

CHAPTER 1

MASTERS OF CONNECTION

Many of us struggle to connect with those who seem *different*. But there are a few rare individuals who are extraordinarily good at it. We were curious to discover what made some people especially effective, so we decided to study three such people to find out what makes them tick. We were certain that if we looked below the surface at interactions involving these masterful connectors, we would uncover patterns, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that could help anyone interested in connecting more effectively when there are differences.

Both of us listen to National Public Radio, and we pay special attention when Terry Gross interviews a diverse spectrum of people on her show *Fresh Air*. We decided to dig deeper into her success at connecting by learning everything we could about her. As we were thinking about people who connect particularly well, we stumbled across an article about Richard and Michele Steckel and their Milestones Project in the Denver magazine *5280* (that's the elevation in Denver!); that short article made it clear the Steckels had a lot to teach us—and that, in them, we could study two masters for the price of one. Finally, Lara has known and admired Héctor Orcí for nearly a dozen years and was curious to delve into his success at bridging the gap between diverse groups of people, especially the mainstream advertising community and the Latino market.

When it first dawned on us that the masters we'd chosen were all past fifty, we were disappointed. We had hoped our masters would represent both young and old. Then we realized that their mastery came from the lessons they had learned over their years of experience. They've interacted with all sorts of people through many kinds of difference in all kinds of scenarios. They've tried and failed. They've tried again and succeeded. They had talent as young communicators. And now they've been at it for years. It's all that experience that makes them masterful. Their beliefs have been challenged, and when those beliefs became obstacles to connecting, they took the time to examine their beliefs and change them as appropriate. They've experimented with certain behaviors over and over again. Over time, the ability to connect with all kinds of people has become an important part of each master's identity. Once we figured all that out, we knew it made sense for our masters to be older. Their profiles are rich with information about connecting with people who differ from us. If you're a younger master—or a master in the making—perhaps these stories will offer some shortcuts or encourage you to continue if you stumble on your own pathway to masterful connection. And if you are looking for mastery in younger models, take heart. We learned a lot from younger people, too, and you will find their insights in every chapter.

TERRY GROSS

We googled Terry Gross and got 1,670,000 hits. We scanned hundreds of those citations and then studied her book, interviews other journalists have conducted with her, and dozens of transcripts, articles, and print interviews to uncover the secrets to her success as a connector.

We learned that a typical day finds Terry in the recording stu-

dio, her elbows resting on the counter as she peers through her glasses and leans in toward the microphone as if to encourage it to say more. “I listen as hard as I can,” she says. “I follow people into places they want to go and then lead them back.”¹

Terry has a remarkable ability to connect with all kinds of people, draw them out, get them to reflect on their experiences, and talk about themselves. She’s the host of *Fresh Air*, a one-hour program distributed by National Public Radio to more than 450 stations daily. Since 1987, she has interviewed a wide array of people; they include an Islamic leader from Detroit, an Iranian filmmaker, a Chinese chef, a gay-rights activist, a former White House press secretary, an eighty-two-year-old rabbi, a conservative pundit, and a leading neurologist from the Harvard Medical School.

Terry Gross has an extraordinary following—nearly 4.5 million people tune in each week to listen to her in-depth conversations—yet she just looks like an ordinary person. She’s tiny—only a fraction of an inch over five feet—and she often dresses all in black. Her straight light brown hair is cropped close to her head. She typically wears only a plain gold band on her left hand and a large watch on her right wrist. She often wears a leather bomber jacket she bought at Gap Kids to make herself look “reasonably hip.”²

Her work environment isn’t flashy, either. She sits in front of a microphone with a sign that reads WHYY-FM—the Philadelphia public radio station she works for—in a small, dark room with no windows. On the day she interviewed Ayesha Imam, a Nigerian women’s rights activist and a Muslim, Nigeria had just withdrawn as host for the Miss World Pageant due to violent widespread protest from the Islamic community.

The night before, Terry had dragged home a bag full of tapes, books, and articles, and she had stayed up until midnight poring over information about her guest, the country she comes from, the political situation there, and events surrounding the pageant. Terry

doesn't write out questions word for word; she says she doesn't want her guests to feel like they're being asked things off some random questionnaire. But she has a general sense of a set of questions that flows logically from one to the next, following a loose story line. She also has a clear intention of how she wants the conversation to feel and to flow. Sticking to her plan isn't critical; instead, she listens carefully, allowing the conversation to take its own direction, improvising if she gets an interesting opening.

The first question she asks Ms. Imam on air is, "When you first heard that the Miss World pageant was scheduled to be held in Nigeria, did you worry there would be problems?"³ It's a masterful place to start. She's learned enough to know that Ms. Imam will be comfortable with the topic, the question will engage her, and she will be interested in talking about it. And Terry formulated a question that takes her guest back in memory to a specific moment in time. This strategy delivers an answer that is fresh and spontaneous.

The question reflects Terry's knowledge of the events surrounding the pageant—the Muslim protests against it, the riots that broke out, the conservative Islamic legal backlash—but Terry isn't trying to show off how well she's done her homework. Rather, she wants her guest to shine. Terry has based her question on Ms. Imam's preferences. She has stepped into her guest's shoes to see the interview from her perspective and then designed a question based on that perspective. She says that the more she cares about someone, the deeper she can take the interview.

Listeners would be surprised that Terry Gross and Ayesha Imam are not in the room together. Terry rarely meets personally with her guests. They're thousands of miles away—on the phone or in a sound studio—linked by satellite. While many of us might worry that geographic distance would exaggerate the gap between us and those we're trying to connect with, Terry prefers it. Al-

though it might frustrate us to operate without visual cues to encourage us, Terry relishes being just a voice.

