

Book Review

Hall, R. E. (2012). *This land of strangers: The relationship crisis that imperils home, work, politics, and faith*. Austin, TX: Greenleaf Book Group Press.

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I suspect that I would like Robert Hall if we were to meet. He has had an interesting 20-year history as an entrepreneur, but he has also spent a decade working with the homeless as a volunteer. He is trying, almost desperately, to communicate his personal convictions about the essential importance of relationships, and he does so, at times, with the grace of a master storyteller. In brief snippets, he easily captures the essence of an event and weaves the moral of each story almost seamlessly into the flow of his arguments and assertions. At other times, his voice takes on the timbre and tone of an evangelist throwing out citations as if they were Scriptural texts bereft of context and continuity. Readers most likely to appreciate Hall's arguments will be those who already agree with his assertions.

With almost 300 pages of text and more than 500 endnotes, this book remains difficult to categorize. Most of the time Hall seems to be addressing a caricature of the hard-nosed, bottom-line-focused business executive who cares for productivity above people, but his arguments develop too slowly and repetitiously for this readership. The abundant citations suggest that Hall is attempting some form of rigorous analysis of contemporary societal trends, but his handling of this research is not balanced. He makes few assertions of fact without providing some documentation to support it; however, his conclusions and interpretations often miss more carefully nuanced and accurate interpretations of the evidence. In support of his thesis that "we

are experiencing a wholesale free fall in the most elemental building block of society – personal relationships" (p. 32), Hall summarizes that "in a nutshell, divorce is up, marriage is down; unwed mothers are up, very happy marriages are down; cohabitation is up, and the percentage of children living with both biological parents is down" (p. 16). One cannot understand contemporary households without mentioning the erosion of earning capacity for blue-collar males, the advent of women into the labor market, the adverse influence mass incarceration has had on the marriageability of minority males, or the female gender imbalance in higher education. His largely uncritical assumptions of conservative social values (e.g., personal responsibility) may strengthen the acceptance of his thesis among businesspersons, but may tend to make the book unpalatable to progressive readers.

The first four chapters are grouped under the banner "Relationship Lost: Societal Costs of Unrelenting Relationship Decline." Hall looked explicitly at the supposed decline of relationships in homes, businesses, politics, and religions, but readers might be surprised to discover that Hall interpreted social trends as diverse as divorce, mass incarceration, wage disparities, short job tenures, rapid rates of capital flows, partisan politics, and religious rivalries as the products of the declining value of relationships. It takes a peculiar form of astigmatism for any social observer to overlook completely the structural contributions to these social trends.

I began to wonder exactly what Hall meant by relationship in chapters five and six. If relationships are “Our Most Valuable Resource” as this section proclaims, it is interesting that Hall chose to illustrate this value with a story about a Neiman Marcus jewelry sales clerk who built a file on him, pre-selected gift options for his wife, and visited his office to solicit sales. It is difficult to reconcile this illustration of a *priceless* relationship with Hall’s description of relational attachment, the ongoing obligation, give and take, mutual service, and gracious accountability by which people connect to one another. He defined *relationship capital* as “the wealth or value that flows from productive relationships” (p. 116), and any reader concerned with productivity in any venue will be challenged by Hall to commit more time and attention to building relationships. Without denigrating Hall’s emphasis on the importance of relationships, I do find it interesting that he did not appear to be aware that tying the value of relationships to their functionality (or productivity) may actually erode the quality of connection between two people. The hidden inconsistency in Hall’s thinking is that he valued relational intimacy when speaking of family, but relational functionality when speaking of consumers and employees, without realizing that these forms of relationship may be largely incompatible.

In the next section, chapters seven through ten, Hall provided his explanations of four macro trends that he believes have resulted in disposable relationships. Extreme forms of consumerism (chapter 7) are equated with radical individualism, narcissism, the conflation of self-identity with ownership, and the ascension of autonomy over loyalty. In Hall’s interpretation, consumerism became extreme commercialism when relationships became monetized (chapter 8), the second of Hall’s macro trends. High tech gadgets are targeted next (chapter 9), eroding attentional focus, segregating Americans into homogeneous clusters, and increasing distances rather than improving connections. Finally, large bureaucratic institutions are blamed for being careless and

increasing interpersonal distrust in the pursuit of efficiency. At best, this selection of explanations is highly subjective and idiosyncratic. Even if one agrees with Hall’s premise that relationships are in free fall, one is likely to wonder about the roles played in relational decline by alcoholism, drug use, financial strain, unemployment, job market restructures, reentry from war or incarceration, and globalization. This list could go on.

Hall warned in the introduction that he had “not provided a snappy, simple solution at the end of the book to make our society more relational, because such a solution does not exist” (p. 6). Even more sadly, Hall seems to have forgotten his passion for personal relationships by the end of the book where he wrote almost exclusively about organizational relationships and societal needs. The three-tiered solution required revalued relationships (chapter 11), support for small and local organizations (chapter 12), and practiced relational leadership (chapter 13). Revaluing relationships, in Hall’s view, is a function of expanding *relational capacity* that is “the potential for relationships, working in concert, to be highly productive” (p. 246), but there are few hints of what produces relational capacity beyond a need for *relational leadership*. I wonder who Hall hopes readers might turn to for help in this area? Readers should be forgiven if they feel that these three chapters are a lengthy marketing brochure for Hall’s relational management consulting business.

Readers of the *Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics*, I am happy to assume, are quite likely to place a high value on relationships in their personal lives and professional practice already. Accordingly, I believe that Hall has little to offer these readers. On the other hand, Hall’s book might make an interesting gift selection for a hardnosed conservative who quickly dismisses social problems such as poverty, poor educations, and unemployment with a dismissive homage to personal responsibility and hard work. At the very least Hall forces his readers to ask themselves, what am I doing personally to improve my relationships? Maybe caring for one another is one place from which shared common good can grow.