



IMAGINE THE FUTURE | FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Connection Should Move at the Speed of Need

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The Empty Seat

There is an **empty seat** in a classroom.

Yesterday, it was empty too.

At first, an empty seat is simply an absence.

But what happens when it is empty again tomorrow? And the day after that?

At what point does an absence become a signal?

Here in Lynchburg, this isn't an abstract question. At the Lynchburg City Schools Community Partner Forum this summer, Superintendent Kristy Somerville-Midgette reported that nearly one-third of LCS students experience chronic absenteeism.

The division's needs assessment also identified mentors, staff support, student mental health, food security, attendance interventions and classroom support among the schools' most pressing needs.

Those are important numbers and important needs. But **statistics don't miss school. Students do.**

So imagine one student and one empty seat.

Why is it empty?

The reason might be academic. It might be transportation. It might be something happening at home. It might be something nobody has thought to ask about.

The empty seat tells us something is happening. **It doesn't tell us why.**

What Happened Before?

We often encounter human needs at the moment they become visible.

The eviction notice. The lost job. The failing grade. The repeated absence. The conflict that finally boiled over.

But human lives do not happen in isolated events. **There is usually a before.**

What happened before the eviction notice? What happened before the employee lost the job? What happened before the student began failing? What happened before the seat stayed empty?

This isn't about assigning blame or assuming every difficult outcome could have been prevented. **It's about trajectory.**

Was there an earlier moment when the need was smaller? Did someone notice? Was help available? Was there an opportunity for a connection that might have changed what happened next?

Need Has a Clock

That brings us to a simple proposition:

Connection should move at the speed of need.

That doesn't mean every need is an emergency. It means recognizing that **need has a clock.**

Some needs are emerging. Some are active. Some become urgent. Some become critical.

And sometimes the difference between those stages is simply **time.**

One absence may simply be one absence. Repeated absences may be telling us something else. Eventually, the occasional empty seat can become chronic absenteeism.

So perhaps the question is not only whether someone has a need. Perhaps we should also ask: How long has the need existed? Is it becoming more urgent? Has someone offered help? Did the connection actually happen?

How many urgent needs began as ordinary needs that simply waited too long for a connection?

2:17 A.M.

Now imagine a very different situation.

A person is released from incarceration at **2:17 in the morning**.

Our community has organizations that provide food, clothing, employment assistance, recovery services, mentoring and other forms of support. But at 2:17 a.m., most of those doors are closed.

Some local organizations have recognized that gap and prepared care packages and information kits for people being released - something tangible to help them navigate those first hours.

Think about what that care package represents. It doesn't solve re-entry. **It bridges the distance between the moment a need occurs and the moment the community can respond.**

The Empty Seat asks whether we can recognize a need soon enough. 2:17 A.M. asks what happens when we already know the need is coming.

Different circumstances. Same underlying question: **How quickly can the right connection happen?**

A Community Ready to Help

There is another part of this story worth considering.

More than 100 businesses, community organizations and volunteers gathered at Heritage High School for the LCS Community Partner Forum because they wanted to support students and schools.

The willingness exists. The resources exist. The needs exist.

Superintendent Somerville-Midgett made an important observation that morning: no single organization has to solve every challenge. Different partners bring different strengths, and combining those strengths can accomplish more than one organization can accomplish alone.

Perhaps, then, one of our challenges isn't simply getting more people to care. **Perhaps it is getting the people who care connected to the moments when they can make a difference.**

How do we turn a community full of willingness into thousands of timely, appropriate human connections?

Connection Is Not Surveillance

There is an important boundary.

A Connected Community doesn't need to know everything about everyone. It shouldn't.

People deserve privacy, dignity and agency. Technology should not become an excuse to collect information simply because we can.

Connect, don't collect.

The objective isn't control. **The objective is connection.**

When a need is appropriately known, can we make it easier for someone to reach a person or organization capable of helping? Help can be offered. A connection can be made available. And the individual remains free to say yes - or no.

A Connected Community respects free will while multiplying opportunities for people to choose a better trajectory.

Perhaps LOVE, expressed as community infrastructure, begins with something remarkably simple: **We notice one another.**

Imagine the Future

Return to that classroom.

The seat is empty again tomorrow. But this time, someone notices. Someone asks why. Someone listens. Someone knows who might help. And the connection happens while it can still make a difference.

We don't control the outcome. We don't choose the path for someone else. **We simply make another path easier to reach.**

Imagine a community where that becomes ordinary.

Where someone asking for help doesn't have to understand the organizational boundaries separating the people who might help them. Where organizations don't have to solve every problem themselves. Where people willing to serve can become visible to people who need what they have to offer. Where an emerging need doesn't have to become a crisis before the community recognizes it.

Perhaps one measure of a truly Connected Community should be more than how many programs we operate, how much money we spend or how many services we provide.

How quickly can appropriate help reach the moment it is needed?

Food for Thought

What would change if our communities stopped measuring only **how much help exists** and started asking **how quickly the right help can reach the moment it is needed?**

Imagine the future...

Connection should move at the speed of need.

Source Note

Lynchburg City Schools Community Partner Forum reporting: Madi Kirkman, “Building a stronger future,” The News & Advance, July 1, 2026. The article reports that more than 100 community partners attended; nearly one-third of LCS students experience chronic absenteeism; and the division identified mentors, staff support, student mental health, food security, attendance interventions and classroom support among current needs.

The 2:17 A.M. re-entry illustration reflects local community practice described to Community Mountain: organizations have assembled care packages and information kits to help people through the first hours following release. It is presented as an illustration of connection latency, not as a claim that every release occurs at that hour.