



Dr. David Hanscom

Beyond Labels: Reconnecting Across Generations

An interview with Donald Cohen, PhD
on Back in Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom

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Beyond Labels: Reconnecting Across Generations

Tom Masters: Hello, everybody, and welcome to another episode of Back and Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom. I'm your host, Tom Masters, and our guest today is Donald Cohen. He's a licensed marital and family therapist, author, and lecturer with over four decades of clinical experience. He holds an MSW from Columbia University and a PhD in clinical psychology from California School of Professional Psychology.

He completed a fellowship in the Department of Psychology at Yale University Medical Center and maintains a private practice focused on family dynamics, communication, and personal growth. He's also the author of "The Inside Ride: A Journey to Manhood, Letters Between Father and Son." The book was co-written with his late father, Dr.

Max Cohen, and explores vulnerability, masculinity, and intergenerational healing through the decades of personal correspondence. He's also published poetry collections, articles on child development and family communication, and hosted the television and radio program, "Kids Are Talking," currently featured on YouTube.

His forthcoming book is "Small Thoughts, Big Ideas." His work centers on the power of reflective writing to foster authentic connection, emotional honesty, and lasting legacy, particularly in father-son relationships. He lives in Connecticut. Welcome.

David Hanscom: Thank you, Tom. I'd like to welcome Donald Cohen back to the Back in Control Radio podcast. As I mentioned in the first podcast, he's a very good friend of mine. He's a psychologist who practices in Connecticut. It is Connecticut, right?

Donald Cohen: Western, Western Connecticut.

David Hanscom: Connecticut. And he's been in between New York and Connecticut for a long time. He does all sorts of counseling. In the first part...

And we just, for a long story, I won't go into details, we've just become very good friends. We bonded almost instantly. We've stayed bonded. We shared a common interest being s- Golden State Warriors basketball fans, and then we happened to w- Babs and I became Knicks fans. So we've just shared a bunch of things together, amongst many other things.

We've, we've been back to his house a couple times, which is this huge, huge collection of just paraphernalia from all over the country and all over the world, which is fascinating. It's like a museum. But anyway, what I'm talking about, we talked about s- really a lot on the first podcast, is that healing it begins and almost ends with connection.

The human race evolved by interacting with each other, language evolved from human interaction, and the essence of being human is connection. And of course, we all know without saying too much that we're in a very disconnected world. So Donald wrote a book called "The Inside Tribe" where he wrote a letter to his father, and please listen to the third pos- first podcast if you've not heard it.

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But what I want Donald to start with is that they weren't particularly that close. His father was a psychiatrist and, you know, as lots of kids that age, gave his father a hard time. And something happened around age 30, you said, that started to change things around.

Donald Cohen: Thirty-one, when my son was born.

David Hanscom: Oh, is that right? Yeah. Can you talk about what seemed to precipitate that, and then what actually transpired?

Donald Cohen: I was afraid that I was gonna be, I wanted to be a really great father, and I figured the more I could figure out where I came from and understand myself better through my relationship with communicating with my father, it would help me to be a better father.

I had already had a daughter but somehow it took having a son to get me to really start to think about myself at 31. I think the 30s are important, actually. It's when a man, it's when a man begins to really try to figure out what he wants to be when he grows up.

David Hanscom: So that awareness came over you, and so that happened shortly after your son was born? That happened pretty quickly?

Donald Cohen: Yeah, yeah, it happened pretty quickly. I was... i, I mean, the book had three different phases, by the way. We wrote the first book, which was called My Father-My Son was really, uh, during my year 31, being 31, and going through that period. And then the book, we put it away for a while, and then when I was 40, picked it up again and started writing to him in the 40s, and when I was 40.

And then at the last, we then picked it up again when I was 58. Took him to Coney Island on his 83rd birthday, where he grew up, and gave him a goodie bag, and we did our last phase of life together. So the book really spanned 29 years. Okay. Through the whole, through the whole life cycle, showing what, what men in their relationships go through developmentally, not just with themselves, but in their relationships with other people, and that's where the connection comes in.

