

# THE GEOMETRY OF DIALOGUE

## CHAPTER 7

### STYLES OF ACTION AND INTERACTION - THE GENESIS OF REFLEXIVITY (DIMENSION 4)

#### **7.1. Style of action and the significance of adverbs.**

The goal of building the Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model has been to see how much information about human experience, interaction and communication I can integrate under one conceptual umbrella. My exposition up to this point has been as follows. In chapter 4 I discussed various views on the structure of experiencing, and distilled from those views a template of experiencing that constitutes Dimension 1 of the Six Dimensions model. The next step in the Six Dimensions “spiral story” is that we develop an intention that represents our felt response to our experience. In chapter 5 I reviewed some recent thinking on the role of intentions in communication and presented a preliminary map of intentions that people can use as a menu to remind themselves of the wide range of possibilities that are open to us in the course of an evolving conversation.

The next step in the spiral story is that we convert our intentions into action. In the last chapter I reviewed two current books that present overviews of conversational actions and used them as a basis for developing a menu of fundamental conversational actions that we use to carry out our intentions. In what I see as continuing a line of thought developed by Searle and others, I divide the work of conversational action into overarching interpersonal intentions (to share, comfort, criticize, praise, instruct, etc.), addressed by Dimension 2, on the one hand, and relatively low-level, multi-purpose

speech actions such as listening, speaking, waiting, etc. addressed by Dimension 3, on the other. This distinction allows us to conceive of various overarching intentions being carried out by chains of simpler speech actions.

That brings us to the present stage of the Six Dimensions spiral story: styles of action, Dimension 4. Up to this point the key elements in each dimension of the model have been verbs that the reader can translate into first-person actions. In the experiencing dimension you will find observing, thinking, feeling, wanting, envisioning. In the intentions dimension you will find intending to share, to instruct, to complain, to appreciate, etc. In the action dimension you will find speaking, listening, waiting, reflecting, etc. Even though this matrix times a second matrix times a third matrix allows us to conceive of an infinite variety of conversational actions, it is still far from being a complete account of interpersonal interaction. So at this point I would like to introduce into the model the dimension of adverbs, or qualities of action and interaction, as Dimension 4.

The adverbs one can apply to conversational interaction span a large spectrum from the rather utilitarian at one end to the psychological, and then to what might be called spiritual.

Focusing on the utilitarian adverbs might lead us to pay attention to how concretely we expressed our experiencing (vs. vaguely), or how completely (vs. partially). Focusing on the psychological adverbs might lead us to pay attention to how self-inclusively we express our experience (using “I want...” rather than “They should...”), or how action-oriented-ly or thing-oriented-ly we express ourselves (using verbs to describe actions desired vs. using a noun “shorthand” such as “I want... love... respect... obedience... tolerance...,” all of which are complex streams of action that have been turned into mental ‘things’).

And finally, focusing on the spiritual adverbs might lead us to pay attention to how compassionately we listen, how patiently we negotiate, how forgivingly we receive another person’s apology.

It is not within the scope of this study to review the history of the emergence of adverbs in human language (although I am fascinated by the question of when and how

adverbs arose). I would, however, like to make one point about the tremendous power of adverbs as a human invention. The combinatorial mathematics of adverb use allows for the careful calibration of action with a modest number of words. Imagining the simplest scenario, given a hundred verbs and a hundred adverbs one can potentially use those two hundred words to come up with ten thousand two-word action descriptions on an as-needed basis. The verb-only alternative would require that one have an already established vocabulary of ten thousand distinct verbs at one's command. Getting two hundred words to do the work of ten thousand (or even just a few thousand) is a major achievement. I see the significance of this as follows: Since cooperation between people means the coordination of action, the easier it is to express fine calibrations of behavior the easier it would be to cooperate.

## **7.2. Adverbs as facilitators of self-observation and development**

A second significant feature of adverbs is that they allow us to conceive of acting upon our own actions<sup>144</sup> and of developmental progressions of skill. Thus when I think of throwing a ball, I can articulate the idea of throwing the ball clumsily or skillfully, and I can use this and similar words to mark out a path of desired development. In using adverbs in this way I am engaged in a linguistically mediated and facilitated process of self-observation. In the light of Robert Kegan's position that a growing capacity for self-observation is the central theme of human development, adverb vocabularies are deeply significant because they are one of the tools that human cultures have evolved to support the emergence of this self-observation.

I became aware of this role of adverbs over the course of several years of studying with Marshall Rosenberg, a psychologist and communication trainer. I observed Dr. Rosenberg coaching participants in many communication workshops. After about a year of this, it became clear to me that almost all of his coaching was focused on four adverbial issues. He was continually encouraging people to express themselves more completely, concretely, self-inclusively and action-oriented-ly. Here is a brief description

of each of these four issues.

- How completely did people express their experiences and wants? As do many communication trainers, he gave his students a kind of mental check list of important elements in experience, and encouraged his students to express themselves more fully, including observations, feelings, interpreting and wanting. One key problem in communication is that people leave out important elements of their experience from their self-disclosures and depend on their listeners to fill in the missing information from what is assumed to be understood by both parties. Those assumptions are often wrong.
- How concretely and specifically did people describe their experiencing? For a variety of reasons, many people express themselves in terms that are vague, generalizations or both. The person who says “You never wash the dishes!” seems to be making an emphatic argument, but in fact leaves it to their listener to translate that general remark into a specific request for help in the present, such as “I would really appreciate it if you would wash the dishes now.”
- How self-inclusively does a person describe their experience? In the hope of increasing the force of what they say, or perhaps to shield themselves from hostile rejoinders, many people express their distresses as if their own involvement did not matter. The person who says “A real friend would know to call.” is obviously angry and disappointed with their conversant, but the anger and disappointment are not acknowledged as the speaker’s experience. The “I” of the speaker is entirely absent in the surface structure of the statement. This may shield the speaker from a harsh rejoinder but it also makes it much more difficult for the conversant to offer amends or apologies. To say “I am angry and disappointed that you didn’t call me.” leaves the speaker more vulnerable (their feelings may not be acknowledged, or may be rejected) but also opens the way for possible reconciliation.
- How action-oriented-ly does a person express their wants and needs? English, and European languages generally, favor nouns and adjectives over verbs and adverbs to such a degree that people who speak English continually convert streams of action into mental

