

LESSON 1

Start Connecting

The bus driver was about fifty-five, balding, and overweight, with a sad, sweet smile. “Call me Boston Bill,” he said as I boarded his bus.

It was a little past 10:00 PM. My family and I were completely exhausted. Bad weather had caused our flight home to be canceled, and even though we’d waited standby at the airport all day, we’d had no luck. Our only choice was to stay in Boston overnight. Needless to say, we were not too chipper as we climbed into Bill’s hotel shuttle. Worse, the little bus was not wheelchair accessible, so I had to be strapped into a child’s car seat, riding shotgun next to Bill. I was a very tired ten-year-old who just wanted to go to sleep, but Bill seemed nice. I brushed off my bad day and turned on my good vibes.

We talked the whole ride, from the airport to the hotel. The time went by easily as I joked around with Bill,

asking him a million and one questions. When we finally arrived, I said my good-byes and wished him well.

It was late, but my family and I were famished. We headed for the hotel dining room for a quick meal. The restaurant was closing down as we walked in, but the hostess took pity on us. I'm guessing we looked too hungry and worn out to turn away. When the food came, I dug in.

About halfway through my pasta marinara, I looked up to see Bill making a beeline to our table. He wasn't smiling now, though. Instead, he had that expression all humans make right before they cry.

"I hope you don't mind that I'm interrupting your dinner," he said to my parents. "I just had to share something with you." He placed his hand gently on the top of my head.

"I've been going through a rough period in my life lately," he continued. "My wife left me, my kids won't speak to me, and I've been drinking too much. I've been going to therapists and counselors, but none of them were able to get through to me. Before this little guy here got on my bus, I was seriously considering committing suicide tonight." By this time, we'd all put down our forks and were listening intently.

"But your son here did more for me in a short trip from the airport than all the therapists combined. After meeting this boy, and seeing how happy he is despite everything that he has to deal with, well, it put my life in perspective. I have hope now, and I just wanted to thank you."

Crying quietly, he kissed the top of my head and walked away before we could say anything. Mom, Dad, Heidi, and I just sat there in silence, as though we’d witnessed some kind of miracle. I was mystified.

I thought, *What did I do?* I just sat on his bus and asked him questions about himself and teased him a little. I was just trying to be a nice person. I didn’t burst into a burning building and risk my life to save him or anything.

This experience puzzled me for years. Then one day, when I was in my early twenties, I was sitting in a seminar listening to a highly regarded professional speaker. He was sharing great information, and he was obviously very intelligent. Nevertheless, the audience was restless, fidgeting, and bored—a woman sitting near me had actually fallen asleep. It was painfully obvious that no one was able to pay attention. I knew that the information he wanted to communicate was valuable, so why didn’t anyone feel compelled to listen?

Suddenly, it came to me! He simply lacked the one component that must exist in order for one human being to feel emotionally moved, inspired, and safe with another human being: the ability to make a connection. I made an earthshaking distinction: *communication is merely an exchange of information, but connection is an exchange of our humanity.*

And right then and there, I flashed back to my bus ride with Boston Bill. Now it all made sense. Now I could see why what I had thought was just conversation had changed Bill’s life. I was paying attention to him, listening

to him, teasing and joking and having fun with him. I had established a deep connection with him, a connection that apparently no one else had made with him during all his years of “communicating.”

Now, sitting in the audience, I realized the speech was over. Everyone stood up and filed out of the auditorium quietly; there was not a trace of happiness or warmth on people’s faces. Communication without connection had actually drained them of energy!

In that moment, I decided to set out on a quest to find out what the experience of connection was all about. Along the way, I learned that we can talk to others and ourselves all we want, and never get anywhere. It’s the act of truly connecting—not only with other human beings but with yourself—that is step one in getting yourself off your BUT.

Remember, we’re all in this together!

Why Should We Have to Connect?

Imagine if I had said to myself, “I could interact with Boston Bill, BUT . . . I’m too tired, and it’s not going to do me any good!” The imagined outcome of that decision makes me shudder. The BUTS that hold us back from connecting with our fellow earthlings keep our souls in the dark. I truly believe that our major social ills would disappear if we just spent our lives perfecting the art of connecting with each other.

Why? Because it's *impossible* to do harm to anyone with whom we feel truly connected. Malice cannot coexist with connection. Even if we try to entertain the thought of hurting someone we're truly connected with, we immediately recoil, horrified at the mere idea.