In the case of my father and I, what we did and nobody else had done is that there are actually developmental stages in relationships, not just with yourself, but in your relationships and your connections to other people. In this case, it was father-son.

David Hanscom: Can you outline that briefly, what those phases are?

Donald Cohen: Well, you have pre-adolescence, early childhood.

David Hanscom: Okay.

Donald Cohen: And then you have adolescence, and then you have young adulthood And then you have adulthood, and then you have the later years, and basically that takes you through the life cycle of, of

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one's life journey and w- ultimately you strive for what I call individuation, which is integrating yourself and becoming a whole person.

And so we basically, the book is chaptered, we went through all the different stages of the life cycle and looked at our lives both with each other and how, what it was like even for him and myself. So you get his, his view of what it was like for him growing up during those different stages, and then also how we related to each other during those different stages.

David Hanscom: Wow. So I just learned something today that I did not know about you, is that I think it's pretty unusual to become a new parent or new something, and people just sort of get in and just do what they can do based on what they know. But you actually stopped and actually became curious, "Well, what did my father go through?

What can I learn to be a better father?" Why, I mean, that, uh, it explains to me a lot who you are in many other domains. How do you think you got that trait? That's a trait I beg the people I work with to find. Yeah. Just being curious and open and aware.

Donald Cohen: I love the word curious, by the way. It's one of my favorite words.

I think that people, even in my art collection, I mean, they call me the Memory Man because for me everything is about curiosity and exploration, e- not whether it's about other people, about yourself, even my collection or from traveling around the world, me being curious about understanding how other people live, other different cultures live.

And just we learn by asking and seeking knowledge, by being curious, asking questions, and getting out of ourselves to learn from others, and that is what connection is all about.

David Hanscom: So that's interesting because it's been maybe 15 years, which is way too late in my life, but it, and you know, I, I have a capacity to talk a lot. I don't know if you've ever noticed that

Donald Cohen: I have noticed that. But you're also a good listener, too.

David Hanscom: But that, that's what came later. What, what happened, I had my opinion on everything, and I honestly could not understand when people weren't just compelled by my pure intellect. And one day I woke up, I go, "You know something?

People, I think, look at the world differently than I do," which is obvious now. Um, but also found something that if you give your own opinion, let's say you're talking politics or anything, religion, y- you already know your own opinion. Exactly. And it becomes really tedious and boring to keep repeating it over and over again.

So it is infinitely more interesting to actually listen. Totally, completely. You have an infinite amount of wisdom coming in. With your self-talking all the time, it's really quite tedious. That was a huge paradigm shift for me. So the fact that you were trying to figure out, okay, here am I, I'm becoming a father.

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Here's my father. What was his like? What mistakes did he make? Where did he learn that I can learn from to help myself become a better father? And that's a wonderful little story right there in of itself. That's fantastic.

Donald Cohen: Well, the other word that I like is empathy. Right. You can have empathy for people when you try to understand where you're co- like you say, listening, allowing people to to see where other people are coming from and understand where they're coming from and not take everything so personally.

We get attached to our own share of self-perceptions rather than realizing that, wow, maybe, maybe there's something that I, I'm missing that this person is trying to tell me and convey and get out my own projections. People project all the time. That's one of the biggest problems, is that everybody thinks, uh, they, they think that they're really, their perception is accurate.

But what's happening is that they're really projecting some of their own unresolved issues on other people.

David Hanscom: Especially when you're critical.

Donald Cohen: Yeah, because then you're not really seeing the other person for who they are.

David Hanscom: Yeah.

Donald Cohen: Not at all. You're not being, and you're not being present with them.

David Hanscom: Nope.

Donald Cohen: Your past traumas are not allowing you to live in the now, in the present.

David Hanscom: So I'm gonna pair maybe one piece of advice that you would give to the audience, 'cause a lot of people in chronic pain are very socially isolated, and the data shows about 53% of Americans are socially isolated. And I will say when you're, when you're in chronic pain, you don't feel like reaching out. You feel very self-conscious.