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<sup>144</sup>I am indebted to Rom Harré for introducing me to the idea of acting upon one’s own action. He describes this as part of the process through which a person develops a sense of self. Harré, *Personal Being*, 213.

‘things’: “walking” (a verb) becomes getting some “exercise” (used as a noun), taking off one’s hat becomes showing respect (a verb now tied to some sort of ‘thing’). What we often want from other people is that they behave differently toward us in some significant way. But our language of substances and their qualities does not help us negotiate with the world for different actions. Instead of saying “I want some respect...” an irate parent might evoke a more cooperative response by saying “Please shut the door quietly.” Dr. Rosenberg continually encouraged his students to shift to a more action-oriented way of thinking and conversing.

In observing Dr. Rosenberg’s coaching I had performed an informal kind of factor analysis, i.e., I had identified four clusters of his responses to students and gradually discerned the underlying theme of each cluster. It was (and is) a matter of disagreement between Dr. Rosenberg and myself that he did not announce and explain these four adverbial criteria in a more explicit way. (In my own classes I explain my coaching criteria to my students in advance of making any comments or suggestions about their communication styles.)

### **7.3. Adverbs and reflexivity**

Being able to identify these four qualities of communicative action was a major step forward for me in my development both as a person and as communication trainer. I believe this is because these four adverbs allowed me, as I proposed at the beginning of this section, to conceive of acting on my own communicative actions<sup>145</sup> and to conceive of developmental progressions of talking and listening skills (along the lines of “more completely,” “more concretely,” “more self-inclusively,” and “more action-oriented-ly.”)

Up to this point in my narrative about the Six Dimensions model the theme of self-observation has been implicit. The dimensions concerning experiencing (#1), intending (#2) and acting (#3) all imply a large amount of standing back and looking at one’s own processes and activities, but the self-observation theme is not directly stated. By introducing the adverbs into the model as Dimension 4 and including “awarely” as one of the qualities of action, the model begins to describe the self-awareness which is always present (to some greater or lesser degree) in living. Dimension 5, the next step in

the spiral (to be explored in the next chapter), is entirely about the process and methods of self-observation and exploratory self-questioning. While cyberneticists are fond of talking about the way that living systems “steer” themselves toward goals,<sup>146</sup> it is not so clear how living systems as complex as human persons “steer” themselves toward fulfillment. I am convinced that adverbs are an important part of the answer to this question, because they are one major way that people bring their own activities into focus.

#### **7.4. Resources for a menu of adverbial options**

The four qualities of good communication that were (and are) the basis of Dr. Rosenberg’s coaching are not unique to his approach. Many communication teachers and therapists advocate one or more similar style changes,<sup>147</sup> but often see these particular style changes as part of a longer list of recommendations. There is no consensus on what constitutes the subject matter of communication,<sup>148</sup> and the same is true with regard to *good* communication. But although there is not a consensus, there is certainly a convergence toward central themes, as was evident in my review of several communication self-help books in chapter 4. These themes suggest what may be the most important style changes to aim for. If one accepts (for the sake of discussion) that all the advice in the communication training and self-help books is good advice, the human limits on time and effort press a person to ask “Out of all this advice, what are the most important qualities to aim for?” For example, a recent popular book on communication and negotiation, *Getting What You Want*,<sup>149</sup> consists of a list of one hundred recommendations (many of which I agree with). It is not clear to me how anyone could carry around a list of one hundred recommendations in their mind while trying to communicate or negotiate!

I believe the question of priorities is a question worth wrestling with, even if there

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<sup>145</sup>Harré, *Personal Being*, 213.

<sup>146</sup>Felix Geyer, “The Challenge of Sociocybernetics,” Paper presented at the 13th World Congress of Sociology, Bielefeld, July 18-24, 1994.

<sup>147</sup>For example, Matthew McKay, Martha Davis and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: The Communication Skills Book* (Oakland, Calif.: New Harbinger, 1983).

<sup>148</sup>A brief comment about the lack of consensus regarding the teaching of communication appears in W. Barnett Pearce, *Interpersonal Communication: Making Social Worlds* (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1994), xv.

<sup>149</sup>Kare Anderson, *Getting What You Want* (New York: Dutton, 1993).

are angles from which it can be seen to be unanswerable.<sup>150</sup> Because each person is different and each situation is different, “good communication” and “what is most important” do not appear to be a stable targets of knowledge which one can approach by a series of successive approximations. There will always be a large element of creative improvising involved. Keeping these limits in mind, in the remainder of this chapter I present a summary of the most widely advocated communication style changes, translated into a list of adverbs and arranged in what seems to me to be an approximate order of ascending difficulty.

