
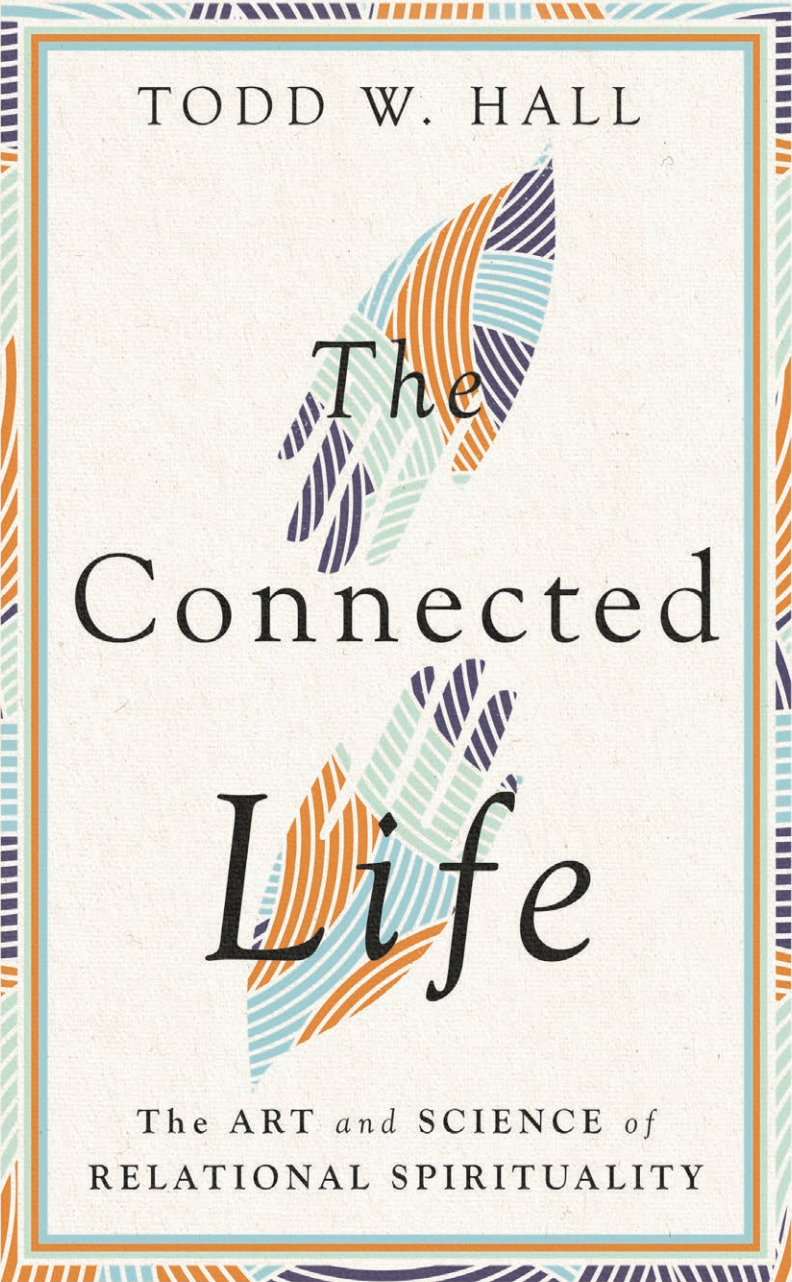


TODD W. HALL



The
Connected
Life

The ART *and* SCIENCE of
RELATIONAL SPIRITUALITY



InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

Taken from *The Connected Life* by Todd W. Hall.

Copyright © 2022 by Todd W. Hall.

Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

www.ivpress.com.



The Causes of Our Connection Crisis



ONE EVENING when I was in the fourth grade, my parents called my sister and me to the living room. This was a rare occurrence, so I knew something important was about to happen. They proceeded to inform us, in a very matter-of-fact manner, that they were separating. My mom would move out and we would stay there with my dad. My parents probably gave some reasons for the separation, but I don't remember what they were. I was struggling to understand what was happening to my world; life would be different from that moment forward.

SIGNS OF A CONNECTION CRISIS

My parents separated in 1979, right at the end of an epidemic period of divorce. My family is a prototypical example from this period. From the outside we were a seemingly normal middle class family living in the suburb of Irvine, California—two parents, two kids, and two cars. On the inside, however, we were a family falling apart and disconnecting from each other, extended family, and community. In Judith Wallerstein's landmark study of the children of divorce, which started in 1971 and

spanned twenty-five years, Wallerstein and her colleagues noted: “Since 1970, at least a million children per year have seen their parents divorce—building a generation of Americans that has now come of age.”¹ Millions of families were being torn apart—some silently—leaving the children with a legacy of disconnection despite the widespread, misguided belief that children would quickly rebound from divorce and experience no permanent psychological damage. As of the publication of Wallerstein’s book in 2000, this group represented one-quarter of the adults in the United States who had reached their forty-fourth birthday.

