

A newspaper reporter went to interview a successful entrepreneur. "How did you do it?" he asked. "How did you make all this money?"

"I'm glad you asked," the entrepreneur replied. "Actually, it's a rather wonderful story. You see, when my wife and I married, we started out with a roof over our heads, some food in our pantry, and five cents between us. I took that nickel, went down to the grocery store, bought an apple, and shined it up. Then I sold it for ten cents."

"What did you do then?" the reporter asked.

"Well," he said, "then I bought two more apples, shined them up, and sold them for twenty cents." The reporter thought this would be a great human interest story.

"Then what?" the reporter asked excitedly. "Then my father-in-law died and left us \$20 million," the businessman said. That man prospered not because of his own ingenuity, but because he was connected.

Connected. Think about that word for a moment. What does it mean to be connected?

I. It Means Power

First of all, it means power, doesn't it? We hear someone say, "I have connections." It means "I have access to power, wealth. I can get it done."

There's a humorous story about another successful businessman who was invited to deliver the commencement address at a school. He elected to speak on the subject, "How to Succeed." As he entered the door leading to the auditorium stage, he noticed the word PUSH printed in bold letters on the outside. He thought that would be a good theme for his speech PUSH. When he hit the high point of his speech, he said, "I can sum up my message in one word," and he pointed to the door . . . and the students started laughing. Puzzled, the speaker looked at the door. Printed on the inside was not the word PUSH but the word PULL. (1) That is how many people succeed not because of their PUSH but because of their PULL because they are connected to someone who is powerful. How often have we said, "It is not WHAT you know, but WHO you know"?

Julius Little of Greenville, North Carolina was hospitalized for congestive heart failure. The doctor warned him his recovery would be slow. His daughter Judy told him not to worry. "Everybody in my church is praying for you," she said. Still, he said, he was fearful. In a matter of days, though, he began to rally. In fact, in practically no time he felt like himself again. Even his doctor was amazed at the progress. He saw no reason why Julius and his wife, LaRue, couldn't go through with their travel plans to visit Opryland in Nashville, Tenn., on their way to visit Judy in Blue Springs, Mo.

And so they made their way to Opryland. It was hot and crowded in the theme park, so

LaRue rested on a shady bench while Julius went to find a cold drink. LaRue struck up a conversation with two friendly ladies sitting beside her on the bench. They couldn't believe it when LaRue told them she and her husband were on their way to Blue Springs, Mo. to visit their daughter. "Why, I'm from Blue Springs!" said one of the women. "What's your daughter's name?"

Julius walked up just as this friendly woman said that she was a member of Judy's prayer chain. Then she exclaimed to Julius, "I've been praying for you. I thought you were really sick . . . What in the world are you doing standing here?" Julius smiled sheepishly. "I'm standing here," Julius said, "because of you." (2)

Julius is convinced he was standing there because he was connected. He was connected to the ultimate source of power and healing. That is the first thing we mean when we say we are connected. We have power.

II. We Have a Presence.

To be connected also means we have a presence. We have a presence in our lives. We are not alone. Someone shares our life. Someone is there for us. Is there anyone sadder than the person who is not connected to somebody? Consider the alleged Unabomber an obviously intelligent man who reportedly committed bizarre and cruel acts. Can we help but deduce that part of his problem was that he cut himself off from family, colleagues, and friends? There is something about isolation that does something to the human spirit, whether that isolation is chosen or whether it is caused by circumstances beyond our control.

Many of you have had the experience of being cut off from someone you love by death or divorce. There is no more devastating experience in life, is there? The loneliness and the sense of isolation can be overwhelming. All kinds of experiences can cause us to feel disconnected.

Sometimes it's having your children grow up and leave home. I understand that there is a luncheon group of older mothers in New York. They call themselves the "It Wouldn't Hurt You to Call Me Once in a While" club.

Paul Tournier tells a story about a lonely lady he once knew who turned on her radio every night just to hear an announcer with a friendly voice say, "We bid you a very good evening." She felt the announcer was the only person who cared about her. (3)

There is a program at the University of Florida in which veterinary students staff a hotline to help grieving pet owners cope with the death of their precious animal friends. The students receive specialized training to learn how to counsel and assist callers experiencing painful emotions. "There is a tremendous need for such a service," says faculty member Thomas Lane, who spearheaded the project. Growing numbers of

single and elderly people rely on pets for companionship, feeling the death of a pet as strongly as that of a family member or friend. (4) If you don't think people can grieve over the loss of a pet, you know nothing about loneliness. Isolation is a terrible way to live.

Tim Kimmel in his book, Little House on the Freeway, tells about his mother, who died of cancer. From the time the doctors discovered it to the time it took her life was only five months. Her decline was swift and unstoppable. Surgery, radiation, and chemotherapy had no effect on it. It was difficult for the family to watch her die.

Tim and his younger brother flew 2,000 miles to see her three times in the five months that she was sick. During the last month Tim called every morning to see how she made it through the night, and every night to see how she made it through the day. Tim's father stayed with his beloved wife every day. Tim's three other brothers and sister all lived in the area. They stopped by regularly, almost daily, to be with her.

