Dr. Will Miller & Dr. Glenn Sparks

refrigerator *rights*

Our CRUCIAL NEED *for* CLOSE CONNECTION

P.O. Box 3188
Barrington, IL 60011-3188

Refrigerator Rights

Dr. Will Miller and Dr. Glenn Sparks

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Willow Creek Association
P.O. Box 3188
Barrington, IL 60011-3188
www.willowcreek.com

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part 1 how we *live*

1

LOSING REFRIGERATOR-RIGHTS

> And I don't know a soul who's not been battered; I don't have a friend who feels at ease.
>
> —PAUL SIMON

It's Not Just Me

We all want the same thing: a happy well-adjusted life with not too many downs and some really high spots. We want to be at peace with ourselves while at the same time being productive in our careers and close to our nearest and dearest. I'm certainly like this, and so (I suspect) are you. I'm reasonably successful, personally and professionally. But I am bugged by a nagging sensation that I ought to feel better than I do, given how well my life has gone. I should be serene and con-

tented, or so I think. But for the life of me, I've never been able to hang onto serenity for more than a few hours at a stretch—or so it seems.

For a long time I assumed it was my biology—that I was hard-wired to be incapable of calm. Certainly I'm an intense individual, but I don't want to exaggerate: I'm social and engaging and I genuinely want to be a good person. But I often have to battle tendencies that move me in the opposite direction. My intensity is actually anxiety and I constantly live with its discomforts. It's not that I've got an awful lot to be genuinely anxious about. I'm well aware that my feelings about my life do not match the actual quality of my life. I rarely become melancholy but I'm frequently too wound up with worry.

Over the years I've tried most of the available remedies. I not only attended psychotherapy, I thoroughly engaged the process. In fact, I became a psychotherapist myself. I've read a great deal of the literature about how to live a full, balanced, and peaceful life, from the abstruse classic masters through the cheesy self-help junk. I've listened attentively to motivational speakers and sat through infomercials about marriage and my inner child. I've explored spirituality, embraced my faith and even become an ordained minister. I've spent years in the garage of my own mind tinkering and rebuilding, trying to fix myself. And I've taken myself into the shop for the professionals to have a go.

The results are mixed. I have insight and understanding and a capacity to expound on the human condition. But, in all honesty, I still have the anxiety.

Was it my family background? I thought it might be—hence all that psychotherapy—but now, from the vantage point of 50 years of experience and perspective, I can see that we were merely ordinarily neurotic, nothing extreme. In the long run I came to realize that compared to so many others, my psychological problems were trivial. Of course I had issues to address, but in the end I came to recognize that my parents and siblings were healthy and well adjusted enough and did not owe me any more than what they gave, which was plenty. But it took years for me to discover and accept this conclusion. In the meantime I'd wasted enormous amounts of time and energy exploring my own navel and hopping from one career to another in search of satisfaction. I never gave much thought to whether my angst was normal or common. Instead, I focused only on trying to feel better and fix myself.

Although I still read, reflect, and pray, I am no longer persuaded that my ongoing anxiety and stress symptoms are caused principally by either genetics or childhood experiences. At eighteen I charged out into the world on my own without a second thought about leaving all these people behind. It never occurred to me that I would suffer consequences by disconnecting from my family. I just left…and went on leaving. Ever

since I went off to college, I've been a moving fool. When I actually calculated the number of times I've relocated since then, I shocked myself. Since graduating from college I've lived in 18 different places in 7 states. I've moved every two years as an adult. Oh, the boxes! Oh, the duct tape! I've lost more personal items than I've kept, and have stuff in my attic packed two moves ago. Images of past apartments and houses float through my mind. My life has been a profile akin to that of someone fleeing the authorities.

Curiously, late in life, my parents began their own itinerant lifestyle. After decades of stability in New York, they've lived in a dozen places in three states, moving constantly to be close to one or more of their seven children who live in seven different states. I am beginning to wonder if we moved simply because we could. But I wonder more what influenced us to become so mobile and disregard the model of stability that characterized our upbringing. I never reflected at all on the loss of contact with my family or the consequences of my choices. Because I have moved so often and my family is so scattered, that stability is now long gone for me. I no longer share my daily life with any of these people I knew and loved. I live wholly apart from the associations of my childhood. For me as for many others, home isn't there to go to any more.

