

# The Net

Someone recently opined to me that life is the sum of all our relationships. Expanding on the thought means that my father, plus mother, plus sisters, plus friends, plus everyone else I knew made me what I am today. I rejected the notion at first, because it seemed patently preposterous. No one has that kind of control over me. I am my own man. I determine my identity and life purpose through my own values, understandings and internal cogitations. Don't I?

After some serious rumination, however, I find myself coming around to the same notion as my friend. I have not arrived at my present identity in a social vacuum. Whether or not I admit it, or even if I can't fully comprehend it, I can see that I am a product of significant people, role models who influenced me and persons to whom I was either attracted or repulsed. I have obeyed, accepted, embraced, pleased, loved, admired, trusted—or I have hated, debated, ridiculed, resented and rejected—individuals who interacted with me from my infancy onward. The fabric of those relationships has molded my entire psyche.

How much do your relationships affect you? All of us understand the reality and need for relationships in our lives, but few of us understand the impact they make on us. Maybe an illustration from the world of physics will help us grasp this idea. We know that the gravitational force on Earth pulls everything toward the ground. This concept was formulated by Sir Isaac Newton, the renowned scientist of the 1600's, who observed an apple falling from a tree and began to wonder why. He determined that a universal attraction affects all masses of matter through the force of gravity. This is called the Theory of Universal Gravitation. He posited that not only does the Earth propel the apple toward it by the force of gravity, but the apple also pulls the Earth toward it by that same force. In the same way, every person in one's circle of family, friends and acquaintances affects that person. Conversely, that same person also has an affect on every other person in his or her universe. This creates an enormous and complex network of interdependent people, all of them connected to each other in some way, whether directly or indirectly. The things we hear, see and feel in other people in our network exerts either a positive or negative force on us.

There are many ways you can test this concept. You can start with the impact your parents had on you. Your physical appearance, behavior and personality were directly produced by your mother and father through your DNA. The primary way that babies and toddlers learn is by imitating others. Your accent is the product of the speech brogue in the locale in which you were raised. Your loyalties and preferences are most likely shaped by the people, groups and institutions in your same city or state. Social scientists have coined terms like acculturation and socialization to describe how people come to hold views espoused within the norms of their particular culture. Famed criminologist Edwin H. Sutherland formulated the theory of differential association based on his findings that people develop criminal minds through associating with other people of similar backgrounds and experiences. Groupthink, gangs, peer groups, classes, schools, cadres, political parties, clubs, factions, denominations and wings all testify strongly to the behavior of people in groups.

The old saying, "birds of a feather flock together," refers to the fact that people tend to stick with those who most likely resemble themselves. The Bible says, "Evil communications corrupt good manners." Based on the realities of social development outlined above, we can readily see the powerful truth contained in this scripture. A person who does not think in evil ways can grow to be evil through the company he or she keeps. A pure mind and heart can be corrupted by associating with people who have evil hearts. This means that a person's life is not merely a function of his or her own internal thought processes. We often make huge decisions, not by intellectual musing, education or thoughtful analysis, but by the innate desire that we possess to conform to our group. Moreover, this pressure can be exerted upon us by even one significant person in our lives.

To put it bluntly, you do not make up your own mind. A little of what this person thinks and a little of what that person thinks become influential factors in your final decisions. Added to that, a desire to please one person or a strong resistance to one person contributes to the end result as well. Deny it if you want, but you are extremely interested in what people think about you. Even when you boast of your independent spirit, you are playing off of some person or group. You use people, good and bad, as your reference point in establishing your identity. Whether you seek their approval or you reject their control, you end up judging yourself by what they think. Even though I am of a certain age, I still wonder what my father would think of decisions I make or developments in my life, twenty-five years after his death. In my mind, I have carried on conversations with him and imagined what he might have said. My ability to do this is based on my familiarity with his values and opinions, my knowledge of similar decisions he actually made, and my deep respect for him as a man. In a very real sense, he continues to influence my life today. Other people who played a major role in my life also continue to speak into my life. High school teachers, college professors, bosses, ministers, coaches and relatives still govern my thought processes because of their words and examples. Psychologists believe that older adults often live their lives in quest of the approval of their parents—even after their parents are deceased!