The rise of divorce is just one indicator of a broader connection crisis in our culture that has emerged over the last fifty years.² Over this time period we’ve also seen a decline in emotional well-being in parallel with decreasing social connection. One trend that illustrates this is the increasing rates of depression in recent decades. Psychologist Martin Seligman stated: “The rate of depression over the last two generations has increased roughly tenfold.”³ Along with depression, we’ve seen an alarming increase in loneliness in recent decades. In a 2017 article in *Harvard Business Review*, former US surgeon general Vivek Murthy stated, “Loneliness is a growing health epidemic.”⁴ He goes on to note that, despite being more technologically connected than ever, rates of loneliness have more than doubled since the 1980s. In addition to general social isolation, over half of US adults recently reported feeling like no one knows them well.⁵

There are many interrelated factors that led to our current connection crisis. In some ways they can all be tied back to cultural trends that steadily grew in the last half of the twentieth century—the collective consciousness of the American mind about what constitutes the “good life”—what we might call “the American ideal.” This set of ideologies, values, and beliefs that constitute the American ideal include extreme forms of individualism and materialism. This “good life” values independence over friendship, personal comfort over commitment to others, solitary achievements over the common good, and economic success over social and emotional well-being. We can see this set of ideologies

in the breakdown of the family and the decline of community—two major trends that have contributed to our connection crisis.

THE FRAGMENTATION OF THE FAMILY STRUCTURE

The family unit, and parent-child relationships in particular, are the most important social context in which children develop attachment bonds. It's in these close relationships that children first learn how to connect to people and God and to develop a sense of morality.

From the mid-1960s through about 1990, the family as a social unit got steadily weaker on numerous counts. The divorce rate more than doubled from 1960 to 1980 (a 136 percent increase). This resulted in large part from dramatic changes in the cultural winds and family law in California in the late 1960s. "A series of statewide task forces," notes Wallerstein, "recommended that men and women seeking divorce should no longer be required to prove that their spouse was unfaithful, unfit, cruel, or incompatible."⁶ As a result, in 1969 Governor Ronald Reagan signed the no-fault divorce law into effect, and within a few years no-fault divorce laws spread like a virus throughout all fifty states.

Even before my parents' divorce, their marriage had declined to nothing but a shell of a lifelong partnership. They didn't argue in front of us, but there was a certain emptiness I felt in our family. My parents' relationship wasn't healthy and authentic. I didn't see them express affection toward each other, engage in meaningful dialogue, laugh together, or do things together. This, of course, set the tone for the family; we rarely did things together. As I mentioned, my mom also suffered from emotional and physical illnesses, partly due to the very dysfunctional and fragmented family in which she grew up. The attachment bond developed with my mom was fragile and insecure, and this would come to impact all my significant relationships. The most important social context in which I learned how to connect was unhealthy, which impacted my ability to connect to God and others. Sadly, this is true for millions of Gen Xers and Millennials, and Gen Zers who are now coming of age.

I didn't have to look far to see this same pattern in my friends. In fifth grade, we moved a few houses down from the Peterson family. They had five kids and I became close friends with Johnny and Jeremy. Their family was, in some ways, more dysfunctional than mine. On the surface theirs was also a "normal" middle class family in suburbia, but under the surface was deep fragmentation and chaos. Their mom was an alcoholic, and her alcoholism grew worse as we got older. She was often drunk when I was at the house, and she was verbally and emotionally abusive to her kids. I remember her screaming at the kids and sometimes at me, often for no apparent reason. On a few occasions she threw things at her kids. I remember one afternoon when she threw a frying pan across the room at her son Gary. Thankfully, she missed. The summer after my fifth-grade year, the Petersons divorced. By comparison, I felt my family was calm and "normal." My sister and I lived with my dad who was secure, stable, and calm compared to Mrs. Peterson, but he was still disconnected in some ways. This was the norm I grew up with—divorced, chaotic families filled with all kinds of disconnection.

My experience is a reflection of trends in recent decades related to divorce and family households. The probability of divorce increased steadily from the early 1900s through about 1990 and then plateaued.⁷ Even with this plateau, nearly all studies conducted through about 2005 converged in suggesting that the lifetime probability of marital disruption is between 40 percent and 50 percent.⁸ In fact, well over half of my childhood friends' parents went through a divorce. Among my inner circle of friends growing up, two-thirds were from divorced families.