So I now ascribe more of my restless feelings to this loss of my social network—the loss of my refrigerator-

rights relationships. But it's even more than that. I've come to believe that what I've been feeling for most of my life is the norm for millions of otherwise fully functional, successful individuals—perhaps for you, too? While the symptoms of this malaise vary from one person to another, no one disposition or character type is exempt. For me, it's anxiety. For you, maybe it's a mild sense of depression if not Real Big Depression. If you've tried to describe this mild depression you might say you're just a bit…well, discontented. But that really isn't it. "Down" isn't really it either. You're just not as happy as you know you could be. You've got a nagging sense of melancholy that doesn't go away. You don't have a disease; you're just ill-at-ease too much of the time.

Some of us have a temperament that predisposes us to discomfort in various ways. I have come to the conclusion, however, that modern life has gnawed away at the cushion that our past refrigerator-rights relationships used to provide for our idiosyncratic temperaments. My wife Sally has always been easygoing and upbeat, while I'm more torqued-up and tightly wound. Not surprisingly, we manifest our discomforts differently. When I'm anxious or stressed out, I become hyper, impatient, and testy. I have a temper and a sharp tongue, and tend to take it out on the people close around me. Sally ruminates over her problems and projects her anger inward. As a result she endures

stomach and digestive problems. She can look peaceable on the outside while she's quietly burning a hole in her gut. My colleague Glenn is the same way. But his serene outer visage aside, he too reports that sense of feeling adrift, not really happy, despite his steady, successful life.

The bottom line is that whatever our varying temperaments, we are more uncomfortable than we care to admit…or think we should be. Most people we talked to in researching this book identify with our sentiments. Listen to Pam's story:

> *I was driving to work this morning and heard you on the radio talking about refrigerator-rights, and I was vigorously nodding my head at what you were saying. I haven't lived near my hometown since 1980. I have relocated twice, the first time to Florida and the second time to Tennessee, where I've been now for 11 years. I am quite aware that having no extended family near me has had an impact. I'm raising two boys without the support and companionship of family. Friendships have come and gone. My spouse is my only constant companion, and I know that relying on him for everything is not realistic.*
>
> *I do have two close friends that have refrigerator-rights, but still, I wonder if I have those rights in their homes. This has caused a lot of anguish over the years. In Florida, I didn't realize what was causing the loneliness. In Tennessee, I know—but what does one do about it? The kind of "knowing" someone that comes with blood relation can never fully be realized through a friendship. That takes years, and commitment on both sides.*
>
> *My husband is in sales and is gone about a third of the year. I have been trying to cultivate friendships that can fill that void, but it isn't easy. Maybe it's my imagination, but it seems like the people around me have their own busy family life and don't need that kind of closeness. It's especially hard during holidays, when friends are with their families and my husband isn't home.*

It's Not Just Us

Maybe chronic, low-grade discomfort is a condition unique to my generation or, more narrowly, to my socioeconomic peers. Maybe we're just cranky, selfish, college-educated baby boomers. Although my father has never said it out loud, I often suspect that he and his friends believed this. And how can I tell them otherwise? They grew up through the Great Depression and then went straight out of high school and into a harrowing World War. Compared to us they suffered and they sacrificed—not just occasionally, but as a norm for daily living. Who can blame them for looking down their nose at their coddled, self-centered

kids? It's no wonder they were suspicious of our motives when we balked at going to Vietnam for a national cause. Our tributes to them as the "Greatest Generation" are well warranted, but we feel some guilt about our own spotty record of public service.

Whatever the tension between the "Greatest" and the rest of us, it's been an opinion expressed by many that we are a defective generation—that we are stressed out because we are so self-absorbed. I've been inclined to accept this assessment. Now, of course, this has all changed. The terrorist assault on America awakened all of us to the stress of uncertainty. In 9/11 we have had an experience that joins us to our forebears and helps us comprehend a bit more fully the emptiness and ultimate futility of a lifestyle of career pursuit and material accumulation. But this awakening is recent and after the fact.

Like so many millions I grew up in a culture that allowed me the freedom to be ambitious and to plan for the future. I have always had ambitions. Like any kid I "knew" what I wanted to be when I grew up. It's just that the vision kept changing with each exposure to different possibilities. Everything seemed so possible that nothing really became probable. I went to college with absolutely no vision or plan for my future career or personal life. Sadly, four years later, I graduated without any more clarity. And this was quite common. Many of my peers seemed restless and even aimless.

With the exception of a handful of young people in hot pursuit of a career in medicine, law, or business, most of my liberal arts friends had no clue about where they were headed in life. We weren't reflective about our past or worried about our future, except for the draft. We lived utterly in the moment—but not in some highly evolved Zen sense. Quite the opposite: I was always focused on whatever was in front of my nose, like a distracted dog.

