

ALIGN WITH GOD MINISTRIES

Checking your Spiritual Pulse: *A new look at our relational DNA*

We all feel something is missing if we get really honest with ourselves. We know somewhere deep inside that we need deeper connections with God and others, but life seems to get in the way. In a world full of attachments formed with anyone and anything but God and others, there's no need to wonder why forming sustainable connections seems so difficult at times. We have learned defense mechanisms to keep us from connecting. When an abandoned dog is adopted it takes time for him to trust. If an orphaned child is adopted, they are often diagnosed with "attachment disorder." The truth is, since the fall of Adam, we all have an "attachment disorder" because we've been detached from God, from ourselves and from each other for so long. Jesus knows this about us and that is why He came down in bodily form. Brain science shows detached children need a face and a body to connect with. They need to look into their new mom's or dad's eyes, see their smile, smell their closeness, feel their I'll-never-let-go-of-you touch repeatedly in order to become attached. The parent has to fight for it until they have a breakthrough. They need to *experience* connection.

In the same way God knew we needed to experience attachment with Him. To feel Him, to sweat with Him, to walk with Him, eat with Him, look into His eyes and see His smile, and feel His gaze upon us. This is why He sent Jesus in the flesh. He could have sent Him some other way, as a voice or a detached figure that was held in awe and worshipped. The real Jesus, in bodily form, is what the early disciples were able to experience as God. Prior to this they had only known the Torah, and the Jewish community. They saw God coming down to their level, just as a small child responds when an adult stoops low to look into their eyes and really see them. This relational attachment with Jesus transformed their brains, their lives, and their ability to connect with God and others forever. They were able to pass on what they experienced through what they wrote in the Bible, which is full of the love of God and stories that brim with the life that comes from aligning our spirits, souls and bodies with His. Yet it wasn't only through the words that they were inspired by God to write, they also transmitted this relational DNA through the people whom they encountered along the way. Each touch, each smile, each miraculous healing, each baptism infused with God's life in them transmitted this new life-giving relational substance that transformed the next person. In the same way, all of this has passed down to you and me today. Real life, transforming life, is sustainable and transmittable first within attachments with God's people that are filled with His Holy Spirit, and then with God Himself.

So what's the point of all of this? Our God is highly relational. In fact He is in a relationship. You are made in His image. Therefore you are made for highly relational attachments with God and others. This is true whether you are in a culture that sustains real connections or not, whether you believe it or not, and whether you have experienced it or not. This is true whether it's happening in your church or community, or not. You are made for relational attachment, like it or not. It's at the core of who we are as humans. You are made for this. More importantly God has sent His Son to connect with you, and to bring you out of isolation and disconnect. He has also sent His Holy Spirit to live inside of you and be with you at all times. You are never alone. The answer to the question we all ask ourselves is "Are you Alignable?" is absolutely and resoundingly YES! The real question is, are you ready for it?

What causes us to hide out in a disconnected state? Just as Adam and Eve relied on the enemies' lies and hid from God in the garden, what seems so reliable and true about our disconnection, and why do we

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fear coming out of hiding and into deeper attachment with God and others? These are very valid questions that we have all asked ourselves at some point in time. Sherry Turkle attempts to describe one of the culprits involved in our disconnection. “We are changed as technology offers us substitutes for connecting with each other face-to-face. We are offered robots and a whole world of machine-mediated relationships on networked devices. As we instant-message, e-mail, text, and Twitter, technology redraws the boundaries between intimacy and solitude. We talk of getting “rid” of our emails, as though these notes are so much excess baggage. Teenagers avoid making telephone calls, fearful that they “reveal too much.” They would rather text than talk. Adults, too, choose keyboards over the human voice. It is more efficient, they say. Things that happen in “real time” take too much time. Tethered to technology, we are shaken when that world “unplugged” does not signify, does not satisfy. After an evening of avatar-to-avatar talk in a networked game, we feel, at one moment, in possession of a full social life and, in the next, curiously isolated, in tenuous complicity with strangers. We build a following on Facebook or MySpace and wonder to what degree our followers are friends. We recreate ourselves as online personae and give ourselves new bodies, homes, jobs, and romances. Yet, suddenly, in the half-light of a virtual community, we may feel utterly alone. As we distribute ourselves, we may abandon ourselves. Sometimes people experience no sense of having communicated after hours of connection. And they report feelings of closeness when they are paying little attention. In all of this, there is a nagging question: Does virtual intimacy degrade our experience of the other kind and, indeed, of all encounters, of any kind?”

Although technology may be only one of many things getting in the way of connection, we each have our own issues that tend to degrade our experiences of true connection. They may substitute connections in the form of distractions, addictions, busy-ness and popularity. They may involve over-eating, over-sleeping, and overspending. They may come in the form of angry outbursts, depression, irritable moods and anxiety disorders including panic attacks, obsessive disorders and the like. The enemy of our souls is disconnected from God and strives to get us to believe his lies that it is better, safer, and less restricting to remain in that state of disconnect. We need to always pray for wisdom and discernment. This is where the real battle begins. The problem is that all of these false attachments actually hijack the attachment centers of our brains and make the false attachment feel real. The “feel good” hormones are released just as readily when a person views pornography as when they try to connect with their husband or wife in a real and life giving way, which actually takes more time and uses relational skills that some of us may not yet have. Notice I said “yet”. The good news is that the brain is wired to learn new relational skills until the day we die. And when we learn them, it keeps us in a happy and joyful state much longer than the fake connections do, which wear off very quickly. We truly are not designed for false substitutes, we are made for the real thing.