Shortly before Tim's mom died, a wealthy, influential member of that small community was admitted to the intensive care unit for observation. On the third night of his stay in the hospital, he had a discussion with the nurse who was preparing him to go to sleep for the night. Tim called the unit shortly after she finished working with this wealthy gentleman. She couldn't help but relate their conversation to Tim.

This young nurse was a committed Christian. She knew of Tim's family's love for Christ and of his mother's quiet but compelling testimony. She told him that the man she talked with was one of the most powerful men in the community. He wielded great influence, even at the hospital. Yet he had lain in that hospital room for three days without a single visitor. He had a wife, and he had children, but they had not come by.

As she was giving him his medicine, he inquired of the patient in the private room. "Oh, that's Mrs. Kimmel," the nurse replied. He wanted to know about Tim's father and his brothers and sister. She told him all about them and mentioned that her two sons out of town had flown back to see her several times and called daily to check on her status. He asked about Tim's mom's condition. "Mrs. Kimmel will die any day," the nurse told him. "If she lives a week, we'll all be surprised." At that point this man of influence dropped his head back on his pillow and got quiet. Just before she walked away, he looked up at her with tears in his eyes. "You know," he said in a husky voice, "I would gladly trade places with Mrs. Kimmel and die a week from now, if for that week I could have a spouse and children who care enough about me not to make me die alone." (5)

We all have a need to be connected. We need to know that there are people who care about us. We need to know that we are not alone. Of course, this is where our faith comes in in a powerful way. Our faith tells us we are not alone. We are never alone no matter how isolated our situation seems.

Columnist Sheila Graham had a compelling interview with Ruby Bridges Hall sometime back. Maybe that name doesn't strike a bell. It will for some of you if I describe what Ruby went through as a child.

Ruby looked like a typical first-grader. With a big bow in her hair and lunch box in hand, she climbed the steps of William Frantz Elementary School for the first day of school. But little else was typical about that day in November 1960. Though she wasn't aware of it, Ruby had been chosen to be the first African-American child to integrate this particular New Orleans grade school. Every day on her way to school, escorted by armed federal marshals, she braved angry whites shouting at her as she entered an empty classroom. White parents had moved their children to other schools. Ruby did not realize until later, when a little boy told her why he couldn't play with her, that she was the reason for all the commotion.

In her interview Sheila Graham noted that even in this stressful situation of having mobs scream at her, little Ruby prayed every day, before and after school, for those who were verbally abusing her. Ruby Bridges Hall explained it this way: "One thing my mother always said to me was that when she couldn't be with me, if I was ever afraid, I should say my prayers . . . Even at night, if I would wake up from a nightmare and want to get up and go to her room, she would immediately ask, Did you say your prayers?' That's where that came from and it sort of stuck with me." (6) Ruby's mother wanted her to know that no matter the situation she was never alone. She was connected. To be connected is to have power. It is to have an eternal presence in your life. It is to know Someone cares about you.

III. To Be Connected Is to Live a Productive Life.

And one thing more, being connected means living a productive life.

The reason many people fail to achieve great things with their lives is that they lack a focus, they lack a driving sense of purpose. Like Willy Loman in Arthur Miller's play, they live their lives not really knowing who they are. And so they fail to make their mark in the world. If only they could be connected to One who could give them a sense of purpose, a sense of mission, a sense of their place in the world. And of course that is the Good News for the day. We CAN be connected to One who can give us the power, One who can give us the presence, One who can help us live productive lives.

Jesus put it this way: "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit . . . If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you . . ."

Here it is the great secret of life. Here is the secret of having real "pull" in the things that matter most. It is to be connected connected to the One who is the ultimate Source of power, to the One who will never forsake us, to the One who will help us live

productive, meaningful lives.

Vineyard owners tell us that the strongest point on any vine is the place where the vine and branch are joined together. If you pull on a branch that goes into a tree it will always break at the trunk of the tree in a tree that is the weakest place. But in a grapevine that is the strongest point.

That should not surprise us. Christ says to us: I have the strength to provide all your needs. I have the strength to hold you in the time of testing. I will never let you go. When we are joined to him, we have a source of power, presence and purpose. We live productive lives. When we are joined to him we can truly say, "I've got it made. I've got clout. I've got a Friend in high places."

-
1. Joe Gordon, SPEAKER'S LIBRARY OF BUSINESS.
 2. GUIDEPOSTS Jan.1997 p.17.
 3. "Reach Out!" by Frank Minirth, TODAY'S BETTER LIFE, Spring 1994, p. 38.
 4. American Veterinary Medical Association, 1931 North Meacham Road, Suite 100, Schaumburg, Illinois 60173-4360. CITED IN THE FUTURIST.
 5. (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1987).
 6. "Dignity Under Fire," THE PLAIN TRUTH, May/June 1996, p. 28.

Collected Sermons, King Duncan, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20