

Connections

A monthly letter calling the church to faithful new life

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Our stories connect us

Although sharing our personal stories and our faith with each other can be hard at first, it helps us connect with other people and even with God.



Despite the fear and discomfort that precede taking that kind of new step, when I finally take one in response to God's nudges I always wish I'd done it sooner.

That's how I've felt about revealing some of my thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and experiences in *Connections*. Even though at first I was hesitant about doing it, it has helped me make valuable reconnections with some long-lost friends and long-lost parts of myself, and new connections with strangers who have turned out to be welcome kindred spirits.

Connecting with strangers

Most people on my original *Connections* list were strangers to me. I included some people I knew, but I left off many of my relatives and personal friends. Some of them, I knew, had views that were quite different from mine, making me expect them to dislike what I was saying in *Connections* if they read it. Others, I felt, weren't interested in such subjects and might think I had become a yukky religious fanatic. I wasn't willing to risk letting either of those things happen. So to the people who knew only one side of me and apparently liked it, I avoided showing the other sides that I was revealing in *Connections*.

Reconnecting with friends and relatives

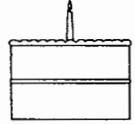
When articles about *Connections* appeared in two newspapers, however, my new steps became public knowledge. I started hearing from people who knew me but hadn't been aware of what I was currently doing and thinking. A beloved math professor from my undergraduate years at college phoned.



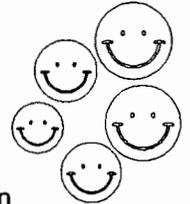
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A birthday for *Connections*

With this issue I begin the second year of *Connections*. Before starting *Connections* last November I agonized for months about whether to risk it. I wrote and re-wrote, and at various points I asked a few kindred spirits for their reactions. Finally I mailed the first issue to a list of about 1500 names. I was hopeful, but I was fearful too. Although I knew some people shared my concerns about the church, I wasn't sure that many did, and I didn't know if many people would read what I wanted to write. But I promised myself to send *Connections* for a year to find out.



Then the responses started coming—enthusiastic letters and phone calls, unsolicited checks, and people asking "How can I get on your mailing list?" and "Would you add my friend's name to your list?"



Now my list includes over 2300 names in 49 states. Several recipients make copies of *Connections* each month and distribute it to lists of their own or to church groups they're in. I've gotten hundreds of encouraging letters, phone calls, and in-person comments. They are all exciting, and I cherish each one. If you've been among these responders, I give you my heartfelt thanks.

Of course I've received negative responses too, but only a handful. In this first year I've added about 800 names to my list, and only 5 people have asked me to remove their names. A Conference Lay Leader wrote early saying "Keep me on your mailing list!", but later he wrote "Please remove my name from your mailing list," with no explanation. I wonder what changed his opinion. A Central Texas layman asked me to stop sending him *Connections*, saying "I do not have the same opinion of change and authority that you express... Change is inevitable but needs to be more carefully considered." I feel sad when I get comments like this, because I know they reflect the feelings of many church members, and I think that's a big reason for our churches' decline. We've considered far too long already. It's time for brave action.



I think writing *Connections* is my calling for now, so I'm going to keep doing it for the foreseeable future. I'll continue to appreciate your support.



Let's stay connected for a while longer. There's no telling where our connection may lead.

(Our stories connect us, continued from page 1)

Relatives asked to see *Connections*. So did a former next-door neighbor, and some women who had been my closest friends in the community arts council that I was heavily involved in as a volunteer for many years. Suddenly I had to connect some parts of my life that I'd been carefully keeping separate.

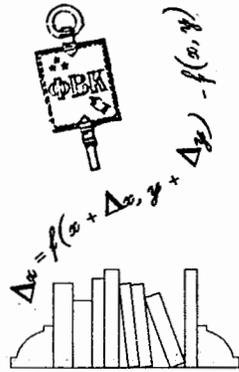
It was scary. But to my relief, most relatives and friends have responded positively. We've found that even if we no longer have in common the interests that we once had, we have others that we hadn't previously realized. So I'm connecting more often as my real self now, rather than feeling so much need to censor and pretend, and I'm finding that the new way is a lot better. ❖

Our many selves

Most of us play a variety of roles as we move through life. As a result, friends from different stages of our lives may see us differently, and we may feel that we have several unconnected selves. I invite you to reflect on who you've been and how your varied selves connect, as you read about mine.

