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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Chapter 6

YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN!

What Is Said

Are you sure?
Slow down, watch out.
You know better than that!
Behave!
What are you doing?
This really is a good one.
What did I say?
Well, that's what I think.
You do this all the time.
(sigh)

Translation (What Is Meant)

I don't like your choice.
I'm scared you might get hurt
I'm disgusted with you!
Don't embarrass me.
Stop it!
Choose this one.
I'm disappointed in you.
You're about to get into **BIG** trouble!
Agree or be damned!
I am disappointed, disgusted, and hurt.

What you say is often not what you mean. In addition, it is often not what is understood by your child or other person you are talking to. Every communication contains both the explicit message and the implicit message. Children are very intuitive about recognizing what the "real" message is (whether or not the adult recognizes or admits what his/her own "real" message is!). Sometimes, adults claim to present a reasonable and fair message, but actually are expressing frustration, disappointment, and anger quite clearly with their implicit message. When I work with couples in therapy, they often have disagreements about what was meant in an earlier discussion or argument. Normally, the verbal communication was relatively straightforward. However the nonverbal communication was open to interpretation. Often times, the interpretation would be highly negative. Relatively simple comments would be interpreted like negatively. For example, the question, "Did you take out the garbage?" is interpreted as an accusation, "You never take out the garbage. You don't follow through. I'm tired of asking you. You don't do your share..." Or, "You're doubting me. You're trying to control me. You're pushing me. You think I'm unreliable..." (I actually had a couple spend half a session arguing about taking out the garbage! They were unable to explicitly communicate with each other, but attacked each other implicitly around the garbage!). Sometimes, the interpretation of the implicit messages is absolutely correct!

Implicit messages become a sneaky way to attack or criticize the other person while claiming to be reasonable and innocent. This inherent dishonesty complicates the relationship between any two people. An adult is more likely to challenge the discrepancy between the overt message and the covert message. He or she will note the difference between the verbal message and the nonverbal message -- the tone, the facial expression or body language, and action or lack of action. For example, the truth of the verbal statement "I'm listening" will be negated by nonverbal communication if spoken in a harsh cold tone, or accompanied by a frown, or with arms folded across the chest, or is spoken while reading a newspaper. Young children, on the other hand, can be confused by the discrepancy between the verbal and non-verbal messages. Or, when they are older and more sophisticated (as sophisticated as teens can be!), they recognize the discrepancy and may ascribe it to a fundamental dishonesty of particular or all adults. They then may distrust everything those particular or all adults say.



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It is important to be honest with yourself about how you feel and what you want to communicate. There are many times in frustration and anger that we may want to lash out, but inhibit ourselves from doing so. This is often quite appropriate. Lashing out can often cause great harm. However, is normal to be frustrated and angry, and important to acknowledge and accept the reality of the feelings. If you do not accept your own humanity, you will attempt to deceive yourself and others in your communication- "I am **not** angry!!" Unfortunately, when you do this, you often present a mismatched communication, where the verbal is contradicted by the nonverbal. Children usually are accepting of the communication from adults as being straightforward and consistent. However, they are also very intuitive regarding the nonverbal communications. They will get the verbal communication and be confused that the nonverbal communications does not match. If the adult denies the dishonesty in the communication, then the child will be even further confused. The child will begin to doubt his/her own ability to correctly interpret the world. This will create insecurity not only about his/her relationship with the adult, but also about his/her safety in the world at-large.

I TOLD YOU THAT!

Do not say, "You need to cooperate," when you mean, "Do what I say." Do not say, "You need to share," when you really mean, "Stop arguing." Do not say, "Be good," when your deeper fear and command is, "Don't embarrass me." Such deeper messages may be difficult to comply with, but they are even more difficult when they are not clearly presented and are obscured by the explicit verbal message. In addition, some of these covert messages are impossible for a child to comply with. If the embarrassment fear comes from the adult's childhood stresses and traumas and has become an ingrained sense of shame, then "Don't embarrass me," becomes far too deep and complex a command for a child to handle. That would make the child feel incompetent or inadequate. Other communications can be even more directly harmful. The statement, "I told you that!" can be particularly dangerous. That statement is not merely a reminder of earlier commands or even of current frustration. It clearly implies that there is something very wrong about the child because he/she did not remember. The child will be consumed with guilt that he/she failed at what he/she should have remembered. As opposed to having been very human... very much a child and had been distracted or had forgotten what was not particularly an urgency with him/her.

When a parent is very upset (anxious, fearful, worried), the upset often becomes anger. This can be especially true for men. One of the consequences of male cultural training is the tendency for boys and men to be very uncomfortable with their more vulnerable emotions. As boys and men were trained to be warriors, their vulnerable and gentle feelings (sadness, loss, distress, anxiety, fear, and such) were discouraged as unsuitable and even hazardous to the demands of warfare. This training continues today to a large degree, as boys are trained (and shamed) to deny and avoid such feelings as not masculine and weak. As these aspects of their humanity are denied, the emotional energy is often diverted to (even encouraged to express as) anger. Unfortunately, this means that when some boys and men feel any of these vulnerable feelings, they quickly jump away from them and express and act out with anger. Domestic violence can be seen as a direct consequence of some men's inability to handle the emotional challenges of intimacy- to be sad, disappointed, distressed, anxious, or hurt in a relationship without descending into anger and the violence that it may precipitate. While men may be particularly culturally vulnerable to this distress or upset to anger dynamic, many women are also so inclined from the experiences of their lives.



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FROM “DON’T” TO “DO”

As discussed in the previous article, intense anger can be very distracting from the point of discipline- teaching appropriate behavior. Interpreting the intended or desirable (not the same thing) message often becomes difficult for children. Or, a message may be incompletely understood. For example when you give, a "Don't..." command to a child, do you also give "Do..." options? "Don't run inside" clearly defines what your child should not or cannot do- run inside. However it does not tell him/her what **to do**. It does not give any guidance or suggestion as to what he/she is to do with his/her physical energy and need to be active. What is the opposite of "Don't run inside?" Many people will answer, "walk inside." However "walk inside" while it helps manage household safety and lessons the likelihood of unexpected crashes and destruction and helps with your peace of mind, it does nothing for the high energy within the child seeking expression. "Go outside and run around," "Put on some music so you can dance," or "Let's take a walk," are ways to complete the "don't" command with "do" options.

Very often, parents are quite adept at telling a child what NOT to do- things the child shouldn't do because they are dangerous, or messy, or inconvenient. However, what can result is a kid with pent-up energy and no way to express it. He/she become like a hot water kettle under heat that needs to let off steam, but has it's spout stopped up. And, like such a kettle, the child is also likely to explode dangerously. Unlike a kettle, a child can keep it all inside if parents are demanding and harsh. However, the pent-up energy will cause internal harm- emotional and psychological harm. It is important to train yourself to use affirmative phrases when disciplining children. "Stop it," tells the child to terminate activity that is immediately satisfying. "Finish it later," tells the child to delay the satisfaction of being active and involved in the moment. Both need to be counter-balanced with "Do this other rewarding and energy satisfying activity (which is more suited to indoor activity, the occasion, the circumstances, and so forth) instead." When I was the owner and director (and head teacher) of my own preschool program, I spent considerable energy and was largely able to train myself to balance each "no" and "don't" with a "yes, do this instead." The result was a far more positive atmosphere in the program; children whose energy was more respected and who learn more productive ways to express such energy; and a greater serenity on my part as I felt more positive and less of a negative and punitive enforcer. And it wasn't easy! It took me quite a while and a lot of energy to be able to be positive consistently with the preschool children- and of course, I would still lapse sometimes! A definite additional benefit was that when there was an urgency- a need to say "no", the children would respond more quickly and completely to a strong "no" from me since they didn't get "no's" from me all day long. Repeated telling children "no" and "don't..." leads children to ignore or minimize such commands more readily.

HOW MANY TIMES DO I NEED TO TELL YOU THAT?

