

“Lost Connections”  
Rev. Hannah Petrie  
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CALL TO WORSHIP # 649 From Generation to Generation

READING “Lost Connections” by Johann Hari, pp. 153-155

PRAYER #657 It Matters What We Believe by Sofia Lyon Fahs

SERMON

Is it true that, as a culture, “we have ended up with a distorted sense of our own distress”? (as one researcher of the causes of depression suggests?) This sermon answers yes to that question, but I’ll only speak from my own experience – I’ve navigated depression on and off since my teens. It can be dangerous to make any pronouncements about depression for other people, and the author of “Lost Connections” also makes that clear: a lot of people feel their anti-depressant pills work just fine for them, and have no concerns about taking them – both the author and myself make no judgment here, but like a good Unitarian minister, my job is to raise awareness about what we know now that we didn’t know before – then as good religious liberals, with this knowledge you decide what’s best for you.

I have felt for the last three years or so that my low-dose anti-depressant cocktail I take everyday works pretty well for me, but after reading this book, I’m not so sure. I am thinking about getting off the one that has the worst side effects. Why? Because I don’t want to be taking something that’s hardly more effective than the placebo effect in the long term, which is what the pre-clinical trials for many of these drugs reveal over time – where is the sense in that? It only makes sense for the company that makes the pills. Then again, the placebo effect is still effective, right? If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it? These are some of my thoughts.

But the other reason I’d like to “just say no” is because I have been suspecting my entire life, deep inside somewhere, that the causes of my depression don’t begin in my brain, they begin in how hard it can be to live in a culture that is so ignorant of what people actually need to feel content and secure. This whole time, I have known what I need, but I haven’t been able to articulate it near as well as this book does. It’s like when someone puts into words what you know and feel, even as it’s also been sad for me to realize that I too have bought the story Western medicine has been selling fairly unabated it would seem, since the middle of the last century. “Not up to hacking the cultural norms of Western society? The problem is your brain, and the solution is these pills . . .”

But the very refreshing-to-me articulation goes something like this: I know what I have wished for so many times, when I’ve been depressed. Connections. Community. People who know me, see me, love me, and whom I can know, see, and

love, too. I am really fortunate to be a minister, where meaningful connections and community are part of my job. I haven't been crazy, though, to pine for these things when I haven't had them. Most people who are depressed have some pretty good reasons to be depressed, even if they too, can't quite articulate what these causations are.

Humor me a second. Please, close your eyes and think about a time and place in your life, when you felt very connected to people, as part of a community, and it emotionally fed and sustained you, every day. A time when there was no pervading fear or doubt or depression in your life, just contentment, on the by and by, day to day. A time when there were people around who appreciated and respected you and what you did. Visit this place, in your mind and in your heart! Indulge yourself in the feelings associated with such positive memories. Gosh, I can tell you that, for me, it's when I felt the healthiest and most alive.

For me, that time was when I was a camper and a camp counselor at a YMCA overnight camp in Michigan, Camp Echo – I got to have at least a dozen good summers there. As a camper I only went two weeks of the summer, that's what we could afford, but as a counselor, I'd be there for months. And even though it was idyllic and tended toward the homogeneous - artificial to some degree in its ephemeral nature - I was so very happy there, and it's always been this sore spot in my heart ever since, that real life can't be like camp, where we live, eat, and sleep together, where it only works because collectively, we make it work together. (Gosh if there was no death and destruction involved, I would have loved the army, right?)

Another similar time in my life was when I lived in West Africa, in Sierra Leone, for six months. This is a very public culture – privacy is an absurd concept to people there, and I found that really worked for me. I'm supposed to share everything? Okay, sign me up!

Perhaps a lot of us don't even know how much we dislike our own culture, full of what Johann Hari describes as "junk values" that increasingly prevail as generations come of age - no wonder teens are depressed these days, when they are led to believe that what matters most is individual achievement and material status.

Man, ever since Camp Echo, then Africa when I was 20 years old, I have been aware of how individualistic, isolating, and frankly ass-backwards our culture is when it comes to creating societies where things like depression and anxiety are rare. Let me just name what this boils down to – I look at our culture, and I often think how god-awful *lonely* so many of us are, whatever our age, even if we don't live alone.

I have known in my heart, and maybe some of you have too, that I am going to be sad when I don't have these basic connections in my life that Johann Hari identifies, such as real live friendships where I can share my darkest fears along with my highest joys. I think my anti-depressant pills have been very helpful at a few key moments in my life, but the research shows that most of them lose their initial

effectiveness in about 3 – 6 months. I intuit that if I had an intentionally designed program of social warmth and care, where I make sure I'm getting these very human connective needs met, then I may have a shot at not having to forever swallow these pills every day until I croak. Observe! I am sharing my discernment with you in real time. I do know to have the support of at least two of my doctors before trying any changes, and anyone here should, too.

On nearly every page, Johann Hari's book looks at research that has been done independently of big pharma; he shares his insights from interviews with these researchers; and then he considers these insights for his own life, and shares what he believed about his depression before he made this book, and what he believes now. What he believes now is that there are socially based causes of depression in which we lack something that connects us to the ability to enjoy life. The ones I want to mention are: Disconnection from meaningful work, from other people, from meaningful values, from status and respect, from the natural world, and finally, from a hopeful or secure future.