### **7.5. Suggestions from the work of Bandler and Grinder**

For the past twenty-five years the psychological researchers Richard Bandler and John Grinder have been seeking to translate visionary ideas about the social and linguistic construction of reality into actual methods of psychotherapy and training. Or at least that is one reasonable way of summing up their intentionally provocative work, as long as it not offered as a conclusive description. In the 1970s they founded a psychological school of thought and practice entitled “neuro-linguistic programming” (NLP) and subsequently inspired a large group of psychotherapists to write books exploring the possibilities opened up by this new point of view. The history of neuro-linguistic programming has been marked by a lot of interesting twists and turns as NLP developed from a brilliant book into a many-faceted school of psychotherapy and personal development , but I will not attempt to describe that history here. Instead, I will limit my focus to Bandler and Grinder’s (hereinafter referred to as B & G) first project and first book, *The Structure of Magic*,<sup>151</sup> which is focused specifically on patterns of language use in psychotherapy.

Inspired by the development of transformational grammar, which is concerned with the deep structure that underlies the surface variations of language, B & G set out to describe the ‘deep structure’ of good psychotherapy. They made an intensive study of three renown therapists of the time who were very different in their approaches to psychotherapy: Fritz Perls, a principal founder of Gestalt therapy, Virginia Satir, a

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<sup>150</sup>For example, my use of the phrase “the most important style changes to aim for” does not address the issues of “important for whom” or “important toward what ends.” The goal of encouraging mutuality and cooperation is assumed.

<sup>151</sup>Richard Bandler and John Grinder, *The Structure of Magic*, vol. 1 (Palo Alto: Science and Behavior Books, 1975).

pioneer in family therapy, and Milton Erickson, a psychiatrist and clinical hypnotherapist. Even though these three psychotherapists used very different frames of reference, B & G discovered that there were great similarities in the patterns of conversations that the three had with their clients/patients.<sup>152</sup>

Certain themes in conversation appear to facilitate positive change in psychotherapy. B & G describe these themes in *The Structure of Magic* with the intention of making them generally available, so that therapists can more effectively facilitate change in their clients and, to some unspecified degree, so that lay people can facilitate their own internal and interpersonal changes. One of the creative aspects of NLP is that by focusing on language processes and the representation of experience rather than alleged disease processes, NLP has been able to articulate a more universal vision of improved functioning.<sup>153</sup> Many NLP-related books quietly contradict the “expert doctor/ignorant and diseased patient” mindset that still pervades much of the world of psychotherapy, in spite of decades of effort to shift perspectives.

For B & G, the central problem in living is understood as people withdrawing into their linguistic pictures of life (stories, formulas) and losing touch with the actual process of living. The purpose of psychotherapy is therefore to draw people back into vivid contact with themselves and others. As B & G put it,

...we do not operate directly on the world in which we live, but rather ... we create models or maps of the world and use these maps to guide our behavior.<sup>154</sup>

and

For the therapist to challenge the Deep Structure [of the way clients tell their life stories] is equivalent to demanding that the client mobilize his [sic] resources to re-connect his linguistic model with his world of experience. In other words, the therapist here is challenging the client’s assumption that his linguistic model is reality.<sup>155</sup>

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<sup>152</sup>Surprisingly, *The Structure of Magic* does not give the details of the research, only the results. One description of the research appears in Joseph O’Connor and John Seymour, *Introducing Neuro-Linguistic Programming* (London: Mandala, 1990), chapter 1.

<sup>153</sup>Richard Bandler’s *Using Your Brain - For a CHANGE* (Moab, Utah: Real People Press, 1985) embodies this “power to everyone” attitude.

<sup>154</sup>Bandler and Grinder, *Structure of Magic*, 2.

<sup>155</sup>*Ibid.*, 46.

Analysis of the recorded therapy sessions of the three psychotherapists mentioned above revealed to B & G that there were three main problematic processes in the clients' representation of and communication about their life situations. B & G describe these as deletion, distortion and generalization.<sup>156</sup>

**Deletion.** Client's would leave out significant chunks of information, and the omissions often served to defend the client's dysfunctional framing of their experience.

**Distortion.** Clients would distort or twist their experience to fit the model of life they had created. One of the most significant distortions was to turn streams of activity performed by the client, for example, divorcing, deciding, or avoiding, into nominalizations such as divorce, decision, or avoidance. This translation into nouns makes choosing and changing hard to imagine because it make the processes like the ones mentioned seen like they "are just happening" or "have already happened" rather than being part of the ongoing stream of the clients' own action and interaction.

A second significant distortion (it's a deletion, too) is the disappearing "I": to omit mention of oneself as the experiencer of one experience. For example, saying "Things should be different at home." instead of "I want my kids to behave differently." This, too, makes it difficult to imagine negotiating new patterns of interaction with the significant others of one's life, since the problem or conflict is represented as all "over there."

Presuppositions that lie under the surface of the client's language use are a third significant distortion of experience. For example, the statement "There's no point in my applying for the new job at work." may be the tip of an iceberg of assumptions that includes, "*Since I'm no good at public speaking*, there's no point in my applying for the new job at work." The unstated assumption may or may not be true. We tend to make the assumptions that fit our dominant model or story, but in making those assumptions we may create self-fulfilling prophecies that perpetuate an unsatisfying way of relating to life.

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<sup>156</sup>Unfortunately, although B & G are critical of nominalizing (turning actions into mental "things"), they express their ideas in a heavily nominalized vocabulary. I would have preferred for them to write of deleting, distorting and generalizing, in order to keep alive in our minds the idea that these are actions that people are performing and therefore could perform otherwise!

**Generalization** can often indicate a retreat from engagement with the details of interaction, and the impoverishment of the client's picture of his or her world. The statement "You never wash the dishes!" paired with the response "You're always nagging me when you know I've had a hard day." sets the stage for each person to retreat even further into their stereotyping of the other. In generalizing, we remove from mental view all the counter-instances that might hold the key to the new behavior we want either from ourselves or from others.