A related concerning trend is that two-parent, single-household families declined in the decade of the 2000s.⁹ This is due to divorce and increased rates of childbearing in unmarried, cohabitating unions.¹⁰ The level of family dissolution has continued since then due to the fact that informal unions are less stable than marriages.¹¹

The breakdown of the family has taken its toll at a societal level. In addition, although the legal act of divorce may be an event, the *effects* of pre-divorce marital conflict and divorce are often long lasting and

impact a person's emotional security and sense of connection to God. This was certainly the case for me.

The effects of divorce and family dissolution stem from two sources: changes in family structure (e.g., multiple households, stepparents, lack of contact with non-residential parent), and the relational struggles of parents, which are associated with unhealthy ways of relating to children. I experienced both of these in my own life and have worked with many clients who've experienced these negative effects of divorce. As I mentioned, after my parents' divorce, my sister and I lived with my dad. We would see my mom occasionally on weekends, but we had relatively little contact with her. Life was forever different after the divorce.

The relationship characteristics that predict divorce—domestic violence, frequent conflict, infidelity, weak commitment to marriage, and low levels of love and trust between spouses—all reflect unhealthy relational patterns among parents that presumably get passed down to children in the form of insecure attachment.¹² Attachment relationships (to which we'll return in part three) are relationships in which a child looks to a caregiver to provide physical and emotional comfort in times of distress, and a secure base, or sense of internal security, from which to explore the world. Insecure attachment comes in two basic varieties: (1) *ambivalent*, in which children are highly anxious, and (2) *avoidant*, in which children are emotionally shut down. Both types of insecure attachment are linked to negative developmental and social outcomes later in life, including one's relationship with God.¹³ Several fascinating studies have shown that pregnant mothers' attachment tendencies predict their children's attachment tendencies at one year of age, suggesting that attachment is passed down from parent to child through emotional communication and relational interactions.¹⁴

While there was no violence or infidelity in my parents' case, there was certainly conflict and lack of trust that reflected deeper attachment issues. I know very little of my mom's background because we never visited her extended family, and both her parents died by the time I was two years old. I suspect she experienced a lot of suffering during

her childhood. I believe my mom rarely talked about her past with us because it brought up too much unresolved pain. When I tried to have these conversations with her when I was in college and graduate school, she would either fall apart emotionally or get angry. She simply wasn't capable of talking in a coherent and contained way about her past. This incoherence reflects an insecure attachment, which led to significant challenges in our relationship.

Consistent with research on attachment insecurities being passed down, in the past two decades research has generally shown that children with divorced parents, compared with those with continuously married parents, score lower on emotional, behavioral, social, health, and academic outcomes.¹⁵ This corroborates previous findings and indicates that the links between divorce and various aspects of child well-being have remained relatively stable across decades. Young adults with divorced parents also continue to experience negative effects from divorce. While they don't necessarily show higher rates of clinical depression and anxiety, they do continue to experience a significant amount of emotional pain as a result of their parents' divorce.¹⁶

For example, in one study these young adults reported that they were forced to take on adult responsibilities as a child, felt lonely during childhood, experienced family events and holidays as stressful, felt unsafe at home due to their fathers' absence, missed their fathers, and felt torn between their parents' households.¹⁷ I experienced many of these things as a young adult. I became the peacemaker in my family and took on a parental role with my mom much of the time. Family events and holidays were stressful and brought up a longing for the way things were supposed to be and sadness over the way things were.

The primary functions of the attachment bond—emotional comfort and security—are negatively impacted by the typical experiences of young adults from divorced and dysfunctional homes. This, in turn, has a negative impact on people's experiences of God. If we can't trust our parents, who we can see, to provide emotional support and security,

how can we trust God, who we can't see? Patterns of interactions with our attachment figures get stored in our memory as gut-level expectations of how close relationships work. These expectations get placed on our relationship with God, often without realizing it. This doesn't mean that our experiences and expectations of God can't change, but it does mean that the social context in which we are raised profoundly shapes the "God of our gut." And this—not the God of our head—is the God we experience most of the time.