She loves the invisibility of radio. “Since we’re not looking at each other,” she says, “we’re not judging each other by the clothes we’re wearing or how our hair is that day.”⁴

Since there are no withering looks and no one across the table to stare her down, it’s easier for Terry to ask tough questions. Guests never see Terry yawning, checking her notes, or glancing at her watch.

Without visual cues, Terry needs to be all the better as a listener, tuning in to voice cues. Everything she and her interviewee need or want to communicate must be said in their voices. She gives guests the sense that there is plenty of time to converse thoughtfully with someone who is genuinely interested in what they have to say. As a result, her interviews often sound like two friends talking on the phone.

In response to the first question—whether she worried there might be trouble in Nigeria—Ms. Imam tells Terry she knew problems were likely to occur because both conservative Muslims and conservative Christians are uncomfortable with the idea of beauty pageants.

As the conversation continues, Terry doesn’t shy away from serious issues—religion, rape, and morality. Her most pointed question—“Do you think that Islam is incompatible with women’s rights?”⁵—might be offensive from another interviewer. But inherent in the tone of the question is Terry’s acceptance of Ayesha’s beliefs. Terry times it well, asks the question sensitively. And it follows logically from the conversation they’ve been having. Terry admits that, were she at a dinner party, she might not be quite so direct. On the radio, she cuts right to the heart of the matter, and she asks the tough questions up front. She tells Ayesha and all her guests to let her know if she is asking things that are too personal.

Ayesha answers unequivocally, “No. It’s not what Islam is or isn’t. It’s what people make of it.”⁶ To illustrate, she tells a story that comes from the traditions of the life of the Prophet Mohammed. A young woman went to him and told him her father wanted to marry her to her cousin. The young woman wanted to know if her father had the right to do this.

Ayesha says the Prophet answered that he did not.

“Okay,” the woman said, “I don’t mind marrying him. I’m just glad to know I have the choice.”

Terry pauses and waits an extra beat to make sure Ayesha is finished, not just taking a breath. That thoughtful pace gets her below the surface where she learns intriguing things about her guests. Imam tells her that, when she was twelve, she started a club for “good eating and good works.”

“What was that about?” Terry asks, and it turns out that Ms. Imam went to boarding school, and the food was bad. And Ayesha was interested from the beginning in helping other people.

“So you got an early start there,” Terry says, with the rich laugh that is her signature.

By the end of the interview, Terry has learned that Ayesha had an uncle who wrote about women’s rights in the 1950s and that, when she studied in England, Imam felt fragmented by all her causes—women’s rights, black people’s rights, economic rights, and social justice. These details would likely have gone undiscovered by another interviewer.

In her interviews, Terry’s goal is to connect people’s lives and their work. She delves into their personal worlds—the people and events that shaped them—because it is the best way to better understand their work.

When Terry is interviewing someone, she tries to ask them about the cataclysmic moments in their lives—when they were in a car accident or struck by lightning—because those things change

people. She feels that, if she doesn't ask about events like that, she misses out on important clues to who people really are.

She asks, "How did you feel?"—even though journalists are taught not to use words like "feel"—because the word helps her establish the work-life connection. For the same reason, she asks people about their failures, the mistakes they've made, the challenges they've faced. There's something in her tone that lets her guests know it's okay to have warts. "We're defined at least as much by our failures, the contradictions in our lives, as we are by our successes," she says.⁷

Interviewing combines Terry's love for reading, stories, and learning. Early in life, she decided she didn't have many stories of her own she wanted to tell but that she wanted to *hear* all the stories she could. "The whole world is filled with stories waiting to be told," she says.⁸

She credits her mother for her powerful listening skills. "She was a wonderful listener," Terry says. "I could have said anything to her. I mean the most boring thing in the whole world, and she was endlessly interested in what her children were doing. Maybe that helped teach me the importance of being listened to and the importance of listening to somebody."⁹

How Terry Gross Connects

- Putting the focus on the other person
- Being nearly invisible
- Listening
- Creating an atmosphere for unhurried conversation
- Researching
- Staying up-to-date with people, events, trends
- Respecting individuals
- Accepting different beliefs, values, lifestyles

When we analyze the way Terry connects with people, we are studying attitudes and skills she developed and polished over nearly thirty years. Terry is clearly a master at connecting. More than anything else, we believe her success is based on her attitude that *it's not about her; it's about her guests*. She's friendly, down-to-earth, and unpretentious. In her observer role, she seeks to be nearly invisible, putting the focus squarely on those she's interviewing. In 2004, Terry compiled a book of her interviews. In the introduction to *All I Did Was Ask*, she tells readers the question people ask most often about her is what she looks like. To answer, she tells readers about the jacket from Gap Kids—there's a label inside with her name in case another kid has one just like it. But after divulging only that one detail, she refers people to the book cover. It's black, and more than half of her is in shadow.

Terry creates an atmosphere that lets her guests know they have all the time in the world. Her skillful listening—her monitoring voice cues and pausing to encourage the speaker to say more and her love for a good story—tells them the focus is on *them*.

And then there's her meticulous research. Not only does she spend time reading about her guests—the countries they come from, the industries they work in, the projects they've done—but she keeps up with what's going on in the world. She subscribes to nine or ten newspapers and magazines to stay current on people and events.