To sum up, Bandler and Grinder's observations of psychotherapy strongly suggest that as clients picture their experience, deleting, distorting and generalizing are three key actions that keep clients stuck in their problems by making their current life seem inevitable and making alternative possibilities seem unimaginable. B & G's great discovery was that therapists operating from very different frames of reference engaged in similar conversational transactions with their clients as the therapists worked to confront and redirect the clients' distorted and impoverished representations of their experience.

After I became familiar with Bandler and Grinder's research, I was delighted to see how much their conclusions support the conclusions that I had reached over two years of informally observing Dr. Rosenberg coach students in communication skill workshops. I believe that B & G's work suffers, however, from being expressed in language that is too critical. If one translates B & G's language from diagnosing problematic behaviors to recommending styles of communicative action, criticizing "deletion" becomes advocating that people express themselves "more completely," criticizing "generalization" becomes advocating that people express themselves "more concretely and specifically," and criticizing "distortion" becomes (among other things) advocating that people express themselves "more self-inclusively" and "more action-oriented-ly." And in fact, that is just the role that B & G see effective therapists playing, although the advocacy in therapy is usually implicit. (I interpret continually asking a person to be more specific to be an implicit advocacy of communicating more specifically.)

The significance of Bandler and Grinder's early work, summarized above, for the Six Dimensions project is that they were trying to identify the underlying essential themes of good psychotherapy. These themes turned out to be complementary responses to the

basic ways that clients' misrepresent their experience, both to themselves and to others. In describing these themes B & G can be seen as advocating particular styles (adverbs) of communicative action for clients, for therapists and for everyone. This is because the issue of accuracy or genuineness in the representation of one's experience cuts across all of our social role boundaries. It is as much about everyday life as it is about psychotherapy.

In searching for what is truly essential in the client/therapist conversation, Bandler and Grinder also address the issue of priorities that I mentioned above. As teachers and students (and humans) we need, given the limits of time, to try to work on the most important issues first. My goal in creating the Six Dimensions/Five Transformations model is to do in relation to communication training something parallel to what B & G did in relation to the practice of psychotherapy. In organizing the materials of communication research into six lists, which in principle could each be infinite, I continually try to push the most fruitful, important and widely recommended items to the top of each list. This inevitably involves subjective judgment on my part, but in each case I try to test my subjective judgments against the work of other researchers, especially researchers who try to summarize the best in their field. On this basis I have incorporated the essential themes identified by Bandler and Grinder, and by Rosenberg, into my list of recommended adverbs of better communication.

(Given that B & G drew a large part of their inspiration from Gestalt therapy and General Semantics, there are many other authors and psychotherapists who have made similar recommendations. But I do not believe it would carry forward the current discussion for me to go into the history of these ideas.)

### **7.6. Levels of abstraction in psychotherapy and teaching**

Using the frame of reference laid out by Bandler and Grinder, it is possible to see that one level of psychotherapy is for the therapist to challenge the clients particular deletings and distortings, so that the client can see new possibilities. Another, more difficult, level is for the therapist to name those processes and to help the client become

aware of how much they may be habitually deleting, distorting and generalizing,<sup>157</sup> so that the client can make changes in conversational and representational style that apply in many contexts. These two levels of abstraction are central in parenting and teaching, as well.<sup>158</sup> And they are both at work in the Six Dimensions model. I am both recommending specific adverbs and inviting people to understand the overall role that adverbs play in helping us conceive of our style of action and steer our actions toward fulfillment. (One drawback of this approach, from my view, is that many people may have difficulty shifting back and forth between those two levels of abstraction.)

### **7.7. Carl Rogers' view of the essential qualities**

The work of Carl Rogers is especially relevant to my effort to create a menu of qualities of fulfilling communicative action. First of all, he was consciously looking for the essential qualities of supportive communication. Second, he argued that the qualities of good communication in the psychotherapy setting are the main qualities of all growth-promoting relationships. And finally, he went to great lengths to test his personal inferences about the nature of growth-enhancing communication, and cooperated with many other researchers to carry out these tests. One of the many exemplary aspects of Rogers' career was the way he combined the role of a caring therapist striving to be a supportive presence in the lives of others with the role of a scientific researcher looking for publicly verifiable knowledge.

In my analysis of adverbs, presented above, I suggested that adverbs related to communication can be viewed as spread out on a spectrum from the pragmatic to the psychological to the spiritual. The qualities identified by Rosenberg and NLP appear to me to be primarily pragmatic and psychological, and seem to apply most readily to self-expression. The qualities identified by Rogers appear to me to be more psychological and even spiritual, and to apply most readily to nurturing and listening to others. (I will say more about the spiritual element below.)

Rogers' work is linked at a deep level to the work of Bandler and Grinder several

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<sup>157</sup>This would be an example of what Gregory Bateson called "deutero-learning." See Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics*, 263.

<sup>158</sup>For an extended examination of levels of abstraction in parenting, teaching psychotherapy, and human development, see Kegan, *The Evolving Self* and *In Over Our Heads*.

decades later in that all used tape recorders as instruments of empirical research. To understand the significance of this, one has to remember that until the advent of tape recorders, the main intellectual tool for understanding the dynamics of psychotherapy was the case study, a narrative written in retrospect by the therapist. This meant that the reader received a highly edited, highly summarized and often highly ideologized version of what had happened, even when the writer had the very best intentions of telling the truth, (which, unfortunately, is not always the case).<sup>159</sup> It was difficult, if not impossible, for another researcher to look at a given case from a different angle, because all the information that might support a different view would probably have been left out. The wide-spread introduction of recording equipment in the 1940s and 1950s fundamentally changed the boundaries of what kind of research was possible concerning the dynamics of psychotherapy. As Rogers writes,

I was at last able to scrounge equipment for recording my and my students' interviews. I cannot exaggerate the excitement of our learnings as we clustered about *the machine that enabled us to listen to ourselves*, playing over and over some puzzling point at which the interview clearly went wrong, or those moments in which the client moved significantly forward.<sup>160</sup> (my italics)

(The introduction of the tape recorder into psychotherapy research is, I believe, as significant as the introduction of the microscope into biological research. For the therapists it represented an entirely new form of technology-assisted self-observation.)

