

Connecting Hearts and Minds: Insights, Skills, and Best Practices for Dealing with Differences by Greg Nees. Longmont, Colorado: Vagus Publications, 2015, 377 pages, \$19.95 softcover.

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Now more than ever, people need to learn how to communicate effectively. Humanity has always been rife with division and infighting but even since this book was published, these problems have been exacerbated by political, religious, and other ideological differences as well as an increasingly hard-to-ignore wealth disparity not just among nations but also within the United States. Greg Nees, a self-identified “interculturalist” and the author of *Connecting Hearts and Minds*, takes a deep dive into the brain and body mechanisms underlying human communication in an effort to bridge these chasms between people. Through countless personal stories, substantiated by current research and professional insights, this book sets readers off on a journey of beginning to understand people who are different from them.

The book is organized into four sections: Part One: Introduction; Part Two: Brains and Minds; Part Three: Culture and Communication; and Part Four: Mindsight and Identity. The four parts comprise seventeen chapters in total. Rather than a blow-by-blow review of the book, my intention in this review is to give the reader a feel for the book and a sense of Nees’ writing style. Reading this book will be a worthwhile pursuit for anyone making the choice to shift their mentality from “us versus them” to “we’re all one.”

I had never heard the term “interculturalist” before reading this book. According to Nees, an interculturalist is someone who has developed a clear awareness, either experientially or through formal education, of how our cultural conditioning influences the way our minds process information and how cultural differences can create misunderstandings when people from different cultures try to cooperate. Nees’ formal training in psychology, linguistics and communication

and his many years living and working abroad enable him to focus on the way different mindsets and different communication styles interact to create challenges to cross-cultural cooperation. Professional interculturalists like Nees work as mediators and coaches to help people in many fields, including business and education, build bridges of cross-cultural understanding.

In Nees' words, "conversation is like a force field of shared meaning" (p.74) and, most interestingly, he offers analogies to both the inorganic and the organic worlds to help us understand his meaning: "Just as iron filings are held in place by an electromagnetic field, so, too, our perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and the way we act and talk are influenced by the contexts in which we find ourselves" (p.74). As for the organic analogy: "Survival requires all living organisms to adapt to their changing environments — that is, to adapt to an ever-changing context. Context-sensitivity is thus a hallmark of life itself, but in humans, with our large brains, context-sensitivity has expanded to new heights and is present in all our sensory systems" (p.75).

When social science researchers (which, I would argue, includes interculturalists) can make insightful analogies to both the non-living natural world and the living world, I am more persuaded by the wisdom of their claims. We would expect that fundamental human abilities like communication and cooperation toward a common goal would be foreshadowed in living beings who are evolutionarily older than us. Modern philosophy went so far astray in virtue of its haughty assumption that humans were distinct from, and superior to, the rest of the natural world. But since humans evolved in the same natural world as other living beings, there ought to be huge crossover between our way of communicating and surviving and other organisms' methods for doing so. Furthermore, we should expect to find fundamental patterns repeated in us that originated in the natural world preceding organic life. So Nees' line of reasoning checks out, at least for this philosopher.

In his story of how he came to be an interculturalist, ultimately finding his life's work of building bridges between people from different cultures, Nees weaves a rich tapestry of personal stories from his life and travels, successes and challenges in his consulting work, and lots of insights from research in psychology and neuroscience. He pulls from both well-known and lesser-known research from Robert Sapolsky, Stanley Milgram, V.S. Ramachandran, Viktor Frankl, Michael Gazzaniga, Antonio Damasio, Jonathan Haidt, Jared Diamond, and many more. While much of the research Nees reviews in his book will be familiar to readers of this and other psychology journals, what's original is how he uses that research to bolster his points about how the multiple granular layers of human communication work together (or not!) to foster a more respectful, progressive, and cohesive human society — the kind of world we all want to live in.

One of Nees' important insights in the book is what he calls "safety first, truth second" (p.92), which he explains as meaning, if we don't feel safe, we cannot

trust. And if someone doesn't trust you, good luck getting them to listen to you. But say, for instance, this person is someone you have to work with on a grant proposal for research funds. How will you two collaborate effectively toward this shared goal unless you can come together in a trusting and empathic way? Nees shares a story from his consulting work here to make the point that when someone resists being vulnerable and letting defenses down in the name of cooperating, it's best to be patient and allow trust to develop organically until finally both parties are in a place where differing viewpoints can be shared and respected, allowing for collaboration toward that common goal.