Her respect for the people she's interviewing is evident not only from the time she takes to prepare to interview them but also from the way she treats them. Her questions, her tone of voice, and her hearty laugh demonstrate that she cares and empathizes. She doesn't pursue "gotcha" moments. "I respect someone's right to privacy, and I want them to know it," she says. "I feel that private citizens don't owe telling us about their dysfunctional families or their former cocaine habit. It's really none of our business."¹⁰

Some of Terry's favorite interviews were with Orville Schell,

dean of journalism at the University of California at Berkeley. He was in China when President Clinton was visiting there, and each evening after a hectic day of presidential events, he would stretch out on the bed in his hotel room and call her. Then, he says, he'd turn out the light, lean back, and spend an hour telling her all that had happened that day. What Schell enjoyed most was the sense that he could think out loud and even try out some new ideas at a leisurely pace with a masterful listener who was sincerely curious about everything he had to say.¹¹

RICHARD AND MICHELE STECKEL

It's an icy day in early winter, and Richard and Michele Steckel are bouncing along in a Land Rover that is winding its way up the side of a mountain in Lesotho, the tiny kingdom surrounded by South Africa. This is the Steckels' first visit to Lesotho, although they've been fascinated with the country for years, and they're hoping to spend the day taking photos for their Milestones Project. When the tour is over, they will have traveled to twenty-three countries over five years and taken 28,000 National Geographic-quality photos of the world's children—capturing their first haircuts, first steps, first birthdays, and other childhood milestones.

Richard is silver-haired, with soft brown eyes. He is dressed in wrinkled pants and a beige shirt, open at the neck. "The Milestones Project," he tells us, "is a nonprofit initiative that helps parents teach their children to value and respect people who are different from themselves." His soft voice is warm, resonant. "We're not professional photographers. We're picture-takers with a purpose."

The purpose is to help people see—one photograph at a time—that no matter where we live, how we pray, or what we wear, we are more alike than different. "We think it's harder to hate some-

body who looks like you, who's going through the same experiences. Everybody's gorgeous and goofy when they lose a tooth," he tells us. He uses broad inclusive language—*empathy, hatred, violence, acceptance, promise, hope*—as he gestures with an open hand to his heart.

About halfway up the side of the mountain on one of the more jarring hairpin turns, one of the Land Rover's doors pops open. Michele grabs on to her seat, knuckles white, until the road levels off again. Then she and Richard fumble through their duffle bag, where they always keep a length of duct tape wrapped around a piece of cardboard. They tape the door closed. Michele eyes it warily, her classically beautiful face looking lived in, as if it has been used warmly over the decades. She has three daughters and seven grandchildren.

Once they arrive at the village, which sits atop the mountain at 11,000 feet, their young South African guide takes them to watch women making bread in a dark hut. They pat the loaves into shape, then bury them in hot coals to bake. After a while, Richard steps outside. Michele soon joins him. The panorama is awesome, and they scramble back to the Land Rover for their cameras. They perch on a rock and begin to snap photos of the broad vista below. Before long, Michele spots a boy in the distance running toward them. She can hear him singing and laughing, and she soon sees that he is sticking out his humongous tongue, flaunting it.

"You've got to take this," Michele tells him. "You've got the long lens." She's often the one who first spots a photo opportunity. The two work well together, signaling each other almost imperceptibly when it's time to move in, step back, or change perspective.

The photo of the boy with the huge tongue will become one of their personal favorites, the keystone of the "tongues section" in Milestones exhibits. It defies nationalism; this could be an exuberant child from any corner of the world.

The boy has approached out of curiosity about the Land Rover and the people who arrived in it. No one made an announcement that the Steckels were coming. They never do. Kids are drawn by their own fascination. They begin to appear out of nowhere. In Peru, Richard tells us, they came out of alleys and distant doorways; in Mexico, from around corners. They want to investigate. They hear something is going on, and they want to see what it's about.

Richard and Michele don't normally start by taking pictures; they usually interact with the children first. If adults are present, they ask permission to take photos. But the boy with the big tongue has warmed up the crowd, and by now there's a gathering of children.

"Occasionally, children are wary," says Michele. "In the beginning, they see us as strangers with cameras. But, in our minds, we look just like them. We are them. We're their age. We're part of their culture. We just melt in." To get the shots they want, Richard and Michele get down at eye level with the children. They bend on a knee or sit on the ground.

"Kids observe you carefully," says Richard. "They decide whether you're friendly, if you're to be trusted, if you're going to embarrass them. They're watchful."

There's at least one shy child in every crowd. At a Fijian church in New Zealand, a little girl about four years old arrived attached to the back of her mother's leg, stealing occasional peaks at the two strangers. Her older siblings were less reticent.

"It's okay," Michele told her with a soft smile. "Why don't you watch? If you want to join in later, you'll be welcome."

When they were nearly ready to leave, Richard approached the mother. The four-year-old listened gravely. "We'd love to send photos back to you," he told her. "Would you like us to get a picture of the whole family?"

Richard tells us the mother turned to the child, who looked up

into her face with mournful eyes, then nodded her assent. The tiny four-year-old stood tall and proud for the family portrait.

In Lesotho, Richard asks a small group of boys if they'd like to jump over a rock. Even the shyest member of the group joins in with enthusiasm.

A couple of children speak English, so Michele asks them to make happy faces. Then sad. Then scary.

"A scary face is consistent all over the world," she says. "Another thing that's always the same is when we ask children to pose for us." Boys consistently pose as fighters or jump at each other. Girls get closer. They go cheek to cheek or put their arms around each other.

By the time Richard and Michele are ready to climb back into the Land Rover for the return trip down the mountain, they've taken more than a hundred photos. These are some of their best; the Lesotho photos show up disproportionately in Milestones exhibitions.