On the other hand, when people are trying to make friends, there, there's a need to actually strut your own importance. I can do this, this, and this. I know this, this, and this. I know the in reality, making friends is exactly the opposite. Other people just wanna be seen and heard. You don't have to do anything to connect with that other person.

Is that a fair statement?

Donald Cohen: Well, you say a little more about that.

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David Hanscom: Well, I mean, as far as making friends or being with people, people don't need to know who you are and the image you're trying to portray. They want to be heard, they want to be validated, and just listening to them and being with them is how I think deeper friendships are formed.

Donald Cohen: Well, you mean just being patient and listening and not just making everything about yourself.

David Hanscom: 'Cause I think people in a s- in a social situation particularly, you know, they talk about their jobs and they do this, this, and this. But you go to a cocktail party and people aren't really listening that carefully. Is that a fair statement?

Donald Cohen: Yeah, I think it's better... I think people have trouble being in the present with people, just listening- And allowing yourself to really hear what the other person is saying. Right. And to read the room. Read the room. You c- you know, one of my other f- expressions, read the room.

Try to be more aware of where people are and don't talk over people. I always... I'm sensitive, like when I'm at a party and two people are talking to each other, I don't like interrupting.

David Hanscom: Right.

Donald Cohen: So I won't in- I used to... I was so irritated when I would be having a conversation with somebody and somebody just randomly comes over and starts talking to the person I'm talking to, totally unaware that they've interrupted something that's going on between me and that other person.

David Hanscom: Right.

Donald Cohen: So I'm very mindful of how I affect other people.

David Hanscom: So can you tell us some of the stories, let's take, take the eras, the early transition phase, the middle part of adulthood, and then late adulthood. D- what are some of the things you guys talked about early on when you were transitioning?

Donald Cohen: During the middle adulthood?

David Hanscom: Well, just right from the beginning where you made the switch from being somewhat difficult, not much relationship with your father, to actually listening, writing, interacting. What were some of the things that you shared during that period of time that stand out f- stand out for you?

Donald Cohen: Just how we felt about ourselves.

A lot of it had to do with our relationships with other people, interestingly enough. Back to connection again. It's like each stage of your life cycle is influenced by the relationships and how you're connecting

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with other people And the more you're connected to yourself, you begin to see a change in your relationships.

You outgrow certain people as you outgrow yourself, and you grow into something new. And so there became a deeper appreciation of understanding how, just how hard it is to just grow up. So in the early years, early childhood, then you get into the adolescence, everything is a fight for feeling good about who you are and learning about yourself.

And so through each stage, hopefully you grow closer to understanding yourself, which then helps you to be- understand the otherness of the other person and develop what we talked about tonight in terms of empathy, uh, self-respect, mutual respect, allowing people to have their own opinions, getting out of your ego and thinking more in terms of a higher self.

And as you get older into the... For me, as I got into later adulthood, becoming more spiritual seeing life for its internal meanings. That's why I like Carl Jung, and Jung talked a lot about dreams. And I'm a big beli- I don't believe in accidents. I believe in what's called synchronicity. I think everything happens for a reason.

I have a cosmic view of the universe. I think even the Knicks it's almost cosmic what happened to the Knicks. You know, even with sports, just when you come back from 29 points it goes beyond reason. Right. And you think of the story of David and Goliath, and you look at a 6'1" Jalen Brunson and a 7'5" Wemby, and you see the determination and the dynamic of a myth being played out between somebody small and somebody big, and the mentality of somebody like a Jalen Brunson, who clearly, again, benefiting from the closest, I think, of a good relationship with his father-

Just plays to win is a leader of- amongst his players. So I think as you go through each stage of the life cycle, we learn how to be leaders. We learn how to will ourselves into things, to manifest positive things. So as we say, if you are positive, you m- I believe you manifest victory

I actually feel in some ways you watch Jalen Brunson, one, one of the great things about watching what he did on a basketball court was he- his will to win. His will to... It's even a will to see the signs free. We have free will. There's magic around us all the time, and if we really pay attention, we have the ability with our free will to see magic around us and see the coincidences, see the meaningfulness in.

