

## WELCOME TO THE CONNECTED AGE

By Keith Ferrazzi from his book "Never Eat Alone"

We human beings are social beings. We come into the world as the result of others' actions. We survive here in dependence on others. Whether we like it or not, there is hardly a moment of our lives when we do not benefit from others' activities. For this reason, it is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationship with others.

--Dalai Lama

There has never been a time to reach out and connect than right now. The dynamic of our society, and particularly our economy, will increasingly be defined by interdependence and interconnectivity. In other words, the more everything becomes connected to everything and everyone else, the more we begin to depend on whom and what we're connected with.

Rugged individualism may have ruled for much of the nineteenth and twentieth century. But community and alliances will rule in the twenty-first century. In the digital era, when the internet has broken down geographic boundaries and connected hundreds of millions of people and computers around the world, there's no reason to live and work in isolation. We've come to realize, again, that success is not contingent on cool technology or venture capital; it's dependent on whom you know and how you work with them. We've rediscovered that the real key to profit is working well with other people.

We've taken some lumps getting back to this fundamental truth. All the changes, all the fads, all the technologies of the last decade too often foundered on the human factor, leading the business world to treat people less as human beings than as just so many bits and bytes. We placed our faith in gadgets, processes, new organizational structures, stock market prices. When these things didn't deliver on their promise, we returned to us, you, and me.

Life is about work, work is about life, and both are about people. "The most exciting breakthrough of the twenty-first century will occur not because of technology, but because of an expanding concept of what it means to be human," said the futurist John Naisbitt. Technology has proved no substitute for personal relationships. To the contrary, it seems to be enhancing them. Look around you and you'll see this expanded view of what it means to be human, and how we interact with one another, in action. Here's just a small sampling:

1. The hottest trend these days is found in social-networking software tools, and services like Spoke Software, Plaxo, Ryze, and LinkedIn. People are now finding new ways to use technology to connect people with bonds of trust and friendship. Some are calling it a social revolution.
2. Blogs, part of the same phenomenon, are allowing passionate individuals with good content to reach literally millions of other people. These self-sustaining communities are flourishing. In the future, as personal branding continues to solidify itself as a mainstay in the economy, blogs will become as ubiquitous as resumes.

3. Social scientists are making remarkable discoveries about the power of social networks. Recent research findings are proving that people who are more connected with other people live longer and are healthier. In communities where people are connected, the schools work better, the crime rate is lower, the economic growth rate is higher. Bringing people together by building personal relationships is becoming far more than career strategy; it's increasingly regarded as one of the most effective ways to enhance America's civic and social health.
4. Old-style labor unions and guilds are showing signs of revitalization. As the outsourcing of jobs outside the U.S. continues, and more and more of us become free agents, Americans are finding strength in membership to something larger than themselves. We're giving our loyalty and our trust not to companies but to our peers.

That's just a small taste of what's to come. We are in the formative stages of a new era of connectivity and community. You now have the skills and knowledge to thrive in this environment. But to what end? How will you survive? What does it mean to live in a truly connected life?

Certainly, some of us will tally success in terms of income and promotions. Others will cite their newfound celebrity or the exciting expertise that they've amassed. For others still, it will be the fabulous dinner parties they throw or the aspirational contacts they've befriended.

But will such success feel empty? Instead of being surrounded by a loving family and a trusted circle of friends, will you only have colleagues and clients?

Sooner or later, in one way or another, we all will ask ourselves these questions. Moreover, we'll look back on our life and wonder, What is my legacy? What have I done that is meaningful?

How many of you can recall the names of the last three CEOs of General Motors, IBM, or Wal-Mart? Are you struggling to come up with names? Now try and recall three important figures in the Civil Rights Movement. Ah, here people usually can name six or more.

Ultimately, making your mark as a connector means making a contribution—to your friends and family, to your company, to your community, and most important, to the world—by making the best use of your contacts and talents.

It's funny what events in life will make you question where you're headed and what you value most. I remember as a young man, for instance, dreaming of owning my own Brooks Brothers button-down shirt. All throughout my years growing up, I wore hand-me-downs from my mom's cleaning customers' kids or I'd find my clothes in secondhand thrift shops. I thought that when the day came that I could walk into a shop like Brooks Brothers and buy my own firsthand shirt (for retail!), well, that would be the day I arrived.

That day came. I was in my mid-twenties and I proudly bought the finest, most expensive button-down shirt Brooks Brothers sold. The next day I wore that shirt into work as if it were a rare, emerald-studded gown from the Victorian era. Then I washed it. I remember pulling my shirt from the washer and (gasp!) two buttons had fallen off. I kid you not. This, I asked myself, is what I've been waiting for all my life?

As noted author and speaker Rabbi Harold Kushner once wisely wrote, "Our souls are not hungry for fame, comfort, wealth, or power. Those rewards create almost as many problems as they solve. Our souls

are hungry for meaning, for the sense that we have figured out how to live so that our lives matter so the world will at least be a little bit different for our having passed through it.”

But it would take many more missing buttons before I truly started to ask myself what meaning, exactly, my soul was hungry for.

That time finally came with what I call my own personal mini-revolution. Revolutions sometimes begin in the least likely of places with the least likely of heroes. Who could imagine that a small Indian man with a very strong accent could challenge what I wanted out of life and how I was going to attain it? Or that doing nothing and remaining silent for ten days, rather than trying to do everything all at once, could change the course of my life?