BUT . . . people hurt the ones they love all the time! How can they do this? Simple: their connection with the person is somehow broken. As long as we remain connected—*really* connected—we're not going to do deliberate harm to our loved ones, friends, family, colleagues, and clients. It's simply not possible.

So what is connection, anyway?

How We Can Tell When We're Connected

Connection comes into being the moment that one individual feels that another genuinely cares about him or her. As soon as this genuine caring energy is mutually experienced, the connection is reciprocated. Both parties know a connection has been created the instant it happens.

If you and I have a real connection, we'll be able to communicate on a deep level. But if I feel as if you don't care about me, even though you might have the best advice on the planet, I will feel zero interest in implementing your words of wisdom. And if a child, teenager, or college student doesn't feel that her teacher, coach, counselor, or assembly speaker really cares about her well-being—forget

about it! All that good advice will just fall to the floor and blow away like dust.

By design, you are built to recognize who cares about you and who does not. It's hardwired in your biology for a very good reason. Eons of evolution have turned our brains into very effective danger detectors. If we feel that someone doesn't care about us, we also feel intuitively that he could do us harm. We want nothing to do with him, for our own good.

Connection Versus Communication

A student once asked me, "If connection is so valuable, why don't we integrate courses on it into our academic curriculum?"

Good question. Unfortunately, at this point, we're only teaching our future generations about how to communicate with each other.

Communication is valuable too. I would certainly be unable to share this idea of connection without the existence of communication! Clearly, if we were unable to exchange information through spoken and printed words, our early societies wouldn't have evolved into the complex, information-driven human civilization in which we live today.

However, without taking the next step in our evolution—from communication to connection—our society is going to have a million devices for staying in close communication,

yet we will have no greater purpose motivating us to do so. We see it now, even in this very day and age. We have instant messaging, texting, e-mailing, faxing, cell phones . . . yet, if anything, we feel more isolated and lonelier than ever. I often wonder if our great-great ancestors felt more connected to each other than we do.

Emotional Energy Is the Fuel That Powers Connection

I'm a huge technology buff, always up on the latest phones and Internet services. I love these communication devices, yet I am quick to remember their purpose: to bring us closer together so that we can share our caring energy anytime and anywhere on the planet.

We need electricity to make our communication devices operate. What's the primary fuel that powers authentic human connection?

Emotion!

Every individual (barring neurological dysfunction) is capable of feeling emotions. We've all felt happy, sad, lonely, excited, confused, afraid . . . The spectrum of human emotion is vast and rich. I can't ever know exactly what you're going through in life, but I do know that you and I have both experienced similar emotions.

Without emotion, life would be nothing more than a series of mechanical maneuvers. The movie *Equilibrium* provides a glimpse of what society might look like if human

emotion were removed: violence would be eradicated with the elimination of aggression, but because passion and expression would also be gone, art, comedy, and music would not exist.

I don't want to live in that sort of world. Do you?

Ten Things I Learned About Connection from President Bill Clinton

Love him or loathe him, you can't deny that Bill Clinton is a masterful connection artist. I've seen him in action many times, and he's a wonder to behold. How does he do it? How can he connect with people who despise him, and within a few minutes have them laughing, hugging, and listening closely to him?

During the time I worked for the president as a White House intern, I watched him closely, trying to figure out his secret. The first thing I noticed was that he always paid very close attention to how other people were feeling. If they retreated emotionally during an exchange, he immediately reengaged them and brought them back on course. He had an infinite number of techniques, but these were the ones I saw him use most often:

1. **He told a story.** This was far less intrusive—and way more effective—than making his point directly. And his story would always evoke specific emotions from the listeners—laughter, anger, compassion—that would help them connect with what he was communicating.

2. **He made physical contact.** On many occasions, he would place his hand on your shoulder, back, or forearm as he spoke, passing his energy on to you kinetically.

3. **He remembered your name.** This one baffled and amazed me. The number of people a president meets in the course of one year in office is overwhelming. He couldn't possibly remember them all. Yet if Clinton met you on more than a few occasions, he would retain your name perfectly and use it every time he spoke to you. Which brings us to the next point.

4. **He called you by name.** Whether he remembered it or had to glance down quickly at your name badge, he would make sure to call you by name more than once in the course of his conversation with you. During one of the recent post-term visits I had with him, he walked into the room and said warmly, “Sean, boy am I glad to see you.” Someone once told me that the sound of our own name spoken in a loving tone is one of the most soothing sounds we can ever hear. I agree.