If I'm thinking about David Hanscom, all of a sudden David Hanscom calls me and says hello, uh, or I'm thinking about, uh, something that's important in my life, and then all of a sudden it happens. So I'm a big believer in positive thinking, using your will, trying to look for the signs around you to enhance a broader understanding of the universe.

So in the later adulthood years, even my father and I started talking about spirit. We, we had these Freud-Jung debates. He was Freudian, I was Jungian. To all of you that don't know who that is, is that Jung was basically much more spiritual than Freud. Uh, they had a father-son relationship in in, and, uh, basically we got past Freud and Jung.

We just became father and son and human to human

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David Hanscom: I mean, what are some of the things that must've been obviously it did, but it must have been a fairly profound effect initially when you and your father started writing and also looking at life through his eyes, because you tend to put a label on your father that he's this, this, and this, but you don't necessarily see that human side.

What were some of the things you saw initially about your father that were surprising or enlightening?

Donald Cohen: That's a good question, by the way. I'll tell you an important insight from the book is that we tend to make a lot of assumptions about people without checking it out. I misunderstood that what I viewed as intrusive in my rebellious years was really his just need to connect with me and his love for me.

So what a misunderstanding of intention. Here's a man who's trying to guide his son 'cause he loves him and help him along, and all I would see him was being controlling, intrusive, uh, man. And all I... What we, what I was realizing later, and that comes out of the book, is that his in- he really was not trying to be intrusive.

He was trying to connect with me, and I wasn't allowing him to connect with me. And that was one of the really powerful re- realizations I had with him. And he felt badly because he thought he did such a good job as a father. He couldn't understand why I was giving him such a hard time. And it was really kinda sad that for years I did give him such a hard time, but th- that's what we're doing when we're trying to figure out who we are, right?

And in the end, it's like, I think the book for him, uh, turned out to be a gift. He was grateful for the book in the end.

David Hanscom: Did he help write the book, or is it a book written by you with the intera- about the interactions?

Donald Cohen: Well, no, the book is letters back and forth. Oh,

David Hanscom: back and forth. I gotcha.

Donald Cohen: I wrote a letter to him, and then he responded to my letter, and we just went back and forth. It was all back... It was a dialogue between us.

David Hanscom: I gotcha.

Donald Cohen: Correspond as a dialogue and through every stage of the life cycle.

David Hanscom: It must've been really interesting to watch how your letters... When you look back over the book to put together the final book, it must've been very interesting to see how your relationship evolved.

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I'm sure you can see that on paper pretty easily, right?

Donald Cohen: Yeah. It's amazing how I saw him as the enemy as opposed to the friend, just projecting my own fears and my own insecurities on him, and never giving him the benefit of the doubt, always assuming things without really being open to the fact that maybe the things I was assuming weren't really true.

Then you're back to curiosity, that maybe the things that you really think are going on with somebody isn't really happening at all

David Hanscom: Well, one of the classic cognitive distortions which you're well familiar with that David Burns has pointed out is the one of labeling. And so you're labeled father... I'm sorry, he's labeled father, you're labeled son.

And, Anthony De Mello talks about this in his little book, you know, *The Way to Love*, where, which is the way to awareness, that labels just knock out awareness completely. Once you have a label on somebody, that's all your projection. You cannot see who they are anymore. And this is one of those- Yeah, there's no flexi- What's that?

Donald Cohen: No flexibility, no flexibility in thinking.

David Hanscom: So that's what happens to, to countries. We got different countries labeling each other as X, and usually that label includes less than. And when you've labeled somebody less than you, then it justifies really bad behavior.

Donald Cohen: Exactly.

David Hanscom: But even with parents in general, I spent the last couple years of my practice working almost exclusively with families, and there is this thing to say, "I'm the parent, you're the child."