Adults often have learned to communicate using rhetorical questions. The problem with rhetorical questions is that they are normally statements spoken in the form of questions. This often confuses young children. Once when we took our small preschool of 30 children out a walking field trip in out neighborhood. There was a wide and busy street (two lanes each way for a total of 4 lanes) that we wanted to cross. When the red light turned to green, we started to cross- a long line of fifteen pairs of children holding hands with one teacher in front, one in the back, and two in the middle. As you can imagine, the children were not the most efficient hustling across the street. The light turned to yellow while the end of the line of children was still in the middle of the street. As usual, some of the children were distracted by the cars, the people, the stores, and whatever else they could see, and were walking very slowly. One of the teachers got a bit flustered with the



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imminent red light, and said to the kids, “What do you think you’re doing?” You or I as adults would recognize the rhetorical question as a complaint, “I don’t like what you are doing (walking slowly).” And, a command, “I want you to do change what you are doing (walk faster).” Unfortunately, the children did not understand it that way. They did understand that they had been asked a question, and that when adults ask questions, children are expected to give an answer. So, several of the children (who can have difficulty doing more than one thing at a time), **stopped** in the middle of the street as they thought, “What **am** I doing? Must be a trick question because I thought I was walking across the street... like the teacher wanted... but maybe she doesn’t want me to walk across the street, because I can tell by her tone and face that’s she’s upset... maybe mad at me. What did I do wrong? What am I doing wrong? **What am I doing?**” And then, the teacher became even more flustered as part of the line of children stalled out in the middle of the street! And more upset with the children... upset because they were not cognitively and socially sophisticated enough to understand rhetorical questions. It was confusing for the children because they did understand that the teacher was upset with them but they did not know what for.

Any attempt to answer rhetorical questions becomes automatically an admission to the truth or relevance of the implicit statement underlying it. The frustration question, “How many times do I need to tell you that?” may not only be confusing to a child, but it can also be a particularly dangerous rhetorical question. The implicit statement is that “I have told you many times before, and yet you still don’t understand or obey. Therefore, you must be extremely stupid, that you still don’t understand or obey. Or, are being purposely defiant because you are such a bad child!” If the child attempts to answer the question, he/she admits to being either stupid or bad. Don’t trap your children with rhetorical questions. Be aware of your frustration and other emotions so that they don’t come out in ways that harm your children’s emotional well being. Your communication can be clearer and cleaner when you’re self-aware- you can say what you mean, and your children will receive communication as it is intended and be able to respond more appropriately. In discipline communication, this is even more critical because you are shaping your child’s current and future successes or failures with social interactions and relationships.



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Chapter 7

MORAL DEVELOPMENT- WHEN WINNING MEANS LOSING

A woman was near death from cancer. A druggist had discovered a drug that could save her. The druggist was charging \$2000 for a small dose of the drug- 10 times what it cost him to make. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, borrowed as much as he could, but could get together only about \$1000. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No. I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." Heinz, desperate, broke into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife. Should Heinz have done that? Why or why not? (Lawrence Kohlberg, 1969).

*No, Heinz will get into trouble.
The druggist isn't bad. He has a right
to make money.*

*Yes, it's okay. It's not worth that much
money. His wife needs it. He has to steal it
to save her.*

*No, stealing is bad. And it's not his fault
the druggist is greedy. But it's still wrong.*

*Yes, it's what he has to do as a good husband
He can't let his wife die. He's responsible.*

*No, although you can't blame him, you
can't have people defying the law when they
feel justified- consider the community values.*

*Yes, it isn't right, but it is justified. To
preserve the life of his wife has greater moral
justification than the rule not to steal.*

People constantly face choices in their lives. As they make choices, the consequences of their choices determine the principles around which they follow throughout their lives. Power and control are among the motivations that determine such choices. Children constantly try to get more power and control in their lives (and more candy, and more toys, and more TV time, and more and more!). Adults continue this struggle with employment, education, housing, luxuries, and so forth. When the drive for power and control becomes the overwhelming driving force for anyone, then other issues including morality, social responsibility, others' well being, and the community welfare can be lost. There are times when adults must not allow a child to "win" a power struggle (and many times, when a child should be allowed to win- another article at another time). Sometimes a child will try to prevail around some issue or circumstance because of short-term gratuitous motivations that may have significant harmful long-term consequences: gaining an extra cookie that leads to an upset stomach... or a loss of appetite for the healthy meal... or poor lifelong eating habits... or eventual nutritional and health problems; or a delay in going to bed to watch more television that leads to difficulty waking up the next morning... or poor concentration in class... or moodiness that harms relationships with peers... or an enduring habit of intimidation to force his/her will upon others... or an irresponsible sense of entitlement. The potential for negative learning, the development of harmful habits, and of dysfunctional processes to deal with life and relationships becomes high if children "win" such negative power struggles. Adults need to provide the discipline- the boundaries and consequences to shape children into becoming healthy individually sound and socially responsible people.

FUNCTIONAL MORALITY

Children are extremely practical. They have a functional logic- a functional morality. "If it works, then it's good... if it doesn't work, then it's bad." Or, "if I can get away with it, then it's good... if



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"I can't get away with it, then it's bad." Unfortunately, that sounds like a lot of adults as well. It becomes vital to make sure (with proper discipline) that poor choices do not "work"- that is, they are not rewarded for the poor choices; and that positive choices "work"- that is, they are rewarded for the positive choice. Do not let the children "win" when they make poor choices. If they "win" this way, they will lose. Be sure to have them "win" when they make positive choices. If they "win" this way, they will win in life. This simple functional morality needs to be understood, "accepted," and then used to move them toward more sophisticated and higher morality. Adults will often try to teach higher and more advanced forms of morality to young children whether or not they are developmentally (cognitively, emotionally, psychologically, or socially) ready to understand. While the children often can respond verbatim with the correct answers to moral dilemmas as presented by adults, when faced with actual choices, they are driven by morality that is largely determined by their developmental stage. This also means that children can make the "right" (correct) choices that adults want them to make, but often for the "wrong" (incorrect) reasons. The choices often come from a functional morality rather than from internalizing the principles and values of adults such as parents or teachers. If not approached developmentally, but instead with rigidity and demands for compliance, children will stay in functional morality into adulthood and be removed from the higher morality of autonomous individuals who are socially and community conscious adults. Recognizing and accepting the simple morality of young children allows adults to more successfully move them forward to higher more authentic morality. In other words, you cannot simply make a child into a moral person with demands and harshness. If you attempt this, they become vulnerable to responding rigidly and without any evaluative skills of their own. You see children who are paralyzed... who are unable make even simple choices, because they need definition from authority figures as to what the "right" choice is. There are many adults who do not have enough ego strength and require someone else (a political figure, a religious leader, a guru, a psychic, or other authoritative and charismatic personality) to tell them what life choices to make. Uncertainty becomes certain only "because Mommy says it's ok." Eventually, it can become "Because such and such leader says it's ok."

Yet this certainty often remains only words rather than expressed in subsequent behavior. How many times has you seen a child (your child, perhaps!) spout the morality of the family or classroom (or of the Christmas "naughty or nice" doctrine) and then turn around immediately to sneak an extra cookie, push to grab, or tell Santa how well behaved he/she has been because he/she thinks he/she can get away with it!? Or, of a child gravely committing to the rules of the home or of the circumstance (not to beg for a toy or treat during a visit to the store, for example), and then seize the moment to violate his/her commitment, because he/she knows he/she can get the toy or treat? How terribly similar to the numerous community, government, business, military, and even religious leaders who too often chose selfish gratification over their most fundamental moral commitments to serve their peoples, charges, and societies. There have been many in positions of power and influence who have transgressed with impunity because they could get away with it. Because it was possible and they felt they would go unpunished, they indulged in temptations of money, sexual improprieties, power, property, and crimes against people and institutions. Yet, they then still claim to be "nice" rather than admit to having been "naughty!" To claim to have been righteous despite destroying the lives and livelihoods of thousands and corrupting the integrity of organizations and companies. And, refuse to take responsibility and blame others instead. "Uh uh! I didn't do it. He did it! I'm a good boy!" Sometimes, the denial of complicity works, and children (or adults) get away with the mischievous and even the reprehensible. And



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learns both that they can get away with the morally improper behavior... and that denial and lying works as well. Unaddressed, this methodology carries into adulthood in the most horrible ways.

LEVELS OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Lawrence Kohlberg presented a very useful theory of moral development that is based on both cognitive development and interaction with the world. It is important to note that these are principles rather than rigid standards. The ages should be viewed as age ranges rather than absolutes. He broke moral development into three levels each with two stages:

Level I: Preconventional Morality (ages 4-10). The emphasis in this level is on external control. The standards are those of others, and they are observed either to avoid punishment or to reap rewards.