5. **He made deep eye contact with you.** Once President Clinton's eyes locked onto yours, they didn't leave until the interaction was complete. In all my years of talking to celebrities, from sports icons and Hollywood starlets to business moguls and politicians, few have used this technique with such finesse. Most of these ego-monsters can't hold the connection more than a few seconds before they start scanning

the room for someone more important to talk to than the person right in front of them. Yuck!

6. He used his facial expressions to convey his emotional state. President Clinton would greet you with a smile in his eyes on a joyous occasion, and with sad eyes and an expression of empathy in moments of devastation. If he was upset about something, it showed on his face like a summer storm. I'm sure there were times, as there are for all of us, when he felt one emotion and projected another. But he never seemed false around me—he was always successful in conveying the emotion he wanted to show.

7. He calibrated his vocal inflections and volume based on the amount of rapport he had established. If the rapport was strong, he would be more boisterous in his volume. If it was weak, he would have a more soft-spoken demeanor. Simple, but effective.

8. He asked for your opinion. The first time the president turned to me and asked, "Sean, what are your thoughts on that?" I thought, "Did he just ask me for my opinion?" Whether he asked because he really wanted to know or because he knew it was tremendously flattering to be asked a question by the leader of the free world, I'm not exactly sure. I do know that it felt good, and I remember it to this day. Humans love to give their opinions on things. On those rare occasions when we are actually asked our thoughts on

something—and we are listened to—it makes us feel tremendously important.

9. **He chose his words wisely.** Never once did I catch President Clinton taking the verbal low road, slinging slang with disregard. He carefully selected every word to create just the right expression he was looking for.

10. **He praised you publicly any chance he got.** On July 24, 1998, I was attending an event in the Rose Garden, when out of the blue the president said, “I’d also like to thank Sean Stephenson, [Boys Nation] class of 1996, now an intern in Cabinet Affairs. Thank you for what you are doing here.” Then he nodded and smiled in my direction. Was he doing that because it was standard protocol, or because he really was truly grateful for my service at the White House? I’m going to choose to believe the latter. It felt great.

Sometimes I affectionately refer to President Clinton’s gift of connecting to those who don’t like him as “the carwash phenomenon.” Dignitaries and their families—specifically the ones who were skeptical and unfriendly toward him—would enter the White House through the East Wing gates, often with expressions of disdain. They would take a tour of all the public areas and then work their way over to the president’s office in the West Wing, to meet with him. A few hours later, when they exited the

White House through the West Wing gates, they looked completely different. It was as if President Clinton, like a cosmic car wash, had magically washed away their scowls and replaced them with expressions of pure relaxation. Absolutely remarkable!

It's been said that Clinton's greatest skill is his ability to communicate. I would disagree. I believe his strongest suit is being able to connect.

What If You Feel Too Shy to Connect?

More than one client has said to me, "I get that connection is important, Sean, BUT . . . I'm just too shy."

No one would ever call me shy, but I know that individuals fall on a spectrum from extreme introverts to extreme extroverts. But no matter what our personal style, sometimes we just identify ourselves as "shy." Why?

"Shy" behavior exists for many reasons. The greatest is that we think it keeps us from getting hurt. If we don't get involved, we can't fail, be made fun of, disappoint someone else, or look bad in any way. I call this the "turtle complex." If I curl up and hide in my shell, you can't get to me . . . Meanwhile, though, I'm missing out on the juice of life: *connection!*

Shy behavior is triggered the second we start thinking about ourselves. The moment we start thinking and acting selflessly, reaching out to help those around us, shyness subsides.

GET OFF YOUR BUT NOW!

Getting from Shy to Fly

Opportunities to connect with others are available to us every day—in the coffee shop, at the watercooler, and in the line at the bank. Too many people never capitalize on these opportunities because they have identified with the behavior of shyness, creating a strong barrier to connection. Guess what the antidote to shyness is?

Connecting!

Next time you're out and about, try this and see what happens:

First, just pretend you're not shy. Ask the person behind the cash register at the store how her day was, and don't stop at "Fine." Listen to what she tells you, and get curious about the little details. Ask her follow-up questions, such as

"What do you love about your job?"

"If you could have any job in the world, what would you want to do?"

"What are you looking forward to tomorrow?"

Pay attention to how you feel before you start talking—you'll probably be a bit nervous!—and be sure to pay attention to how you feel at the end of the conversation.

Then do it again!