The first shot in my revolution happened, in all places, while I was in Switzerland for the World Economic Forum, attending an oversubscribed talk entitled, simply, “Happiness.” The room was jam-packed with the world’s rich and powerful—a clear indication that there were others in my midst who had experienced a few missing buttons of their own.

We were gathered together to hear a short, stout, and thoroughly happy-looking man named S.N. Goenka deliver a speech on how he, as a businessman-turned-guru, found health and happiness through an ancient tradition of meditation known as Vipassana.

Goenka slowly shuffled to the podium and launched into a talk that enraptured the entire audience for the next hour. With his words, we were all transported into our own heads, forced to confront the feelings of inadequacy, stress, and imbalance that still accompanied our seemingly successful lives.

Not a word was spoken about business, per se. There was no talk of balance sheets or influential contacts. Happiness, he told us, had nothing to do with how much money we made or how we made it.

There is only one place to find real peace, real harmony. That place is within, Goenka told us. And while we may be masters of business, it was clear that we were not masters of our own minds and souls.

There was a way, he said, to ask the right questions and become masters of our mind. Vipassana, we were told, is an insight meditation technique that means “to see things as they really are.” It was a technology for inner peace that could drive fear from the heart and help us have the courage to be who we really are. Goenka described a grueling ten-day course, during which practitioners sit for hours-long stretches in absolute silence, without eye contact, writing, or communication of any kind except with teachers at the end of each day.

It was up to us. No, it was within us to live a happy and meaningful life. We just had to ask the right questions and spend the time looking and listening.

While I’m not sure how many of my fellow executives were intent on learning Vipassana, it was clear that Goenka had touched us...deeply. He made us feel, at least for that moment, that we had the power to make our work and lives mean something, that it could be important, that it could make a difference, and that we could learn to be happy if only we took the time to listen to what our souls were telling us.

I left refreshed and inspired, but I was sure that I would never learn Vipassana. Ten days with no conference calls, no power lunches, no talking....ten DAYS! Impossible. I could never find the time.

Then, suddenly, I had all the time in the world. After my departure from Starwood, one too many buttons had gone missing and I was in need of some clarity—and happiness.

Until that moment, I thought I didn’t have enough time, or courage, for ten days of introspection. But eventually I took the Vipassana course and learned, for what seemed the first time in my life, to slow down and truly listen. In the process I shed many—though not all—of the thoughts of what I “should” and ought to be doing.

If you commit yourself to finding your passion, that blue flame, it's interesting how that commitment is rewarded with answers. The answers that came to me after all that meditation helped me to reevaluate my pursuit of prestige and money and refocus on what I've always known matters most: relationships.

Vipassana certainly isn't the only way to get clarity, but so few of us give ourselves the time and space we need to come to a better understanding of who we are and what we really want. How had I—along with so many other perfectly capable and intelligent people I know—allowed my life to get so far out of whack? By failing to ask ourselves the kinds of questions that are the most important: What is your passion? What truly gives you pleasure? How can you make a difference?

When I left the meditation course and got back to the routine of my life, I was like a kid in a candy store. There were so many people I wanted to meet! So many people I wanted to help! The pursuit of achievement could be, I realized, so much fun and so inspiring when you knew what was worthy of achieving.

We've been taught to see life as a quest, a journey that ends with, hopefully, meaning, love, and an IRA that will keep your golden years golden. There is, however, no end, no final arrival; the quest never quite ends. There is no one job title or one Brooks Brothers shirt or one dollar amount that can ever act as the ultimate finishing line. Which is why the achievement of some goals can feel as disappointing as failure.

Living a connected life leads one to take a different view. Life is less a quest than a quilt. We find meaning, love, and prosperity through the process of stitching together our bold attempts to help others find their own way in their lives. The relationships we weave become an exquisite and endless pattern.

There is a line in a lovely movie called *HOW TO MAKE AN AMERICAN QUILT* that sums up this philosophy nicely: "Young lovers seek perfection. Old lovers sew shreds together and see beauty in the multiplicity of patches."

What will be the legacy of your own quilt? How will you be remembered? These questions are potent measuring sticks for anyone who cares about making a difference, not just making a living. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be the best in the world, as long as you remember that doing so also means wanting to be the best FOR the world.

Remember that love, reciprocity, and knowledge are not like bank accounts that grow smaller as you use them. Creativity begets more creativity, money begets more money, knowledge begets more knowledge, more friends beget more friends, success begets even more success. Most important, giving begets giving. At no time in history has this law of abundance been more apparent than in this connected age where the world increasingly functions in accord with networking principles.

Wherever you are in life right now, and whatever you know, is the result of the ideas, experiences, and people you have interacted with in your life, whether in person, through books and music, e-mail, or culture. There is no score to keep when abundance leads to even more abundance. So make a decision that from this day forward you will start making the contacts and accumulating the knowledge, experiences, and people to help you achieve your goals.

But first be honest with yourself. How much time are you ready to spend on reaching out and giving before you get? How many mentors do you have? How many people have you mentored? What do you love to do? How do you want to live? Whom do you want to be part of your quilt?

From my experience, I can tell you the answers will come as a surprise. What's important probably won't come down to a job, a company, or a cool new piece of technology. It will come down to people. It's up to each of us, working together with people we love, to make the world a world we want to live in. As the anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." It is my hope that you have the tools to make that a reality. But you can't do it alone. We are all in this together. Make your quilt count.