- Stage 1: Orientation toward punishment and obedience. “What will happen to me?” Children obey rules of others to avoid punishment. They ignore the motives of an act and focus on its physical form (such as the size of a lie) or its consequences (for example, the amount of physical damage).
- Stage 2: Instrumental purpose and exchange. “You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours.” Children conform to rules out of self-interest and consideration for what others can do for them in return. They look at an act in terms of the human needs it meets and differentiate this value from the act’s physical form and consequences.

Level II: Morality of Conventional Role Conformity (ages 10-13). Children now want to please other people. They still observe the standards of others, but they have internalized these standards to some extent. Now they want to be considered “good” by those persons whose opinions are important to them. They are now able to take the roles of authority figures well enough to decide whether an action is good by their standards.

- Stage 3: Maintaining mutual relations, approval of others, the golden rule. “Am I a good boy or girl?” Children want to please and help others, can judge the intentions of others, and develop their own ideas of what a good person is. They evaluate an act according to the motive behind it or the person performing it, and they take circumstances into account.
- Stage 4: Social concern and conscience. “What if everybody did it?” People are concerned with doing their duty, showing respect for higher authority, and maintaining the social order. They consider an act always wrong, regardless of motive or circumstances, if it violates a rule and harms others.

Level III: Morality of Autonomous Moral Principles (ages 13, or not until young adulthood, or never). This level marks the attainment of true morality. For the first time, the person acknowledges the possibility of conflict between two socially accepted standards and tries to decide between them. The control of conduct is not internal, both in the standards observed and in the reasoning about right and wrong. Stages 5 and 6 may be alternative methods of the highest level or moral reasoning.

- Stage 5: Morality of contract, of individual rights, and of democratically accepted law. People think in rational terms, valuing the will of the majority and the welfare of society. They generally see these values best supported by adherence to the law. While they recognize that there are times when human need and the law conflict, they believe that it is better for society in the long run if they obey the law.



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- Stage 6: Morality of universal ethical principles. People do what they as individuals think right, regardless of legal restrictions or the opinions of others. They act in accordance with internalized standards, knowing that they could condemn themselves if they did not. (adapted from Kohlberg, 1969, 1976).

Adults are often drawn to the highest levels of morality as expressed in Level 3, Stages 5 and 6, and wish to instill such values in their children. However, children cannot jump ahead to these levels without successfully going through the earlier stages. As with all developmental theories, the rules of sequence, progression, and the requirement for satiation of each developmental stage hold true. Attempting to skip or rush through stages will inevitably cause one to be pulled back to that stage again. Stress, trauma, or abuse will cause people to regress back to or cause people to get stuck at earlier stages. Moral development can also get stuck at earlier stages, or people can regress to earlier less autonomous moral stages- Level 1 morality.

TEACHING “HIGHER” AND “LOWER” MORALITY

If your child functions at a “lower” moral level, consider your child’s age. If his/her moral reasoning matches up with his/her developmental level, then the extent of your concern need not be as great. Verbalize and teach the “higher” moral principles but do not expect children to necessarily internalize such principles. In addition to verbalizing the “higher” moral principles, be sure to set expectations, boundaries, and consequences that are appropriate to their developmental stage. For example, it can be appropriate for you explain that they should not lie about doing their homework because of how it harms the trust between you and them- a sacred relationship, of how a person’s word is the foundation to his/her self-respect and affects his/her self-esteem and reputation in the community, and how you want them to live up to high moral standards so they can have lives of integrity and fulfillment (Level 3: Stages 5 & 6 morality). However (as they look at you with open mouths, wondering, “What is s/he talking about!?”), you also need express and discipline in the “lower” moral language. Direct them toward how such behavior if common (“What if everybody did it?”) harms communities (families, classrooms, workplace, etc.), how it causes people see them negatively and harm their reputation (“Not what a good kid does”) (Level 2: Stages 3 & 4); and how it will cause others to do bad things back to them (“Do you want people to lie to you?”), and that they will suffer negative consequences if they lie (“And, you will be on timeout for lying and won’t get to play”) (Level 1: Stages 1 & 2).

The foundation of the higher levels of morality is in the first level. It cannot be skipped. And, it also needs to be surpassed for children to lead moral lives in adulthood. It may be frustrating when you expect your child (and he/she is old enough) to function at higher levels of morality and he/she functions at a lower level (avoidance of punishment, for example). The recovery process to help your child to more appropriate morality can be complex, but regardless, the foundation is to reassert the Preconventional Morality principles and consequences in disciplining him/her. If you waver and let him/her “win” inappropriately, none of the higher principles will ever be accepted or internalized.



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Chapter 8

DUCKS AND OPEN OR CLOSED COMMUNICATION

At my preschool and daycare program, we used to have all kinds of animals. In the backyard, we kept a duck that roamed around most of the time. One day, the children found a duck egg in the bushes! This brought about a frenzied search throughout the yard for more eggs. The duck had been very busy- there were more than a dozen eggs! The kids came inside to tell me about their discoveries, "The duck laid eggs... the duck laid eggs!" Bright eyed and flushed with excitement, little four year old Tammy asked THE QUESTION, "Are we going to have baby ducks!?" Oh oh... the birds and the bees sex education question! Or the ducks and the eggs question!

Wanting to give a good answer, I said, "Well, no Tammy... we're not going to have baby ducks. You see our duck, Uggy could be the mommy duck, but there can't be any baby ducks unless there's a daddy duck too. Because the mommy duck has the eggs but the daddy duck has to give the mommy duck a little thing... uh... called a sperm, like a seed to make the egg grow to be a baby duck. And, we don't have a daddy duck, just a mommy duck. So Uggy can lay eggs but the eggs won't have baby ducks." Not bad, huh? And, I could have stopped there... but Noooo, I had to continue because I am an educator!

*"You see, like you Tammy. When you're older, you will have eggs in your body all the time too... but you won't lay eggs! They'll be inside you. But you won't have babies grow all the time! You can't have a baby grow from your egg unless there's a daddy (someone very special, we hope) to give you the sperm to make the egg grow." I was rolling! Clear... honest... developmentally appropriate... what an educator! That college education was showing! Tammy stared at me with a deep serious look. Then her face broke into a big smile, and with a gleam in her eyes she said teasingly, "Silly man! I'm **not** a duck!"*

Sometimes we are so interested in seizing a teachable moment, that we teach what children are not interested in, or teach beyond their capacity to understand. "No Tammy, we're not going to have any baby ducks! There has to be a daddy duck too," would have been enough... maybe just a "no" would have been enough. However, discipline is very much about education. You just have to be clear about what the children are learning versus what you are trying to teach. Good communications are key to good education and good discipline. Good communications convey validation that the other person is valued, and connection between the speaker and the other person. The communication is more than the words spoken. As I mentioned before, it includes gestures, body language, facial expressions, voice tone, touch, action and the lack of action. When the non-verbal does not match up with the verbal, for example, you say "I'll be there in a minute," but don't show up as you are distracted, the lack of action communicates that the other person does not count (is invalidating) and is not connected.

Communications oriented relationship building is based on the theory that poor communication and misunderstandings create a loss of self-esteem and, thus are the basis of dysfunctional relationships. Better and improved skills in giving and receiving communication become the key to giving and gaining self-esteem, improving relationships and facilitating healthy strong children. Members of a family must learn how to identify the implicit aspects of communication within the family- the covert communication. These are the messages that are sensed, assessed, and responded to



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

consciously and subconsciously in addition to the overt communication (the words spoken). Children make guesses at what may be the underlying communication. Tammy, in the above situation, since she did not understand my well intended but confusing over-explanations and comparisons, made a guess that I was joking- teasing her. In this case, it was a benign misinterpretation. However, there are often situations where the misinterpretation can be harmful. For example, if I had found the question about baby ducks uncomfortable, any answer I may have given could have been tainted with my anxiety about a sex education question. My anxiety could have inadvertently communicated to the kids that I was upset with them for bringing up such a question. That they were “bad” to ask such questions. They may then refrain from asking such questions again. In addition, what they interpret and “learn” from their families becomes transferred to their interactions with other people in other circumstances: another family, at school, with grandparents, and so forth. Such assumptions can be very problematic if they do not match up well with the expectations of new group. For example, if a child is told that he/she is to try harder and the implicit message through tone, facial expressions, and body posture is of anger and disappointment, then when he/she is urged by his/her teacher to try harder on a project, the child may interpret the encouragement as criticism from a disappointed upset adult. Recently, a major supermarket chain, began requiring its staff to constantly smile and greet their customers with a “How are you?” and/or “Could I help you?” The intention was create a friendlier customer-pleasing atmosphere in the supermarkets. Unfortunately, some customers misinterpreted the implicit message. Many of the female supermarket employees became unhappy with the results of their smiles and greetings, as various male customers responded with sexualized overtures as they interpreted their courtesies as flirting!