We're All Connected

Connection is not just about being friendly; it's about actually recognizing that the person you're interacting with is going through his own set of problems and pain, just like yourself. It's so easy to wander through life acting as if everyone around you were a hologram, not really there, separate from you. This is so not true.

We are all connected. When we remember that, we can see ourselves in the eyes of others—and others in ourselves. Every form of religion and science that I've ever studied always comes back to this very point: we're all connected.

Why I Love Everyone

Here's what one client said to me during a therapy session:

"I'd like to connect with everyone, BUT . . . some people are just jerks. I refuse to be nice to them."

Connecting with people you like is not much of a feat. It's easy to connect with someone who praises you, showers you with positive attention, and wants to see you succeed. This is good practice, especially if connections are one of your biggest BUTS. But you'll build the real skill of connection by connecting with people who annoy and frustrate you.

I'm not saying you have to be friends with these people, but don't make the mistake of thinking that connection

should be reserved for your personal fan club. We need to connect with *everyone* in order to truly connect with ourselves.

In fact, I’ve stated many times that I love *everyone*!

What? How can I make such a blanket statement?

Simply put, I love everyone so that no one can own me. If I hate another person, she owns me. It’s true. Watch what happens in your life when you don’t like someone:

- He owns your very thoughts, every time you think about how awful he is.
- He owns the conversations you have when you complain about him to your friends.
- He even owns your behavior, when you change your plans to avoid him.

When we hate someone, we become her little marionette. She can make us bob up and down, side to side, in any direction she chooses—that is, until we finally stop hating her and move on. Not being controlled by another person is not the only reason for loving everyone, but it is certainly a very important motivator.

Connecting Is Great—Even When It Hurts!

I learned the power of connecting to difficult people when I was in college, taking a child psychology course. I was assigned to an elementary school several miles from my campus. My project consisted of working with a group of

forty kids, ranging from kindergartners to sixth graders. These children were in a special program designed for children from families with two working parents or with single parents who had to work and needed to drop their children off a few hours before school started and pick them up a few hours after school ended.

One afternoon, I had them all in the school gymnasium, sitting in a semicircle around me at half-court. I was teaching them valuable life lessons—the importance of loving yourself, being kind to your classmates, why it’s important to share . . . and then a shoe came flying out of nowhere and hit me squarely on my left temple.

Ow!

I was pretty certain that shoes don’t fly by themselves, and sure enough I saw a one-shoed boy sitting in the circle, laughing hysterically at his obnoxious prank.

What would be the normal, instinctive thing to do in a case like this, with the pain of a heavy gym shoe burning in the middle of a red spot on the side of your head? Throw it back? I wanted to. But I was supposed to be a responsible teacher in a public classroom. Should I take the child out in the hall and have some choice words with him? Sure, that would have been a good idea. But for whatever reason—shock, pain, inexperience, immaturity—I did absolutely nothing. In fact, I went so far as to pretend it didn’t happen. Thankful the shoe hadn’t caused me lasting damage, I just went on trying to connect with the kids around me, including the boy I was now thinking of as the Shoeless Monster.

Eventually, the day ended. The kids were picked up by their parents one by one until I was left with one child. Guess who? Yep, the Shoeless Monster. We sat there for forty-five minutes, my head still smarting, just talking. I was still mad at him—what kind of kid throws a shoe at his teacher?

Finally, the door swung open, and an older woman walked slowly into the gym.

"It's time to go," she said, grabbing the boy by the hand.

"See you later, Mr. Sean!" he said, with glee in his voice. He seemed to like me.

"Can't wait!" I said, giving him the smile adults make when they know the child is too young to understand sarcasm.

I collected my stuff and headed to my vehicle, glad to be leaving the Shoeless Monster and the day behind. I was half-way there when I heard a booming voice. "Sean, wait up!"

It was the school principal.

"Sean," he said, "how's your project coming? How are all the kids?"

"They're all a bunch of angels, except for this one child!" Then I told him the shoe story.

"I know just the boy you're talking about," he said. "You need to know something about this kid."

"I already know he's quite a pain!" I said, rubbing my head.

"Well, Sean, what you don't know is that just about a year ago this boy's father killed his mother . . . and now

his father is in prison, and the only living relative around to take care of him is his grandmother. She had to pick up two side jobs just to support the two of them. For lunch, he often comes to school with just a candy bar and a soda. He doesn't get much attention at home. I just thought you should know this."

Now all I wanted was to give this kid a huge hug and become a loving mentor in his life. I'm so glad I didn't throw the shoe back; that wouldn't have solved anything.