Rogers framed his fundamental hypothesis as follows: "Individuals have within themselves vast resources for self-understanding, and for altering their self-concepts, basic attitudes and self-directed behavior; these resources can be tapped if a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided."<sup>161</sup> Thus Rogers and his colleagues went looking for those "facilitative psychological attitudes." What they found is the now famous trio of genuineness, acceptance and empathy (actively expressed empathic understanding).

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<sup>159</sup>For a discussion of this issue, see Jeffrey Masson, *Against Therapy* (New York: Athenium, 1988)

<sup>160</sup>Rogers, *A Way of Being*, 138.

In giving a brief summary of these three attitudes I am going to take the liberty of translating Rogers' nouns and adjectives into adverbs. Although Rogers was devoted to facilitating positive change and to a process vision of being a person, he expressed his ideas in the language of his era, a language which emphasized (and still does) fixed objects and their stable qualities. In translating wonderful nouns such as "acceptance" into wonderful adverbs such as "acceptingly," I hope to bring these qualities more within people's reach. It is easier for me to imagine myself "listening more acceptingly" than it is for me to imagine myself "adopting an attitude of acceptance" (notice the two nouns). A process vision of being a person strongly suggests that virtues are adverbial, that compassion, for example, consists in a thousand different actions performed *compassionately*. (I doubt that we can ever give up nouns completely and I would not even try. Most of my favorite adverbs are built on nouns. What I believe we can do with great benefit is to shift the emphasis in our speaking and thinking from nouns to verbs and adverbs, to streams of action and styles of action.)

**Communicating more genuinely** is the first of the three activities on the part of therapists that appear to help clients grow and change. In every human culture there is a tension between the social role playing demanded of people and people's actual feelings, desires and experiences. Rogers saw the main source of psychological pain in life as the product of people learning to play their social roles so well (responding to the rewards of acceptance from others) that they fell out of touch altogether with their actual experiencing. So one major step toward growth and inner healing is to get back in touch with all the parts of one's experience that for one reason or another one may have pushed out of awareness. Congruence, as used by Rogers, means the congruence of experience, awareness and expression. To the degree that the therapist can be present without a facade, to that degree the therapist can, by example, encourage the client to be present without a facade, to face and work through their troubling feelings and experiences. This contagious honesty is also a key element in friendship and parenting, and it serves to counteract our vulnerability to using denial as a way of coping with our life difficulties.

**Communicating more acceptingly** has to do with therapist's response to the

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<sup>161</sup>Ibid., 115.

client's problems and the client's self-disclosure. Rogers used the phrase "unconditional positive regard" to try to express his vision of acceptance and caring. By an attitude of concern for the client and faith in the inner potential of the client and at the same time not judging, condemning, correcting or steering, the therapist creates an emotional 'space' in which the client can face their experiences, failures, compromises, mistakes, etc. without being overwhelmed by loss of self-esteem. This, too, is an element in the best of friendships and the best of parenting. Freed from the need to keep up appearances and avoid punishment and criticism, we can better acknowledge and learn from whatever is going on inside of us and in our lives. Freed from the need to defend our dysfunctional behaviors, we can actually look at them, and get beyond the need to repeat them. But these are hard things to do alone. As Rogers states, "...as persons are accepted and prized, they tend to develop a more caring attitude toward themselves."<sup>162</sup> This interpersonal vision of how people come to care about themselves has received a great deal of confirmation in recent decades from the "object relations" studies of human development and psychotherapy.<sup>163</sup>

**Empathizing more responsively** is my translation into verbs of Rogers' idea of empathic understanding. By this Rogers means more than just that the therapist accurately but silently understands the thoughts and feelings of the client from the client's point of view. The additional element is that the therapist expresses back to the client whatever it is that the therapist has been able to understand so that the client knows that he or she has been understood. And if the therapist's understanding is wrong, the client can have the satisfaction of correcting it. Here again, I see Rogers' ideas as having been confirmed by "object relations"-oriented thinking on the role of a "mirroring" other (usually the mother) in early childhood development.<sup>164</sup> Basically, the object relationists assert that we learn to pay attention to ourselves because someone pays attention to us,

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<sup>162</sup>Ibid.

<sup>163</sup>See, for example, Sheldon Cashdan, *Object Relations Therapy: Using the Relationship* (New York: Norton, 1988), chaps 1-3.

<sup>164</sup>I regret to report that I have not come across any dialogues between Rogerians and Object Relationists or advocates of Kohut's self psychology. These two latter groups tend to cite only writers in their own schools. For a discussion of empathy and the mirroring other from a Kohutian perspective, see Crayton E. Rowe, Jr. and David S. Mac Isaac, *Empathic Attunement* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1991), 41.

and we then internalize that attention-giving care-giver and make her/him a central part of our personality. Although most Rogerian therapists would probably shrink from the idea that they are new parents for their clients, the evidence of early childhood development suggest that they are. The transaction proposed here has nothing to do with the alleged transference to the therapist of the client's alleged sexual desire for their opposite-sex parent; it has to do with the idea that we learn to believe in ourselves because an important someone believes in us and we take their belief "to heart" (as the colloquial expression puts it). Rogers sums this up by saying "As persons are empathetically heard, it becomes possible for them to listen more accurately to the flow of [their] inner experiencings."<sup>165</sup>

In summarizing these essentials of Rogers' vision, practice and confirming research, I have made a minor shift in perspective because it seems to me that "counselor qualities" or "facilitative psychological attitudes" can be understood more fruitfully as styles of action. I believe that my summary is true to the original. I also believe that Rogers would probably agree with and even approve of my translation, since from a theoretical point of view counselor qualities can easily be seen as an abstraction of styles of action. From my coaching, encouraging, training perspective, translating counselor qualities into styles of action is a crucial step in helping people embody those very qualities.