OPEN VS. CLOSED COMMUNICATION

Certain communication styles close off communication, while others keep communication open between and among members of the family, classroom, group, or other system. Rhetorical questions that come out of frustration can close off communication. “How stupid do you think I am!?” pretty much traps the child. “About this stupid... not too stupid” obviously won’t, but even saying “I don’t think you’re stupid” would only bring the retort, “So why do you act like I’m stupid?” Any reply implies agreement with the stupidity accusation. And a denial would also provoke more anger. It is important to identify closed communication styles versus open styles. Here are eight examples of conversation or communication stoppers.

INTERRUPTING

Earl: I got a new dog! He’s so smart. He...

Glen: Joe got a new cat.

Earl: Really? When?

Glen: Yesterday.

Earl: Well, my dog is really a puppy. He...

Glen: Joe’s cat is full-grown.

Earl: Oh, how come he didn’t get a kitten?

Glen: I dunno. Her cat is real fluffy with brown and orange spots. It’s real friendly. It has a real loud purr.

Earl: Oh. My puppy...

Glen: I don’t want to toilet train a puppy. That’s why we don’t have one. Cats are easier.

Earl: Oh.



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When a person is trying to express him/herself, the communication becomes the flow of his/her expression... actually of his/her essence. Interrupting has the effect of stopping or of denying that flow of energy. It has the effect of denying the person's right to express- essentially the right to exist.

PROBING

Dani: Hi, guess what?

Judy: What?

Dani: Remember my friend who you met at the Valentines Day party?

Judy: Yeah, I think. His name Juan?

Dani: Yeah, Juan.

Judy: Is he your friend from church or from your old school?

Dani: I know him from my old school. Anyway, Juan and I saw you and Michael the other night, and...

Judy: Where did you see us?

Dani: At the movie theater.

Judy: When? Was it at night or during the day?

Dani: I'm not sure. I guess it was on Saturday night.

Judy: What was the movie?

Dani: I don't know. Uh... I don't remember. It was probably... uh...

Judy: It was the new movie with that guy from the TV series. Did you like the scene where the guy was stuck in the water?

Dani: Yeah... that happened to me before.

Judy: Really? When?

Dani: Last year I guess.

Judy: When last year? During the fall?

Dani: It was during the summer... about middle of July.

Judy: Where'd it happen?

Dani: In the river.

Judy: What river? You mean the pond?

Dani: Hey, I was trying to tell you something about Juan and me!

Judy: What?! You're trying to evade my questions. Just answer me!

The original speaker has found important enough to try to convey. When someone probes, it can have the effect of redirecting the communication to what the receiver wants to know, rather than what the original communicator was trying to express or share. The implicit message is what the originator is trying to express is unimportant. On the other hand, probing if it extends what the person is expressing can be a sign of interest in the communication.

JUDGING

Raj: Jen, could you help me with this please?

Jen: Poor Raj... Always needing help.

Raj: Well, I need help this time. It's hard to lift. Could you help me with the other end?

Jen: Sure, I'll help. Not strong enough, huh?

Raj: Whatever. Let's lift this thing.

Jen: Well, you certainly try hard. Such a hard worker. Keep it up.

Raj: All right already. Grab it and we'll put it over there I think.



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Jen: Why you want to put it there? That's a lousy place to put it. Stupid!
Raj: It might rain. If we put it over there, it won't get wet.
Jen: Oh yeah. Smart guy! It's going to rain tonight. You're smarter than I thought.

Judging cripples communication as the originator will become wary or even paralyzed by fear that his/her thoughts or feelings will be attacked, critiqued, and found wanting. Instead of focusing on the topic the speaker has found to be urgent or interesting, the receiver of the communication focuses on the fallibility of the speaker's opinions. Open communication is shut down.

INTERPRETING

Mom: I'll meet you at the flagpole so we can walk home together.
Nick: Uh, I can't. I'm going to stay after school for a bit. I need to talk to the teacher.
Mom: Uh oh! You got into trouble again!
Nick: No, I didn't. I just need to talk to the teacher about the project I'm working on.
Mom: Yeah, right. You're just trying to kiss up to the teacher.
Nick: Nah... I need to ask the teacher about something.
Mom: Trying to get the teacher to give you all the answers- that's what you're doing.
Nick: Uh uh. I just need to get some help on a couple of parts.
Mom: Sure you are! Hmmm? You just don't want to walk home with me!

As a therapist, I am allowed (sometimes!) to interpret what my clients are saying. However, if I interpret what my wife or kids are saying all the time, I'd be in deep trouble! While it can be a useful therapeutic process, interpreting also implies that what is being said has a deeper alternative meaning that the speaker is unaware of. Clients in therapy give permission for the therapist to make such interpretations. Your partner or your child or other family or friend normally does NOT give such permission, and experiences it as invalidating. However, it can be beneficial if permission is given.

CONFRONTING

Miles: Wow. I've got so much homework tonight.
Walt: I have more homework than you.
Miles: You're always trying to outdo me.
Walt: Me?
Miles: Yeah. If I say I have a lot of homework, you always have more. If I'm good at something, you always want to be better.
Walt: Say what?
Miles: Whatever. You didn't give me back my book.
Walt: Yes, I did. I gave it back yesterday.
Miles: I don't think so. Just check your backpack.
Walt: I can't help it if you lost track of your book.
Miles: Just look.
Walt: I don't lose my stuff. Just more organized than you are. Oh... here it is.
Miles: You make me nuts!

When a person communicates, he/she is normally sharing something important or interesting in his/her life with someone important to him/her. It is a process and dynamic between two equals with mutual interests. The power is equal or not relevant. However, when one is confronted with a



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competition for supremacy, then sharing becomes allowing oneself vulnerable to a hostile party. This is particularly unhealthy between a parent and a child. Unfortunately, some parents with low self-esteem do compete against their children. And of course, the children will lose... in many ways.

ADVISING

Dad: Looks like something is bugging you.

Tak: Yeah... I got a bad grade on the History test.

Dad: Oh... that's too bad. Why don't you ask the teacher for another chance at the test?

Tak: You mean take the test all over again.

Dad: Yep. And next time, be sure to study. You need to study for a test if you want to get a good grade.

Tak: Yeah. I know that. The problem is that I did study for it.

Dad: Well, you probably didn't study long enough. Listen to my advice; you need to study at least a couple of hours to do well on any classroom test. And, you have to have a good quiet place to study- not the kitchen table. And having a study partner is really good.

Tak: My buddy, Arturo studied with me.

Dad: No wonder. That won't work. You need a tutor or an adult to help you. You should get a tutor or your Mom to help you. Yep. That always was what I did.

Tak: Really? How'd you do on tests? Did you get good History grades?

Dad: What? Don't worry about that. Just be sure you study the right way for the next test.

There are many situations where a person may seek advice. When someone seeks advice, he/she places him/herself in a supplicant position symbolically. One seeks advice from someone who is more knowledgeable, more experienced, or wiser; or to get an alternative perspective because one's own perspective may not be clear enough to act. Responding to a sharing of information with advice changes the dynamic of communication- normally without the speaker's permission, often putting the speaker in the one down position. There will be times when your child asks for advice (and many times when you want to give advice), but knowing when it is desired or not- whether it will be well received or considered or not is vital to the overall relationship.

DOMINATING

Sumi: Hey. I just got back from camping with my family. We went to Lake Tahoe.

Zashe: We were at the lake a month or two ago. We camped out too. My uncle taught me how to fish. It was cool; I caught more than he did. He was the expert, but I caught the most fish. The lake is real nice. I really like it... especially camping by it. I learned how to start a fire... a campfire from scratch. We did our cooking on the campfire. Hot dogs, s'mores, and even coffee for the adults.

Sumi: Uh... we did a fire too.