THE DECLINE OF CIVIC AND COMMUNITY GROUPS

Every month my father-in-law, Phil, goes to a local restaurant at o'dark-thirty to meet with a group for breakfast. This group is part of a service club called Lions Clubs International, which was started by a businessman named Melvin Jones. After starting his own insurance agency in 1913, Jones joined a businessmen's luncheon group in Chicago, Business Circle, which was devoted solely to the financial benefit of its members. Jones saw the potential of a group like this and envisioned a broader purpose. He believed that successful business leaders from similar clubs around the country could join forces and put their talents to work to improve their communities. In the summer of 1917, he invited delegates from men's clubs to meet in Chicago and lay the groundwork for a community service organization, and Lions Clubs International was born. One of their main stated purposes is to "take an active interest in the civic, cultural, social, and moral welfare of the community."¹⁸ Today, they run youth and health programs, emphasizing sight (e.g., blindness prevention and vision screenings) and diabetes programs. I admire my father-in-law's involvement in the Lions Club. Every year he helps raise money for sight programs that serve our local community, and I am reminded of the importance of community ties.

Involvement in such service organizations was common among my father-in-law's generation. In contrast, I've never belonged to a service club like this. None of my friends or colleagues in my age group have

belonged to one either. Something has shifted in the social fabric of our communities in recent decades.

The family is the most important social group for our emotional, relational, and spiritual development. But we live out family life in a broader social context, which influences our sense of self and emotional and spiritual development directly and indirectly through its influence on family norms. What, then, are the trends with regard to broader social connection in the United States? Sadly, we see a similar weakening of social institutions in the United States over the past fifty years.

Political scientist Robert Putnam's landmark book *Bowling Alone* has documented the eroding effects of declining "social capital" in the United States over the past half-century. Putnam defines social capital as the "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them."¹⁹ He describes the decline in the majority of US social institutions, including political clubs and parties, membership in civic organizations, group recreational activities, religious organizations, unions and workplace associations, philanthropic organizations, and numerous varieties of informal social networks, ranging from card-playing groups to family meals.²⁰

This decline cuts across all sectors of American society. For example, we as a nation spent only two-thirds as much time informally socializing at the end of the twentieth century compared to three decades earlier.²¹ Likewise, entertaining friends declined by 45 percent over a two-decade period (late 1970s to late 1990s). On one occasion, as I was picking up my son at my in-laws' house, my mother-in-law, Rosa, was canvassing her neighborhood handing out invitations to a coffee get-together at her house. It was noteworthy because hardly anyone does this kind of thing anymore. If this decline in entertaining friends were to continue unabated, Putnam argues, the long-standing social practice of having friends over for dinner would virtually disappear from American life in relatively short order.

Part of this story is also a decline in trust and reciprocity. Beginning in the early 1970s, informal understandings between spouses, business

partners, and other parties were no longer trusted. Suddenly, everyone wanted to “get it in writing,” giving birth to “preventative lawyering.” Trust and connection, it turns out, go hand-in-hand.

Putnam summarized the decline in social connection in this way: “Thin, single-stranded, surf-by interactions are gradually replacing dense, multi-stranded, well-exercised bonds. More of our social connectedness is one shot, special purpose, and self-oriented.”²² Larger groups with long histories, diverse constituents, and multiple objectives (i.e., authoritative communities) are being replaced by smaller groups that “reflect the fluidity of our lives by allowing us to bond easily but to break our attachments with equivalent ease.”²³ Place-based social connections are being replaced by function-based social connections; but attachment bonds develop in the context of face-to-face social interactions. The development that occurs in place-based interactions reflects our embodied nature. Our very selves exist in space and time, and the deepest form of relational connection occurs “in person” as it were. Media, through which many function-based social connections now occur, is fundamentally about extending ourselves across space and time. This is reflected in the subtitle of Marshall McLuhan’s influential 1964 book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*.²⁴ This perspective highlights the notion that we can only extend ourselves so far without a negative impact on deep social connection.

These aspects of decline in social capital are often more pronounced in divorced families, but they have occurred across the board in our society. Many of these trends resonate with my experience and the experiences of my friends growing up. My family wasn’t involved in any civic, community, or religious organizations. My dad worked and took care of the household and my sister and me, and that was about it. Divorce typically shatters social relationships maintained by couples. This results in limited contact with would-be friends of the parents and mentors for children. This was the case for my parents—any lasting informal social networks were relatively minimal and thin. It wasn’t until I started going to church in the fifth grade with the Peterson

family that mentors came into my life. These mentors showed me that God just might be different from my experience of authority figures to that point.