If you have an opportunity to see a Milestones exhibit, don't pass it up. The pictures are colorful, touching, funny, intense. "The photos remind people of our basic humanity," says Richard. The roots of the Milestones Project concept go back to Richard's doctoral studies at Boston University, where he studied the work of the Brazilian Paulo Freire. Freire taught that simple, repetitive images disarm people and open them up to talk about their assumptions, prejudices, and values.

Richard tells us about a time he and Michele were confronted by an upset man in front of one of their photos at an exhibit at the United Nations. "Where did you get this photo of my daughter?" the man demanded.

Richard explained he had taken the picture at the Johannesburg Zoo when they were in South Africa.

The man took a deep breath.

Then a huge smile crept across his face. "My daughter is from

Tanzania,” he announced. “This child,” he said, pointing at the photo, “from South Africa. She could be my child.”

The Steckels find doing their work irresistible. For Michele’s sixtieth birthday, they went to St. Lucia, in the West Indies, to relax and do nothing. By the afternoon of their second day, they were bored senseless, so they grabbed their cameras and drove to a remote school. By the time they were finished, their shirts were sopping wet and their hair was plastered to their heads from working in the heat. But this was closer to their idea of *fun* than sitting on the beach, and now they had a collection of striking photos of children against the rich orange wall of their school building.

“Our vision is to prompt 100,000,000 people globally in the next three years to reflect on, talk about, and take personal action to reduce prejudice, intolerance, and hatred.”

Richard tells us that yes, of course, there are people who are cynical about the project—in which they’ve invested over \$100,000 of their own money—but that skeptics are swayed once they have seen the photos or been involved in the project. A few years ago, the Steckels called a friend, Emmy Award-winning journalist and former CNN anchor Reynelda Muse.

“Would you help us evaluate our work?” they asked. “Look over our materials, our purpose, vision, and objectives, and tell us if you think we’re on target. Come with us to Mexico. Ask ‘why are you doing this?’ and ‘what’s the purpose of that?’ We want to make sure what we are doing isn’t culturally biased. We need to know if it’s original or if it’s just more of the same old thing.”

Reynelda invited Thandabantu Iverson, her husband, to join them. TB, as he’s better known, is an African American who was involved in the social movement in the 1960s. At one point, he moved to Tanzania to live his life away from American racism. He apparently told her it sounded like “just another white guilt thing.”

“Come along,” she answered. “You decide.”

In Querétaro, a little town north of Mexico City, the Steckels loaned Reynelda a Polaroid; they take it along so they can leave snapshots with the children they’re photographing. TB wanted a camera, too, so Richard let him use his spare. When Thandabantu used up all the film in the camera he was using, he asked to borrow Michele’s and directed her out of the way of his shot.

A couple of minutes later, Michele looked over and chuckled to find Reynelda taking a picture “up in someone’s face,” a practice she and Richard studiously avoid for fear of being intrusive.

A little later, in a crowded dentist’s office, the two couples snapped photos of a mother and her sweet, moon-faced six-year-old. There are great shots of him having a tooth drilled, a filling put in, and his teeth cleaned. The mother hovered nearby, wincing as if she were in pain herself.

Afterward, Richard and Michele and Reynelda and TB piled into a Chevy Suburban to drive the child and his mother home. On the way, the mother gripped Michele’s hand and would not let go. When the car pulled up in front of her house, she whispered to Michele, “There should be more people like you.” Everyone got out to say goodbye. Looking around, Michele noticed there were no dry eyes.

“This passes all my tests,” Thandabantu told them, his cheeks wet with tears.

The photos have been reproduced in a book, *The Milestones Project: Celebrating Childhood Around the World*, which has just gone into its second printing. The Smithsonian has recently scheduled an exhibition of the Milestones photos. Richard and Michele are now at work on a new photo project about grandparents and grandchildren. “When we can replace our fear of those who are different with a sense of our shared humanity,” Richard says, “we will safeguard our planet from hatred and war.”

How the Steckels Connect

- Having a clear purpose
- Being unobtrusive, focusing on others
- Responding to cues
- Building trust
- Relating to individuals
- Listening and remembering
- Using stories

Richard and Michele connect so well that they've won a prestigious award for it. In 2003, the United Nations presented them with the Global Peace and Tolerance Award. The foundation of their success is *purpose*. They have a clear set of goals—for their work and for themselves. The purpose of their life's work—to reduce prejudice, suspicion, and intolerance by helping people to recognize our shared humanity—gives them focus and energy because they have a sense that they are linked to something greater than themselves. They've even articulated their personal goals; they tell us, "We're simple people who want to collect mutually satisfying relationships and memorable meals."

Though their goal of touching 100,000,000 people in three years is immense, it's not about them. The spotlight is not on them; it's on the people and the connections. They're unassuming themselves; there's no slickness about them. They're soft-spoken and easy to be with. Especially when they're taking photos, they strive to be unobtrusive.

They believe so completely in their ability to blend in that they sometimes forget they're not eight years old, or Muslim, or Mexican. During their five-year tour, they were in Mexico in a famous park. Three hundred people were standing in a circle around a street performer. Richard and Michele were drawn in by the ex-

pressions on the faces of the crowd, who were laughing and looking delighted. They approached the circle slowly, Richard to one end, Michele to the other. The street performer looked over in Michele's direction and seemed to talk about her. Because they don't speak Spanish, neither was quite certain what it was all about. But it seemed good-natured. Everyone was laughing. When the entertainer was finished, Michele bowed. The crowd clapped and cheered.

Later, someone who spoke English asked Michele if she felt uncomfortable.

"No," she said. "But how did he notice me? I thought I blended in perfectly."

