what we all assume nonprofessionals cannot do and therefore should never attempt; and I have entered into private, vital parts of the patient's life that are rarely seen, let alone adequately dealt with, outside a therapist's office. During the last fourteen of those twenty-five years, I have trained other people to provide similar services. When Kep was born, I gave him to the Lord and vowed to do my part in steering him in good directions, to fill his mind with the truth of God.

I look back on all that time with great satisfaction. By any standard, I have enjoyed success in my professional career and have helped some folks along the way. It would make obvious good sense to keep on the same track for the next twenty-five years.

But that's not what I'm doing. I have strong reason to suspect that Christians sitting dutifully in church congregations, for whom "going to church" means doing a variety of spiritual activities, have been given resources that if released could powerfully heal broken hearts, overcome the damage done by abusive backgrounds, encourage the depressed to courageously move forward, stimulate the lonely to reach out, revitalize discouraged teens and children with new and holy energy, and introduce hope into the lives of the countless people who feel rejected, alone, and useless. Maybe "going to church," more than anything else, means relating to several people in your life differently. *Maybe the center of Christian community is connecting with a few.*

I want to see people connect with a few others as intimately as the various parts of my body work together, as cooperatively as my fingers are working together to write these words. With blood from one heart flowing through each finger and instructions from one mind controlling their movement, the job gets done. If one finger were to suffer a cut, my body would quickly send life-giving resources to the damage site to fight off infection and help restore the finger to full use.

The church, we're told on good authority, is ". . . held together by every supporting ligament." Does that mean that a church community can hold me together when my life is falling apart? The church is designed to "grow and build itself up in love, as each part does its work" (Eph. 4:15-16).

But what does that mean? What does a community of a connected few look like? Will it happen through the good activities that for most people define church life? Can we go on relating to our family and friends as we have and expect it to happen? Or is something more needed?

I suggest that it's time to take a hard look at what really gets passed back and forth in our relationships and to ask what is being withheld that, if given, could change our lives. It's time to consider a radical understanding of "going to church" that centers on releasing the power to change lives that God has placed within every member of the Christian community, a community Christ calls his body, a community made up of lots of people connecting to a few others.

What would it mean to enter the battle for someone else's soul by connecting with them? Does soul care deal with the core issues lying beneath a history of sexual abuse? Does connection address what's going on beneath panic attacks, shoplifting, and eating disorders? Is there real power to do what needs to be done in ordinary relationships?

When Paul proclaimed Christ "so that we may present everyone perfect," was he grappling with what we moderns call emotional problems? When he claimed that the energy of Christ was powerfully working through him as he related to others, was it an energy that might help a parent worried sick over a rebellious drug-abusing son or a troubled eating-disordered daughter? When he felt as though he were in the pains of childbirth until Christ was formed in the lives of people he loved, was something coming out of him that could meaningfully help a woman struggling with multiple personalities or a man who has never felt close to anyone?

I have been captured by the idea that God has placed extraordinary resources within us that have the power to heal us and our relationships. If released they could do a lot of good that we now think only trained specialists can accomplish. I believe that, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, these resources can do whatever needs to be done to move people toward maturity. I have what it takes, not as a psychologist but as a Christian husband, to help my wife become deeply whole. I can influence my kids, help my friends, and be an instrument of soul healing in the lives of a few. The core requirement is that I be godly. It's easier to get educated.

I envision the church as people who are connected in small healing communities, connected by what they give to each other. Perhaps they gather with other little communities in larger groups to celebrate the life they share and be instructed in that life and then go out to connect even more deeply and invite others to enjoy that same intimacy.

My burden is twofold:

1. To understand the Christian life (and those who want to live it) in a way that frees us to release the good that God has placed within us. I want to move away from the pressure to live

up to a set of prescribed standards, and I don't want to keep trying to repair whatever damage our backgrounds may have caused.

2. To understand what community could be in a way that excites us with its potential to liberate, strengthen, and encourage just a few and to touch the deepest, deadest, most terrifying parts of those people's souls with resurrection power.