That day taught me more about life than the rest of all my collegiate experience combined: people are not their behavior; there is never any use in throwing the shoe back.

We often get so caught up in our lives that when someone comes along and disturbs us or makes things difficult, we think, "How dare you interrupt my life!" Rarely do we ever have the full picture. Even if we think we know someone, and understand what she is going through, we actually don't. *We can't.* We are not living in her skin.

The Shoeless Monster's behavior was not condonable, but it was certainly forgivable. We must look past people's behavior and ask what's going on in their inner world that's causing brash, rude, selfish, and hurtful actions in their outer world. Again: people are not their behavior.

I love the part in the movie *Peaceful Warrior* when the main character says, "The ones who are the hardest to love are usually the ones who need it most." I couldn't agree more. When we've been hurt, all we know how to do is hurt others. As soon as we heal ourselves, we are able to heal others.

This little boy was hurt, and he was crying out for help using the best method his little mind could conjure up. It was as if he were trying to get my attention, to signal to me, “Sean, please walk a mile in my shoe . . . I need your help!”

GET OFF YOUR BUT NOW!

Taming the Shoeless Monster

Can you tame your own Shoeless Monsters? You might be able to, if you remember this important fact: your goal is not to correct their behavior; it’s to help them out of the bear trap their mind and heart are stuck in. This won’t be easy, but it certainly will be worth it.

1. **Make a list.** In your Get Off Your BUT Now! journal, write down the names of all the people you have to deal with regularly who are annoying, selfish, rude, or obnoxious, or who exhibit any other destructive behaviors.
2. **Take an honest look.** To what extent are you simply being judgmental? Are you quite possibly projecting your issues onto them when they might have no issue at all? If that’s not the case and you are really sure that your Shoeless Monster(s) is destructive, go on to step 3.

3. **Discover what's behind their behavior.** This isn't a license for you to pry into their private business or to tell them that their behavior sucks. It is a license for you to show them that you care about them. Help them understand that you have no clue as to what they're going through, but that if they ever need to talk, you'll be there for them with no judgment.

Connecting with Some Really Tough Customers

The first time I spoke at a maximum security prison, my friends asked me, “Were you scared?”

To be honest, I was more scared of the prison than the prisoners. Once I got past all the razor-sharp fences, armed guards, and heavy metal gates, all I could see was a group of men—not prisoners or criminals, but *men*. Many of them were my age or younger. Sure, these men had made poor choices—extremely poor choices. But I knew that if I wanted to be a part of their “correction,” it was up to me to see them as humans, no less than I.

So the first words out of my mouth were, “I just want you to know that I respect you.” That got their attention. I could tell that this group of individuals hadn't been given respect without having to beat it out of someone.

“You know,” I continued, “we have something in common.” That really got their attention.

“I’m imprisoned by my physical condition, and you’re imprisoned by your past. I think we can learn a lot from each other.”

Commonality, I knew, is imperative for connection, and I could see that they agreed with my statement—many of them leaned forward and began listening to me as if I had the secrets to the universe. As my speech progressed, they began nodding in agreement with me, little smiles began replacing their guarded looks, and I knew we had forged a connection.

If real connection can take place between a tiny guy in a wheelchair who’s never even shoplifted a candy bar, and physically intimidating men whose rap sheets are a mile long, then anyone can make a connection with anyone else.

You can too.

How? By finding your commonalities.

We like people who are like us. We feel disconnected from anyone whose life seems drastically different from ours. Looks, money, age, race, religion, intelligence, education . . . these are all elements that can make us feel different from others. So if we want to connect with an individual or a group of individuals, we must find a common thread—no matter how unlikely it seems.

It can be really simple:

“Did you see the game last night?”

“Can you believe the gas prices today?”

“What’s with this weather?”

As soon as we find common ground, connection can take place.

GET OFF YOUR BUT NOW!

Vulnerability—The Glue of Connection

The most effective way to find common ground is by sharing our vulnerabilities. As hard as we work at maintaining an appearance of “having it all together,” we actually connect best in those moments when we admit we don’t.

Trying to appear perfect and superior kills connection. Think about it. When was the last time you heard someone talk on and on about his accomplishments and strengths and you ended up feeling closer to him? Never. We bond through our imperfections and shortcomings. Authenticity and vulnerability are the glue of connection. So let’s make some glue, shall we?

1. In your journal, make a list of ten things that are slightly embarrassing about yourself that *no one* would ever guess about you—the more ironic the better. Here are some examples:

“Even though I’m an accountant, I have to use a calculator for basic math.”

