Connecting vs. relating —
Wall Street is but a symptom

*"We cannot serve at a distance. We can only serve that to which we are profoundly connected, that which we are willing to touch."* Joan Borysenko

Wall Street:

I'm sure, like me, you're drowning in reports, debates, opinions, treatises, articles and sound bites about recent events on Wall Street.

While most of these data bits and opinion pieces have focused on issues of financials, credit, "paper", mortgages, housing, greed, and the like, what shouts out at me is a deeper issue – that of a systemic breakdown in relationships and an erosion of trust.

There was a time when, for example, obtaining a loan was processed between two individuals, one's banker and one's self and resulted in a long-term relationship characterized by deep long-term bonds based on a deeper relationship, a relationship that fostered trust, openness, transparency and honesty.

Over time, this "relationship" has morphed into a fragmented process which includes numerous individuals and often the individual with whom one first spoke is no longer in the mix. In essence, the "relationship" has now become a "transaction." The "relationship" has now become a complex series of disjointed "connections" with numerous players – each of whom is seen as a "function", as opposed to a real, flesh-and-blood human.

Main Street

A flavor of what has been happening on Wall Street is also happening on Main Street, namely, the dynamic we have come to know as "relationship" is quickly disintegrating and being replaced by another dynamic called a "connection" between, for example, a spouse and their partner, a parent and their child, and between lover and lover – a transaction or "connection" that most often is separated by distance.

The "new relationship" on Wall Street and Main Street is a more superficial one, defined by "connecting" through an email, iPhone, Blackberry, Twitter, Linkedin, MySpace, fax, etc. – an electronic "connection" devoid of any "personal-ness." Personally and professionally - at work, at home and at play - folks are becoming more and more dis-connected and distant. As these relationships have become more impersonal, with limited face-to-face interaction, an all-important emotional connection is lost, and with that loss, trust erodes. In this depersonalization, when trust erodes, untrustworthy behavior fills the void.

Healthy, conscious relationships that exude openness and trust can only be cultivated when and where all parties experience an emotional "safe zone". As relationships are replaced by "electronic" interactions and transactions, emotional connection, the "human factor" — the "secret sauce" that defines and creates true and real relationships —erodes. In addition, as relationships erode, and as trust erodes, so does friendship, the one element that marriage researcher John Gottman says is the definitive foundational element that determines, for example, the sustainability of relationships. When there is no emotional connection, there is no friendship. No friendship, no trust. No trust, no honesty, no transparency, no truth-telling.

The "ethers" through which electronic connections are made today – with our banks, with other businesses, with our loved ones, with our friends and colleagues - *cannot* create this safe zone. Electronic connections do not and cannot create an emotional trustworthiness. Thus, the one major unintended consequence of "separation by electronics" is the erosion of trust.

The reality is within this electronic, "transactional" world, what is happening is that more and more folks may be "connecting"; however, fewer and fewer folks are "relating." We might live in an increasingly interconnected world, but we are living less and less involved in an "interrelated" world. Thus, we are experiencing the fragmentation of relationships at work, at home and at play – one major consequence of living in an electronically-connected world.

The disintegration of relationships outside the business world, in the family as we know it, is the subject of much sociological and psychological research. Parent-to-parent, parent-to-child, and child-to-child contact is more and more a function of an electronic connection and a quick "cu" text message that substitutes for true and real dialogue, conversation and relating – lacking emotional connection and a deeper sense of commitment and intimacy. Is it no surprise that more and more parents and their teen-age and adolescent children are reported to be engaged in ever increasing incidents of drug abuse and addiction? The fragmentation and disintegration of true and real relationships in favor of "electronic" connections lead to an erosion of trust and an erosion of trust spells inappropriate behavior and "trouble."

The disintegrating relationships on Wall Street and Main Street are simply symptomatic of a greater threat and challenge we face today – where increasingly we are living in a world of increasing interconnecting and decreasing interrelating.

**So, some questions for self-reflection are:**

- Do you deal with your internal/external clients personally after the initial contact, or do you hand them off to others? Are you available to them personally if they want to contact you later on?
- Do you ever view colleagues, co-workers and clients as irritants? How about your children? Do you ever view them as irritants? Do you prefer to "connect" with them at an "arm's distance"?
- What is your preferred mode of communicating at work? In person or by electronic device (even when in-person is very do-able)? With you family during the day?
- How would you describe the nature of your relationships at work, at home and in friendships: connecting or relating? What would others say about how you relate?
- Do you have trust issues with folks at work, at home and/or at play?
- Are you usually physically available when folks need you? Emotionally available?
- How many chairs in your home actually face one another? How often do you have face-to-face conversations with each other as opposed to snippets sitting side by side while watching TV, or reading the paper or some business document, etc.?
- When you and your family sit down for meals, is the cell phone also a require utensil?
- When you have meals with your children at home, or out, do they spend more time looking at some electronic device than they do being engaged in meaningful conversation with you and each other? What about you? Is your cell phone an added part of your dining experience?
- Does your spouse, partner or child ever remark that, in some way, shape or form, you feel distant to them?
- Would others describe you as superficial, "cold" or "unapproachable"? How do you know? Would you consider asking them?
- Do your children have social challenges when relating to others, when relating to you?
- How many hours of watching TV, or playing electronic games, or being on the Internet do you and your children engage in every week? Do you care? It that important to know?
- Are you ever lonely?

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