Beneath these two burdens is a longing to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ in a way that fills us with passionate confidence that it can do what no other force in heaven or earth can do. Throughout the book, I assume the gospel is the good news that believing that Jesus is the Christ guarantees eternal life to the believer (John 20:31). Believing the truth about Jesus, that he is God in the flesh, that he died to pay the price for our sins, and that he freely forgives everyone who believes that he is who he says he is and that he does what he says he does, is saving faith.

And with saving faith comes the gift of life. As I will later make clear, that gift means more than forgiveness and a guaranteed future. It also means that I now possess the life of Christ, the same energy that was released in everything he did, most visibly in how he related. When I realize the gospel has equipped me to relate with that energy, I get excited about what Christ could do through my life as I enter into other people's lives.

As we progress in our understanding of these things, my prayer is that "going to church" will become the most important activity in our lives, the activity of building healing communities of a connected few.

MY MIDLIFE CRISIS

A few years back I turned fifty. The reflection required of folks who reach that milestone led me to realize something was missing. It dawned on me that I had somehow survived half a century without going through a full-fledged, dream-shattering, midlife crisis, and that felt wrong, or at least unfashionable.

So I prayed about it. And God was faithful. He answered exceedingly abundantly.

After more than twenty-five years as a psychologist, about half in practice and half teaching, I have reached a few conclusions that have required me to shift the focus of my work. The conclusions don't feel entirely new, just more central. Let me express them this way.

- *Beneath what our culture calls psychological disorder is a soul crying out for what only community can provide.* There is no "disorder" requiring "treatment." And, contrary to hard-line moralism, there is more to our struggles than a stubborn will needing firm admonishment. Beneath all our problems, there are desperately hurting souls that must find the nourishment only community can provide—or die.

- *We must do something other than train professional experts to fix damaged psyches. Damaged psyches aren't the problem. The problem beneath our struggles is a disconnected soul. And we must do something more than exhort people to do what's right and then hold them accountable. Groups tend to emphasize accountability when they don't know how to relate. Better behavior through exhortation isn't the solution, though it sometimes is part of it. Rather than fixing psyches or scolding sinners, we must provide nourishment for the disconnected soul that only a community of connected people can offer.*

The crisis of care in modern culture, especially in the Western church, will not be resolved by training more therapists. We do not need a counseling center on every corner. It will be worsened by moralists who never reach deeply into the hearts of people in their efforts to impose their standards of behavior on others, even when those standards are biblical.*

* Some readers may be interested in the implications of my thinking for professional counseling, especially for Christian counseling. In Appendix A, I refer to recent research in psychotherapy to argue that the considerable good done by trained counselors could, in many cases, be done as well or better by mature, nonprofessionally qualified people who relate well. I provide a quick overview of the development of the "talking cure" to bolster my point.

- *The greatest need in modern civilization is the development of communities— true communities where the heart of God is home, where the humble and wise learn to shepherd those on the path behind them, where trusting strugglers lock arms with others as together they journey on.*

As I have shared these conclusions at conferences and in a few publications, I have lost students and disturbed friends and raised more than a few eyebrows. I fear, too, I have made a few friends I will not keep.

But I have been most surprised (and gratified) by the number of people who have said, "You're on the right track. Keep going." One psychiatrist wrote to tell me I was committing professional suicide. And then he added, "And it's about time!"

I think so too. It's about time to go beneath the moralism that assumes the church's job is done when it instructs people in biblical principles and then exhorts them to do right. It's about time to find a better way to help each other when we struggle than the way of our therapeutic culture, which looks beneath every troublesome emotion or behavior pattern to find a psychological disorder that needs repair.

It's about time to free ourselves from the pressure that moralism creates and to tone down our preoccupying fascination with our internal workings, whether with psychological dynamics or with the subtleties of idolatry, a fascination that therapy often encourages.

I want us to think about the kind of connection that is required for a small group of people, perhaps a family or a couple of friends, to become a healing community. I want to understand how a

father can relate to a sullen, troubled son with a power that could change his direction. I want to be able to guide the wife of an angry husband toward a path that could restore their relationship.

Then, in Appendix B, I sketch my understanding of when professional help is appropriate, and suggest the kind of resources that a community could develop to deal with the vast majority of personal concerns. If these topics are of interest, I suggest reading both appendices before proceeding with chapter 1.

