

Essential Relationships
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[Jesus] left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. ²On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?” And they took offense at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, “Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

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In 1965, elementary school principal Lenore Jacobson and psychologist Robert Rosenthal conducted an experiment to measure the degree to which teacher expectations might influence student performance. Teachers were informed of students who'd scored highly on an intelligence pretest and were expected to display significant academic growth in the coming year. What they weren't told, however, is that the pretest was phony and that the students it projected for strong performance had actually been chosen at random.

When all the students were tested later in the year, Lenore and Rosenthal discovered that the randomly selected students actually did score higher and show more significant improvement than their peers. Clearly, this was not because these students had some predisposition toward academic and intellectual prowess. The researchers concluded that:

it was their teachers' belief in them that accounted for the growth of these students. Because they believed that these students could and would succeed, the teachers, often unknowingly, gave more attention to these students and engaged with them differently than they did with kids for whom they didn't have any special expectations.¹

This phenomenon became known as the Pygmalion Effect.

Named for a sculptor from Ovid's *Metamorphosis*, Pygmalion is said to have carved a statue of a woman from ivory. Over time, Pygmalion fell so in love with the sculpture that it came to life. Whether or not you've heard of Pygmalion and his sculpture bride, you've undoubtedly heard of its more contemporary retellings in *Pinocchio* and *My Fair Lady*.

¹ Daniel Harkavy. "The Power Of Believing In Others," Forbes.com, February 25, 2020: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescoachescouncil/2020/02/25/the-power-of-believing-in-others/>.

Whether teacher, sculptor, puppet-maker, or Henry Higgins, it was belief in another that made the other into what was believed. That's the Pygmalion Effect.

In the text I read a few moments ago from the Gospel According to Mark, Jesus had returned to his hometown of Nazareth to preach and heal. Instead of a red-carpet welcome, however, he was greeted with skepticism, scorn, and disbelief. As a result, he could, as Mark says, “do no deed of power there.” So he left. And he sent the disciples away as well in pairs to minister in other places.

In its own unique first century way, this text illustrates two important truths that perhaps we take for granted in our 21st century context. Firstly, humans are social animals and we do better when we're not completely alone. Hence, the pairs. We are made for relationships.

An article published by Harvard Medical School states that:

Dozens of studies have shown that people who have satisfying relationships with family, friends, and their community are happier, have fewer health problems, and live longer.

Conversely, a relative lack of social ties is associated with depression and later-life cognitive decline, as well as with increased mortality. One study, which examined data from more than 309,000 people, found that lack of strong relationships increased the risk of premature death from all causes by 50%.²

Another study, this one from California Researchers conducted over the course of several decades found that: “[People] with close social ties and unhealthful lifestyles (such as smoking, obesity and lack of exercise) actually lived longer than those with poor social ties but more healthful

² “The Health Benefits of Strong Relationships,” Harvard.edu, December 1, 2010:
https://www.health.harvard.edu/newsletter_article/the-health-benefits-of-strong-relationships.

living habits . . . Needless to say, people with both healthful lifestyles and close social ties lived the longest of all.”³

We do better when we’re not completely alone. We need relationships. And that brings me to the second point: we need relationships with people who believe in us.

It may sound weak to admit it, but we actually do better as humans when we have people that believe in us. That’s not weakness, it’s actually evolution. We are made for relationships and we do better when we’re in relationship with people who believe in us. The Pygmalion Effect doesn’t just apply to the classroom. It’s true of the workplace, the home, and just about everywhere else. When people believe in us, we rise to meet their expectations.

Maybe Jesus knew this. Maybe that’s why he couldn’t work miracles for the hometown crowd that day – because they didn’t believe. Maybe that’s why he sent the disciples out in pairs. Maybe. But that’s definitely why personal relationships and healthy community with people who believe in us is absolutely crucial to our own flourishing.

In his book *Outliers*, journalist, author, and speaker Malcolm Gladwell tells the strange story of Christopher Langan, a genius with a staggering IQ of 195. (For some perspective, Einstein's IQ was 150). During high school, Langan could ace any foreign language test by skimming the textbook 2-3 minutes before the exam. He got a perfect score on his SAT, even though at one point he fell asleep. But Langan failed to use his exceptional gifts and ended up working on a horse farm in rural Missouri.

³ Markham Heid. “You Asked: How Many Friends Do I Need?” Time.com, March 18, 2015: <http://time.com/3748090/friends-social-health/>.

According to Gladwell, Langan never had a community to help him capitalize on his gifts. Gladwell summarizes the story of Langan in one sentence: "[Langan] had to make his way alone, and no one—not rock stars, not professional athletes, not software billionaires, and not even geniuses—ever makes it alone."⁴

We are made for relationships. We need people who believe in us. We cannot thrive without them. We simply can't make it alone. And that's not weakness. That's simply the way our species was created and evolved to be. So, let's prioritize healthy relationships. Let's connect deeply with community. Let's listen to the voices of those who believe in us and be that voice for others. After all, the very best way to have good friends is to be a good friend. May it be so. Amen.

⁴ "We All Need Others to Help Us Succeed," Preachingtoday.com:
<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/february/7021411.html>.