“I’m a nutritional coach, yet sometimes I crave Spam and Cheetos.”

“I’m an author, but I don’t like to read.”

2. When appropriate—at a dinner party, not a job interview!—share some of the items from your list. These insights into your authentic self are pure gold to share with people whom you want to connect with; they show that you’re not pretending to be someone you’re not.
3. When you find yourself in a group of disparate individuals, you can bring the group together by doing a little detective work to find out what everyone has in common. Share your own interests—you’ll be surprised how quickly the group relaxes and connections start forming!

Connecting Through Conversational Ping-Pong

Have you ever been in a conversation with someone who was painfully boring and seemed to drone on forever? You were probably looking at your watch, frantically trying to figure out how to get away. Obviously, there was no connection present. Moments of strong connection, in contrast, are so pleasurable that we lose all track of time.

So how do we spark connection in a conversation? We have to play Ping-Pong.

Huh?

Ping-Pong works like this: you take a ball and serve it back and forth on a table, over a net. What would happen if you hit the ball across the net and the other player never hit it back? Or if the person serving the ball just held on to it and never hit it over to you? How fun would that be? Yet that's how many of us converse with others. Either we hog the ball and just talk about our lives the whole time, or we never play at all.

If you want to master the art of connection through conversation, just remember to play verbal Ping-Pong. I love to talk, so I have to check in with myself all the time: "Sean . . . has the ball been on their side of the table much during this conversation?" If the answer is no, I quickly say that I've been going on about myself, but I really want to catch up on what's happening with them. You can't fake it, though. Talking for an hour straight about your life and ending with, "Gotta go—by the way, how are you?" is not going to cut it! Neither is asking them a bunch of questions about their life but not sharing anything about yourself. In order for people to feel connected to you, they need to know how you're doing, what you're up to, and how you've been feeling. If you hide behind a battery of questions, a person may feel as if you care about him, but he will have nothing invested in you.

Once you've mastered conversational Ping-Pong, you can take it to the next level. At the beginning of a conversation, recall and mention some of the things the person told you in your last interaction. "What happened with that

car you were talking about buying the last time we spoke?” This tells her that you care enough about her to remember and be interested in what she has to say.

Women are pretty good at this. Unfortunately, most men really fall down on the job on this one. How powerful is the man (or woman) who can see a person three weeks later and ask,

“What outfit did you end up wearing to that party you told me about?”

“Did they ever find your camera?”

“So did the blind date work out?”

When your friend is flattered and touched that you remembered, and hits the ball back to your side of the table, the connection will be made.

There’s Always Time for Connection

I often hear people say, “I’d do all this connection stuff, BUT . . . I’m just too busy.”

We all fall prey to the idea that we don’t have enough time. Yet time is the only commodity that we’ve all been given an equal amount of.

The excuse of “not having time” is never really about time; it’s about priorities. If you don’t set making

connections as a high priority, you'll never feel that there's time for it. Ironically, when you don't spend a little extra time connecting with your friends, family, lovers, and colleagues, you'll end up spending tons of time on the back end repairing hurt feelings and enduring endless amounts of drama.

If you set the goal of authentically connecting for just a few minutes a day, you'll be amazed at the positive reactions you get. Romantic dates, free meals, pay raises, party invitations . . . connecting is giving, and people always want to give back. Can you really afford the time not to connect?

Recently, at the airport, I overheard two friends talking. One of the guys said that he really liked this girl who worked at his office, but he never let her know. Years went by, but he never reached out to her, never made any effort to connect with her on a personal level. Then one day she showed up at work with a huge rock on the fourth finger of her left hand. When she showed him, he said, "That's great" in a somewhat sarcastic tone. Then he walked away.

His reaction upset her so much that she asked around the office, trying to understand why he wasn't happy for her. Surprised, her colleagues told her that it was obvious that he had always had a crush on her. She collapsed in her chair, crying. "I've always had a crush on him too," she sobbed, "but I thought he didn't like me because he never talked to me . . . and now it's too late!" The man telling the story was crushed. At this point his friend reached over and patted him on the back.

We can't procrastinate when it comes to making connections. When we see the window of opportunity, we have to reach out and connect—no BUTS about it. In fact, I believe we put ourselves in real danger when we refuse to connect with others. Like this man and woman, we can not only lose positive opportunities but also incur negative consequences.