#### **7.8. Dimension 4: An adverbial agenda for communicating more satisfyingly**

In seeking to develop a "teaching menu" of the most significant adverbial qualities of good communication, I have reviewed the research of several scholars who themselves were trying to understand the most significant qualities of good communication, both in and out of the psychotherapy setting. The resulting combined list of adverbs, shown below, which I have arranged in clusters of related qualities, closely parallels Brammer's summary of the characteristics of the helper as growth facilitator, which attempts to summarize a wide range of research on the topic.<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>165</sup>Rogers, *A Way of Being*, 116.

<sup>166</sup>Brammer, *The Helping Relationship*, chap. 3. Some of the overlap is due to the fact that Brammer cites Rogers, but he cites many other researchers as well.

Although the topic of interpersonal communication will always include a large unique and subjective element for each person, this convergence of lists allows me, first, to test my intuitions, observations and hunches against the combined research of many other researchers, and second, to feel confident that I am passing on the best available advice (at least for people from European cultures<sup>167</sup>). If the qualities of action on the list are difficult to master, at least we have the satisfaction of knowing that we are working on the essentials of good communication, good relationships and a fulfilling way of being a person.

At every step of the way, I try to reconceptualize these ideal styles of communication as developmental gradients. By translating the “qualities of an effective growth facilitator” into more approachable “styles of action” I hope to put these various noble qualities onto everyone’s “possibility menu.” For example, in relation to various of the qualities of action on the following list, I could frame a true sentence beginning with “Right now I could learn to express myself a little bit more...” And in relation to other qualities I could frame a sentence beginning with that “Right now I could learn to listen a little bit more...”

1. **More completely and richly** - describing a full range of the aspects of my experiencing, a preliminary parsing of which might include observing, thinking, feeling, wanting, envisioning and intending.
2. **More concretely and specifically** - giving more details and avoiding abstractions and generalizations unless the context actually requires them.
3. **More self-inclusively and person-inclusively** - using I-statements to locate myself inside of my experience and using you-statements rather than it-statements to summarize and reflect your experience.
4. **More action-oriented-ly** - using verbs and adverbs rather than nouns to describe what you and I are doing and how we are doing it.

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<sup>167</sup>To the degree that our multi-cultural environment becomes a low-context environment, with less of a single background of shared understanding, advice to express oneself more fully may be good advice for everyone. For a comments supporting this point of view see Lock, “Metaphenomena and change,” 113, and Littlejohn’s summary of Basil Bernstein’s concept of the “elaborated code” style of communication “in groups in which perspectives are not shared.”, Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication*, 198.

5. **More honestly**, sincerely, genuinely, congruently - allowing myself to be known by others, avoiding deception, facades and rigid role-playing.
6. **More acceptingly**, respectfully, caringly, warmly, forgivingly - relinquishing punishment, belittling, judgment and coercion as ways of relating.
7. **More empathically and understandingly** - making the effort to see your world and your experience as I imagine it would look from your point of view.
8. **More responsively, engagingly** - letting you know the way in which I have understood your experience, actively confirming your experience when I can (when it is within the scope of my values to do so). (We can always acknowledge other people's experience in a respectful way. We may not always be able sincerely to confirm another person's experience.)

As I mentioned above, in a process philosophy view of life, virtues are largely adverbial. Although some activities are inherently better than others (it is better to teach than to steal), most everyday activities can become expressions of virtue according to how they are performed: awarely, creatively, compassionately, etc. Zen masters perform the smallest of daily tasks with great awareness, and therefore do not divide life into important tasks and unimportant tasks, because it is awareness itself that is truly important. And Mother Theresa once remarked that it is not given to us in this life to do great things, but rather to do small things with great love. (That is to say, "lovingly.")

One way of understanding psychotherapy is to view it as an attempt to understand, refine and reproduce the best of what happens in nurturing and supportive relationships, which is to say the styles of action of people at their most virtuous moments. From this perspective it is not surprising that when researchers used the most careful scientific techniques to study the most effective therapists in action, they rediscovered a set of adverbial qualities that include virtues recognized for millennia: caring, kindness, forgiveness, honesty, attention to detail, and so on. The qualities of good communication in psychotherapy turn out to be the universal qualities of fulfilling living and satisfying relating.

Perhaps part of the dream of science and reason has been that virtue can be replaced by enlightened technique. Well, the most conscientious and determined

scientific observers have come out of the laboratory to announce to us that the very best technique is...virtue! It is not the result that a science- and technique-oriented culture wanted to hear, and therefore this news falls on many deaf ears.<sup>168</sup> But it is good news for ordinary people, because it affirms that with effort and attention we can all become more nurturing and sustaining influences in the lives of the people around us. And those of us who have trouble accepting traditional approaches to virtue can now find encouragement from scientists to be more honest, caring, understanding and responsive.

### **7.9. Additional adverbs presupposed by those already given**

In this chapter I have explored the qualities of mutually satisfying communicative action. By studying the intense conversations that take place between therapists and clients, scholars have been able to identify some of what appear to be the universal qualities of nurturing conversations in Western cultures. (I believe that these are probably the qualities of nurturing conversations for people everywhere, but that is an argument beyond the scope of this study.)