For a while it appeared to me that our children's generation had more focus about their life direction. They seemed to be more aware that it was up to them to direct their futures. Now, of course, I know better. Glenn, who teaches undergraduate students, observes that, while different from their baby boomer parents in many ways, today's young mid-career adults are just as stressed as anyone else. When we interview them, we find that many feel unsettled, pressured, and fretful about their lives and future. My own grown stepchildren and their peers seem just as temperamental and goosey as we do. And when watching my grandsons, riveted to text messaging, the Internet and television, I can't see really big changes to come. Perhaps the culture has been changed irrevocably by the threat of terrorism and war, but for us it remains to be seen. What we do know is this: the habits of moving and isolation that we have cultivated over the past half century are so embedded that they will not change quickly.

Almost everyone seems to be feeling impatient and often jittery. Even my tranquil, elderly in-laws sense that there is something about the feel of modern existence that isn't quite right. Life is in high gear and speeding by, and it's getting harder to focus. A few years ago I went to see the Indianapolis 500 auto race. From my seat in the stands the cars were a blur, whipping by at over 200 miles per hour. I could see the whole pack of cars but couldn't pick out any car in particular. That's how I feel sometimes. I have a larger sense of where we are but I can't stay focused on any one thing for very long. The result: life seems off kilter in some profound way. People I encounter, even the energetic and optimistic, are wrestling with problems of peace and fulfillment.

It's the Stress, Stupid

Most often I hear this current condition described under the umbrella term of *stress*. Now, I make my living speaking about stress, so presumably I know all about it. I have a confession to make: for a long time, I've been just as uncertain as my audiences about what actually underlies our sense that "something's wrong." I tend to lapse occasionally into the thinking that stress is equivalent to "worry." Most of us tend to think of it that way. If you describe yourself as "stressed out" about something, you probably are referring to the

fact that you've been worrying about the consequences of something that did happen or something that might happen.

It's true that worrying is stressful. But few of us really seem to fully appreciate that stress is more than just psychological pressure. It wreaks havoc on the entire physical body. Think about the life pressures that make it harder for your body to function smoothly. In the medical community anything that makes it difficult for your bodily systems to operate is referred to as a "stressor." If your heart muscle is weak, it stresses the rest of your body. If your back gets wrenched by a fall, your body is stressed. If you lose sleep worrying about money or your rebellious teenage daughter, your body is stressed.

And the particular variable that makes it most difficult for your body to operate properly is change. Any significant change in your life puts additional stress on you. And here's the amazing part: it doesn't matter whether the change is good or bad—it still counts as stressful. Changing jobs, getting married, or reconciling an important relationship are all high in stress, even though they are positive changes. So with the pace of modern society moving at faster-than-lightning speed, change is the order of the day. We often don't account for the stress these changes put on our whole body, physically and psychologically.

While change may be stressful, our social support

system is supposed to shield us from a lot of the impact. Yet many of us are living lives of almost constant change, which has had the effect of diminishing our social network. This strips us of valuable armor in the battle against stress taking its toll on our body. The survivors escaping the disaster at the World Trade Center attack were following deep human instincts when they made urgent, spontaneous connections to complete strangers in the midst of the trauma. While a terrorist attack may serve to highlight the importance of forging connections with others, when the shock wears off most of us find ourselves back in our same routine. Maybe you are someone who has "stayed put," but have people in your life who are simply passing through. As long as you remain emotionally distant from others, the very insulation you need against stress—close relationships—is diminished. Social and emotional isolation places you at a profound disadvantage when trying to stabilize your mood. And isolation is the ongoing story—perhaps the headline—of the modern age.

I've slowly come to the conclusion that the core emotional problem of modern life is this: *a pervasive personal detachment and aloofness from other people.* And this characterizes life for too many of us. We no longer live in physical or emotional closeness to the people who helped shape us, including our family of origin, friends, neighbors, and the acquaintances of our childhood. And we have failed to replace our social

network with new people. It's not just about moving away. It's about being away, being apart, being isolated and too alone. It is about the loss of refrigerator-rights with others.

When Glenn teaches his students about the impact of mass media on their lives, he often uses the metaphor of fish not noticing the water that makes up their environment. If something is nearly constant or routine, we tend not to notice it. Breathing is so automatic that you don't tend to consciously think about the mechanics of your body as you take a breath. In today's environment, our isolation from other people has become so routine that many of us don't even realize that this is our state of affairs. We may tend to notice our stress a little more because there is more of an ebb and flow to daily anxiety and tension. But rarely do we tend to think about our levels of stress and our isolation from others as essentially interconnected and part of the same problem.