Zashe: It was great! I wish we could have stayed longer. We stayed two weeks. I didn't want to go home. My cousin hid when it was time to leave! We couldn't find him for 15 minutes. He just didn't want to go home. Boy, that fish was good to eat too. We ate a whole bunch. Fried with some green onions. Yum! I got a new fishing pole too. I had an old one but this was a new model. Really cool. Caught a lot of fish. You know, there's a lot of different fish in that lake.

Sumi: I like fishing too. I caught...



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Zashe: Big mouth bass. That's my favorite. There were some of those too. I got some. My uncle caught some too. I didn't like cleaning them though. Too messy and slippery. But I had to clean my own fish. Yuk. But yum to eat later! We saw some deer up there too. A mother and two fawns walked right pass our camp. Oh well, it's getting late. I have to go now. Thanks for telling me about your trip.

Dominators are not interested in the other person's sharing. They are most interested in turning any speaker into an audience. Gaining the other person's attention is the point of any interaction. Sharing the attention or allowing for a mutual reciprocal relationship is not desirable. Dominators do not allow others to have a voice... to count.

PUTTING DOWN

Lee: Hi fool!

Kim: Hi.

Lee: Did you go to the game yesterday?

Kim: Yeah, I was there, but I didn't see you. Were you there too?

Lee: You blind or what? Can't see straight? I was there the whole game.

Kim: Hmmm. Well, I didn't see you at all.

Lee: Dang idiot! I did the scoreboard the first quarter of the game. I was at the scorer's table.

Kim: I must have missed it. I came a little late.

Lee: Late... late... later... slowpoke that's you. Don't you ever get anywhere on time?

Kim: Sure I do. I'm here today on time.

Lee: For once in your life.

Kim: I'm not that late all the time. You should talk. You were late yesterday to meeting. And last week, you were late too.

Lee: No way, Kim-head. I was on time.

Kim: No, you were late.

Lee: No I wasn't, punk breath!

Kim: Yes you were, noodle noggin!

Lee: Fool!

Kim: Double Fool!

Lee: !@#\$\$%

Kim: !@#\$\$%

Some people are playfully tease each other AND the teasing is received playfully. Clear non-verbal messages of affection and playfulness AND permission distinguish this playful teasing from putdowns. Putdowns are intended to take people down in status and there is not the reciprocal permission in playful mutual teasing. When there exists an already inherent power or status difference between two people, then "playful" teasing is more likely to be experienced as putdowns. In any relationship, when someone handles communication by habitually attacking the other person, he/she turns a conversation into a battle. Enough of these battles, the relationship turns into a war. Unfortunately, this happens between couples and within families between parents and children.

The eight conversation stoppers are harmful in any communication but become especially dangerous when involved in the communication of discipline. Interrupting, probing, judging, interpreting, confronting, and advising can have appropriate application at times in



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

communication and discipline communication, but one needs to be wary of them becoming over exercised. Dominating and put downs, however, are always dangerous. Although, I missed in discussing eggs and ducks with Tammy, the communication stayed open. Tammy misinterpreted my message but still felt safe to tease me back. Positive interactions had kept the relationship healthy so that it could tolerate a well-intended “educator.” The next article will continue on the role of communication in discipline and relationships.



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Chapter 9

“I CAN’T TELL GRANDMA THAT!”- RULES AND RITUALS

One time in therapy working with a teenage boy Alberto, the topic of his grandmother who lived with him and his parents came up. Grandma had suffered a minor injury in her right leg as a result of a car accident. As a result, Grandma was using a cane to get around the house for the time being. She was expected to have a full recovery within a month or so. However, Grandma, who was fiercely independent would not slow down or restrict her activities one bit. Fortunately, since the injury to her leg made it impossible for her to drive, the family was able to control her activities somewhat since she would need them to drive her to places. But at home, she would insist on moving around, carrying her things (such as her plate to the TV tray from the kitchen) while balancing on her bad leg and cane. Alberto told me that the whole family was stressed worrying that she might fall down and really hurt herself.

I suggested to Alberto, that he tell his grandmother that everyone knew and respected that she was very independent but that she needed to take it easy for a little while until her leg got better... to let the others in the family help her out a little bit. Immediately, a look of surprise and shock spread across his face, “I can’t tell Grandma that!”

What couldn’t Alberto tell his grandmother? It was simple, honest, straightforward, loving, and caring. But it also would have been violating a huge secret rule of the family. When I asked Alberto, why he couldn’t tell his grandmother, he responded, “You just can’t.” When I insisted “why not?” Alberto didn’t know what to say. Alberto clearly knew that he couldn’t tell his grandmother that, but he didn’t know exactly what **that** actually was! In every family, in every group, in every organization there are rules that everyone knows and are obligated to follow. They may be simple household rules such as closing the closet door after getting your jacket or writing thank-you notes that are openly expressed, acknowledged, and enforced. Anyone entering the system of the home, workplace, lunch table, team, etc. usually is quickly informed of or directed to the rules overtly or covertly, or through the disapproval of the “violations.” There is a classic scene in the movie, “The Ten Commandments” where Moses is not so subtly communicated to by his host to burp his approval over the just completed dinner. Moses, not knowing the gracious rule of appreciation in his host’s culture initially is perplexed but eventually comes to the realization of appropriate behavior. His host is delighted when Moses finally burps. Moses received the communication and had learned the “rule” of his host’s household (tenthold!).

People experience this type of implicit learning constantly in their daily lives. When you enter the DMV to register your car, you quickly scan the office for communication cues as to where to go. Entering a new restaurant, you scan to determine whether to seat yourself or to wait for a host or hostess. Or, when you enter your new boyfriend’s or girlfriend’s house, you try to figure out where to sit (or stand!). As your child enters a new classroom, scout meeting, team meeting, friend’s or relative’s house, he/she tries to figure out what is ok and what is death to his/her social status. Outsiders eventually are told (called an “orientation”), discover, or stumble over (making social gaffes) the various rules. Insiders born into a family (or well established over time in a group or job) learn all the rules through a systemic osmosis- ongoing family communication, gradually absorbing all the rules and all their nuances and exceptions.



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

SECRETS

Many families/systems, in addition to overt rules, also have secrets. Secrets are often truths that everyone is aware of at some level, but no one feels safe to communicate. Secrets are tightly held by individuals and systems to avoid the discomfort that open acknowledgement of the secret would create. For example, although everyone knows or has experienced a particular person in the system (mom, for example) as having trouble with controlling his/her alcohol use, no one mentions it since acknowledging it would hurt the person's feelings and/or create tension from the possibility of the person losing his/her status/position. Or, everyone knows that a family member has a characterological flaw (a violent temper, for example) that impedes successful family functioning, but no one acknowledges it in the group (although two members may acknowledge it between themselves). Insiders know not only the rules and all their nuances and exceptions, but also the secret unexpressed rules. As an outsider (the therapist), I didn't know the rules of Alberto's family, much less the secret rules. I didn't know that breaking the rule would make Grandma uncomfortable... would make Alberto uncomfortable. Alberto "knew" the rule in that he was bound by it, but since it was a secret rule, he had never spoken it out loud nor had it overtly taught to him out loud. Only when I, in my ignorance of the family rules, had the audacity to suggest a violation of that rule, did he have an inkling that there was a rule!

Alberto's fiercely independent grandmother always asserted her continued competence despite her advancing age. In fact, as she faced the normal decline of ambulatory abilities and minor memory, she was terrified that her decline would leave her senile and helpless (as she had observed with horror, her grandparents and parents deterioration). Any hint that she was changing for the worse or mentioning of reduced competency- even signs of normal and benign aging made her very upset that she would go into a frantic and angry denial. The family had learned to defer to her when this happened. They deferred even though they were often anxious (sometimes, scared to death!) because her "independence" created dangerous situations for herself and the family- a forgotten pot cooking on the stove, shaky transit up and down the stairs, and erratic driving. Her son and daughter-in-law knew her secret fear consciously, but Alberto and his siblings obeyed the secret "rule"- never to remind Grandma of her mortality or aging, or even hint at it. My query to him to tell his grandmother to ease up while her leg healed was tantamount to asking him to betray this secret family rule.