I have used a focus on adverbs as a way of bridging the gap between discussions of attitudes, facilitating conditions and counselor qualities, on the one hand, and a vocabulary of action styles that are potentially available to everyone, on the other. How a person goes about learning to talk, listen, or otherwise behave in a new ways is a topic that we understand imperfectly at best, as our societal difficulties with drugs, alcohol, prison recidivism and family violence indicate. At the very least, a person needs to be able to conceive of the new direction in which they wish to move. (Examples of success, and social support to keep trying are probably important ingredients, as well.) The list of “adverbs of better communication” presented in this chapter is my way of trying to help my students identify and imagine possible new ways of talking, listening and being a person. As Alan Fogel has argued with great eloquence, communication and personhood

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<sup>168</sup>For example, in relation to most of the psychological complaints of modern life there is no evidence that Ph.D.’s and M.D.’s make better counselors than people with M.A.’s, or even than hot-line volunteers who have received a brief training to mobilize their capacity for empathizing. But the institutional momentum to train experts seems unstoppable. Graduate programs continue to produce them. State governments continue to license them. And the very careful research that has revealed that they are not needed gets ignored. See Dawes, *House of Cards*.

are two ways of looking at the same process.<sup>169</sup>

Although I feel confident about the eight adverbs (or groups of closely related adverbs) that I have included in my list so far, I am not confident that the list is complete. Of course, in one sense such a list could never be complete because people are always capable of dividing the terrain of living into different provinces. A second reason for my list's necessary incompleteness is that I am trying to document the most fruitful starting places, which would include some but not all the qualities of the most skillful and compassionate communicating.<sup>170</sup> But beyond these issues it does seem to me that there are several more adverbs of equal importance that I believe were taken for granted by the researchers I have quoted so far, perhaps because they form the universal backdrop of psychotherapy. In shifting contexts from the world of psychotherapy to the world of everyday conversation and conflict resolution, these taken-for-granted elements need to be stated explicitly.

The first of these additional qualities is "awarely." The eight qualities identified above as helpful or humanly fulfilling all presuppose that a person is paying attention to their interaction with others. Cultures vary in the degree to which they encourage people to develop their capacity to pay attention and to overcome the human tendency to deal with painful or challenging stimuli by withdrawing into numbness or by distracting oneself. Another eternal temptation is to stop paying attention to the process of living because one has fallen into a reasonably satisfactory routine. Psychotherapy, whatever else it may be about, is about slowing down and paying attention: the therapist to the client, the clients to their own experiences, and the therapists to their own experience of being with the clients. The West lacks traditions of mindfulness such as Zen and yoga, and those few that it has are intended primarily for monks and nuns. Psychotherapy represents the emergence of a distinctly Western form of disciplined attention to the present moment. In the face of the universal temptation to try to deal with our life

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<sup>169</sup>Fogel's full position is that communication, personhood and culture are three different ways of looking at the same process, but it is his linking of communication and personhood that I want to offer in support of my argument. See Alan Fogel, *Developing through Relationships: Origins of Communication, Self and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>170</sup>For one scholar's attempt to summarize the qualities of fully actualized persons, see Abraham H. Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (New York: Viking, 1971), 135. All of Maslow's fifteen "B-values" (qualities of fully actualized persons) can easily be translated into adverbs.

difficulties by absent-mindedness and absent-heartedness, psychotherapy appeals to us to “be here now,” to develop our capacity to be more fully present to ourselves and others. For these reasons, and the fact that positive changes generally require attention, I have included “awarely” in my recommended list of communicative styles.

Closely related to and complementary to the quality of “awarely” is the quality “skillfully.” Encouraging people to think about improving their skills is in fact encouraging them to view themselves as developing through time and capable of learning. These are givens in much of psychotherapy but are not givens in everyday life. Part of the message of humanistic psychology has been the recommendation that people accept themselves and feel good about themselves simply as part of being human, without relation to action or accomplishment. But life includes action, life is living, skillfully or clumsily, and people’s sense of self-esteem needs to be anchored at least partly in the ongoing process of developing actual life competencies.

Our use of nouns to refer to ourselves, as convenient as it may be, continually suggests that we are fixed objects with stable qualities (car, house, tree, person, man, woman). This continuous suggestion is quite wrong and makes it difficult for us to imagine living differently, coping skillfully, and learning to handle our life difficulties in new and more satisfying ways. Thus the word “skillfully” implies a different way of looking at one’s life, a way that is more open-ended and open to learning.

The third addition to the list, making it item Number 11, is the adverb “creatively.” Living is a continuous process of creative improvisation, whether one is a symphony conductor or a truck driver. But many people imagine that creativity is only for artists and people of leisure. Unfortunately, there is an element of truth about social class differences in this stereotype, as Basil Bernstein documented in his study of language use among working-class school children in British schools.<sup>171</sup> The dominant theme in the lives of the working-class families was obedience, and therefore the children learned a language of obedience rather than a language of exploration. The middle-class children were being prepared by their families for professional lives in which they would have to consult, negotiate, explore possibilities, etc., and the language use of the middle-

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<sup>171</sup>As summarized in Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), chap. 2.

class children was more exploratory. Unfortunately, I see the culture of “following orders” as leaving people helpless in the face of many life difficulties, which demand of us that we negotiate, explore, experiment and improvise, whether we think of ourselves as creative or not. Creativity is also built into the structure of language: we continually improvise new word combinations (sentences) to fit new situations. It is important for me to introduce the idea of creativity to my students to help them see more possibilities in each encounter, rather than imagining that there is a fixed rule somewhere that they ought to have known in order to respond more successfully. Openness to new experience is closely related to creativity. In creativity we rearrange the elements of experience. In being open to new experience, we allow new experiences to rearrange us: our thoughts, our feelings, our guiding stories.