Richard and Michele know in their bones how to establish trust. When Richard was photographing a six-month old whose nose was three inches from a service dog's nose, he got down on the floor on his stomach. "I was totally unaware of what I was doing," he says. "My knees told me later that I'd been crawling around, but at the time, it was just right."

The trusting relationship between Richard and Michele says a lot, too. They work together like experienced hunting dogs who've worked the field together so often they just know what the other is doing, thinking. It's one other way they make themselves unobtrusive.

"Children know they can be wacky around us," Michele tells us, "and we won't embarrass them. Eventually we become wallpaper. They know we're there, but they ignore us."

We attended a meeting of the Consular Corps of Colorado with Richard and Michele. They were introducing the Milestones Project and looking for opportunities around the world to place exhibits in airports and other public places. It was an opportunity for us to observe them connecting across differences with adults.

As they showed their photos and told the group about their project, we noticed that they both are exceptionally responsive to

cues. The way they listen—carefully, completely, making mental notes they can refer to later—makes everything else possible. Without it, they wouldn't be nearly so successful at responding to cues or individualizing their approach. They pay attention to details and then adapt their words and actions to match. In the meeting, we got an inkling of this when Richard adjusted the volume of his voice for a man sitting near him at the head of the table and when he moved into his conclusion because Michele alerted him that at least one of the participants was looking at his agenda.

Although this was a meeting of a group of people, Richard and Michele never approached them as such. They related to each person as an individual. They greeted the consuls one-on-one as they entered the room. Richard shared personalized stories that enhanced the photos because they related to specific countries represented at the table. He told the consul from Peru that they were so captivated by the scenery and the faces when they were in Peru that they took 2,400 pictures. "And when we were in Los Rosales," he told her, "people heard we were taking pictures at a birthday party, and the whole town showed up." By collecting and using stories, the Steckels show commonality and create rapport.

HÉCTOR ORCÍ

Héctor Orcí was just twenty-eight when he walked in and took a seat on the hard metal chair across the desk from Bill Eagleston in the executive offices of a well-known worldwide manufacturer of consumer products. Héctor and his wife, Norma, had just relocated from Chicago to Hato Rey, Puerto Rico. "It took me a few days to tune my ear to the lilt and timbre of the Spanish spoken there," Héctor says. "And the food took some adjusting. There was no salsa, no hot peppers. We had to make do with frozen tortillas."

It was Héctor's first assignment in his new job as account executive. He had no ad agency experience and none of the vocabulary that might make it seem like he knew what he was doing. Héctor, slim and sandy-haired, wore what the unwritten dress code called for—gray suit, white shirt, striped tie. He had shaved off his moustache because the screener for the new account executive job had told him, "If you keep that moustache, people will focus on it and not you."

Héctor had just taken a job with McCann Erickson, one of the world's largest advertising agencies, and his challenge that day was to save the account. This was McCann Erickson's largest client in Latin America. The offices were in a one-story concrete and steel building that was attached to the warehouse.

On top of Eagleston's big metal desk were lots of orderly piles of paper, along with a photo of Eagleston and a swordfish. Muscular, more than six feet tall, with salt-and-pepper hair, Bill Eagleston had earned a reputation in the advertising community for being a demanding client. He was unpleasant to people who set him off, with no patience for those who didn't do high-quality work delivered on time, on budget.

Talk about differences. Héctor was twenty-eight, and Bill Eagleston was forty-one. Héctor had only two years of work experience and a master's degree in economics; Bill was a veteran sales guy with an M.B.A. Héctor was born in Mexico, Bill in the United States. Héctor's native language was Spanish; Bill's was English. Héctor sat on the hot seat; Bill held total control.

"Bill was a rough, tough, gruff Yankee," Héctor tells us. "A very matter-of-fact guy. There was no way to misunderstand him. He was intolerant of people who didn't do things right. He only wanted to work with professionals."

Weeks before Héctor arrived, Eagleston had put McCann Erickson on six-month notice to terminate the contract. "In the ad

business,” Héctor says, “once you go on six-month notice, you’re history. The decision has already been made.”

“I decided to go see Eagleston immediately,” he says.

He was scared witless. “But I had this belief that if I just shut up and listen and then say the right things, everything will turn out all right.”

Héctor did have lots of experience with people who are intimidating. “My first two jobs,” he says, “I worked in a demanding environment with tough, smart people. I had chutzpah and confidence.”

He got a lot of those qualities growing up, as well. When Héctor was twelve, his father began working for the Mexican consulate. “From my perspective, lots of the ministers and cabinet people were intolerant older adults,” he says, “but I had good relationships with them. I sat at their feet and learned—and I did it in both Spanish and English.”

He also learned about how to deal with intimidation from spending time with his uncles. “I come from a family,” says Héctor, “where as a young person you have no standing. Children should be seen and not heard, especially young men.” But Héctor’s uncles enjoyed being around him because he was interesting and a good conversationalist. He said things in unusual ways. He was smart, creative, insightful.

Once, when he was three, he was trying to climb a ladder outside the house. His babysitter came out and told him to get down.

“What do you care about this?” he asked her. “You’re not the owner of this ladder.” Instead of getting in trouble, Héctor earned his parents’ praise for his creative thinking, and the story was told so many times it became part of family history. It’s the first example Héctor can think of in which, by putting the right words together, he got himself out of a jam.

“Manipulating my environment and the people who control it

is what I've done most of my life," he says. It will come as no surprise that Héctor was often in trouble as a kid. He regularly had accidents that required stitches. One of his uncles was a doctor. The uncle not only sewed him up but also criticized Héctor relentlessly about being careless.