That's a huge block. Well- And so it's really human to human that I have this role, you have this role. But you put those labels on, then the parent thinks they have to teach a kid their wisdom, so to speak, and they... with the kid labeled as this, this, and this. And neither side can actually see each other, then parents and children wonder why there's so much chaos.

Donald Cohen: Well, basically you're really talking about what I call hierarchal language. Okay. Which is hierarchal language is not better or worse, not more or less, not good or bad. It's really We live, we ought to be living in an and/or world, not an either/or world. We're so polarized. So, to think in terms of more or less or good or bad it it's, we're we're all human.

We're all going to the same place. We all get born, we all die. So in the end, while we're here, it would be good to give each other more of the benefit of the doubt.

David Hanscom: Yeah, absolutely.

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Donald Cohen: And have more of a brotherhood and sisterhood with each other and a humanhood.

David Hanscom: Over what period of time did- in your early 30s did your relationship with your father change to, just, to being something more functional? Or did it come and go in spurts?

Donald Cohen: Well, I started to understand that I was doing a lot of the same things with my son that I was critical of him for. I started even hearing his voice sometimes, which I didn't like. His kind of... I'd say, "God, I hear, I hear my son- my father's voice." I started to see that as I, as my son voices to me when I watch him with his kids, he says, "Dad it's like you start to see all the things that, that you did, that now you're in the position." That's where the empathy comes in.

David Hanscom: Right.

Donald Cohen: When I became a father, I started to have more empathy for what it was like for him and how difficult it is to be a father with your own kid. And that happened with my son too. And so it's generational, so it's just, that's the empathy is beginning to understand through your own experience what other people have gone through. Getting out of, getting out of being self-centered, basically.

David Hanscom: Exactly. Yeah. I mean, awareness is always a starting point, and the essence of abuse is actually lack of awareness, not seeing others' needs and just doing your own. A lot of people wouldn't label it abuse, but if you really are not meeting your kids' needs for love, attention, and support, even though you might be, even though you may not be aggressively, quote, "abusing them," you're neglecting them.

You're not hearing them. You're not seeing them, and those effects are pretty profound. So what... So I can finish up with a couple things here. I'd just like to sort of at the end maybe depict a little bit how your father-son relationship evolved, but then just a couple general words of advice to our audience about how would you parent differently or how would you look at relationships differently?

Donald Cohen: What you're asking, what would be a good way to parent differently? I'm not sure I understand the question

David Hanscom: Just what's your advice to parents? Let's put it that way. But before that, I'm just curious how you would depict the relationship with your father towards the end of his life after all these years of letter-writing.

It obviously had an effect. It obviously changed things. But how do you, how would you describe how it ended up with your father?

Donald Cohen: Well, I love the way it ended up with my father. And but one of the things that I've learned with parents, this maybe helps to answer your question, is that with my patients, even the adolescents I see, I always want their opinions.

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We can always learn. It doesn't matter how... whether it's the parent or the child. I just, I've always asked my kids for their opinions. I ask my young people in my office their opinions. I don't pretend to know everything. I try not to act like I know everything. And actually, if I don't really know something, it's okay to say I don't know.

Something stood out for me once. I was listening to a Jungian analyst talk in San Francisco, and there was a Q&A period, and the only thing I remember about the Q&A period with him was somebody asked the great Jungian analyst at San Francisco a question, and he looked in front of probably 1,000 people and said, "I don't know the answer." And that's what I remember.

David Hanscom: Interesting.

Donald Cohen: Don't have to always know. But the other thing I want to highlight, because I know we're re-reaching the end of the time, is we tend to do to others what was done to ourselves.

David Hanscom: Right.

Donald Cohen: So the unconscious is powerful. So we end up creating what I call self-fulfilling prophecies.

So if we don't get self-awareness, we tend to act out and do to others what was done to us. That happens a lot in abusive relationships. Right. Many people that were abused end up doing the same thing in their relationships as well. But so you see people that have either come out of really uh, i-impaired relationships from childhood who do everything they can to try not to be what they were growing up, and there are others that get locked right into it.