It's quite controversial indeed to talk about anti-depressant pills as not being what they've been cracked up to be, for close to three decades now. But remember that 12 steps definition of insanity: why do we keep applying the same solutions to depression and anxiety and expect different results? Let's explore this controversy of crazy.

The truth cannot be prettified, depression is on the rise in the United States, according to researchers at Columbia University's School of Public Health. From 2005 to 2015, depression rose significantly among Americans age 12 and older with the most rapid increases seen in young people. As a mother of 6 and 8 year olds, this concerns me.

It also concerns me as a minister. I see depression in folks all the time. It's a very common malady of modernity that can hit anyone – you don't have to have a genetic pre-disposition or something wrong with your brain – depression and anxiety, which often go hand in hand, can affect anyone in the Western world because of the ways we live.

This is why I'm preaching about it, because organized religion, at its best and most functional, is about transforming the way we live, day to day. That's why I got into this racket, I'm sure I've mentioned that before and will many times again: I learned in college that our society has calcified into isolated, social enclaves, where we don't do much communally, anymore. An enclave isn't a community, you see, it's a small group of like-minded people with the same socio-economic status, where you get to socialize with these people, but you don't get challenged much to grow or to change.

This congregation, for example, is not an enclave; we are a community. Yes, we have like-minded folks who affirm our values and beliefs, but there is some measure of socio-economic diversity here; there are more walks of life to rub elbows with, than

you could find, say, just at home or at work. That's why y'all are here! – some of you are *looking* for this deeper concept of community, and many of you have *found* that here, and keep coming back, because it works, just like 12 steps.

I'm probably hyperbolizing here, but this place is a regular one-stop-shop for many of the connections "Lost Connections" talks about: people, spiritual opening and challenge, affirmation, group efforts. We're no corporate big-box here, we're more of a mom-and-pop, "come on in and sit deep, you're one of the folks!" kind of congregation. We're like a village inside the big, anonymous, and faceless city – a slice of a sweet, country church in a desert of tangled highways and urban sprawl.

We try to be here for people who are so sick and tired of the modern junk values we are subjected to everyday. I never can quite believe this, but apparently we are exposed to about 5,000 advertizing messages a day! This place, and any religious community at its best, is about countering the de-humanizing effects of western modernity.

Now, as I was writing this sermon, I realized I'm starting to sound like a communist, and frankly that's a concern rearing its ugly head again in our current geo-political landscape. I mean, we got Russia acting like Russia, and the term and actions of "antifa," which stands for Anti-Facism, becoming the new target of the extreme right, similar to when McCarthy went after communists. I mention this because that's how threatened Western culture can sometimes feel by communal values.

The most important, and chilling, insight this book articulated for me is how very well set up our pharmaceutical system is to exploit people, and it keeps getting better and better at it, whether it's the scourge of the Opiate crisis, or the billion-dollar anti-depressant industry, based on crappy science big pharma orchestrated – we should be - if not alarmed and disturbed - then *concerned* enough to consider how we as a society, as individuals, should be trying to save ourselves: save the goodness and best parts of Western society, rather than succumb to how much sicker it seems to be getting with each passing decade.

Before I share with you the very, very good news, however, in this regard, allow me to get even darker for a sec – any of you who identify as a depressive may recognize the depressive's delight in super dark humor, (I'm quite certain we have the English to thank for that), but here's my question. If big pharma keeps killing us, eventually they're not going to have any customers left, and perhaps that will be their just reward!

But here's the most excellent news: there are so, so many ways we can intentionally look after our key human needs for connection. And what seems to work best are often the totally unexpected turn of events that bring a disparate group of people together, to work together toward making the world a better place. There are a few notable examples in Hari's book, but my good news is we don't have to wait for strange circumstances to present themselves: we can just do it. We can think

creatively and rather than doubt how far-fetched it might sound, we can trust our instincts and just go for it. I did this once, and it worked.

Several months ago, I mentioned that I would like to get an SOS group started here. SOS stands for “Sailors of Sadness.” It’s a program I invented during my last settled ministry, where anyone who’s ever been told by a doctor or health professional that they have depression, anxiety, bi-polar, etc. can come to this meeting and belong to a group of people who, like a sailor, navigate depression and mental illness. We share our stories, our struggles, *and* we share laughter, knowing nods, and tips for what has helped us. Most crucially, we counter the isolation depressives so often feel, because the stigma associated with depression is still well entrenched in 2018.

Instead of receiving tepid sympathy from whomever, SOSers receive, and give, real *empathy* to one another. And it helps! Not every SOS meeting helps everyone, but the gatherings mostly help. This sermon topic was selected so I could officially kick off SOS in Studio City. If you’re interested, and I already know at least a couple of you are, please tell me in the line, after the service, or email me, and then we can find the monthly time-slot that works best for most of us.

The way this works: I make it clear that I am not a therapist – I’m a facilitator, facilitating camaraderie amongst a group of people for whom it is incredibly refreshing to speak openly about depression.

So it’s time to end, and I hope this sermon hasn’t been a total downer! Bear in mind, that religious liberals have an undying love for the truth, even when the truth is hard to look at, or not very clear. We believe that having the courage to question our most deeply held assumptions is not only how human beings evolve, and become bigger, better people – a form of worldly salvation – we also believe it’s how societies are saved from their own self-destructive tendencies. There must be enough of us who connect the dots together, and say, what we’re doing isn’t working, and we must try something else. We must try something else.

May it be so.