

THIS LAND OF STRANGERS

The Relationship Crisis That Imperils
Home, Work, Politics, and Faith

ROBERT E. HALL

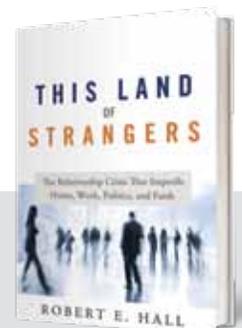
Introduction

THE YEAR WAS 1936 AND OUR NATION WAS struggling with economic depression, bank failures, and record summer temperatures. In a small, dusty town in southeastern Oklahoma where the locals were experiencing the worst drought on record, my grandfather, a rancher, was dying of cancer. The cancer was eating away the flesh from the side of his face. The pain was so acute that his neighbors took turns sitting up with him at night. At times, near the end, these men had to physically hold him on the bed.

My grandfather owned one of the largest ranches in the county and was known for his generosity in helping others

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in need. Years after his death, we found a trunk in the attic of his ranch house filled with IOUs from widows and men without work. My grandfather, Bob Hall, had “loaned” them money or a cow to provide milk for their kids.

But by the time he was ravaged with cancer, he had lost just about everything. My grandmother later recounted the last time he got out of bed. Bankers had come to foreclose on his last few head of livestock. My grandfather got up, put on his hat, as was his way, and walked outside onto the large front porch and into the yard. As the men on horseback drove the last herd of cattle through the corrals, onto the dusty road, and then westward until they were out of sight, he took off his hat, waved it weakly above his head, and let out a yelp. He then walked back into the house where he died a few weeks later.

My father, 17 years old and a freshman in college at the time, left school to return to the ranch. There were no livestock left, and the family owed substantial taxes on the land. Everyone said, “There’s no way those boys will be able to hold on to the ranch.” Dad and his two brothers went to every bank in the neighboring town of McAlester looking for a loan, and each time they asked they got the same answer: “We would like to help you boys, but your deal just isn’t bankable.”

After exhausting all the banks in McAlester, they headed north and west across the South Canadian River to a bank in the little town of Holdenville. They got the same story. But as they were leaving, the banker said, “If you could find someone to cosign the note, I might be able to make a deal work.”

As a last gasp, they went to an adjoining neighbor and lifelong family friend by the name of Buzz Newton, who was known to have money but also to be a bit miserly. He used a piece of baling wire for a belt, had toes sticking out of his worn-out shoes, and had holes in his old shirts and pants. One lens in his wire-rim glasses was cracked, and the other one was shattered. Buzz attended church about four times a year. When the offering plate was passed around, he would dig down into his pocket for what seemed like an eternity and then pull out a nickel and put it in the collection plate.

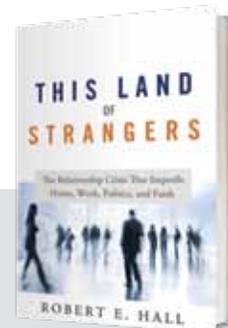
When the three brothers asked Buzz if he would cosign the note, he replied, “I always thought so much of your dad; he was the most generous man I have known. Yes, I’ll cosign the note.”

On February 9, 1937, the bank note was signed. The boys received \$228 to buy livestock, seed for a crop, and implements. They had a good harvest that fall, paid off the note, and made sufficient payment on the taxes to keep the ranch. My father lived on and worked that ranch for the rest of his life. It is where my sisters and I were born and grew up, it was the site of my younger daughter’s wedding, and it remains a family treasure today. That bank note, cosigned by Buzz Newton, is framed and hangs on the living room wall of the old stone ranch house as a reminder of the value of one single, committed relationship.

