

# “Overcoming the Big Disconnect”

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

It all began with an altruist and an algorithm.

Someone willing to give up a kidney  
and someone with a computer program  
that could leverage that single donation  
in order to connect the lives of sixty people,  
linking them in a string of 29 more kidney donations called Chain 124.

The extraordinary story, told by Kevin Sack in *The New York Times*,  
explains that it started with Rick Ruzzamenti,  
or better, with the desk clerk where he went to practise yoga.<sup>1</sup>

One day, she mentioned that she had recently donated a kidney  
to an ailing friend she had bumped into one day at Target.

In a shining instant of inspiration,  
Rick decided he'd also donate one of his own kidneys—  
but to a complete stranger.

A few months later, his left kidney took a red-eye flight  
from Los Angeles to Newark, where it was “stitched  
into the abdomen of a 66-year-old man” living in New Jersey.

That “man’s niece, a 34-year-old nurse, had wanted to give him her kidney,  
but her Type A blood clashed with his Type O.”

“So in exchange for Mr. Ruzzamenti’s gift,  
she agreed to have her kidney shipped to the University of Wisconsin  
Hospital in Madison for Brooke...Kitzman’s transplant,

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<sup>1</sup> Kevin Sack, “60 Lives, 30 Kidneys, All Linked,” *The New York Times*, 18 February 2012.

....[a woman] whose former boyfriend,  
“despite an intensely bitter breakup, ...agreed to donate a kidney...  
for the sake of their two-year-old daughter.”

Farther down the chain, “A woman from Toronto donated for  
her fifth cousin from...Brooklyn, after meeting him by chance in Italy  
and then staying in touch mostly by text messages.”

“Children donated for parents, husbands for wives, sisters for brothers.”

“On and on the chain extended, with kidneys flying [in all directions],  
iced down in cardboard boxes equipped with GPS devices  
and stowed on commercial aircraft.”

“In a system built on trust, one leap of faith followed another.”

The elaborate chain of sixty surgeries took place  
over the course of four months in seventeen different hospitals.

“It was born of innovations in computer matching,  
surgical technique and organ shipping...”

And it was built around a series of promises,  
a chain of commitments made by thirty donors  
to give a kidney to a stranger so that another kidney in the chain  
could be given to their own loved one.

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Kidney transplants have been possible for almost sixty years,  
and given new life to tens of thousands of people,  
saving them from an exhausting and often unpromising regimen  
of dialysis three times a week.

Yet, even when people have family and friends  
lined up willing to donate a kidney,  
those in need are often unable to find a suitable match.

The creative solution in the past has involved small-scale kidney swaps,  
where two pairs of donors and recipients work out a deal

that eventually plays out simultaneously in the operating room.

Yet, this still limited approach leaves a great portion of the people living in kidney failure without a realistic hope of receiving a kidney in time.

That's where the computer program that I mentioned comes in. And, it's where the need for an extraordinarily generous soul to kick off an extended chain of donations becomes absolutely crucial.

In 2007, "a transplant surgeon ... had a forehead-slapping insight. If an exchange began with a Good Samaritan who donated to a stranger, and if the operations did not have to be simultaneous, a chain could theoretically keep growing, limited only by the pool of available donors and recipients."

And that's where Rick Ruzzamenti comes in.

"Until recently, hospitals regularly turned away Good Samaritan donors on the working assumption that they were unstable."

So, when Rick showed up at the hospital offering to donate a kidney to anyone who needed it, he had to undergo "rounds of psychological screening as well as [extensive] medical tests."

The medical team didn't quite know what to make of him. They were unclear about his motivations and feared he might be seeking glory or fame.

But to him, the reason behind his decision seemed perfectly obvious.

"People think it's so odd that I'm donating a kidney," he said. "[But] I think it's so odd that they think it's so odd."

While he was quick to explain that he's no saint, he shared that "he felt driven to help others when possible."

When he weighed the benefits and the risks, which are actually quite small for kidney donors (in case you're feeling inspired this morning...),

he saw an opportunity to “relieve a whole chain of suffering.”

He saw a chance to cause with his actions “a shift in the world.”

Rick had practiced Buddhism for a few years,  
and felt that a Tibetan meditation he used influenced his decision.

“You think of the pain someone’s in,” he said,  
“and imagine you take it from them and give them back good.”

He also added that he was “in a position to donate  
only because the economy had dried up so much of his work.  
He was essentially unemployed and could take time off to recuperate.  
The 30 kidney recipients, he [said], could “all thank the recession.”