I want us to be honest about the insecurities, fears, and inadequacies that lie hidden in our hearts, beneath the appearances we may present to others. I want us to speak with neither shame nor pride about the dark nights of our soul. I want us to be able to tell the stories of our abuse, rejection, or failure to a few special people who will listen and know they can't take the pain away, to people who will not think something is wrong with us that a therapist can fix and who will not simply tell us to get a grip on things.

But I don't want us to focus on the hard things, the ugly things, the awful things. I don't want us to gloss over them—we must never pretend that things are better than they are—but I do want us to look beneath all that is difficult and see the miracle God has wrought in our hearts.

I want us to see that he has placed powerful urges to do good in the deepest recesses of our regenerated hearts. That's what the New Covenant is all about. Something wonderful and beautiful and resilient is within us that no abuse, rejection, or failure can ever destroy. I want us to focus on that!

A friend of mine spent a weekend with a Christian ministry for troubled young people. During a morning session of the residents and their parents, a young woman rose to address the group.

With trembling lips and tears of shame streaming down her face, she said, "I've been a prostitute for the last three years. I am so sorry."

As she stood there, paralyzed by her vulnerability, her father left his seat, walked to the front of the room, embraced the shaking girl, and said, "When I look at you, I see no prostitute in you. You've been washed. I see my beautiful daughter."

She replied, "I had forgotten the joy of being your little girl."

I want us to relate to one another, not as moralist to sinner or therapist to patient, but as saint to saint, father to child, friend to friend, as true lovers, with the confidence that we can help each other believe that, by the grace of God, there is something good beneath the mess. Even when all we can see is the mess, I want us to believe that we can nourish the good and encourage its release.

This book is a call to *healing relationships*, a call away from a moralism that thinks the law is still outside of us and that we need to be pressured to obey it, a call away from the assumption that professional training equips people better than godliness to speak powerfully into people's lives. This is a call toward the day when our deepest wounds and struggles will be meaningfully and adequately dealt with in the ordinary relationships of life.

God has given us the power to be his instrument in healing souls. That power is waiting to be released.

I am writing to ordinary people, to dads and moms, husbands and wives, friends and colleagues, to everyone who understands that we cannot make it on our own, that we cannot become all we could be without the love, wisdom, and feedback of others. I am writing to anyone who yearns to escape the miseries of loneliness and a meaningless existence by richly connecting with at least a few other people but perhaps isn't sure how to go about it.

I am writing to folks who sincerely want to make a positive difference in the lives of the people they love but who feel inadequate to do so. Exactly how do you connect with an angry or depressed spouse or with a shy child who hides in her room while the neighborhood kids play together? How do you connect with someone you just don't like or someone who has hurt you? How do you move connectingly toward others when you feel insecure, afraid you'll not be wanted? How do you help a friend who worries too much or a daughter who won't communicate?

I am writing to that middle-aged couple who sees a younger couple struggling and wants to help but isn't sure how, to the father of an estranged adult son whose every overture is rebuffed, to the friend of a busy person who feels close to no one but acts the part of a well-adjusted, together woman.

When you finish reading this book, I think you will have a new understanding of what you can give to others and how you can make a powerful difference in their lives and in your own.

My discussion begins with a story about my older son who was lifted out of significant struggle by the power of connecting. It continues as I spell out the three ingredients of healing community and then illustrate their power in the life of a well-known spiritual leader (chapters 1 through 3).

I then explore why connecting is so powerful and why alternative ways of helping don't accomplish nearly as much. We are all disconnected people, and it is the unbearable reality of separateness that causes us so many problems. My central point in chapters 3 through 7 is that the gospel of Christ connects us to God, to ourselves, and to others; it places something alive and wonderful in our forgiven hearts that bridges the gap of separateness and joins us in life-bearing union. We now have something to give that has the power to change the entire course of someone else's existence.

Chapters 8 through 14 ask some important questions: Why is real connection so rare? What gets in the way? Why do we settle for counterfeit connection, for a false intimacy that changes no one? And what can we do about it? What must we do to clear away the obstacles to what we really want?

In chapters 15 through 18, I suggest a game plan for relating powerfully to others, for dreaming good dreams about what we could become, and for helping one another get there.