IMPLICIT RULES- CONSEQUENCES

Every family/system has rules about communication (and behavior): who may speak up, when, and how. For example, there may be a rule that no one is allowed to directly criticize anyone- or quite commonly, that no one is allowed to openly criticize dad in particular. Then in a family meeting, if someone has a criticism of how dad is acting, s/he will present it in an abstract form rather than specifically naming dad and his behavior. The family member might not specifically complain that dad does not do chores and he should. Such rules can be transferred unknowingly and in an unhealthy manner into new groups including marriage and work. I had such an experience in one of my prior jobs. The supervisor had a specific issue with one of the staff. The staff person was not being responsible with some duties and as a result, caused impediments for other staff in doing their jobs. As we all sat in the staff meeting, the supervisor began by reiterating the general expectations and the problems that non-compliance caused. I remember pondering with great consternation, was he talking about me? Had I done something? I glanced at the other staff people, and saw the same looks of confusion- had they done something? Finally, as he continued with additional issues of



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

concern, I recognized what the specific issue and the actual person to whom this was all directed towards, that is, the person who had been irresponsible. Of course, that person had a look of blissful ignorance and innocence on his face! That's another story! Somehow the supervisor had transferred a rule of communication (probably from his family experiences)- not to directly confront someone with criticism to the work situation. Because this was ineffective, other staff were stuck with the irresponsible co-worker and had to make up for his deficiencies. Resentment grew and a distrust that the administration valued their concerns developed. The staff eventually became acclimated (seduced... intimidated...) to the secret rule since they were "punished" by the supervisor whenever they broke the rule by criticizing specifically. When I assumed a supervisory position, it was difficult to get others to break the rule and be direct, or to accept my direct feedback and expectations. The consequence of the prior dysfunction made it more difficult to have an honest and healthier organization with greater personal accountability and responsibility.

Some of these kinds of rules are explicit and recognized by all members; others are implicit, and are generally only recognized when they are broken. Implicit rules tend to be extremely powerful and problematic. They are often harmful. Identifying the implicit rules and eliminating dysfunctional rules and clarifying well-intended rules are important to positive relationships. Alberto was bound by such an implicit rule and it caused him and others in the family great distress. In fact, it jeopardized the physical safety of his grandmother and others in the family. The otherwise straightforward and logical rules and boundaries of discipline become harmed as well, if there are secret nuances and exceptions to those rules and boundaries.

Children learn that they are to ask for help if something is too hard for them to do on their own but are stymied with the secret rule- but do not "interrupt" mom if she is in a bad mood. Children are encouraged to be open and candid with their parents with their concerns without fear, but are blocked by the mood exception- better not bring anything difficult up to dad when he's stressed from work. Children are taught to emulate their parents and treat everyone with respect but another secret rule confuses them- their parents hold the exception to the rule if they feel wronged (the self-righteous exception) and thus feel justified to be disrespectful to others. Children are expected to do their chores but the secret "school priority" rule interferes- that they don't have to do the chores if there is a school function to attend or homework to do, even if there had been time to do chores and the child had wasted the time with television, video games, or other fooling around. Often parents hold children to these secret rules while having amnesia about the existence of the rules themselves! And then, be upset that the child didn't interrupt and bring up the earlier concern that they now see is important (or was important) and now has negative consequences, or be surprised at their children's self-righteous indignation and sense of being wronged, or that their children are nonchalant about getting chores done.

RITUALS- OF TURKEY LEGS

Every family/system also has rituals (sets and patterns of behavior) that members are required to follow. Like rules, some are implicit rather than explicit, and some are harmful, while others serve the system. The father and mother putting the children to bed every night (bath, brushing teeth, putting on PJ's, reading a book, tucking in, placement of snugglies, etc.) is an explicit ritual that serves the system in that it helps both the children and their parents feel connected to each other. It also is a transition ritual to move from the waking to the sleeping world. This ritual serves to increase communication and self-esteem. Rituals give security to its members. Identifying and creating positive rituals lead to better communication and cohesion. Some rituals have origins that



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

have lost meaning, yet still direct and even restrict functioning arbitrarily. Such rituals should be examined to determine current applicability. Still other rituals are so ingrained that they continue to define current functioning despite the loss of their original relevance.

A classic story is the turkey legs story to illustrate forgotten origins. The children of the family come to realize that the cooks of the family always cut the turkey legs off and roasted them and the rest of the turkey separately for the Thanksgiving dinner. Their curiosity as to its origins of this odd ritual, led them to ask their parents, "Why do we cut off the turkey legs when we cook Thanksgiving turkey?" Their parents, the assorted aunts and uncles, replied, "Why, that's what we always do. That's what your grandparents always did, so we just kept up the tradition." Unsatisfied, the children went to their grandmother and great-aunt, and asked them, "Why do we cut off the turkey legs when we cook Thanksgiving turkey?" Their grandmother responded, "That's how our mom- your great-grandmother always cooked it, so we just continued the family tradition." That still didn't make sense, so they found their great-grandmother who was sitting quietly in the corner, enjoying her large extended family. "Nana," they asked, "Why do we cut off the turkey legs when we cook Thanksgiving turkey? Everybody says they learned that from you as the family tradition." Nana smiled and replied in a quiet but strong voice, "I don't know about everybody else, but I didn't have a pan that was big enough!"

Some of the rituals and traditions of families and of discipline come from older times where the family and social situations were very different. What developed helped families and communities survive the demands of the times. However, as the demands of the times have changed, some rituals and traditions have been carried forward without any examination for their current relevance. For example, unquestioned obedience to the authority and demands of adult authority figures may have been vital to learning the social behavior for survival in less civilized communities and times, when a mistake could be literally fatal. Having a question or an alternative perspective was considered defiant and blasphemous. In modern times, when critical thinking in a democratic and evolving society is vital to success, then questioning rules, rituals, and tradition (questioning authority- the mantra of the 60's hippie generation!) becomes important to meeting the new demands and challenges of a never experienced and often unanticipated changing world community.

RITUALS- ROCKET TECHNOLOGY

On the other hand, some traditions or rituals are so ingrained into the fabric of our society that they cannot be altered without major and unacceptable consequences. The space shuttle and the Roman war chariot is such an example. The space shuttle technology is among the most advanced in modern times (despite two horrific accidents). The space shuttle has a large rocket to which it is attached that provides some of the major propulsion for its liftoff. Interestingly, it is only so wide in diameter. A rocket wider in diameter would hold a greater supply of fuel, thus providing greater power upon liftoff. Despite this, the size is smaller than it could be. The reason for the smaller diameter is that the rocket is built at a factory that is far from Cape Canaveral and needs to be transported by train there. The trains sometimes need to go through tunnels only slightly wider than the width of the train itself which limits the diameter the rocket can be. So, why are the trains (and tunnels) only that wide? Why are the tracks that wide- a bit wider than a meter or almost four feet? The tracks are that wide because the first trains in America were built by the early wagon and carriage makers in America, and they used the same dimensions they used for the wagons and carriages. Where did they get those measurements? Well, those early American wagon and



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

carriage makers were from Great Britain and they were continuing the style and make (and measurements) of the British wagons and carriage makers. And, Great Britain wagon and carriage measurements? In the roads of Great Britain, were ruts that any vehicle with either wider or shorter axles than the ruts could not transverse without the axles breaking, so all wagons and carriages were built with axles that were the same width as the ruts. And the ruts? The ruts turned out to have been worn into the roads by the great Roman war chariots. Many of the early roads of Europe were built as part of the conquest of Europe by the Roman Empire's legions. So, why did the Roman war chariot have those particular measurements? The Roman war chariot was designed (from over two thousand years ago) to fit the two horses that side by side were required to pull it. So in other words, some of the most advanced technology in the world- the rocket that propels the space shuttle out of earth's gravitational pull, was determined by the width of two Italian horses' butts over two thousand years ago!

Aside from being a cute story (less cute with the recent Columbia shuttle disaster), it illustrates a tradition or present day consequence of a very old set of circumstances. However, while it would be relatively easy to get a larger pan so as not to need to cut off the turkey legs, although the roads are now paved and there are not the same ruts that force axles to be any particular widths, to change the widths of the thousands of miles of railroad tracks, retool and re-engineer the axles of all the existing train engines and railcars, and to widen all the train tunnels in America would be impractical, not to mention outrageous and needlessly expensive.