▪ Star pupil, mathematician

Growing up, my strong point was academic achievement. I read a lot, made top grades in school, and loved learning. After graduation I loved my job as a mathematician. I dreaded having to abandon all this, but from everywhere I constantly got the message that because I was female I would eventually have to.



▪ Wife, mother, homemaker

When I married I obediently left the academic world and the career world that I had liked so well. I became the charming hostess, the always-available mother, the maid, the cook, and the seamstress. I attended showers and style shows, and the "ladies' activities" at Rotary and feed manufacturers' conventions that my husband was involved in. Occasionally I still read serious books, but when I did I felt guilty for "wasting" time reading instead of doing something useful like dusting or running the vacuum cleaner.



▪ Church and community volunteer

I did all the typical women's volunteer jobs in my church and community, too. I taught second-grade Sunday School, ran Vacation Bible School, served as a room mother, and held the offices in numerous local organizations. And my friends were women who were doing the same kinds of things.



Reviving buried abilities and interests

At mid-life I finally began realizing that I could connect these separate selves and revive interests and abilities that I had needlessly abandoned. I saw that God didn't want me to leave them unused.

As a result I stopped doing some home and community jobs that I now realized didn't have to be my only occupation. I started reading again, went to graduate school, began writing, and took on some new roles in the church and elsewhere.

But I kept going through many of the old familiar motions, too. I kept making the same expected small talk at social events, and I still dutifully participated in many familiar activities that seemed important to the people around me. So to many of my friends and relatives my changes weren't very noticeable. This meant that when they read about *Connections* in a newspaper, it was a surprise. ❖

Some long-time friends who have only recently discovered *Connections* tell me that reading my story has triggered some helpful new insights about their own. This letter came from a cherished friend from my community-volunteer days, whose life has since gone in a different direction from mine —

"I'm in awe. ... Most of what you say strikes such a familiar chord. ... I see a lot of myself in your actions to find out who you are. ... It's a major achievement that we've grown and come to terms with our potential and possibilities. ... You've given me reason to look closely and consider getting involved again [in the church].
... Your newsletters have really touched me."



"Unless my mind and heart are hopelessly barricaded, all these things that define me as a person are forever changing. ... if you knew me yesterday, please do not think that it is the same person that you are meeting today. ... I have experienced more of life, I have encountered new depths in those I love, I have suffered and prayed, and I am different."

—John Powell, *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am?* (Argus, 1969)

Personal prattle, or connection?

Some *Connections* readers may agree with one who wrote, "Please remove my name from your mailing list. I do not appreciate getting your personal prattle." So why am I sending it? Because I think that reading my story can help readers see their own in new ways and thus see the Bible, the Christian faith, the church, and themselves in new ways. I think we need to do that, for these reasons.

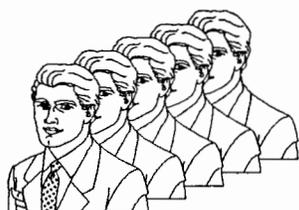
▪ The church needs to change

The church is not carrying out its God-given mission as faithfully and effectively as it needs to. Change is needed.



▪ We are the church

Because we are the church, needed change in the church won't happen until a lot of us let God change us individually, renewing our minds and opening our eyes so that our faith can mature.



▪ By sharing our stories we help each other grow

By revealing how we have survived the discomfort and experienced the benefits that come from that kind of change, we encourage other Christians to make the changes that God is calling them to make.

Changing is too hard to do alone

Changing long-standing ways of thinking and behaving is hard, risky, scary, and often painful even when it is urgently needed. To summon the nerve for it, we need to hear about others who have already made similar changes and have seen that the results were worth the cost.

Reading and hearing other Christians' experiences has helped me make needed changes, so I want to furnish similar help for others. Also, telling others where I currently am and how I got here helps me see it more clearly for myself. ❖

"I had thought that private affairs should be dealt with privately. What I had not realized was that usually, if I could not bear to deal with them in public, they were also too painful to be dealt with in the privacy of my own mind. For, unless I was very clear what I was about, I tried to hide the painful thought just as urgently from my own eyes as from those of others."

