

Six Degrees of Separation

By Zeke Flores

In 1929, Hungarian author Frigyes Karinthy wrote a short story titled "Chain-Links" in which he postulated that any two people on earth are connected through, at most, six degrees of separation. The idea is that anyone can be connected to anyone else through acquaintances or someone connected to an acquaintance by a separation of only six steps or lower. The process has come to be known as the "Six Degrees of Separation" and was further popularized by a 1990 play written by John Guare. Then came the game "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" in which the concept is to link actors to Bacon by six connections or less where the connection is whether any actor has appeared in a movie or commercial with Bacon. The search site Google even has an algorithm which when you type in "Bacon number" and an actor's name in the search box, the site will return a "Bacon number," that is, the degrees of separation between the actor and Bacon. Other popular sites such as Facebook and Twitter have also developed their own version to get in on the act.

It's an unproven theory, of course, and all done in fun but the thought that we are all somehow connected to one another through such few connections is a dynamic that should cause us to pause and ponder: "How is my connection being used for good?"

Some 400 years ago Englishman John Donne wrote, "No man is an Island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in Mankind" What was true for Donne is true for you and me and everyone else on Earth. We are all joined, however loosely, to one another and what you do matters to someone else.

We recognize this as influence and we all have it to some degree or another and none of us is exempt from whether we want to exert it. Before he retired, basketball player Charles Barkley said, "I'm not a role model... Just because I dunk a basketball doesn't mean I should raise your kids." Too late! He had already begun to influence a generation of fans who wanted to play like him, dress like him and - unfortunately - act like him.

The idea that anyone can live their life without influencing someone else - even a little - is not just naive, it's also un-Biblical. "He who walks with wise men will be wise, but the companion of fools will suffer harm." (Prov 13:20). Or, as another version puts it: "Be friends with those who are wise, and you will become wise. Choose fools to be your friends, and you will have trouble."

Influence can reach far beyond established relationships. Some people buy a product because they liked or trusted the pitchman they saw in the commercial for that product. Others watch certain news programs because they trust the newscaster to give them the news truthfully. That's why TV commercial producers and actors (as well as TV newscasters) work hard to present a persona on camera that will be liked and trusted. They know that will influence your habits.

Influence is a powerful thing and can be used for good or bad. It can be manipulated, exerted, accepted, and resisted. A person can influence others and be influenced himself - all for good or bad. So, the Bible warns about both aspects of it. In His sermon on the mount, Jesus reminds that our influence can be used to illuminate and preserve just as light and salt does (Matt 5:13-16). Conversely, the Bible also reminds us that we each have the responsibility to be aware of who/what will influence us. "I will set no worthless thing before my eyes; I hate the works of those who fall away; it shall not fasten its grip on me ... My eyes shall be upon the faithful of the land, that they may dwell with me; he who walks in a blameless way is the one who will minister to me." (Psalm 101:3, 6) Why? Because we're all connected somehow even if only by six or fewer degrees.

If we want to connect with someone - and be connected by someone - in a positive way, shouldn't we fill ourselves with God's will and pass it on to others with the prayer that God will use it for His intended purpose?

"I Will Do the Same Thing!"

The story is told of a man in Massachusetts many years ago who found his neighbor's horse in the middle of his wheat field. He was so angry about it that he took the horse to the public impoundment. Meeting the owner soon after this, he told him what he had done and added, "If I catch him there again, I will do the same thing."

The neighbor replied, "Well, the other night I looked out of my window and saw your cattle in my corn field. I took your cattle and drove them over to your house, and put them in the barn, and fixed your gate. If I catch them in my fields again, I will do the same thing." The man was reportedly so struck with his neighbor's soft reply that he at once took the horse out of the pound and paid the charges himself.

Perhaps the most difficult command given to us by Jesus concerns our attitude toward those we view as enemies. It is hard to restrain ourselves when we have been mistreated or when a hateful attitude has been shown toward us. The natural response is to repay evil for evil. But we will only be able to make an impact on the world around us by following the example of Jesus Christ, and are willing to repay good for evil.

Romans 12:17-21 - "Repay no one evil for evil. Have regard for good things in the sight of all men. If it is possible, as much as depends on you, live peaceably with all men. Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,' says the Lord. Therefore 'If your enemy is hungry, feed him; If he is thirsty, give him a drink; For in so doing you will heap coals of fire on his head.' Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

A Moments Wisdom

- Gold is tested by fire; man is tested by gold.
- Living in the lap of luxury isn't bad, except that you never know when luxury is going to stand up.
- Marriage is an institution, not a reform school.
- To marry for beauty is like buying a house for its paint.
- All of the good proverbs have been written; it now only remains to put them into practice.
- Even a bad man has his value; you can learn from him how not to live.
- Poor memory often has its root in poor attention.
- A wise man changes his mind; a fool, never.
- Great minds discuss ideas; mediocre minds discuss events; small minds discuss people.
- Misfortunes test friends and detect enemies.