"I grew up being able to listen and explain things so I would get what I wanted," he says. When he was a freshman in high school, he was given a scholarship by the music department to attend the next year for free. Meanwhile, the disciplinary department was in the process of expelling him for bad behavior. All through his ninth-grade year, he rebelled against the priests and the upperclassmen. He ended the year with seventy-four demerits. To be reinstated, he would have to write the Declaration of Independence 148 times—twice for each demerit.

To Héctor, this seemed like an impossible task and a waste of time, so he intercepted the letter from the disciplinary department before his parents could get it. He had a plan. He told his parents he wanted to attend a different school, and he was prepared with information about the other school—its faculty, students, schedule, and offerings. He talked his folks into it and enrolled.

"We lived in Mexico, but I went across the border to school in San Diego. The school I chose was better, and I got a wonderful education there. Once again, I was able to manipulate things to my advantage."

All of this was preparation for Héctor's meeting that day in Eagleston's office. "I got right to the point," says Héctor. "I asked him what the problem was and why we were on probation. And I asked what he needed to see in order to take us off. Then I sat quietly and took notes."

As it turned out, there were some simple answers. The client had more than a dozen products—it was no longer just the company that made razor blades, and it wanted consumers in Puerto

Rico to know about its oral and skin care products, batteries, and appliances—and a complicated product structure: the target market for one product was young men; for another it was middle-aged women.

“As an agency, our primary role,” Héctor says, “was to buy TV and radio advertising so consumers would know what products the client had and would buy them.” Héctor learned that the agency was not delivering what Eagleston wanted—an easy-to-understand media plan that could be executed without mistakes. And he wanted to be sure his budget was being used wisely, that the agency wasn’t wasting his money. “The problem was,” says Héctor, “no one had been listening to him with the view of solving the problem.”

“I solved it. Quickly.” He stayed up night after night and designed a simple twelve-page plan that included Eagleston’s ideas and addressed his concerns.

“Then I pioneered the thirty-second-plus-thirty-second piggy-back commercial in Puerto Rico.” In those days, all commercials were sixty seconds long. In the United States, agencies had just begun parceling two shorter commercials together, and market research showed the shorter ads were just as successful. Héctor proposed parceling the ads. This meant the client could get double the value from its media budget.

“Within six weeks, I had a letter on my desk taking us off probation and congratulating us on turning the situation around and renewing the contract. In that first meeting, all I really did was ask what we could do. Then, of course, I had to make sure we were doing it.”

A couple of years later, Héctor had serious problems at home that tested the connection he’d built. Norma was going through a difficult pregnancy that required that she stay in bed. Héctor needed to go home and take care of the kids and the house.

"I explained it to Eagleston," he says, "and he was extraordinarily nice about it. He leaned over backwards to accommodate my situation."

In 1986, fifteen years after that difficult pregnancy, Héctor and Norma founded La Agencia de Orcí in Los Angeles. Over the next two decades, they opened up offices in Chicago and New York. La Agencia is dedicated to connecting the Latino consumer with brands, ideas, and innovations through advertising, public relations, and consulting. They've racked up an extensive client list, which includes names like Disneyland, Carnation, Pepsi, KFC, MoneyGram, MCI, and Verizon.

When we visited Norma at their home in Pacific Palisades one late spring afternoon, she told us about one of La Agencia's first clients, American Honda.

"They were wonderful to work with," she says. "At our first meeting, they told us there would be no quota of cars for us to sell." Instead, the company asked the Orcís to help it earn the right to market to Latinos.

"That first year," says Norma, "Honda did absolutely no brand advertising—no magazine ads, no TV commercials, nothing."

Instead, following the Orcís recommendations, Honda did three important things. First, they supported the U.S. census drive. Héctor and Norma helped them design public service messages that showed Latinos why it was important that they be counted. Next, Honda sponsored the first U.S. tour of Ballet Folklórico de Mexico, which celebrates Mexican culture through dance. "Ballet Folklórico fills Latinos with pride," says Norma. "We videotaped people coming and going, and you could see it on their faces." And, since soccer is so popular among Hispanics, Honda sponsored World Cup Soccer.

These three efforts helped Honda build a bridge to the Latino market. The unanticipated result at the end of that first year was that Honda had sold a whole bunch more cars to Latinos. That

year it went from the bottom of the list to number three. The next year, they rose to number one.

“Nobody expected this,” says Norma. “Their budget was smaller than Toyota’s.” More than a decade later, Honda is still number one with the Latino consumer.

How Héctor Orcí Connects

- Being confident
- Listening intently
- Eliciting the criteria for success
- Putting the “right words” together
- Being creative
- Knowing two cultures
- Being responsive to the other party’s needs

Héctor’s entire career has been about connecting; the mission of his company is to connect the Latino consumer with products and ideas. And his own mastery of connecting with those who are different from him is what has made him so successful. He is recognized as a leader in the advertising industry and serves on the boards of the American Advertising Federation, the Association of Hispanic Advertising Agencies, and the New America Alliance.

He comes across with more chutzpah than our other masters. He is willing to be honest with himself, and he recognizes his personal strengths and weaknesses along with his unique qualities. He goes into business interactions with the belief that, if he does his job, the response is guaranteed.

“When I’m sitting in front of clients,” he says, “they have as much stake in a good solution as I do. We both need a good outcome. Even if they’re sitting there telling me I’m fired, it’s something they would rather not do. I have an opportunity to turn it

around and make something happen that will be good for all of us.”

Héctor’s chutzpah comes from knowing that by listening he can get what he needs to “put the right words together.” In that meeting all those years ago, he saved the account by listening. As it turned out, no one had really done that until he showed up.