The last of my fundamental adverbs of better communication is “courageously.” Implied in the psychotherapy encounter is the courage to face one’s problems rather than deny them or run away from them. And in a larger context, risking disappointment and the shame of failure is part of every worthwhile endeavor, from saying hello to someone to climbing a mountain or building a cathedral. A key theme in Rogers’ overall vision of life is that we need the approval of others so badly that we blot out of awareness the parts of our spontaneous experience that do not fit the role that others want us to play. But the core of each person has an integrity that they need to fulfill and express (within the boundaries of not injuring others), regardless of what other people want. To be true to oneself is thus often to risk the disapproval of others.<sup>172</sup> At the level of existential philosophy, it is only by courageously facing the fact of death that we can open ourselves in gratitude to the miracle of being alive.<sup>173</sup> Putting “courageously” on the list is my way of validating my student’s fears. Their fears make perfect sense to me. Courage, to me, is not about being fearless. It is about facing one’s fears, admitting one’s fears, acting in the face of one’s fears, and also, paradoxically, about finding support from others to face difficult situations. The greatest courage of all, from my perspective, is to face my own

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<sup>172</sup>Jordan and Margaret Paul put courageous openness to learn at the center of their approach to counseling couples, as described in their book, *Do I Have To Give Up Me To Be Loved By You?* (Minneapolis: CompCare Publishers, 1983).

<sup>173</sup>For an extended discussion of this and other themes in existentialist philosophy, see Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952).

mistakes and failures. To personalize Santayana's epigram about history, it is only by facing my mistakes that I can be free from repeating them.

With the addition of the four adverbs discussed in this section, the list of adverbs included in Dimension 4 now reads as follows.

1. More completely and richly
2. More concretely and specifically
3. More self-inclusively and person-inclusively
4. More action-oriented-ly
5. More honestly, sincerely, genuinely, congruently
6. More acceptingly, respectfully, caringly, warmly, forgivingly
7. More empathically and understandingly
8. More responsively, engagingly
9. More awarely
10. More skillfully
11. More creatively and open to new experience
12. More courageously

### **7.10. Summary and conclusion**

In this chapter I have explored using adverbs as a way of encouraging people to adopt the perspective of acting on their own actions,<sup>174</sup> thereby opening up a new range of creative possibilities for more cooperative and fulfilling communication (and living). Our vocabularies are one of the main lenses through which we look at life. I have used the work of Carl Rogers and of Bandler and Grinder to assemble a rich vocabulary of conversational styles that I hope will be both descriptive and facilitative, and I have tried to express these styles as developmental gradients (gradual "on ramps") in order to make them as accessible as possible.

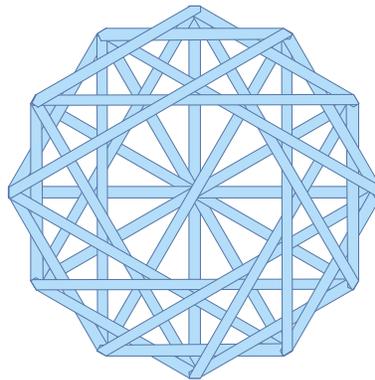
Robert Kegan posits a growing capacity for self-observation as one of the core

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<sup>174</sup>As mentioned in previous chapters, I am indebted to Rom Harré for this insight into the genesis of reflexive consciousness.

processes of human development, perhaps the central process, but he has serious reservations about whether self-observation can be taught in any straightforward way. I believe that the language of adverbs plays an important role in the unfolding of a person's capacity to observe themselves in action and interaction. By bringing the topic of adverb use to the conscious level and by offering my students and myself a challenging and existentially meaningful list of adverbs (as Dimension 4 of the Six Dimensions model), I hope to facilitate the emergence of our awareness, interpersonal skill and compassion.

Earlier in this study I shared my belief that in order to understand communication one needs to understand human life, and in order to understand human life one needs to understand communication. From my point of view, the adverbial dimension bridges the gap in scale between the moment and the lifetime. The adverbial qualities of a nurturing conversation can easily be seen as the qualities of a fully human person.<sup>175</sup>



A web of related qualities of action  
Drawing by Dennis Rivers

The question remains as to how a person would come to feel empowered to aspire to such qualities of action as appear on my list. From my life experience, that appears to happen in four ways: by being in a relationship with an inspiring person, by reading about exemplary lives, by experiencing and then reflecting on situations in which I failed miserably because I lacked various qualities, and by reading the works of authors such as

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<sup>175</sup>This implies and suggests to me that communication training is a very fundamental kind of developmental coaching (which was a conclusion that I had hoped to avoid, in order to keep my trainings from getting too serious).

Abraham Maslow,<sup>176</sup> who directly advocate a life of conscious personal development.

In many religions studying the lives of saints is a central part of spiritual practice. Seeing how other people have embodied various virtues makes it possible to imagine that one could develop in similar directions, even if not to a similar degree. No list of adverbs can do that as deeply as the story of a human life. On the other hand, it is not always clear just exactly what we are trying to learn from the lives of exemplary persons. For many people, to consciously emulate the qualities of another person's way of living will probably involve bringing those qualities into focus, naming them and thinking about them. And for that effort, a list of adverbs may be very helpful. From this point of view, my list of the twelve adverbs of growth-supporting communication represents the inspiring teachers of humanistic psychology at their best moments (Rogers, Perls, Satir, Erickson, Maslow, and many others).

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<sup>176</sup>Maslow, *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*.