So how does this translate into real life? How do we get ready to make the baby step back into real connection and away from false connections that hijack the attachment center of our brains? When I first started trying to really hear from God and connect with Him in a more relational, emotional way, it didn't go very well. I kept hearing one word for many months, the word “fire.” I wondered, is He trying to warn me about something? Is my house going to catch on fire? Am I going to die in a fire? I kept asking God questions from my fear based posture, as He loves us to do, and He led me into a Bible study regarding that word that revealed aspects of His character that I was missing. He revealed to me that He was not a God of “fire and brimstone” whom I needed to fear in an unhealthy way, but a God who would burn down anything in the way of a connecting with me, including the places I was hiding from Him and the lies I had come to believe about Him. I began to see God, and all the things He does in the Old and New Testament

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that didn't make much sense to me and seemed at times too "extreme", through more of a relational lens. The unhealthy fears I had of Him since childhood began to melt away as I saw the passionate love that drives His pursuit of mankind, at the heart of everything He does. I began to trust Him more, and as a result I could relax in His presence. I lost my fear of what He would do to me, require of me, expect from me. I was simply His beloved.

Although this process took many years for me, with new awareness and breakthroughs in brain science and Christian formation available today, the process can be shortened. However, just as it takes time to build a muscle at the gym, there are no real shortcuts to building these relational muscles. Finding or creating sustainable communities with like-minded interests is the first step in the journey. Learning tools from these communities is key, so that your connection to God can be a Biblical and safe journey that is both life-giving, sustainable and transmittable to future generations, and to your old age and beyond. We all want to leave a legacy. What greater legacy is there but helping others stay attached to God and loved ones throughout their lives in ways that create and renew life? It is within these attachments that we find our true identity, our God-given destinies, and the authority and confidence to step out and do the works God has given us to do from a place of secure love, and apart from driven legalism.

Below is a short pneumonic that may help you overcome the roadblocks.

THE FIVE HEART PRINCIPLES OF CONNECTING WITH GOD: (Taking your spiritual pulse-Is He safe?)

1) P- PEACE BE WITH YOU, DO NOT FEAR - He protects me.

We cannot be in relationship mode, if we are in fear or anger. Jesus often greeted those he knew with two phrases: "Peace be with you," and "Do not fear." He is the Prince of peace. He knew that unless they could get out of their "fight or flight" brains, they could not be relational. The parts of the brain that deal with danger include fear, anxiety and anger, and when we are operating from that place, we do not care about being relational. We simply want to be safe. *"In peace I will lie down and sleep, for you alone, O Lord, will keep me safe" (Psalm 4:8). Before we are willing to relate to God, we must know and experience that He is safe, He protects me.*

2) U- UNDERSTAND- He understands me. He sees and hears me. He wants to be with me, even in the midst of my weaknesses.

Jesus wants to be with us and He protects us and keeps us safe. We are valued and important to Him. He protects, provides and values us enough to lay down His life for us. Our value needs to be rooted in this very fact that we are so precious to Him.

He understands me and is happy to be with me.

3) L- LISTEN to me and incline your ear to me. Turn away from idols and live.

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Josh 24:23- "Now therefore, put away the foreign gods which are in your midst, and incline your hearts to the Lord, the God of Israel.

Isaiah 55:3- "Incline your ear and come to Me. Listen, that you may live; And I will make an everlasting covenant with you, According to the faithful mercies shown to David"

Incline means to EXTEND, STRETCH, INTEND, YIELD oneself to God. God is faithful and is devoted to restoring you to Himself. Since foreign gods are "in our midst" we must make an effort to stretch toward God with intention and openness of all of ourselves to Him.

2 Timothy 4:3-4 "For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance with their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths."

We can either turn toward God or away from Him. Is God more reliable than the lies that this world is based on? Only you can decide. This is a heart posture of turning aside from idols and other teachings, and recognizing the wisdom of the one who is your Creator.

He wants me to listen to Him so that I may live.

4) S- SEEK MY FACE:

The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make His face shine upon you, And be gracious to you; The Lord lift up His countenance upon you, And give you peace. NUMBERS 6: 24– 26

You can see how much God takes initiative in Psalm 27: 8, but also invites us to respond. "When You said, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to You, 'Your face, Lord, I will seek.'" He is imploring us to seek His face, to seek Him relationally and with our hearts and emotions. We must be willing to give up intellectual knowing. God will reward your initiative. In Hebrews God tells us that He rewards those who seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

He wants me to seek His face and remember that He is smiling.

5) E- EMBRACE MY GRACE:

Staring into anyone's eyes can bring discomfort for even the most confident person, yet this is what God asks us to do, to seek His face. Sometimes we are afraid of being "known", or "judged". Sometimes we feel ashamed of our sins. But God assures us that He knows us deeply and still accepts us for who we are. His grace is always there, whether we've accepted it or not. There is always the possibility of greater intimacy with God. Some of us are truly afraid of intimacy, and we need to trust that He wants us to belong together with Him, in a community with other believers. He created us for a trusting relationship with Him.

He wants me to embrace His grace for me.

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Together these five principles spell out the pneumonic P.U.L.S.E. This is how we check our own pulse to make sure we are not approaching God from the “fight, flight or freeze” part of our brains (our pulse would be elevated), but from a place of relational attachment. The PULSE pneumonic reminds us of how relational God is and releases us from fear. Memorize and practice this pneumonic-it only takes a few minutes. Check your pulse before trying to attach to Him. It will make all the difference! For more tools and connections to other resources, see the below websites for references and tools.

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1- Footnote: Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic, 2011), 11-12