When Héctor asked Bill Eagleston what it would take to keep the account, he was searching for the criteria by which Eagleston would measure success. When Eagleston answered the question, the contract was back on track.

“As frightened as I was,” Héctor says, “I kept telling myself to just shut up and listen. If I did, I could come up with the right things to say and do to keep the account.”

Once he had listened, really listened, to Eagleston, Héctor was ready to “put the words together”—to come up with a simple, logical media plan and a creative solution to Eagleston’s budget concerns.

Héctor and Norma are both bilingual and bicultural, and it’s a key component to their success. “Norma and I have been transformed by living and breathing two cultures,” says Héctor. “We can shift from one language to another, one culture to another. And we are passionate about building bridges between the two worlds.”

THE TITANIUM RULE

The masters we’ve profiled here don’t have one universal approach for connecting with those they differ from. Each has a unique style. Terry Gross spends hours—sometimes days—preparing. The Steckels speak in the universal language of photography. Héctor Orcí puts words together to solve problems in unique ways.

But all are masterful at what we call the Titanium Rule: *Do unto others according to their druthers.*

The Golden Rule—do unto others as you would have them do unto you—means that you treat others exactly the way you like to be treated. It works best when we're the same. When we're from similar backgrounds and have the same style and preferences, it's likely we can connect in virtually any setting, almost effortlessly. We can probably even make decisions for each other. If we follow the Golden Rule and we like sushi, we order sushi for you. If we enjoy big, loud parties, we throw one for you on your birthday. If we like to work through interpersonal conflict at the conference table with the whole team, we bring up our issues with you there.

But the Golden Rule can cause a disconnect when the other person is different. "Do not do unto others as you would that they should do unto you," said George Bernard Shaw. "Their tastes may not be the same."

Your preferences may not be the same as ours, especially if we're from different backgrounds. One of the first things La Agencia de Orcí does to serve client companies is to help them understand how the Latino market differs from the mainstream market.

Norma Orcí says, "Some of the worst marketing efforts have been hopeless and clumsy because companies weren't recognizing and adapting to the differences. I was once at a conference with almost all mainstream corporate types, giving a presentation and talking about how Latinos shop for groceries. We go daily. It's an outing. It's a social event to see the butcher and catch up on the latest news. Once a week, we make our big purchases."

A woman in the back of the room raised her hand. "Isn't there a way we can just get them to shop like us?" she asked.

"This was Golden Rule thinking," says Norma, "assuming everyone in the world sees the world as I do—or should."

Here's another way Golden Rule thinking plays out in busi-

ness. Many people have become successful by developing dynamic speaking skills and by being outgoing. We've observed these usually successful people trying to connect with people from other cultures, continuing to do what has worked so well for them historically—backslapping, telling jokes, being the life of the party—even when they realize their usual approach isn't working. Then they repeat what they have been doing, with even greater enthusiasm. It's as if they'd studied a book called *The One Right Way to Connect With All People*.

"If that much boisterous enthusiasm didn't work," they seem to be saying to themselves, "then perhaps twice as much will." But when the person they are attempting to connect with comes from a culture that values the ability to quietly draw out the personalities of others, their efforts end in failure.

What makes Terry Gross, the Steckels, and the Orcis so successful at connecting is the way they tune in to individual preferences. Practicing the Titanium Rule requires two sets of behaviors. First, we get to know people as individuals so that we learn their *druthers*, or preferences. Are they naturally more straightforward or more diplomatic? More logical or emotional? Casual or formal? Leisurely or focused? Spontaneous or disciplined?

It's easy to learn to observe druthers. People broadcast them, and, if we're observant, we can find clues all around them in the environments they create. To learn their styles and preferences, pay attention to the words they choose. Watch their mannerisms. Notice how they're dressed. Check out what's displayed in their offices, how cluttered or neat things are. Listen—as Terry Gross does so well—to tone of voice, inflection, pace. Notice whether they take time to chat about the weather and ask about your vacation—or whether they get straight to the topic at hand. What do they seem to enjoy talking about? How do they approach projects? When they make decisions, are they consensual or independent?

How do they organize their schedules? Do they spend evenings and weekends at work, or are they out the door at five o'clock right on the nose? All this valuable information about druthers is available when you sharpen your observation skills.

Then, once you have some ideas—even just guesses—about the preferences of the people you're attempting to connect with, you can adjust your words, your style, your body language, the tone of your voice to match their druthers. If you're ordering for a friend, you order what your friend likes—whether it's sushi or a hamburger. You observe your friend's reaction when you talk about a big party you attended so that you know whether your friend would enjoy a large, raucous gathering or a quiet dinner party with just a few friends. If you notice your friend never orders a drink when you're out together, you offer nonalcoholic drinks as an option when your friend comes over for dinner. You observe your friend and listen to him or her and ask questions until you know whether your friend would prefer to wrangle with an issue that has come between you in front of the whole team—or whether your friend would prefer that you come to his or her office and close the door to talk about what's bothering you.

One of our favorite examples of the Titanium Rule in action comes from the only non-Mexican executive in a Latino TV network in New York City. While Court was attending business school, he met a woman from Shanghai. They enjoyed chatting with each other and became friends. One day, Court was sitting next to her in class, and she was slurping her coffee. Loudly, with gusto. It was driving him nuts. So he took a moment to focus his thinking on her, to think about her druthers, about what motivated and mattered to her.

He wrote her a note that said, "I'm not sure you're aware of this, but where I'm from, making noises with your mouth when drinking from a cup or glass is considered rude." (By the way, in

China slurping and smacking your lips are generally not considered bad manners—just signs that you’re enjoying your beverage or meal.)

