

Connections

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On a Thursday night not so long ago, my roommate Chris and I were anxiously preparing for what promised to be a nightmare of an accounting midterm, when a rapid knocking at the front door interrupted our cram session. It was Alexis, our neighbor from down the hall, sporting a brand new business suit, but in more of a Reese Witherspoon “Legally Blonde” fashion than anything else. It turns out that she had just been hired as an intern for J.P. Morgan by her dad’s golf partner, and was getting ready to go out with both of them for dinner. Chris and I were stunned by this revelation; we both undoubtedly have higher g.p.a.’s than Alexis, but JP Morgan rejected us when we applied for their summer internship program. Nevertheless, I congratulated her, and prepared to get back to work, but Chris wasn’t satisfied. “I have a 3.7 g.p.a.” he declared, “and a million activities to go with it. How did you—this is absurd.” I understood his frustration, but still indiscreetly motioned him to exercise restraint. “Whatever Chris,” Alexis replied, “I have to finish getting ready. Bye Josh.” I offered her a brief wave goodbye, and then quickly followed Chris’s lead in getting back to work. We were in for a long night.

After the accounting midterm, I found myself with an unusual amount of free time to sit back and relax, but for some reason, my encounter with Alexis the night before plagued my thoughts and left me uneasy. I had always known that connections were a part of life; my step dad always used to tell me “law or business, doesn’t matter—you’re learning how to golf.” Golf was a connections builder, a way of interacting with colleagues and forming bonds that could prove beneficial to my career. But I didn’t like golf. I grew up in Queens, New York, with a cement backyard, and if by some miracle I stumbled upon a golf course near my house, my mentality probably would have been “If there is actually this much grass in my neighborhood, why the hell did they build a golf course on it? How about a football field, or some basketball hoops that actually have nets so we can see when the shot goes in?” More important, I didn’t like what golf represented—a society in which my performance in school and on the job wouldn’t be enough to guarantee me a suc-

successful career. In my mind, A (good grades), should lead to B (a good job), and adding C (hard work) to B, should equal D (a financially successful career), but in a society where connections play a vital role in the job market, this isn't always the case.

George Simmel argues in his essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life," that the eighteenth century "called upon man to free himself of all the historical bonds in the state and in religion, in morals and in economics" (259), and the nineteenth century "demanded the functional specialization of man and his work" (259). If this is the case, then I would venture to say that the twenty-first century calls upon man to form connections with influential businessmen if he wishes to enjoy a successful career. In recent years it has become increasingly difficult to get one's foot in the door of the job market. I recall the disheartening experience that my brother Chris had when entering the job hunt as an NYU Stern School of Business graduate in 2002. He knew that he would have to be a self-made man because my parents have little to no business connections, but with a 3.92 g.p.a. and a degree in finance and accounting after only three years of college, he never expected the search to be so difficult. Many of his friends that earned fewer accolades over their college careers found opportunities waiting for them at respectable institutions through family connections. On the other hand, Chris was forced to accept an offer from a small firm that trades stock options on the AMEX—an admirable feat, but not what he was hoping for after three years of outstanding academic performance.

The power of connections is most prominent in the metropolis, and Simmel explores how "the extent to which the group grows—numerically, spatially, in significance and in content of life...the group's direct, inner unity loosens...through mutual relations and *connections*" (262). Simmel claims that this leads to greater freedom of movement for the individual, but I believe this can surely be contested. How can a social system where high-level jobs are often inherited through connections, one where hard work coupled with impressive accomplishments isn't always enough, lead to greater freedom of movement for the individual? Many of the people I know that have the opportunity to intern in major companies "earned" the right through connections; more specifically, their parents either work in the company, or have a friend who does, and through this an incredible internship opportunity is born. With J.P. Morgan or Lehman Brothers on your resume, doors that are unavailable to someone like my brother Chris are suddenly opened.

But do these doors remain open for those who are unqualified? Scott Lasser, a Stock Trader for Lehman brothers, describes his experience in a

large Wall Street firm as a fight to survive. Although he admits that “some well-connected traders always manage to get more than their fair share,” he also claims that “management could not resist replacing people who made five hundred thousand dollars a year with those who made less than a hundred” (247). This leads me to believe that well-connected individuals may have an easy time entering the firm, but in order to actually stay around and reach the higher levels of compensation, these individuals must make themselves indispensable. In Lasser’s experience, he received the biggest promotion of his career “by simply surviving” (248), a testament to just how competitive Wall Street can be, and how little room there is for employees who are well connected but unqualified.

However, this doesn’t change the fact that connections are a privilege that can catapult an individual ahead of the pack. During my post-midterm lull, I received a call from my brother Chris. His “small firm that trades stock options” isn’t so small anymore, and he was now in a position to give me opportunities that he hadn’t enjoyed early in his career. The conversation was short because it was still market hours, and Chris concluded with, “So you have a suit? Perfect. Take the C or the E to Fulton. It’s 199 Water, right across the street from the dorm, you can’t miss it. Bobby is gonna be out front at 7:45, tell him you’re Mouse’s brother.” “Mouse” was Chris’s floor name, the name he goes by when he’s trading, and the Bobby he was referring to was Bobby Keller, the man responsible for one of the most lucrative deals in the history of the American Stock Exchange.