—Joanna Field, *A Life of One's Own* (J. P. Tarcher, 1981)

Why tell our personal stories?

In his book *Telling Secrets* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) Frederick Buechner tells why he subjects readers to his personal story of his faith journey in his books. Even though he's a well-known Christian author and I'm not, and you may not be, I think his reasons apply to us too.



Buechner says that autobiographical writing "is like telling somebody in detail how you are before they have asked the question." But, he goes on to say, "I do it anyway because I need to do it. ... I find I need to put things into words before I can believe that they are entirely real."

Also, Buechner says, "I have come to believe that by and large the human family all has the same secrets, which are both very telling and very important to tell." They are telling because "what we hunger for perhaps more than anything else is to be known in our full humanness, and yet that is often just what we also fear more than anything else." Here's why he thinks the telling is important.

▪ Without occasionally telling who we truly and fully are, even if we tell it only to ourselves, we risk losing track of who we really are. Little by little, Buechner observes, we "come to accept instead the highly edited version which we put forth in hope that the world will find it more acceptable than the real thing."



▪ Telling our stories makes it easier for us to see where we have been and where we are going. We see patterns, meanings, and relationships between events, which we didn't see when we were in the midst of those events. We see how we've changed over the years, or how we have suffered from refusing to make needed changes.

▪ Telling our story, Buechner finds, "makes it easier for other people to tell us a secret or two of their own, and exchanges like that have a lot to do with what being a family is all about and what being human is all about."

▪ Finally, Buechner reminds us, when we enter "that deep place inside us where our secrets are kept" we find God.

As he reflects on the telling of his story, Buechner asks himself "Who cares? What in the world could be less important than who I am and who my father and mother were, the mistakes I have made together with the occasional discoveries, the bad times and the good times, the moments of grace."



Then he answers his own question. "My story is important not because it is mine, God knows, but because if I tell it anything like right, the chances are that you will recognize that in many ways it is also yours." And it is through our stories in all their particularity, Buechner reminds us, that we find God most powerfully and personally.

Sharing our stories can help the church

I hope that reading my story will give readers some new perspectives on their own and therefore on their relationship to God and to the church.

Maybe seeing how I've made changes, survived, and seen that the results were worth the pain will encourage others to make the changes God is calling them to make. I think that as a result of our doing that, the church will become better able to carry out its God-given mission.

[God] consoles us ... so that we may be able to console [others] with the consolation with which we are consoled by God.

— 2 Corinthians 1:3-4

Besides, as more of us risk sharing our stories with our fellow church members and with the people God calls us to minister to, the church will become more nearly the true community that God has had in mind for it all along. ❖

Barbara

Next month . . .

The church in the world
and the world in the church



Do not be conformed to this world ... Romans 12:2



Connections 11-93

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Our stories connect us

It's time to order *God's Partners*

I'm excited! My book *God's Partners* will be released December 1 by Judson Press. You can order it now, using the enclosed sheet. I'll autograph your copy and mail it to you when it's available.

God's Partners is a dialogue between a female voice from the pew and a male voice from the pulpit and seminary. I'm the lay voice, and the clergy voice is Dr. Stanley J. Menking, Associate Dean of S.M.U.'s Perkins School of Theology. In alternating sections written in everyday lay language, Stan presents the theological basis for the ministry of the laity, and I present views that lay people often have but sometimes hesitate to express openly. Questions after each chapter make the book useful for church study groups as well as for individuals reading on their own. Here's what some readers say about it.



"These authors bring theology and life into a working dialogue. More than that, they provide a way for the reader to enter the conversation and make it a triologue." — Loren B. Mead, President of The Alban Institute

"Here's a book that says why we lay women and men reject some common platitudes of faith, and why we want more than those. It is a personalizing message, openly and clearly involving me, the person, in discovering my potential as God's partner." — Rachel Conrad Wahlberg, author of *Jesus According to a Woman*

"*God's Partners* is a winner." — William Diehl, author of *The Monday Connection*