So in my practice, I see people that are, are humbled by their beginnings and do everything they can to overcome their problems, and then you see others that just end up doing the same old thing. Hence the value of psychotherapy. Hence the value of self-awareness. People who come here, you're only as good as your players.

That's what a coach is. Yeah. If people come here and really want to work on themselves, they're probably gonna grow. But you have to be open to change, open to transformation, and be humble. My father always said, "Be humble." But basically, I'm always looking to learn. Uh, I'm always wanting to ask...

I love asking my kids what they think. I love asking you what you think

David Hanscom: Yeah, likewise. And, um, that's a learned skill for me that came very, very late in life. And I agree, it just is so much easier, nicer, more enjoyable, really fills up your life in a very rich way. So Donald-

Donald Cohen: Tell people, you tell people you're proud of them.

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If you feel you're proud of somebody, tell them you're proud of them. If you love them, tell them you love them. Give them a hug You want, everybody wants to feel they matter, David, you gotta show it ...

David Hanscom: So my son and daughter-in-law have done a wonderful job creating this wonderful little core family, and I really make it a point at least once or twice during the visit about telling them what a great job they're doing creating this family. I wish they were my parents, I mean, honestly. And I always am surprised how much, to me it seems obvious, but of course they struggle also. So just hearing that just lights them right up. It's interesting.

Donald Cohen: You mean hearing how proud you, when you- Yeah ... when-

David Hanscom: Yeah. I'm proud of what, what you've done and it just, I, to me it seems sort of obvious that I'm proud, but, you know, if you don't say it, they don't really know.

Donald Cohen: We talked about this in the first interview, acknowledgement, validation is really, really important. And how you say things, by the way. Be mindful about how you say things. Don't say you, say I. Come from your own feelings. Come from your own... Don't attack. If you say you, it's different than saying I feel. Always come from a place of mindfulness, of feeling and vulnerability, and try not to attack the other person.

David Hanscom: So Don, I've enjoyed this. I'm pretty inspired by this story. I don't think I've heard it quite like this before. So please take a look at his book, *The Inside Ride*. It's on Amazon. It's gonna be re-presented to the world this next couple weeks.

Donald Cohen: It will. Actually, this weekend. *The Inside Ride*, when it came out during COVID, was not a great time to put a book out.

David Hanscom: Right.

Donald Cohen: This is the anniversary and the rebirth of what I believe is the importance of letter-writing and connection, in the spirit of tonight's talk. Yeah. Right. Connection comes when you communicate.

Sometimes the written word is one of the most powerful ways to communicate. So this weekend on Father's Day I am celebrating with all of you the capacity for self-expression and communication and free speech.

David Hanscom: Absolutely. Donald, thank you. It's a pleasure as I anticipated it would be, and, uh, we'll talk soon.

Donald Cohen: Let's, uh... Thank you, David. Uh, you did a nice job interviewing me. It's good to get to spend some time with you, and I appreciate your celebrating the, uh, New York Knicks. I celebrated your Golden State Warriors for years. Right. I celebrated Steph Curry. I am looking at Steph Curry right now, a painting that's in my office.

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I'm now gonna put Jalen Brunson right next to him.

David Hanscom: Absolutely.

Donald Cohen: Both warriors, one from New York and one from San Francisco.

David Hanscom: Yep, coast to coast.

Donald Cohen: Thank you, David. I hope all of you tonight think about writing a letter on Father's Day to somebody that's really important to you.

David Hanscom: Great. Thank you very, very much.

Donald Cohen: I'm connected

Tom Masters: I'd like to thank our guest, Donald Cohen, for being on the show today and describing how the evolution of his relationship with his father helped inform his approach to therapy. I'm your host, Tom Masters, reminding you to be back next week for another episode of Back and Control Radio with Dr. David Hanscom. And in the meantime, be sure to visit the website at www.backandcontrol.com.