My wife Sally was widowed at 24 and left with two small children. Talk about change! Looking back, she marvels at her decision in the aftermath to move away from her hometown, family, and friends in order to feel better. "After he died I didn't want to be around any reminders of Bob. So I wanted to get as far away as I could." Today she is a writer and speaker about grief and loss, and attests to the challenge of change and loss of support as central variables in the stress of grief. "I

did exactly the wrong thing," she says. "I needed to be around my family and friends and the familiarity of my home. Instead, I followed my feelings, which were curdled with sadness, anger, and loneliness, and made another life change that was just as devastating."

Life Apart

Each of us has a story that brings to life the loss of refrigerator-rights. Mine is not unusual. I come from an apparently functional family, raised by my full-time, stay-at-home mother and a hardworking, blue-collar father. I was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1949. We lived in a small apartment that soon ran out of room. Fulfilling the dream common to young city families after the war, we moved to Plainview, a New York suburb.

Over those next few years most of my extended family migrated out of Brooklyn to various towns on Long Island as well. Before long, we were all relocated, but living within a half-hour's drive of each other. Growing up, my life was filled with an abundance of relationships. I had my big family, the kids at school, and my neighborhood friends. Inside our little ranch house my parents and the seven kids jostled around, negotiating as much personal independence as we could in close quarters. We had one bathroom, which nine people had to share each morning as we got ready

for school or work. As a result, I can now shower and dress for work in less than five minutes. During army basic training years later, it took me several weeks to realize that the reason I was adapting so well to barracks life was that compared to the tough, *move-move-move* rhythm of my home, the army was a breeze.

Most Sundays my family traded visits and ate dinner with my mother's parents, her two sisters and brother, and their families. Virtually every week I spent an afternoon with all my aunts, uncles, and first cousins—about twenty-five of us in all. These relationships, while not quite as involved, were every bit as important to me as those in my immediate family. For us, the distinction between nuclear and extended family was a soft line, and we crossed it weekly. Today we live differently, don't we? I know I do. I suspect that you do too. There is a much sharper divide between nuclear and extended family. And I'm betting—just like me—that the number of people in your life who have refrigerator-rights relationships with you has diminished over the years.

Missing Links

You can't really know people from a distance. Reunions don't cut it. My extended family tries to get together at least once each year at a summer picnic or a holiday gathering. But what can I expect to happen in a

few hours' time? There is a quick exchange about family events, but it's little more than headline news. I may know that my cousin got a new job, but it's unlikely she will take the time over a hot dog to relate how a recent cancer scare changed her entire outlook on life. If I lived nearby and shared some of her daily life, I would know and be able to offer my care and my prayers. But because she lives so far away, I'm not likely to be up to date on the meaningful events in her life. This is so terribly sad. And it's no way to live. But why are so many of us doing this?

What I'm experiencing is not just a matter of physical distance; my own psychological orientation is part of the picture as well. The transition was subtle, but since growing up and moving away, I have developed an altered sense of my family as an adult. Growing up when I thought about "my family" it meant everyone, including my uncles, aunts, and cousins. But now that soft boundary between nuclear and extended family has been hardened and my sense of family today is limited to my parents and brothers and sisters. I suppose it's mostly economy of time, but my efforts to stay in touch with my family have been narrowed down. And I can barely keep up with my siblings. I simply don't find the time to stay connected to the rest of my kin. E-mail has helped a little, but this is limited and superficial.

There is even a second layer of loss. When we have

reunions or periodic visits I hardly know anything about the children of my cousins. They are kin in name, and we know a little about each other, but we don't really know each other the way I desire to know my family. I've lost some relatives to death—my grandparents, my Aunt Carol, my cousin Kevin, my cousin Ferd, and my Uncle Jack. But more subtly, I have lost meaningful connection with many of those others who were so much a part of the relational world that helped shape me.

I guess I thoroughly embraced the freedoms available to me, but now when I look back over my life, I am appalled by the cavalier choices I made. I lost so many of the important attachments and relationships that (I now believe) are needed for a satisfying and less stressful life. I set out blindly to make my way in the world, narrowly focused on my individual happiness and fulfillment. What I failed to calculate is the cost of my fierce individuality—the loss of emotional resources that turned out to be critical for enjoying my achievements and successes.

What is distressing is that so many can tell the same story. I know a therapist who loves to get together with his old college friends. When we were talking about the loss of refrigerator-rights, he noted a connection between the idea and his own longing for college days. He told me about another acquaintance who virtually lives for their reunions and his longing for friends.

I have always been an active member of my alumni association. For 20 years I've never missed our class get-togethers and reunions. I have to admit that I have an unflagging enthusiasm for remembering my college days. When I went there our school was all-male and I had a great group of friends. We lived together for four years and became like brothers to each other. I still keep in touch with several of these guys and, no matter how long the gap since we've spoken, we reconnect in an instant. It's great.