I've read that doctors who don't connect with their patients on a personal level are far more prone to being sued for malpractice—even if they didn't do anything medically wrong. This is because the second a patient has a pain or complication, he'll find it easier and more natural to think that it must have been caused by the doctor who didn't really care about him.

GET OFF YOUR BUT NOW!

Fun with Connecting

Connecting with others doesn't have to be elaborate or deeply meaningful or planned in advance. It doesn't even have to result in a long-lasting relationship. A quick connection with strangers can make both of you feel great for the rest of the day and teach you one of the most important lessons about connecting: it's fun!

1. **Make a silly face.** Make eye contact with the person you want to connect with, and then make a silly

face—simply to make her smile—and then smile to show your intent. Obviously, you’ll want to keep this appropriate to the context! But given the right time, place, and person, you’ll be amazed by how much you can brighten someone’s day with a silly face—and how good it makes you feel in return.

2. **Make a hand sandwich.** Next time you’re introduced to someone who reaches out to shake your hand, place both of your hands comfortably around his, making a nice hand sandwich. Look deep into his eyes, smile, nod, and say, “It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He will connect with your warmth as genuine, and it will be.
3. **Play “What I Love About You.”** This is a great game to play on a road trip or when you’re sitting around the dinner table with your friends, family, or a lover. Go around the group, taking turns saying what you love about each other and listening to what they love about you. I learned this one from a kindergarten teacher who had me speak to her class. We played the game for over thirty minutes, and I loved it so much that I adopted it into my life. I now play at least a few times a month—on dates, on the phone with friends, and on road trips with my family. (Warning: Never play “What I Can’t Stand About You”! That one ends really badly for everyone . . . trust me, I know!)

4. **Play the Question Game.** This is a great game to play when you want to connect with someone and get to know her at the same time. The premise is simple: you take turns asking questions about each other. The more creative the questions, the more fun the game. For example, “What’s something about you that no one would ever guess?” “If you could eliminate one negative thing on this planet, what would it be?” (*Warning: This game is not Truth or Dare! Be nice.*)

I once played this game with a woman who answered the question, “What is a simple pleasure you love more than anything on earth?” Her answer was animal crackers. So the next time we got together, guess what I started nibbling on when she showed up. Priceless connection builder!



By now, I think you understand how passionate I am when it comes to connection!

Connecting with others is never about appearing to be perfect, and it’s about much more than being nice or polite. We make connections when we open up our authentic self and share the things that make us all human—the good and the bad, warts and all. It’s also about using genuine emotional tools like listening, focusing, and empathy

to step into the world of another human being as best you can, making both of your realities happier, safer, and more fulfilling. And there's a bonus: the more you connect with those around you, the more support you'll get from others.

In the next lesson, you'll learn how to improve the most important (yet often overlooked) connection you'll ever have: the connection you have with yourself.



HOW RENE GOT OFF HIS BUT

“I’d be successful, BUT I was born into poverty.”

I was extremely impressed by Rene Godefroy the first day I ever saw him. He was on stage, sharing his life story with an audience of over two thousand professional speakers. Speaking to two thousand people is a feat unto itself; however, speaking to two thousand *speakers* is in a totally different league of intimidation! Yet he communicated his points with such grace and poise that I sat back in awe. I felt as if he were speaking directly to me. Considering the fact that English was not even his first language, I found Rene beyond amazing.

After his presentation, I rolled up to him and introduced myself. We hit it off immediately. He was as great at communicating one on one as he was to a group, yet I found that his communication skills actually paled in comparison to his connection skills. I felt that he was truly interested in getting to know me, that he was really listening and paying attention to what I had to say. He was both inquisitive and genuine, two attributes that ignite connection. How he handled himself on and off stage that

day convinced me that I was in the presence of a man who had what it takes to connect with all of humanity. His life story says it all.

Rene was born in Haiti, in a tiny, impoverished village without running water, electricity, or medical care. When he was nine months old, his mother left him behind with a neighbor and went to Port-au-Prince to find a better way to provide for her son and, she hoped, break the cycle of poverty.

Right after Rene's mother left, he became very ill. Have you seen those infomercials about suffering children in third-world countries? That's how life was for Rene.

His diet consisted of breadfruit, a starchy food that tastes something like a potato. He ate it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. But his weak digestive system simply could not process all the starch, and his tummy would swell.

Because his only source of water was from an untreated source, parasites grew inside of him. Those parasites were sucking the life out of him. Many nights he would be tormented with severe stomach cramps, crawling on the dirt floor in the dark calling for his mother, who was not around to help him.