Because the surgeries didn’t happen simultaneously or even in sequence,  
there was some real fear that donors would renege on their promise  
once their loved ones received kidneys.

But this didn’t happen.  
The chain worked like a charm.

One of the donors—who had to wait 68 days  
after her husband received his new kidney to actually donate hers—  
said she did think at one point of backing out.

But then added she believed in karma,  
“and that [doing so] would have been some really bad karma.  
There was[, after all, she said,]  
somebody out there who needed my kidney.”

## §

It’s worth asking why anyone would give up a perfectly good kidney.  
If there is a relationship of kinship or friendship,  
it is obvious enough that the answer has a lot to do with love.

But the answer is less clear when we consider  
such extravagant generosity toward an absolute stranger.

In the story of Chain 124, part of the motivation, of course, was the extended cycle of reciprocity that it unleashed—the assurance that a loved one would get the organ she or he desperately needed in return.

But, even still, it likely took a real commitment of will and generosity for the donors to trust—that by literally opening their own bodies and giving from deep inside that health and well-being would, indeed, come at last to the one they knew and loved.

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One of the most dangerous theological currents to develop within many of the world's great religions is the belief in, and sometimes even obsession with, personal salvation—the highly individualistic notion that a person must work out her or his own salvation, while everyone else is on their own.

*I've got mine. Good luck getting yours.*

Now, this isn't true of all religions, or even of all sects within a given religion.

But there is often found in the wider religious enterprise this tension between individual and collective salvation.

With our faith's celebration of the interconnected web of being, it's hopefully clear enough where our commitments are to be found, or at least aspire to be.

Our faith stands to say that we're all in this together.  
That my well-being is bound up with yours.  
That none of us can be saved, if we're not all saved.

And, even more, that there's no salvation for humanity apart from the salvation of the whole of life's elaborate web.

At the heart of this, our saving message—the message of hope that dwells at the core of this great faith—is that we, by the fact of being alive,

are radically and irrevocably connected to everyone and everything.

And yet we are so very prone to forget,  
or even deny, this fundamental truth.

There is no place apart from the web where we might seek to dwell.

And to think it so, to try to pull away in a fit of independence  
and convince ourselves of our at best debatable powers of self-reliance,  
is, I would say, to miss the point of the human experience:  
that we can't truly go it alone, and that we need not try.

Theologian Paul Tillich called that impulse sin.

He believed that sin is separation, in a deeply existential sense—  
separation from ourselves, from others,  
and from the very Ground of Being itself (which you may recall  
was his name for the concept and experience of God).

And, yet, this separation, he says, is central to the human condition.

For we live in a state of estrangement.

And so we also live in a world of longing,  
with a desire to reach out, to connect,  
to know and be known, to accept and be accepted.

As it turns out, that tension between the individual and collective plays out,  
on many levels, in the intimate details of our own lives—  
in the tension between our own yearning for independence  
and our hunger for community.

The tension between feeling free and feeling rooted.

Maybe that's why connection can be so hard to come by.

Maybe that's why, in the words of the Quaker teacher Parker Palmer<sup>2</sup>:

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<sup>2</sup> Parker Palmer, *The Company of Strangers*.

The key figure in public life is the stranger.  
The stranger[, he says,] is also a central figure  
in biblical stories of faith, and for good reason.

The religious quest, the spiritual pilgrimage,  
is always taking us into new lands where we are strange to others  
and they are strange to us.

To be alive on this earth is to play the part of the stranger.  
It may be our most familiar role,  
which is painfully ironic given the web in which we live.

Yet, we live in a society of strangers,  
of people longing for connection and acceptance.

Which is why so many of the world's religions  
implore us to take in the stranger, to open our hearts to the other,  
in the sacred knowledge that the stranger could so easily be—  
and at times most certainly is—ourselves.

The great black theologian and preacher Howard Thurman said:  
“Ultimately, a person's only refuge in this world  
is the heart of another person.” (Repeat)

To that, this morning, we might add kidney, as well.

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We are both the refuge and the refugee.  
The safe stronghold and the stranger.

We are potential lifelines to all with whom we journey through this world.

The ground of being, to which we belong, calls us to connect and care,  
even when we are tempted to forget or forsake the bonds between us.

So let us reach out in faith.

Let us give of ourselves in trust.

Let outstretched hands and hearts take in the stranger,

that we might form a great chain of being  
that together seeks a saving hope, for us all.

Amen.