Most of us have family histories replete with similar stories, and a common thread in many of them is a key relationship that delivered us from difficulty and despair. For all of

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Grandfather's accumulated assets, skill, and grit, it was a relationship that kept the ranch from being lost. While we often focus on tangible assets like money and possessions as being pivotal to our well-being, it is uncanny how often at crunch time it is the intangible value of our relationships that helps us navigate through individual crises—divorce, illness, financial disaster, loss of a job, loss of faith—as well as collective crises such as the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Hurricane Katrina, or the recent financial meltdown. The truth is, relationships are the most valuable and value-creating resource of any society. They are our lifeline to survive, grow, and thrive.

Today, the unprecedented unraveling of these relationships is destroying us. At home, at work, in politics, and in faith, a cumulating and compounding loss has collectively retarded our growth and development and injured us in ways both known and repressed. It is hard to miss the fact that pieces of our relationship infrastructure—family, friends, community, organizations, politics, churches—are crumbling. But until now, no one has fully connected the broader dots that form the plummeting arc of decline and the rising slope of its cost; nor has anyone pulled together the narrative on its causes and cure. *We cannot build better lives or a stronger society on deteriorating relationships.*

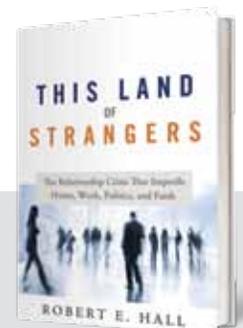
The measurable decline in the strength, number, and duration of genuine relationships has occurred at a time when the array of relational choices and the freedom to exercise them has never been greater. Our democracy, capitalism, freedom of and from religion, technology, and physical and social mobility afford us an incredible array of relational choices regarding whom we select as our leaders, do business with, worship with (or not), and interact with (or not).

Already carrying the baggage of a disposable society, our most harmful waste has become discarded relationships, now piled up and rotting all over our planet. That we have a relationship problem is not news. What is news, however, is just how broad and consequential the relationship demise is across all facets of our lives:

- In homes, growing relationship dysfunction feeds growing economic disparity between “haves” and “have-nots,” and the expanding costs of social services threaten government solvency.
- In a tough global economy, businesses strain to compete, while a few profit inordinately on the backs of broken stakeholder relationships (employees, customers, stockholders).
- In the political arena, federal and state government leaders are gridlocked on tough issues like health care, employment, and deficits in an environment of extreme partisan divide.
- In matters of faith and belief, communities whose expressed intention is to heal wounds and to love one another are now characterized by the loud and divisive voices that dominate, throwing fuel on the fire.

This all points to a society exhausted by attempts to function when its core fabric—relationships—is coming apart at the seams.

We have lost our way. Like a native culture invaded by outside forces, suffering the ravages of having lost its beliefs, rites, and customs, we have come to a place where our



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society seems to be losing its grip on relationships. The loss has come primarily from within.

The collapse of great societies has historically been first and foremost about the collective decay of relationships. While theories on the fall of the Roman Empire abound, a common thread is the change in relationships. British historian Edward Gibbon famously placed the blame on a loss of civic virtue among Roman citizens.¹ He defined civic virtue as cultivation of habits of personal living that kept the relationships of the community healthy, vibrant, committed, growing, and thereby successful. Contrast that to the outsourcing of the Romans' defense to external barbarian mercenaries—relationships for hire. Whether a corporation is outsourcing customer service offshore or an absent father is outsourcing parenting responsibilities to an ex-wife, abandoned relationships create a very heavy load.

In this book we will take a journey through a challenging relational landscape. Brace yourself. Facing this pervasive and consequential relational challenge with all its implications is daunting.

Section I reviews the unrelenting evidence that points to our relational demise at home, at work, in politics, and in faith. We will examine facts and figures to quantify the magnitude of the problem and its costs—economically, socially, physically, and emotionally. We also will share compelling stories that help us get our heads and our hearts around the relationship train wreck we face.