The whole point of this essay is to show how important relationships are to the quality of our lives. We should enter into new relationships with the utmost care. We are wise to evaluate our present relationships to determine the effect they have on us. For example, would you have hired on at your current job had not someone “talked you into it” or at least spoke favorably about it? Would you have chosen your educational major, your career or your profession had you not interacted with others who made the same choices or who encouraged you to do what you’re doing? Do you regret some choices that you made in life because a person (whom you later discovered did not have your best interests in mind) influenced you? It is highly improbable that smokers, alcoholics, drug users, gamblers and criminals simply woke up one day and decided to partake of their vice or lifestyle. Undoubtedly, they were led into their behavior by someone or some group.

The house you live in is very likely one that other people liked. Even if you couldn’t afford it, even if it was not convenient to your work or church, even if it lacked some features you wanted, you still bought it because someone important to you thought it was an outstanding purchase. The same goes for your car, clothes, furniture, paint, carpet, decorations, vacations...and on and on. Many people choose their husband or wife on the basis of a significant person’s urgings. It is said that married women dress, not to please their husbands, but to impress their female friends. Regardless of how you slice it, you are greatly influenced by other people in your life.

A net neatly illustrates this concept. Nets are constructed by tying many pieces of twine or rope together. If a fish is caught in the net, the entire net feels the pulling pressure, even though the fish actually touches a small part of it. Each knot represents a person and the length of rope between the knots represents the relationship between people. Whatever happens to others in the network pulls on each individual person to some degree. Their experiences, opinions, ideas and problems, both positive and negative, cause those connected to them to shift positions. Those closest to them may feel extreme stress on their lives. This scenario helps us frame a strategy to bring sense to our universe of relationships.

First, all relationships are important. Accept as a given that each relationship into which you enter will change you in some way. Your close association with an individual may intensify your passions, inflame your anger or inspire you to nobility. If the relationship becomes especially meaningful, you may engage in radical kinds of behavior that you would never have contemplated otherwise. People have been known to kill over relationships. You may give away everything you have, you may move to some distant point on the planet, you may turn your back on your achievements, you may sacrifice cherished possessions, you may become an essentially different person, all because of the profound impact that one person makes on your life.

Second, get out of bad relationships. If someone is bad for you, if they bring out the worst in you, you cannot afford to stay in close association with him or her. A term has evolved in our society to describe women who are married to an abusive husband. Women who suffer physical and mental abuse over a lengthy period of time, usually by a husband or other dominant male figure, are called “Battered Women.” Helplessness, constant fear, and a perceived inability to escape are listed as typical of this syndrome. (From American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 3d ed). While it may be too late for some, if you have an opportunity to leave an unhealthy relationship, you will either leave in a body bag or walk out on your own. Even the proscriptions of the scripture against divorce do not warrant a spouse to offer himself or herself up for murder. Obviously, marriage vows are important and I certainly encourage married partners to seek out counseling to reconcile their differences before something tragic happens. A relationship that corrupts or abuses, however, needs to change or come to an end.

Third, enter into new relationships carefully. Love-struck romantics often cast all care to the wind when they profess their love and commitment to each other. Unfortunately, their naiveté tanks all too quickly when they really learn what each other is made of. In pre-marital counseling, I take the lead in asking probing questions, like:

“Are you in debt?”

“Are you in trouble with the law?”

“Are you on parole?”

“Have you been convicted of a felony or misdemeanor?”

“Have you ever been committed to a psychiatric facility?”

“Do you have serious health issues?”

“Have you shown your prospective husband or wife your health records?”

“Have you been honest in talking about previous relationships?”

“Have you been a user of illegal drugs?”

“Do you have any dependents that you have not mentioned?”

“How secure is your job?”

Questions like these—and many more—are not only difficult to ask, people who want the relationship badly enough will consciously avoid asking them for fear that they will get the wrong answer. If this happens, they may forever rue the day that they put their heads in the proverbial sand and chose to be willfully ignorant. Pay now or pay later...that’s my advice.

Finally, edify those with whom you are in a relationship. If you don’t want others to drag you down, do your best to lift other people up. This is a fabulous secret that too many people do not understand: When you add value to people around you, you will never be lonely. Lifters attract. People will feel stronger, more secure and more inspired when they associate with you. You are not only influenced, you have the opportunity to be an influencer. Accept this role heartily and with great passion. You may very well be the person who is responsible for powerful and positive changes in the world.

Life indeed consists of relationships. Manage them wisely. In them, you will find all the quality of life that you have ever wanted.

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