The next morning I made my way to the Water Street office building, and as promised, Bobby arrived at 7:45 and managed to pick me out of the crowd, presumably because I looked nervous, over-dressed, and consequently of place. “You must be Mouse’s brother,” he stated, as he finished tucking in his shirt. A feeling of relief came over me as I could tell right away that this would be a very informal introduction, but I still kept with a formal tone. “Yes, you must be Bobby. It’s nice to meet you.” We shook hands and I followed him inside to his 26th floor office. Upon exiting the elevator, a rush of noise immediately overwhelmed me; the source was 50 to 70 Bond Traders, yelling like a pack of wild animals. However, Bobby carried on as if the room was silent, paying no attention to the pandemonium. His demeanor was comparable to Simmel’s description of “the blasé attitude,” a characteristic found in many businessmen of the metropolis that results when “the nerves...finally cease to react at all” (261). I had not yet been subjected to this dulling of the senses, and found the spectacle to be fascinating.

We soon made our way into an empty boardroom, and Bobby asked me to have a seat. He then leaned back in his leather swivel chair, cuffed his hands, and said, “Ok, here’s the deal. We do a lot of business with your brother’s company, and we love him, he’s a riot. He asked that I let you come intern with me over the summer; I’ll show you the ropes, you’ll be working directly on the floor, and making 25 an hour. How does that sound?” The speed at which this had all taken place was mind-boggling. I immediately thought, “How does it sound? It sounds like three times what they pay me at Home Depot. Not to mention I can ditch the orange apron and stop pretending that I’m actually handy.” The prospect of leaving behind my job as an unskilled cashier in order to pursue a career in finance was very exciting. This potential shift in occupations called to mind Simmel’s theory that “specialization makes one individual incomparable to another, and each of them indispensable to the highest possible extent” (259). At Home Depot, I was indistinguishable from other cashiers in terms of skill because the job emphasized uniformity over specialization, but the field of finance would call upon me to hone my skills in a particular area of expertise. Realizing that Bobby was waiting for my response, I composed myself, trying not to seem too desperate, and replied, “That would be great.” Bobby quickly stood up and offered me a handshake, “So it’s a deal. Take a week off after finals and then gimme a call. We’ll take it from there.” I thanked him, and escorted myself out of his office as he prepared for an important phone conference.

In order to avoid the commotion of the subway and give myself time to reflect on what had just happened, I decided to brave the 45-minute walk from 199 Water Street to my dorm. I thought of Alexis and how I had always despised connections for the unfair advantage that they bestowed upon their recipients. By my logic, one connection was all it took to lead to other advantages and opportunities, thus creating a chain reaction that leads to a tremendous rift between the connected and unconnected within the metropolis. It felt as if I were suddenly switching over to the opposite side of a bitter rivalry, leaving behind the values I had once stood for and adopting a more opportunistic creed. But this was the chance I had been waiting for, a shot at getting my foot in the door of the business world and proving that I could be a dividend—paying to any company. Should I simply throw away a chance at jumpstarting my career in the interest of fairness to those who don’t have a “Mouse” in their life?

My inner-struggle led me to re-assess Simmel’s claim that connections create greater freedom of movement for individuals within a metropolis. In a society that places a special emphasis on social interaction and networking,

the lack of a high g.p.a. and top internships doesn't exclude an individual from the business world; he can still seize opportunities by building strong relationships. As much as I hate to admit it, this creates a more level playing field in comparison to a system based solely on achievements because it provides a variety of ways to enter the realm of business instead of simply embracing the academically inclined and excluding everyone else. However, I still wasn't sure if I was ready to toss aside my long-held hatred for the system of connections—in order to reap its rewards. Albert Carr addresses this ethical dilemma in his essay "Is Business Bluffing Ethical?" He declares that if a man is given "a wide-open chance to make a killing, he'd be a fool not to take advantage of it" (101). According to Carr, we cannot fault those who are given advantages in life through connections, nor should we forego opportunities we receive through our own social interactions.

My reason for initially despising the system of connections began to come into focus; I hated connections because, up until this point, I didn't have any, and I was jealous of those who did. In his essay "A Few Kind Words for Envy," Joseph Epstein describes envy as "desiring what someone else has—a desire usually heightened by the knowledge that one is unlikely to attain it" (223). Growing up, I didn't belong to the connected part of society; I competed against it. I knew that if the kids with Investment Banker dads and Corporate Lawyer moms had a 90 average, I needed a 95, and if they belonged to 2 clubs, it was in my best interest to join 4. It was my belief that if I did not trump their accomplishments, it was highly unlikely that I would attain the level of success they appeared to be heading for. My hard work had gotten me this far, a spot in the NYU Stern School of Business, and now I felt compelled to take advantage of the opportunity that was placed before me.

But in the end, connections may have very little bearing on the success of an individual. Carr states, "We can learn a good deal about the nature of business by comparing it with poker. While both have a large element of chance, in the long run the winner is the man who plays with steady skill" (100). In this context, connections fall under the category of chance; whereas, hard work and results are associated with skill. Although chance connections are a clear advantage in the business world, they do not guarantee success. The most notable businesspeople are almost all self-made, turning skill and determination into tremendous fortunes. But these people aren't stubborn intellectuals who criticize every factor outside of job performance that affects their career standing, nor do they rely on connections in order to make up for a lack of ability or job qualification. A true captain of industry is a blend of the two, a keen intellectual with business savvy who doesn't let his pride result

in missed opportunities. In order to be successful in today's economy, one must possess enough skill to succeed in the event that connections do not result in new opportunities, but at the same time, must be fully prepared to jump on every opportunity life has to offer.

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