From the late 1990s and into the 2010s, Putnam's thesis was widely debated, leading to some clarifications. On balance, however, there is a general consensus that Putnam was right: social connection significantly declined in the second half of the twentieth century.²⁵ The causes of this overall trend are complex and difficult to pin down. Putnam, however, suggested four key culprits: (1) time, money, and two-career family pressures; (2) suburbanization, commuting, and sprawl; (3) the rise of electronic entertainment; and most importantly, (4) generational changes.²⁶

Putnam's research suggests that, all things considered, the pressures of time, money, and two-career families account for up to 10 percent of the total decline in social connection. Suburbanization, commuting, and sprawl account for an additional 10 percent of the decline. Electronic entertainment—television, and in more recent years the internet—has privatized and individualized our leisure time, accounting for approximately 25 percent. The fourth and most important factor is generational changes: “The slow, steady, and ineluctable replacement of the long civic generation by their less involved children and grandchildren.”²⁷ Although the effects of generational succession vary across different measures of civic engagement, Putnam suggests that this factor may account for up to half of the overall decline in social connection in the United States. This generational change can be explained in part by the national unity and social solidarity brought about by the common cause and adversity of World War II. Generational changes account for such a large portion of the decline because they overlap with shifts in electronic entertainment (or social media) consumption, values, and where and how people experience a sense of community.

The last two factors turn out to be related—in fact, they may be opposite sides of the same coin. The long civic generation was the last cohort of Americans to be raised without television. The more a

particular generation was exposed to television during its growing up years, the lower its civic engagement during adulthood. People who grew up in the sixties through the eighties watch television and media more and differently than those raised in the thirties through the fifties. The younger generations watch media more habitually and mindlessly than previous generations, which is linked to lower levels of civic engagement.²⁸

These changes reflect a larger societal shift toward individualism and materialism, and away from communal values. This is evident in research on the changing opinions of Americans on what constitutes “the good life.”²⁹ As a generation fades away that is less focused on material goods and more focused on marriage and family, it’s being replaced by a cohort that places an increasingly high value on possessions and money (e.g., “a job that pays more than average”).

We find further evidence for a shift away from communal values in the networks in which people find a sense of community. People born before 1946 are almost twice as likely as Gen Xers to feel a sense of belonging and connection to their neighborhood, church, local community, and groups and organizations to which they belong.³⁰ What we see is a narrowing of community connection in the younger generations. Like the long civic generation, Gen Xers still experience a sense of belonging and community with their family, friends, and co-workers. However, they feel less connected to civic communities—neighborhoods, religious organizations, and other organizations.

We’re not living our lives in community as much as we used to, and this has contributed to a growing sense of emptiness and lack of meaning in our society and in our lives. Even as the internet makes us more globally minded, our sense of meaning and purpose ultimately comes from living our lives out locally in a community. When I travel, I am reminded of the importance of the community in which I live out my life. I can have all kinds of great ideas about how I want to contribute to society and God’s kingdom, but what makes my life meaningful and keeps me spiritually grounded are the people I share life

with day in and day out. These are the people that form the community where I feel a sense of belonging, and to whom I am accountable.

My family is the center of this; they know me better than anyone. Walking on this journey with my wife and two sons is a true joy. It's not always easy, but it's deep and life-giving. They also reveal my heart to me in ways that no one else could, because they know me so well and because I am responsible to them in very concrete ways.

My community also extends to my friends, my church and work communities, and my clients. I think of a friend who just went through a difficult career transition and the many hours we spent talking about it. I think of a friend of thirty years and the times we spent together talking about life and encouraging each other. I think about my students, past and present, who have opened their lives to me as they walked through an intense time of training and growth, which is often accompanied by significant emotional pain. I think of various colleagues I work with and the joy of being part of a team focused on the goal of creating real value in the world. I think of my Sunday school class and the way we share life together and support each other during difficult times. I think of my clients who give me the privilege of walking alongside them in their journey, many of them entrusting me with things they've never told anyone in their lives. This is my community; these are the people that give me a sense of belonging and meaning.

Our society is losing the structures that it once had for bringing people together; individuals participate less in long-lasting communities, socialize less, and trust less. A confluence of entangled factors is converging to produce a decline in social connection in the United States over the past fifty years. Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials have become more individualistic and materialistic, have less leisure time and more financial pressures, and consume more electronic entertainment in a more mindless way. We are, as a society, more relationally disconnected than we once were. This has negative consequences for our emotional and spiritual well-being.



Numerous indicators of a connection crisis in the West have emerged in the past five decades, including the rise of divorce, the decline of emotional well-being, and the decrease in social connection. Although many factors have contributed to the crisis, an overarching ideology that blends individualism and materialism—what I called the *American ideal*—appears to have paved the way. This ideology manifests itself in two major ways in the social fabric of our lives: the breakdown of the family and the decline of community.

Looking back on my life, it's clear that the social disconnection I experienced growing up contributed to a corresponding spiritual disconnection. There is a close link between the connection crisis in our society and the spiritual disconnection many people experience in their sense of self and relationships with God and others. Unfortunately, there are many effects of this spiritual disconnection, which we turn to in chapter two.

BUY THE BOOK!

ivpress.com/the-connected-life