

The Courage to Connect

On safety, vulnerability and the human need for connection

Human life begins in relationship. Long before we understand ourselves, form opinions or have words for what we experience, we depend on other people. We are fed, held, comforted, protected and responded to. Through those countless early encounters, we gradually begin to experience something not only about the people around us, but also about ourselves.

Am I welcome? Is there someone when I need them? Can I reach out and expect a response? Is there room for me as I am?

A child does not ask these questions consciously. They are lived before they can be thought. And through those experiences, something begins to develop that can become a foundation for the rest of life: a basic sense of security.

We do not first become ourselves and then enter into relationships. Something of who we are emerges through the way we are met.

From security to freedom

It may seem paradoxical, but one of the most important things we receive through connection is the freedom to become more independent.

A child who experiences sufficient security does not need to remain close forever. Precisely because there is a reliable place to return to, the world can gradually be explored. A few steps away from a parent. A little farther the next time. Eventually school, friendships, relationships, work and a life of one's own.

For me, this is one of the most beautiful movements in human development. Connection and freedom are not necessarily opposites. Under the right circumstances, one can make the other possible.

I have come to use the term *basic security* for this deeper experience. It is not the certainty that nothing bad will happen or that we will never be rejected, disappointed or hurt. Life offers no such guarantee. It is something quieter: an underlying experience that we are allowed to exist, that we matter and that we do not immediately lose ourselves when life becomes uncertain.

Not everyone develops that foundation to the same degree. And even when it is present, later experiences can affect our sense of security. But throughout life, the relationship between security and freedom continues to influence the way we approach ourselves and others.

Protection makes sense

When connection has been painful, unpredictable or unsafe, we learn to protect ourselves. We may become careful about showing vulnerability, adapt closely to what others expect or try to remain in control. Some people withdraw when another person comes too close. Others hold on more tightly because distance feels threatening.

These responses are sometimes described as problems that need to be corrected. I prefer to begin somewhere else.

Protection usually makes sense before it becomes limiting.

A way of responding that creates difficulties today may once have been an intelligent adaptation to circumstances in which it was needed. A child who learned to carefully monitor the mood of a parent may later become extraordinarily sensitive to the emotional atmosphere around them. Someone who discovered early that asking for help led to disappointment may become fiercely independent.

The question is therefore not simply how to get rid of these patterns. It is whether we can begin to recognize what they once protected us from and whether that protection is still necessary in the life we are living now.

When protection gets in the way of connection

The difficulty is that the same strategies that protect us from being hurt can also make it harder to experience the connection we long for.

If I never show what matters to me, rejection may become less likely, but being truly known becomes more difficult as well. If I constantly adapt to another person, I may preserve harmony while gradually disappearing from the relationship myself. If I avoid depending on anyone, I reduce the risk of disappointment but may also make it difficult to receive care when I need it.

This does not mean that healthy connection requires us to lower every defense or become completely open. Boundaries are essential. There are people and situations in which protecting ourselves is appropriate and necessary.

The question is whether protection remains a choice or has become an automatic response.

When sufficient safety is present, we may discover that we no longer need every form of protection we once relied upon. We can remain cautious where caution is appropriate while becoming more open where openness has become possible.

That is not defenselessness.

It is freedom.

The courage to be seen

Intimacy does not mean revealing everything about ourselves. Nor does authenticity require us to say everything we think or feel. But meaningful connection does ask for something real to be present between people.

That can be frightening.

To allow another person to know that we care is to become vulnerable to disappointment. To say that something hurts means giving up the protection of pretending that it does not matter. To ask for help is to acknowledge that we cannot always do everything alone. To love someone is to allow their presence to become important to us.

Vulnerability is therefore not automatically a virtue, and it should never be demanded. It becomes meaningful when it is freely offered in a relationship that is sufficiently safe to receive it.

Perhaps courage in relationships is not about becoming completely unprotected. It is about allowing ourselves to be seen without abandoning the boundaries that help us remain ourselves.

We need others without losing ourselves

Modern ideas about adulthood often emphasize independence. We admire people who are self-sufficient, make their own choices and do not need the approval of others. There is something valuable in that. Growing up does involve becoming increasingly capable of standing on our own feet.

But independence does not erase our relational nature.

We continue to need other people. Not because we are incomplete without them, but because much of human life only exists between us. Friendship, intimacy, belonging, parenthood, teamwork and love cannot be created by one person alone.

Maturity may therefore be less about no longer needing anyone and more about changing **how** we need one another. Instead of depending on another person to tell us who we are, we can increasingly bring ourselves into the relationship. We can be connected without disappearing and autonomous without becoming isolated.

That balance is never finished. Every important relationship asks us to find it again.

Connection and performance

The importance of connection does not end when we leave our personal relationships and enter a classroom, sports team or workplace. People continue to be relational beings wherever they go.

An athlete may have exceptional talent and years of training, yet the environment in which they perform still matters. A child may be capable of learning but need enough security to take risks, make mistakes and remain curious. An employee may have all the necessary expertise while gradually becoming less creative in a culture dominated by fear or distrust.

This does not mean that feeling supported automatically produces better performance. Human beings are far too complex for such a simple equation. But environments influence what becomes possible within us.

When people feel sufficiently secure, they often have more room for curiosity, exploration and initiative. When much of their attention is occupied with protection, less may remain available for learning, connection or performance.

This is one reason I have become increasingly interested not only in what people can do, but also in the circumstances in which their abilities are asked to emerge.

Love and loss

There is another reason why connection requires courage.

Everything we allow to matter can eventually be lost.

The deeper our connection with another person, the more their absence can affect us. Love does not protect us from grief. In some ways, it makes grief possible.

Yet very few of us would choose never to love in order to avoid the possibility of loss. We accept vulnerability because connection gives something to life that protection alone cannot provide.

Grief can therefore tell us something about the significance of what was there. Not because suffering should be romanticized and not because every loss somehow makes us stronger, but because pain and love can belong to the same human story.

To protect ourselves completely from loss, we would also have to protect ourselves from attachment.

And that would come at its own cost.

The courage to connect

Human beings need both protection and connection. We need boundaries and openness, autonomy and belonging, the ability to stand on our own feet and the capacity to let another person matter.

There is no perfect balance between these movements. Different relationships ask different things of us, and what feels safe in one period of life may change in another.

Perhaps the deeper task is not to become less protective or more vulnerable, but to become increasingly free in the way we move between the two. To recognize when protection is necessary and when an old defense is keeping us from a connection that has become possible.

For me, meaningful connection begins there: not when every defense has disappeared, but when we feel secure enough to choose whether we still need it.

We do not become ourselves alone.

We become ourselves in the encounter.

Roel Klaassen, August 2026