Certain traditions, rituals, and developed behaviors and other expressions from older demands although no longer functionally relevant, the traditions, rituals, and developed behaviors and other expressions may have become so integrated and intertwined into current functioning that they cannot be easily dropped. The cost to benefit ratio is too high or it's change is not time or energy efficient. For example, if a family may have established over many years that the father is the head of the household especially with regard to matters of discipline. While it may be beneficial overall for the family to re-balance its authoritative hierarchy between the mother and father, the situation may be so demanding that it is not possible or prudent. If a teenager is in crisis... out of control with drug, sexual, or violent behavior, the situation may not tolerate the time and energy to resort the family dynamic. Then, using the authority (or even authoritarian intimidation) of the father to stop an imminent disaster becomes acceptable **now**, even if it is part of the family dysfunction and needs to be changed for long-term health. The immediate crisis- life threatening behavior endangering the teenager (which even may have been precipitated by the family dysfunction including the father's domination) needs immediate intervention, which arguably justifies "allowing" the old dysfunction to exist and be exercised (the father stepping in and demanding obedience) if it stops the immediate danger to the teenager.

IDENTIFYING RULES AND RITUALS

Identifying the implicit rules and rituals of a family enables a family (parents, in particular) to accept and maintain the positive ones, have choice as to whether to keep the benign ones, eliminate the dysfunctional ones, and helps to clarify the well-intended but problematic ones. Rules and rituals when positive give stability, predictability, and security to family members, especially children. When parents try to enforce (discipline around) harmful rules and rituals, children are triplely hurt. First, they are harmed as they learn non-sensical rules and rituals that take time, energy, and spirit from them both during childhood and potentially for life (and into subsequent generations). Second, they are harmed as they are punished unreasonably for their "violations" of



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

such rules and rituals. And, third, their sense of logic and reason becomes distorted, perhaps chronically, as the secrets and implicit meanings are denied and a psuedo-logic is indoctrinated into them. What are your rules and rituals in the family? What rules and rituals did you bring into the family from your family of origin? What are you communicating? Question the authority of what was given to you from your family of origin. Question your own authority!



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

Chapter 10

PLAY THIS GAME AND EVERYONE LOSES

Dad: Damn, look at this credit card bill!

Mom: (is he mad?)

Dad: What are all these charges?

Mom: Uh, what charges? (Is he really asking about the charges? Or, is he getting mad?)

Dad: You need to watch your spending.

Mom: Yes, I'll watch my spending. (Agree with him... maybe that will calm him down)

Dad: You always spend too much money with those credit cards!

Mom: I know... I know... I'm sorry. (Please... please don't get mad)

Kid: There's a nasty smell in the bedroom.

Dad: What!? What did you say? Nasty smell? Where? What did you do now!?

Virginia Satir, a well-known family theorist and therapist believed that good communication led to high self-esteem. When someone speaks to you in a manner that conveys his/her respect of you, that conveys that he or she cares about you, and that your feelings and thoughts are important to him or her, then your self-esteem rises. Poor communication, on the other hand causes you to lose self-esteem. Communication that conveys disrespect, a disregard of your feelings and thoughts implies that you have no basic worth. Poor communication that harms self-esteem does not have to be obviously and overtly negative, that is you don't need to call someone stupid to make them feel stupid; you don't need to call someone incompetent to imply that you think they are incompetent. While name-calling clearly can be harmful, there are also insidious other styles of communication that can be even more harmful. In healthy families with healthy individuals, good communication builds self-esteem. In unhealthy families with unhealthy individuals, poor communication constantly tears down the self-esteem of every member. Communication is not only the verbal messages that are given to each other, but also the nonverbal messages. Nonverbal messages include tone of voice, facial expressions, body language, actions, and lack of actions or behavior. Individuals often end up taking characteristic roles in communication dyads and triads. Many of the roles expressed in "games" that are played between members are dysfunctional. For example, there is the rescue game. In the rescue game, one person agrees although he/she may not really agree, but does so in order to placate the other person or people -- the avoiding conflict hopefully. A second person will disagree and blame someone else. Finding this distressful, a third person will do something that will distract person everyone's attention away from the conflict.

In the vignette above, as mom and dad are talking about the credit card bill, the tension starts to increase between them. The dad begins to get angry looking at the expenses and says angrily, "You need to watch your spending." The phrase "You need to..." implies clearly that she has not done so -- that she needed to, but obviously didn't... a slam against her competency in managing money. Her self-esteem goes down. The mother hurriedly agrees, "Yes, I'll watch my spending," hoping this quick agreement will prevent an argument. In the tone of the response, a little bit of anxiety or fear is expressed. His self-esteem is attacked as the implicit message is that his wife experiences him as a bit dangerous or unreasonable. Rather than addressing this, he gets defensive. The blaming starts, "You always spend too much money with those credit cards!" The word "always" (likewise "never" and "all the time") is restrictive, trapping, and condemning. Her self-esteem takes another blow. Still trying to placate him, she responds meekly, "I know... I know... I'm sorry." The meek



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

apology implies that he is an overbearing hurtful and insensitive ogre. Even if he is been an ogre, it is insulting to be treated as one. Strong, strong-willed, assertive... are all acceptable in his self-identification, however overbearing, hurtful, or insensitive insults or demeans his self-image. His face reddens and his eyes bulge. Sensing an ugly fight about to begin, the kid blurts out, "There's a nasty smell in the bedroom." The kid hopes that this will distract his parents from fighting; the distraction will also rescue his mother from his father's anger. Sometimes the kid is successful in distracting the anger from his mother, but unfortunately the anger may be directed at him instead. "What!? What did you say? Nasty smell? Where? What did you do now?!" Or, "Don't interrupt us when we're talking!" The kid will persist in drawing the attention to himself until he is sure that the fight between the parents will be avoided. In doing so he may infuriate both parents. The discipline that follows -- the punishments that follow are the sacrifices the child endures to prevent him other pain in the family. His self-esteem is damaged severely. In this kind of scenario, the family looks at how to discipline the child when in actuality, it is the family or the couple that needs to be disciplined about how they interact with each other. Unfortunately, in some families the acting out behavior of children that draw discipline, is actually a consequence of deeper issues within the family -- often serious conflict between the parents. Sometimes, it easier (less dangerous) for the parents to direct their attention (and their anger) toward disciplining children, than addressing the deep issues and problems in their couples relationship. The children become scapegoated for the parents' issues. In this type of situation, the discipline may "work" or not "work" on the children. However, the underlying distress and pain in the family will most likely erupt in some other manner at some other point. Play this game and everyone loses. This is not the only game that is dysfunctional. There is also the coalition game- two people placate (two agree), one person blames (disagrees); or one placates, and the other two blame. Another is the lethal game- everybody placates (acts like they agree or give in, or give up) at the expense of his or her own needs.

A healthier game -- the growth game, allows for each person to agree or disagree as he or she sees fit. Everyone is included and no one ignores his/her own needs. In the example above, the father would be able to express his anger and frustration, but without blaming and attacking his wife. He would be able to handle the insecurity that the bills cause him. He would activate internal and external processes -- a deep breath, a quick mental accounting of financial resources, and perhaps saying, "Yikes, this is a big bill!" A simple rule from couples therapy would be useful here -- avoid starting a sentence with the word "you" and instead, use "we." "You need to stop..." is an accusation and an attack. "We need to figure this out" expresses unity and joint responsibility -- and caring not only about the bill, but also about the partner. Figuring out who made which purchases would be done in a more respectful manner. The mother would be able to assert her needs, her rights, and take appropriate responsibility. Acknowledging which purchases that she made, would be an acceptance of responsibility rather than an acceptance of blame. Negotiating the priorities and the limits of expenses that can be incurred for the family becomes a practical matter as opposed to a way to assign degrees of fault -- to be forced to accept the designation of being the negligent, careless, and irresponsible one. As she is approached as a responsible member of the family partnership, a clear message of worth is given to her. Her self-esteem rises. Their interaction is more likely to be successful -- a financial plan is derived. Her interest and concern validates this concern. Her participation as a partner -- that he is not in this situation alone reassures him. His self-esteem also rises. The little boy would not have to sacrifice his own self-esteem in order to try to protect his parents from a battle. His needs would be met -- to be a little boy! He could effectively ignore the discussion or listened with interest without feeling compelled to keep his



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

parents from their interaction. He also gets to experience this parents negotiating a charged issue in a healthy manner with mutual respect. His security is increased because of his growing confidence that his parents can handle difficult situations well. This becomes his model for how he will handle interactions in his adulthood. He will have greater confidence having experienced this model. His self-esteem also grows. The growth game is only healthy game that builds self-esteem for everyone without losing self-esteem for others.

