

The Power of Being Seen

Chapter 1 – Introduction

“The real act of, say, building a friendship or creating a community involves performing a series of small, concrete social actions well: disagreeing without poisoning the relationship; revealing vulnerability at the appropriate pace; being a good listener; knowing how to end a conversation gracefully; knowing how to ask for and offer forgiveness; knowing how to let someone down without breaking their heart; knowing how to sit with someone who is suffering; knowing how to host a gathering where everyone feels embraced; knowing how to see things from another’s point of view. These are some of the most important skills a human being can possess, and yet we don’t teach them in school.” (How to Know a Person, by David Brooks)

Comment on the above.

Discussion questions:

- 1.) “There is one skill that lies at the heart of any healthy person, family, school, community organization, or society: the ability to see someone else deeply and make them feel seen – to accurately know another person, to let them feel valued, heard and understood.” (David Brooks) Can you relate to this, and how so?
- 2.) “The worst sin towards our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them: that’s the essence of inhumanity.” (George Bernard Shaw) How have you experienced this?
- 3.) “In a 2021 study, McKinsey asked managers why their employees were quitting their firms. Most of the managers believed that people were leaving to get more pay. But when the researchers asked the employees themselves, the top reason was relational. 79% said they did not feel recognized and valued by their managers and organizations. They didn’t feel seen.” How important do you think it is ‘to be seen’ in the workplace?
- 4.) “Artificial intelligence is going to do many things for us in the decades ahead, and replace humans at many tasks, but one thing it will never be able to do is to create person-to-person connections. If you want to thrive in the age of AI, you better become exceptionally good at connecting with others.” (David Brooks) When do you struggle to effectively connect with others?
- 5.) “William Ickes, a leading scholar on how accurate people are at perceiving what other people are thinking, finds that strangers who are in the midst of their first conversation read each other accurately only about 20% of the time and close friends and family members do so only about 35% of the time.” If this is true, what is the implication on our ability to see others and to be seen?

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Chapter 2 – The Right Questions

“My estimate is that about 30% of the people I interact with are natural question askers. You’re at lunch or on a Zoom call and they turn their curiosity on you with a series of questions. People in the other 70% can be charming people; they’re just not questioners. They spend their conversational time presenting themselves. Sometimes I’ll be walking out of a party and realize: “That whole time nobody asked me a single question.” (How to Know a Person, David Brooks)

Comment on the above.

Discussion questions:

- 1.) “I’ve come to think of questioning as a moral practice. When you are asking a good question, you are adopting a posture of humility. You’re confessing that you don’t know and you want to learn. You’re also honoring a person.” (David Brooks) What do you think about the connection between asking good questions and humility?
- 2.) “If I’m going to get to know you, it’s not because I have the magical ability to peer into your soul; it’s because I have the skill of asking the sorts of questions that will give you a chance to tell me about who you are.” (Nicholas Epley, psychologist). How are you at getting to know someone by asking them questions?
- 3.) “According to research with seminar leaders, conversation facilitators, psychologists and focus group moderators, biographers and journalists – whose job it is to ask other people about their lives, people are longing to be asked questions about who they are.”
Do you find this to be true?
- 4.) “Listen, listen, listen, listen, and if you do, people will always talk. Why? Because no one has ever listened to them before in all their lives. Perhaps they’ve not even even listened to themselves.” (Studs Terkel, journalist). How do you relate to this?
- 5.) “My greatest strength as a consultant is to be ignorant and ask a few questions.” (Peter Drucker). How can asking questions be a strength?
- 6.) “If I were to summarize in one sentence the single most important principle I have learned in the field of interpersonal relations, it would be this: Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” (Stephen Covey, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People).
When have you experienced this principle?

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Chapter 3 – The Lonely Century

Starting around 2018, a plethora of books have been published tracing the catastrophic decline of social relationships across society. They have titles like *Lost Connections*, *The Crisis of Connection*, and *the Lonely Century*. In different ways, they present us with the same baffling mystery: The thing we need most is relationships. The thing we seem to suck at the most is relationships. (How to Know a Person, David Brooks)

Comment on the above.

Discussion questions:

- 1.) The number one reason people don't see others is that they are too self-centered to try. *I can't see you because I am all about myself. Let me tell you my opinion. Let me entertain you with this story about myself.* Many people are unable to step outside their own points of view. They are simply not curious about other people. (David Brooks). How do you experience this dynamic?
- 2.) The number two reason people don't see others is that they have so much noise in their own heads, they can't hear what's going on in other's heads. *How am I coming across? I don't think this person really likes me. What am I going to say next to appear clever?* Fear is the enemy of open communication. (David Brooks). How does this "noise" show up in your life?
- 3.) In May 2023, the U.S. Surgeon General—Dr. Vivek Murthy—issued a report that drew attention to an epidemic that affects 1 out of 2 American adults. Half of us are lonely. Loneliness and social isolation, Dr. Murthy says, are urgent public health concerns, more widespread than smoking, diabetes or anxiety. It also turns out that loneliness poses severe risks to health and longevity. What is your view about "loneliness and social isolation being urgent public health concerns?"
- 4.) "Two are better than one, because they have a good return for their work: If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls down and has no one to help him up!" (The Bible). How have you experienced this?
- 5.) "We spend more time interacting with our screens and less time in face-to-face interactions with other human beings, including strangers. Buying clothes, ordering food and finding an answer to a question—these are examples of interactions that take place increasingly online. (Cornell Medicine). How is this trend impacting you?

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Chapter 4 – Shaped by Your Sufferings

“People who are permanently damaged by trauma seek to *assimilate* what happened into their existing models. People who grow try to *accommodate* what happened in order to create new models. The person who assimilates says, I survived brain cancer and I’m going to keep on chugging. The person who accommodates says, No, this changes who I am....I’m a cancer survivor...This changes how I want to spend my days. The act of remaking our models involves reconsidering the fundamentals.” (How to Know a Person, David Brooks)

Comment on the above.

Discussion questions:

- 1.) C.S. Lewis once observed that grief is not a state but a process. It’s a river that runs through a long valley, and at every turn a new landscape is revealed, and yet somehow it repeats and repeats. How have you experienced grief?
- 2.) “It’s by sharing our griefs with others, and thinking together about what they mean, that we learn to overcome fear and know each other at the deepest level.” (David Brooks). What do you think is the connection between grief and fear?
- 3.) “A person is hit by a blow. There is a period when the shock of the loss is too great to be faced. Emotions are packed away. The person’s inner life is held “in suspension,” as the psychologists say. But then, when the time is right, the person realizes that he has to deal with his past. He has to excavate all that was packed away. He has to share his experience with friends, readers, or some audience. Only then can he go on to a bigger, deeper life.” (David Brooks). How have you experienced “packing your emotions away?”
- 4.) Psychologists recommend that you ask your friend to fill in the blanks to these two statements: “In our family, the one thing you must never do is _____” and “In our family, the one thing you must do above all is _____.” That’s a way to help a person see more clearly the deep values that were embedded in the way they were raised. How would you fill in those blanks?
- 5.) “Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character. (The Bible). Have you ever experienced this dynamic or seen it in another person? Explain.
- 6.) “We develop good character as we get more experienced in being present with others, as we learn to get outside our self-serving ways of perceiving.” (David Brooks). What do you think about this view of developing character?