Another important concept from the book is the notion of "emotional hijacking," which Nees borrows from Daniel Goleman. This is when an unpleasant stimulus in one's environment triggers concern or even panic, and an emotional reaction hijacks the homeostatic normal, paving the way for outbursts we might later regret. Nees recounts another personal story where his emotions almost got the better of him during a workshop on effective communication — a bitter irony turned into a learning experience we can all relate to. Later in the book, Nees dives deep into the practices associated with developing mindfulness through which we aim to respond, rather than react, to stressful triggers in our environment, which of course includes our interactions with other people. He invokes Goleman's notion of "emotional literacy" here to explain the goal of having wisdom in knowing when to express which emotions and to what degree — a work in progress for us all.

Nees lightens up the necessarily heavy content of the book and the proliferation of research throughout with funny stories that highlight cross-cultural quirks and oddities. One such example is the story of Heinz from Germany who didn't understand why Americans kept congratulating him on his doctoral work. While the Americans found it natural to celebrate his hard work and interesting research, Heinz felt he was just doing what was expected of him and was happy to not be harshly criticized for doing it all wrong. America has certainly gone overboard recently with this trend where we all get a hearty "Congratulations!" email for doing something so ordinary as signing up for a discount card at PetSmart. As an interculturalist, Nees is adept at pointing out as quirky or funny what most of us probably assume as "normal" in our everyday lives.

One of Nees' takeaway messages for humorous intercultural differences like this one is that living abroad for any amount of time makes one more open-minded and less culture-bound in terms of expectations and communication habits. As a United States native who has lived in South America, the Caribbean, and Europe, I whole-heartedly agree with this position. Living in different cultures brings you closer to what Nees talks about later in the book where we're all on a path of moving from egocentric to sociocentric to world-centric as we resonate more with our commonalities among human beings and less with our individual differences that can create tension and exacerbate what he calls "mind distance."

The concept of mind distance is perhaps the most important one of the book. It refers to the figurative “distance” that exists between people from different backgrounds, be it cultural, religious, geographic, or experiential. It can be extremely hard to see humanity as one when individuals have polarized beliefs around the fundamental ideas of life, death, God, freedom, justice, and meaning. A simple but profound formula Nees employs is this: as shared meaning increases, mind distance decreases. Essentially, the more we can understand and relate to one another, the closer we feel to one another. And if we feel close, and there’s trust, we’re more likely to listen to each other and be willing to learn from each other, thus instantiating a positive feedback loop of trust and mutual respect. Conversely, a lack of shared meaning between individuals or cultures is synonymous with greater mind distance, and thus less opportunity for mutual understanding, collaboration, or cohesion.

What about the connection implied by the title of the book — that between heart and mind? On page 227, Nees writes, “The joy of caring is about following your heart. Setting smart goals is about using your head. One without the other leaves us less than fully human. When our hearts and minds are aligned, we prosper.” More could be said on the heart–mind, feeling–thinking, or passion–reason dynamic both in this book and in our society in general. Science educators emphasize the need to connect with people through the gut rather than the head to get important scientific messages across. For instance, showing images of ocean creatures caught up in plastic will pack a greater punch when the message is about human pollution than will presenting statistical data on levels of microplastics in the ocean (at least for a general audience; scientists themselves customarily prefer the data). And this *Rush* fan would be remiss without referencing the band’s 1978 prog rock album *Hemispheres*, which relays the origin story of humanity torn between passion and reason (under Dionysus and Apollo, respectively) until finally coming into balance with “the heart and mind united in a single, perfect sphere.”

In closing, I’ll include two longer quotations from Nees that encapsulate both his fluid writing style and his insightful wisdom of human nature. The first quotation: “If there’s one key message in this book, it’s this: To think and act like an interculturalist, we must choose to do so. No one is born with a world-centric identity. [...] it is essential to harness our inner power if we hope to achieve our highest aspirations. To the degree that we make wise choices — as well as take responsibility for those less-than-optimal choices [...] — we can grow our mindsight and liberate ourselves from outdated conditioning as we pursue our highest dreams” (p. 340).

And the second quotation, in the very last paragraph of the book: “If we use our conversations well, we can also harness the ripple effect to share kindness, compassion, and love. As our mindsight and more elevated emotions ripple outwards, they help move us towards the more peaceful, deeply democratic world

that is waiting to be built. Every conversation is an opportunity. All we need is the courage and willingness to accept the invitation” (p. 343).

This book will be useful to communication professionals like the author, working as consultants or coaches, to help minimize the mind distance between individuals, groups, and cultures, to increase shared meaning and create a more respectful, progressive, and unified world. But it's also a useful resource for anyone in the social or mind sciences who is eager to learn about the brain and body mechanisms underlying human differences to more fully appreciate how we communicate with one another and how we could do it more effectively. This book truly is an example of “knowledge is power” since being an effective communicator is indeed powerful. *Connecting Hearts and Minds* will remind you what it means to be human, in a sense; all creatures communicate but perhaps humans are unique in being able to critique how we communicate and, for those like the author and perhaps readers of this book, are committed to learning how we can use communication to improve our world.