



**2023-2024 Undergraduate Ethics Essay Prize
2nd Place**

**Understood: Is Connection the Ethical Response to a Polarized Society?
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past decades” (Coleman 23-24). Arthur Brooks, Harvard professor and author of the article “Our

"Opinion is really the lowest form of human knowledge. It requires no accountability and no understanding. The highest form of knowledge is empathy, for it requires us to suspend our egos and live in another's world. It requires profound purpose larger than the self kind of understanding."

conversation with friends and family fell precipitously” (Sasse 27). Putnam states, "It is hard not to read these figures as evidence of rapidly loosening family bonds.” We live in a world where isolation is encouraged. Our technology and work sequester us from those we love. Apps like Tiktok, Instagram, and Facebook are designed for an audience of one. Yet, these apps “give us ... [only] snacks of connection,” and these “snacks of connection from social media” aren’t as “nutrient dense” as the meal of in-person connection,” says Dr. Marisa Franco, a psychologist and friendship expert. We live in a world where we’re encouraged to show people the perfect version of us, the job promotion on LinkedIn, the bikini body on Instagram, or the perfect family on Facebook. We become conditioned to look for Instagram-worthy moments to impress our digital following with how connected and liked we are. There is no glory in real connection. You can’t post yourself standing next to the dumpster, taking the trash out with a friend. You can’t post the hard conversation you had that ended in disagreement but also a hug. Yet, for people to truly know us, we must drop the facade; we aren’t perfect and never will be, no matter how hard we try to portray that illusion. Recognizing the value of relationships and doing life together fosters a respect and compassion between men that makes having hard conversations possible. When differences of opinion emerge, the connection forces you to have empathy. You respect and adore this person. If they think differently than you on an issue, you know there must be a reason or experience that informs their opinion. You can’t label them as morally deranged for their view. You know their intrinsic goodness firsthand. Real connection and compassion also provide a safety net for you to get it wrong. You can think out loud. You can misspeak. They aren’t looking for a "gotcha" moment. They lovingly challenge you to see the issue from different perspectives.

Why invest all the effort to develop the connection necessary to have these conversations? Why challenge yourself to be vulnerable enough for a real and honest conversation? You must be courageous to be vulnerable. That bravery feels foolish if someone walks away. The energy it takes to practice empathy seems like a worthless investment. Broken relationships take more than just an emotional toll; medical research shows the significant effect it has on our bodies as the “rejection or loss causes stress hormones to flood the body, mimicking the effects of a heart attack”(American Heart Association). “Tests show dramatic changes in

party because I adore her. I understand why that platform resonates with her based on her personal experiences, and while I don't agree with many of her positions, I can respect hers and the party she belongs to. The political atmosphere of the US will not change unless we do. We command this circus we pretend to have no control over. We vote for these divisive candidates. We donate money to these campaigns. We repost the infographic on Instagram positive that our opinion is the only correct one held on the app. We vow only to watch the news channel that aligns with our viewpoint. Connection allows the fog to lift; we realize we're not as divided as they tell us we are. There may even be issues we agree on. While we might hold different views on how to solve various problems, we respect and admire the people on the other side because we know the other side personally. We've been bamboozled by those who want to gain money and power at our expense. Division is one of the "best" political tools one can utilize to increase their base: "the other side doesn't understand you, only I do; vote for me; I am the only one who can solve this problem. Opposing thought is not the enemy. Those who oppose multiple viewpoints are.

Our founding fathers understood that connection provides an opportunity to embrace competing viewpoints. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were best friends but had very different personalities and opinions. Adams was incredibly cynical and cantankerous, while Jefferson was considered the "inspirer of a nation" (The Kennedy Library Forum: Friends Divided, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson). They differed on almost every issue except the "rightness of the American Revolution and [their shared] hatred of Alexander Hamilton." Yet, their differences in opinion and temperament contributed to the creation of a government that has served millions of Americans over the past few centuries (The Kennedy Library Forum: Friends Divided, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson). Adam's cynical nature, which was suspicious of

people's true intentions, spurred the creation of checks and balances, protecting the young nation from power-hungry individuals and ensuring the continuity of democracy for generations to come. Jefferson's galvanizing words in the Declaration of Independence prompted many to fight in the American Revolution, which resulted in the creation of the United States of America. His optimism and vision of America as "a chosen country" with a "special responsibility to bring democracy to the world" resulted in many other countries adopting democracy as their mode of governance and an increase in freedom all around the world as more people than ever before began to have a say in how their government was run (The Kennedy Library Forum). Most people view optimism as the correct lens through which to view the world. We teach our kids to see the glass half full instead of empty, but both John Adams's pessimism and Thomas

false story that he wanted to start a war with France” (Pruitt). John Adams claimed that Jefferson had not written the Declaration of Independence and wrote letters to his sons gossiping about the affair of his former friend. Adams didn’t attend his once best friend’s inauguration for president. They didn’t exchange another word for 12 years.

Thanks to the efforts of Benjamin Rush, they reconnected. Yet, they still held the same radically opposing views. Adams was still cantankerous and wore his thoughts on his sleeve, and Jefferson was still an optimistic visionary. While nothing changed in their mindsets, their affection for each other also never wavered. Rush saw “the estrangement of the two former presidents as a personal and national misfortune” and made it his duty to help heal the breach (Cappon 284). Rush tried for two years to help mend the relationship, corresponding with both