Rene was so ill and frail that when the strong tropical winds blew across the village, he would run and brace himself against a tree so that he wouldn't get blown away. To add insult to injury, he was teased and ridiculed.

Finally, when Rene was seven, his mother was able to afford to send for him. Now you're probably thinking, "What

a relief! No more misery for Rene." Wrong. Life in the city with his mother was just as bad. You see, Rene's mother lived in a little basement shack infested with rats and roaches.

At night, he slept on the floor on some ragged sheets, trying to ignore the critters that crawled over him. The rats terrified him, nibbling at the bottoms of his feet. Despite all his hardships, Rene grew up. Sometimes he dreamed about going to the United States, which he called the "promise land."

When he was eighteen, Rene sat on a small bench and watched a group of guys rehearsing for a play. He thought to himself, "I sure would love to perform with this group." His mind, however, had other ideas. It said, "BUT I don't have any experience or training."

Then one day, in spite of his fears, he decided to stop listening to his BUT. He walked right up to the man in charge of the group and asked if he could join—and, to his surprise, the answer was yes. I wasn't surprised when I heard this part of the story, though. I'm sure that Rene must have looked that man in the eye, connecting and communicating his heart's intention on the spot. How could the man have refused?

So, at the age of twenty-one, Rene left Haiti with a theatre company bound for Montreal, Canada. Once there, he inquired about the United States. When they told him that it was just next door, he couldn't believe it.

Right away, he began to ask everyone he met about the best way to get to America. Most people tried to discourage him. They told him how risky and dangerous it was. Many

suggested that it was almost impossible. Then someone told him about a woman who was smuggling people into the United States.

“It’s dangerous,” the man said. “You might even get killed.” Rene arrived in the United States wedged between the rear tires of a tractor trailer, flat on his elbows and knees. Trembling, terrified, covered with ashes, dust, and smoke, Rene made his prayer: “God, if you help me make it to America safe, I promise I will do something meaningful with my life.”

And he did. He washed cars on the streets of Miami from 1983 to 1984, and mopped floors from 1984 to 1985. He worked as a doorman in Atlanta for fourteen years. Along the way he tried to communicate with everyone he met, and through those efforts he learned English—one word at a time. While parking cars for a living, he discovered self-help books lying on the backseats, and his curiosity was piqued. He reasoned, “If those rich people are reading those kinds of books, then I should read them, too. Maybe they know something I don’t know.”

He started buying more self-help books, devouring them from beginning to end. Through the books, he discovered that some of these authors were “motivational speakers.” He was stunned to find out that such a career existed. He said to himself, “I want to be a motivational speaker in the United States of America.”

Then a BUT appeared: “BUT my English is not good enough and my accent is too thick.” Rene faced those BUTS

head-on and took the plunge in spite of them. He started the journey to becoming a motivational speaker in North America. Rene’s grit, determination, and unwavering commitment helped him blast his way to the top of the speaking field in a short few years.

Today, Rene travels the country sharing his story and the concept that “no condition is permanent.” Through his humanitarian endeavors, he now feeds children, empowers the hopeless, and acts as a light at the end of the tunnel for countless young people in poor countries who didn’t see a way out before. The people in his impoverished village in Haiti call him the village hero.



Every time I talk about Rene’s story I’m blown away all over again. The grinding poverty and illness of Rene’s childhood could have defeated him completely. No one would have blamed him if right now he was curled up in a dirt hut on the brink of death, feeling sorry for himself, shrugging his shoulders, and thinking, “BUT there’s nothing I can do about it. That’s just the way my life is.”

You might say, “Sure, but look at all the breaks he got along the way.” It’s true—not everyone living in poverty has the good fortune to get the breaks that Rene got. Yet think about that; these breaks didn’t just fall on Rene. He noticed them, connected with people who offered them, and forged a chain of success one human link at a time.

If Rene had sat on his BUTS—and he had plenty of them!—he could easily have passed up the opportunity to pursue freedom, wealth, and happiness. And even if he'd made it to America, he could have stayed stuck in low-income jobs his entire life. Yet he succeeded because *every step of the way*, Rene chose to reach out and connect with all the people he came into contact with, no matter who they were, reaching for their authentic self with his own heart. When they felt that connection, they just naturally wanted to help him.

I said it in Lesson 1, and I'll say it again right now: it's the act of truly connecting—not only with other human beings, but with yourself—that is step one in getting yourself off your BUT.