But if truth be told, it makes me sad that I have never been able to replicate that experience in my adult life. For a long time I assumed that this was something I could only experience as a young person. Now I'm not really sure. There was no magic to why we became so close. We lived together, studied and ate together, and shared each other's lives as if we were members of the same family.

Today most of my family lives far away. Obviously my own wife and kids are close, but that's about it. I have no other men in my life that even remotely feel like brothers to me. Yet at the college reunions it's completely different. It seems to me that if the only time you get to enjoy these feelings of being close and connected is at a period reunion of your college or army days, something is wrong.

Glenn's personal history also reflects dislocation and

separation from family, but in his case the model for uprooting came early. At 11 years old his parents bought a donut franchise and they moved from Baltimore, Maryland to New Jersey. They had dreams of independence and prosperity for the family. Glenn remembers losing contact with his extended family and his neighborhood, and the challenge of trying to fit into a new town and school. At the end of that first school year, his parents decided that they needed to be closer to their business, and they moved again to a nearby town. This time, it was to an apartment complex, and the transition was more difficult. Glenn was in junior high where the social cliques are more resistant to newcomers. After two years, they moved once again to a new location in the same town. Two years later they moved a fourth time—to a single-family home, still in the same community. Glenn was in a perpetual state of social adjustment, constantly trying to fit in and find acceptance. He graduated from high school and left the state and his parents for good. Since then his pattern of moving has continued into his adult years.

He's moved four times since college, three times to different states. At last he settled down and has stayed in one place for over twenty years. But during that time his son, David, and daughter, Erin Jordan, have all graduated college and moved away. Today, Glenn and his wife, Cheri, have semi-regular phone and

visiting contact with their immediate families, but like me, they have essentially lost their connections with extended family and other long-term relationships.

Even when family members have lived relatively close, there remains a profound sense of being apart. The feel of separation from others appears to be the stamp of modern culture. Some blame it on "the pace of life" and moan about how busy everybody seems to be. Others pontificate about the breakdown of the family as the result of our moral collapse. Some focus attention on the evils of the mass media. The list of culprits is nearly endless.

But Glenn and I don't believe that the difference between the quality of life two generations ago and today is a consequence of either character deterioration or scientific progress. Rather, our strong suspicion is that it's rooted in the now accepted custom of living the unattached life, moving away and being apart from those we love, with its unavoidable disturbance of all our relationships.

If you want to test our hypothesis we suggest that you examine your own life. As you read through the rest of this book and contemplate our stories and the stories of others, I encourage you to focus on your own life situation and assess the impact the loss of refrigerator-rights has had on you. Who were you close to in your childhood? Your adolescence? Your young adulthood? What has become of those people?

Are they gone? Are they still in your life? And perhaps more important, have they been replaced?

Points to Remember

- Many of us feel much more uncomfortable in our day-to-day lives than we care to admit—and more uncomfortable than we think we should be even allowing for our personal weaknesses that we know so well.

- The core emotional problem of modern life is this:
  a pervasive personal detachment and aloofness from other people.

- Our modern life has been profoundly affected by the loss of refrigerator-rights" relationships—the type of relationships that resemble family interactions—the type of relationships that are so comfortable that you can go into each other's refrigerator with no questions asked.

Questions for Reflection

1. Identify one or two decisions that you have made that were driven by the desire for a "happy, well-adjusted life with not too many downs and some really high spots."

2. As described in the book, change, whether good or bad, can put stress on someone's body. In our modern society, change is the order of the day. What are two or three ways you cope with stress? Are these constructive or destructive ways to handle/alleviate your stress?

3. What is one thing you will do in the next week to begin to improve the ways you cope with stress?

4. The authors make the strong claim that the core emotional problem of modern life is a pervasive personal detachment and aloofness from other people. How does this describe your experience?

2

LIFE IN THE ISOLATION CULTURE

I never saw a moor, I never saw the sea;
Yet know I how the heather looks, and
what a wave must be.
I never spoke with God, nor visited in
heaven;
Yet certain am I of the spot as if the chart
were given.

—EMILY DICKINSON

Connecting the Dots

Perhaps you read the first chapter about the loss of *refrigerator-rights relationships* and didn't identify with this predicament. Oh, you could accept that there's a social trend toward separation, but not consciously experience it as a problem in your daily life. Perhaps you've lost contact with your family of origin and feel okay. Or you choose not to be close to your family. It's just the way things are. You may also feel some degree of life stress, but you don't see any real connection with