After class, she said, “Thank you for saying something. I want to be seen as a lady by my professors and fellow students. That information will help me.” The way he tuned in to her druthers—that having good manners mattered to her—and then shaped his message based on them made all the difference.

The Titanium Rule is based on the concept that *people connect via similarities*. In this book, we’re talking about connecting with people from whom we differ. The way to connect is to identify and increase our similarities. We can’t change things like our birthplace, our skin color, or our ethnicity, but *we can find all sorts of ways that we’re similar*. When we make the effort to match someone—his or her posture, gestures, eye contact, tone of voice, tempo, style, language patterns, expectations, values, or beliefs—it increases our similarities. Matching just one thing begins the process.

Practicing the Titanium Rule requires a shift in thinking. It requires empathy, awareness, and understanding. It involves finding ways, based on what we know about another person, to make stronger connections by adapting, experimenting, and changing the way we do things.

“It’s not what you do or say,” says Court. “If you always use the Golden Rule, you will make mistakes. You need to take the time to read the cues people give you and get the information you need about how they prefer to be treated.”

THE CORE PRINCIPLES

Terry Gross is a radio journalist. Richard and Michele Steckel are grandparents who run a nonprofit foundation. Héctor Orcí is the

CEO of an advertising agency. They operate in different worlds. Terry rubs elbows—long-distance—with celebrities, musicians, and politicians. The Steckels connect face-to-face with children, parents, and grandparents of all colors and creeds. Héctor builds connections between his clients and the Latino market. Yet all four hold a common set of basic operating principles:

- *There's always a bridge.* They believe we can find common ground with all people, no matter how different they are from us. It's what the Steckels' Milestones Project is all about—reducing hatred by focusing on the similarities among children of many cultures at milestones in their lives. “I want people to look at these photos,” says Richard, “and say, ‘I get it. I’m just like that kid.’” Believing that it’s always possible to find something in common will help you when you’re tired or frustrated and struggling to make a connection.
- *Curiosity is key.* These four masters at connection are among the most inquisitive people we’ve ever known. Maybe that’s why it took us a while to realize they were all past fifty; their curiosity makes them seem younger than their years. They’re fascinated by people, especially those who come from different backgrounds. Terry Gross uses her curiosity as a tool. “One of the things that draws thoughtful guests to *Fresh Air*,” says Orville Schell, “is the knowledge that Ms. Gross is among that ever smaller number of broadcasters who expresses genuine curiosity about everything.”¹² Curiosity opens a mental door. As long as that door is open, there’s no container for judgment and self-righteousness. It’s impossible to be both curious and judgmental at the same time. “Curiosity is the universal resource state,” says Héctor. “I’m constantly asking myself, ‘Where is the bridge?’ ‘How can I use this information to my advantage?’ ‘How can I affect that behavior?’”

- *What you assume is what you get.* The masters approach each person they meet, no matter how they differ, expecting the best. They go into every interaction with anticipation and eagerness, asking themselves, “I wonder what I can learn from this person?” They presuppose that *this is a good person who has valuable contributions to make and important things to say*. These positive expectations contribute to successful outcomes. They make a practice of seeking out people who differ because they believe they can benefit and learn. By spending time with those who espouse radically different political and philosophical ideas, by hearing stories from people of other ethnic or economic backgrounds, by learning from those who are younger or older, they have enriched their own lives. “Knowing two cultures has benefited me,” says Norma Orcí. “I get to choose between two very different options. There were things I didn’t like about my own parents’ parenting. Gringos have a more rational way of child rearing. They *think* about it. They read books about it. When I first came to the United States, I observed that my American friends had different relationships in their families. Everyone had responsibilities and took part in decision making. I took that and combined it with demonstrativeness, which is essential to Latino child rearing. I got to design my own parenting style based on the best of both. It’s through differences that we learn about other options.”
- *Each individual is a culture.* When Terry Gross is planning an interview with a Middle Eastern imam, she doesn’t put him in a category—male Muslim from Iran, for example—and approach him with a set of rules for *how to relate to Middle Eastern males*. Instead, she thinks of him as a culture unto himself. Certainly, his faith and the country he comes from are important pieces of who he is, but Terry also pursues clues about his family, his beliefs, his education, key events in his life, his personal style, his artistic tastes, what kind of movies he likes, even

the kind of tennis shoes he wears. Héctor tells us one of his mother's sayings was "*Cada cabeza es un mundo.*" "It means *every head is a world.* She was saying we're all different, each of us a culture unto ourselves."

- *No strings attached.* The masters don't expect reciprocity. Terry Gross is a great listener, but she doesn't necessarily expect great listening from others. An interviewee may be promoting a book or an exhibition, but Terry doesn't expect that interviewee to promote her. Richard and Michele are friendly to everyone they meet, but they're not put off when others aren't as hospitable as they are. Most of the time, successful connectors are rewarded for their efforts and good intentions. "People have been generous of spirit all over the world," Richard Steckel says. But when people aren't receptive, these masters don't take it personally. They assume there's a good reason. Then they become curious all over again. They do their best to learn what caused the reaction they've gotten so they can be more successful in the future.

CHAPTER 1 AT A GLANCE

Here's what our masters of connection have to say about bridging the diversity gap:

- "The whole world is filled with stories waiting to be told."
—Terry Gross
- "We think it's harder to hate somebody who looks like you, who's going through the same experiences. Everybody's gorgeous and goofy when they lose a tooth."—Richard Steckel
- "I had this belief that if I just shut up and listen and then say the right things, everything will turn out all right."
—Héctor Orci

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