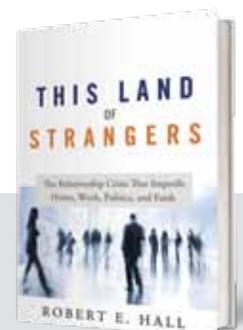
Section II establishes why relationships are the most valuable and value-creating possessions we have. We will examine the central role they have in our growth and development. In doing so, we will weave together social, behavioral, and medical research that places relationships at the center of our health, wealth, and well-being. We'll review examples that will resonate with your own relational life experiences that have helped define who you are.

If relationships are both valuable and value-creating, how and why have we allowed this collapse to happen? Fifty years ago, no one started out with the goal of disassembling relationships. Yet, as you'll see in section III, a series of important societal advancements have had unintended consequences. We will examine four of these that have served us well in many ways but have led us unwittingly to sacrifice our relationships. The result: We have become acclimated to disposing of relationships.

Finally, in section IV, we will look to the hope of the future. Evidence of a movement to revalue and reclaim relationships is popping up in many areas. In fact, as the supply of authentic, trusted relationships declines, there is a growing demand to restore what is a core, organic need. We will examine three key shifts that are central to ushering in a new age—the Age of Relationships. In the process, we will introduce the two important concepts of “relational capacity” and “relational leadership” for moving forward.

Throughout the book the term *relationship* is used as a broad, encompassing concept for examining individually and collectively the set of relational connections we have or might have.

The research and writing for this book has taken more than six years—a much larger undertaking than I initially envisioned. While a little chagrined with how long it has taken, I have felt compelled to stay the course because of a deep conviction that much of the



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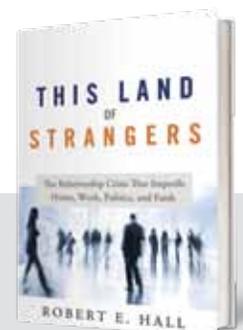
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conversation about our most substantive societal problems misses the mark. We all know that our relationships have lost ground in recent decades, but we have failed to see the larger picture and weigh the costs. As founder and corporate CEO of a relationship management consulting and software company for 20-plus years, my life's work has been to build stronger connections with customers, employees, and shareholders in organizations around the world. I am a strong believer in capitalism and in democracy. As a volunteer among the homeless for more than a decade, I am a believer in helping those less fortunate. Yet our broken relationships have a death grip on economic growth, political progress, and social development that capitalism, democracy, and social programs have been unable to break. As a result, we suffer an unfolding relational caste system: Those with strong relationships “have” and those with broken relationships “have-not.” *Relationship capital has surpassed financial and political capital as the scarce resource that now dictates society's progress or regress.*

My purpose is to sound the alarm by looking at our society through the lens of relationships. I want to change the conversation regarding our relational challenges and how we move forward. My goal is to make the case for each of us to become a more active force for stronger, longer, and better relationships.

I must warn you about three possibilities. First, I think understanding the facts is crucial for coming to grips with the breadth of what we face. However, if I've quoted more research than you deem necessary for certain topics, you may wish to quickly skim data you already know. Second, section I, about our relational decline, may be overwhelming or depressing. Unfortunately, meaningful change often requires facing the magnitude of our problem, which helps us summon the courage to address it. Third, I have 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. While it is tempting to put the onus on our president and Congress or on corporate, government, and religious leaders to proffer a few, powerful changes—a law, policy, or program—real organic change will come from what each of us does in our respective spheres of influence. The stories at the beginning and end of the last chapter provide examples of how leadership for the Age of Relationship starts with the small, local decisions we make and actions we take.

Our relationships are difficult, time-consuming, unpredictable, exhausting, and sometimes hurtful. Most often they are both our most significant source of pain and our only real source of healing and recovery. In writing this book I draw on my own challenges as a son, brother, husband, father, friend, team member, volunteer, corporate CEO, student of politics, consultant to corporations and governments, and fellow traveler on the journey of faith and belief. To take liberties with a quote by D. T. Niles, I am one beggar telling another beggar about where I found bread.²



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