INDICATORS OF POOR COMMUNICATION

The therapeutic implication of this theory is that families need to teach themselves to communicate with respect and caring even when they are anxious, angry, or under a lot of stress. They need to be aware when the communication tears down self-esteem as well. There are certain indicators of poor communication in a family. When these indicators are recognized, then the family can activate to work on improving communication, and thus improve self-esteem within family members. If feelings are blocked or inappropriately expressed, such as crying when something happy has happened or being unable to cry when being sad, then that is a clear indication that communication work needs to be done. In the family and couples therapy that I have provided, there have been individuals who have been unable to express sadness or anger when clearly they are sad or angry. For example, occasionally I will have a man who says that he does not let himself be angry. This would be right after his wife has clearly said something hurtful and provocative. When I point out that I expected him to be angry, he denies it. "I don't let myself be angry." At that point, I have to grip my chair tightly to restrain myself from jumping up, crossing over to him and kicking him in the knees! And, then asking, "Please show me how you don't get angry, now!" Getting angry is not a choice -- is something that happens immediately and instinctively. Afterwards, then the person chooses how to respond to his/her anger and how to act, depending on training and modeling. When someone denies their anger, they also deny it to the people they interact with. The other person experiences the anger (in the facial expression, in the body language, in the tone of voice, in small action, and in the absence of action). Yet, the angry person continues to deny that they are angry. And the other person may become confused and uncertain about their own abilities to evaluate the people and the world around them. Self-esteem is harmed.

COVERT COMMUNICATION

Another indicator of poor communication is when the communication is not clear and overt. Messages have to be interpreted and interpreted from particular perspectives that may or may not be obvious. While the communication is covert, there is still the expectation that the other person will clearly understand what is actually intended. Of course, this means that there will be misinterpretations and consequences of those misinterpretations -- hurt feelings and missed connections. The symbolism of the communication is missed. In one couple that I worked with, the husband's childhood experience of being loved was defined by his mother making a hot dinner for him and his siblings and father every evening. The making of dinner was a message of love from her to the rest of the family. Now married, when he was able to get off of work early, he would go to the grocery store to shop and rush home to make a hot meal for his wife and him. When she got home, as a busy professional she often had to make some last-minute calls, send a quick fax or e-mail before settling down to dinner and the evening routine. He would call out to her, "Honey, dinner is ready." Sitting at the computer, she would call back, "Go ahead and start eating without me." Somewhat in shock, he would insist, "Come eat while it's hot." His first communication actually was the communication of caring and love in the dinner that he had made for his wife. Inadvertently, she had rejected his love. She had missed the first covert communication. Then



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

when he insisted, he had given an additional communication whose underlying message was that it was very important for her to accept his love -- that is, dinner. She missed the second communication. And, he was terribly hurt.

Shortly afterwards, when she came to dinner, he commented/complained that the dinner was cold now. The covert communication this time was that he was disappointed or hurt that she had rejected his affection -- effectively rejecting his love. Again, she missed the covert communication so she addressed the temperature of the meal! As opposed to his rising temperature! "It's not too cold." Since she missed the communication, he tried again (but not addressing his actual issue or hurt), "It doesn't taste as good when it's cold," which really meant "I really need and want you to receive my love." Since this was still covert communication, she missed it again and responded to the taste issue! "It tastes fine." At this point, she started to get impatient and upset because all the talk about the coldness and the taste of the food did not make any sense to her. However, she could tell by his tone and his facial expression that he was upset. They then proceeded to have a tense meal but not before they had a 15 minute fight about food temperature and taste! Never did they even talk about the offer of love that he had tried to make, that is, until they came to therapy later in the week.

DEAD END COMMUNICATION AND STANCES

In the previous example, the communication went around and around without ever getting anywhere. The comments and points that were made, were made over and over w/o ever getting the couple any farther along in understanding or intimacy. In closed communication, instead of continuing in an endless cycle, communication hits a dead end. "Because I say so!" "If that's what you really think." "So, you think I'm stupid or something?" "You don't really care." "No, no, never mind." These types of communication get people stuck without any place to go emotionally or intellectually. They are left holding their issues, concerns, or grievances without recourse. "Too bad." This leads to frustration and sometimes, a sense of powerlessness and bitterness. Self-esteem again is harmed. Dysfunctional rules and rituals can develop in order to help people do with their sense of powerlessness and most self-esteem. In the previous article we discussed some of these rituals and secrets that are held. Low self-esteem, in of itself is an indicator of poor communication in a family.

In order to survive the low self-esteem, individuals in the family may take on particular roles or stances. A person may take on the victim role. He/she will see him/herself as a victim of other people's actions. The basic stance is that there is nothing that the person can do to control his/her destiny. Whatever "fate" or those in control of the world (family, playground, neighborhood) decides, he or she is the victim and has to take the consequences. The victim personality will fail to see the power that he/she has been his/her world. Victims seeking the little power they feel they can have, do so through the kindness or the pity of other people. They look always to be rescued. Fortunately (or unfortunately, because it perpetuates the victim mentality), there are other individuals who take on the role of rescuers. Rescuers do not have a sense of self-esteem unless there is someone to rescue. There are professional rescuers who become human service professionals such as therapists, social workers, teachers, and the like. While rescuers love to save victims, at a deeper level they actually need victims to stay victims so that they can keep fulfilling their roles in as rescuers. Some individuals who feel always that they are under attack and subject to be blamed, become the blamers. They always blame other people for the problems of the world and the problems they themselves suffer. At the core, blamers are similar to victims in their sense of helplessness. The difference is that blamers rather than simply and passively accepting their fate,



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OUT OF THE TWILIGHT ZONE- DISCIPLINE FROM THE INSIDE OUT

loudly bemoan their fate as being caused by others. In a sense they are the loud and vocal victims! Unfortunately, as blamers accuse everyone else, they bring reprisals upon themselves. Other people get sick of their whining and begin to avoid them.

Gender stereotypes and cultural training may push some people toward particular stances. The historical weaker power of women economically and socially may guide females toward the victim role. On the other hand, the traditional role of men as dominant and as problem solvers in communities and families, tend to push them toward the computer role. The computer role is nonemotional (not unemotional) and asserts that is all is logical and rational. In the computer role, a person asserts that the other person is being emotional and irrational, unable to see the clear logic that he/she is so securely and self-righteously attuned. Again, in a couples therapy setting, I have often run across this when often a man (but sometimes, a woman) asserts that the other person is irrationally emotional, that his clear analytical thinking is superior in evaluating the dynamics and circumstances in the relationship. I find amusing when I assert to such an individual, that eliminating emotion from the dynamic is illogical! That not only is emotion of a logical component of every interaction and relationship, but that is logical to assert that a relationship without emotion is pointless. Computer types often find emotion to be overwhelming -- or at least, very difficult to handle. Eliminating it, is an attempt to keep their sense of power and control -- their self-esteem intact. Highly intellectual types will do this and present, what I call a type of "pseudo-logic." Other people call it BS!

Earlier, I gave an example of the distracter who also became a scapegoat. However, a distracter can serve the family quite well by being funny, charming, cute, or even a very high achiever or performer. His/her behavior draws the family's attention to him/herself, for better or worse for his/her self-esteem. The distracter's self-esteem becomes dependent on how well he/she can successfully draw the family's attention away from their pain or conflict. The scapegoat's, on the other hand, basic methodology is to be bad. To misbehave, be outrageous, be defiant, or otherwise disruptive in any manner to draw the attention and ire of the family towards him/her. Again, this draws the family away from its pain. The scapegoat has his/her self-esteem under constant assault as he/she draws discipline and punishment -- clear messages that he/she is bad. Ironically, the scapegoat gains a kind of perverse self-esteem at how outrageous and how disruptive -- how bad, she/he can be. Often only able to be accepted by other scapegoat types -- the bad kids, the more antisocial they are, the more status they have in the group of social outcasts.

Most people think that discipline is about affecting the behavior of children. They feel that children need to learn discipline. They look at children's behavior in isolation, and thus they discipline in isolation as well. The most important... the most effective discipline may be in the family's ability to discipline itself. The greatest cause of inappropriate children's behavior may not be some internal process in the children or some character or moral flaw in the children, but the failure of the family to discipline itself -- to discipline its own processes including its communication processes. The next article will look at the classic dysfunctional family and how it promotes dysfunctional and harmful behavior and roles in its children.