

Six Degrees of Separation

The phrase, “*six degrees of separation*,” was coined in the early part of the last century and is based on the idea that we can socially connect ourselves to any other person in the world through a series of about six relationships. For example, the theory states that any of us might be able to connect ourselves to the Prime Minister of Australia through a series of relatives, friends, neighbours, or colleagues. Each relationship has to be two-way, meaning that both persons have to be able to identify each other. Thus, I cannot use King Charles as a connection because I suspect he doesn’t know who I am. Studies have been done recently that support this theory, saying that it is most probable that a farmer living in a remote area of Southern Alberta can be connected to a Buddhist monk living in a remote region of Tibet through a series of a mere six relationship connections.

Because we are so interconnected, perhaps instead of using the phrase “*six degrees of separation*” we should replace it with “*six degrees of closeness or interconnectedness*.” We are closer to each other than we might think.

Perhaps we are even closer to each other today even with our rapidly growing world population than we were 100 years ago when the world population was just a fraction of what it is today. In the last century or so, the migration of people from across vast distances has become quite common. Even in a village like Nobleford we can run into people from several continents, Africa, Europe, Asia and South America, for example, who have immigrated to Canada in recent years. They connect us immediately to their homes, decreasing the number of steps needed to connect ourselves to people in distant lands. So, while we may not know the person in China who built our smart phone or have any idea who the Vietnamese person was who sewed together the parts of the shirt we are wearing, we can be rather certain that somehow we are connected to them with as few as six relationships.

This is interesting information, and for those of us who love finding connections between people, it can even be rather thrilling to think that there is a network of relationships which join every single person in the world to everyone else. But there is another side and that is one that asks what our responsibility is to others. We want our friends to do well. We also hope that the friends of our friends do well as well, even if we don’t know them. If a friend of a friend has financial needs because of an illness, we might contribute a few dollars to support them. It is the right thing to do after all. But what about a friend of a friend of a friend? Do we want them to thrive as well? Where may we stop? Is a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend too distant? That is how close the most distant person in the world is to us. Do we feel any sort of responsibility to them? Should we be concerned about their needs? Should we offer to help because we are connected to them?

When Scripture teaches us to love our neighbours, it is easy to limit that love to those who are in close physical proximity to us. In other words, our neighbours are only those who we know personally. Jesus had other ideas. When he was asked who he considered our neighbours to be, he told the story of the Good Samaritan. To fully understand that story, we need to know that not only did the Jews dislike the

Samaritans, but that Samaritans had every reason to dislike the Jews. The Jewish people had done much to harm the Samaritans. They surrounded the region of Samaria with Galilee to the north and Judea to the south, thus potentially limiting trade and access to resources. They would not develop friendships with Samaritans, avoiding them whenever possible. And, sadly, Jews would not allow Samaritans to come close to God, excluding them from the temple even when the Samaritans claimed to (and did) worship the same God. When the Samaritans built their own temple a couple of centuries before Jesus walked this earth, the Jews attacked it and tore it down. The Samaritans had every right to dislike the Jews and even desire the worst for them. Yet, as Jesus tells the story, this unknown Samaritan man helped the injured man (most likely a Jew, for this was Jewish territory) by tending to him and paying for his ongoing care. While both Jews and Samaritans worked hard at keeping themselves separate from each other, this Samaritan saw the injured man to be his neighbour, and he did whatever it took to care for him. In telling this story Jesus widened the definition of “neighbour” to include everyone within it even when there is no direct connection. Our interconnectedness serves to reinforce the relationships we have with each other and thus moves us to accept responsibility for each other. Every other person on this planet is our neighbour and therefore we are obligated to show our concern for them.

Thankfully, many Christians have shown a deep concern for our neighbours. One of the biggest problems facing the vast majority of people who struggle is the lack of opportunity. Large western corporations pretend to bring opportunity to the developing world by moving their manufacturing facilities there, but the opportunities they provide often involve long hours, low pay, and poor and unsafe working conditions and tend to profit the corporation and not the worker. On the other hand, Christians have found ways to provide opportunities which have a lasting impact and profound impact on others. For example, I know someone who was involved with an organization called “Farmer to Farmer,” in which farmers from the West shared some of their expertise with struggling farmers, often providing them with small operating loans so that they could improve their buildings and buy equipment. As the loan was repaid, that money, in turn, was loaned to other farmers. Unlike some “helping” which is nothing more than a handout, Farmer to Farmer helped by giving opportunities, and over time, the farmers began to thrive. These efforts often take a lot of time to bear fruit, but when they do it is generally fruit that will last.

The beautiful thing about becoming involved in the lives of others is that the six degrees of separation becomes a personal connection as the farmers came to know each other through personal interaction. Not all of us can develop a personal connection with someone who is six degrees away, but we can certainly support those who do. Even one degree of separation is better than six. The positive side to loving our neighbours is that the separation between us and our six-degree separated neighbour is closed, and we become a close community. For me, as a person who loves finding connections, being able to cut down the six degrees of separation to one or two degrees of closeness is a foretaste of heaven. Being able to do that by loving our neighbour, no matter how distant, is not only a obligation and calling; it is a pleasure and privilege.

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