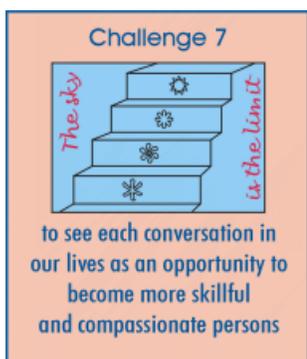


Challenge Seven: Living-As-Continuous-Learning

ADOPT THE "CONTINUOUS LEARNING" APPROACH TO LIVING:
MAKE RESPONDING TO THE FIRST SIX CHALLENGES
AN IMPORTANT PART OF YOUR EVERYDAY LIVING

Living as Learning: Looking at each day of your life as an opportunity to become a more successful communicator. In this chapter I hope to get you excited about *every conversation being an opportunity to practice the six skills described in the first six chapters of this workbook*. That probably sounds about as exciting as washing dishes. But, as far as I have been able to discover, better listening and better self-expression are very similar to better basketball-playing, better guitar-playing and better everything else. All significant human abilities develop through attention, practice and faith in your ability to develop.



In order for us to invest the necessary time and effort required to become radiantly successful communicators, it is vital for us to develop a faith in the possibilities of our own development (and in the development of our families, and of all the teams of which we are members). People everywhere plant and tend the vegetables in their gardens with the faith that there will be a harvest. Musicians practice every day with the faith that their skills will improve. At their best, parents and coaches believe in us so that, relying on their encouragement, we practice enough to have the successes that will allow us to start believing in ourselves. As your coach via the printed page, I hope the information in this chapter (and readings)

will support you in believing in yourself more deeply, so that you will practice enough to discover your own many capacities for skillfulness and excellence.

Could practice matter more than talent!

A recent statistical analysis of Olympic gold medal winners produced a result that is both startling and reassuring. The single most important factor in winning a gold medal was having practiced longer than one's competitors. The analysis showed that the winners had consistently started to practice their skills earlier in life than everyone else in the contests. The evidence strongly suggests that gold medal winners are not necessarily more talented than everybody else. They just work much harder and much longer at being athletes than everyone else does. What this implies to me is that, with intensive practice, most skills are within the reach of most people.³⁷

Over-learning. There is an important psychological principle at work in all skill development and that principle is called *over-learning*. If we learn something just well enough to do it once successfully, we will not actually remember how to do it for very long. To master a skill, we have to practice it a lot more than would seem necessary. In order to remember better communication skills in the middle of arguments and tense negotiations, a person needs to feel very competent and comfortable in using those skills, just as an accomplished musician can play musical

³⁷ From information in an article in the New York Times, October 11, 1994.

scales without even thinking about it. (Even the greatest of musicians still practice many hours a week.) The reward for practicing your communication skills is that you will feel better about yourself and your connections to the people around you, and be able to face conflict situations more confidently. You will probably also be able to get more of what you want -- by being skillful enough to help your partners in living and working get more of what they want, too.



Doing what comes naturally. It might seem as though we ought to be able to get through life by just “doing what comes naturally,” that we should not have to try so hard. I certainly wish that were possible. But if you stop to reflect on how humans learn to talk, it is clear that, as far as communication skills are concerned, we are born knowing how to cry, how to nurse, and how to learn everything else. That’s about it. Almost all of what seems ‘natural’ to us now is the result of intense learning all through our lives. As natural as it may feel to use sarcasm or ask self-defeating questions, these are actions we actually learned by copying others. We can learn new skills that will in time feel as natural as the old ones. In fact, learning new skills is the most natural thing in the world. It is what we are designed to do as creatures with big brains and multipurpose hands.

A homework assignment for the rest of our lives. Mastering the communication skills described in this workbook means:

- learning to see more opportunities to practice them, and
- learning to link together long chains of the six conversational actions described in chapters 1 through 6.

This involves seeing everyday conversations and disagreements in a new light, seeing them as opportunities to learn, grow, practice your skills and enjoy being skillful.

Self-forgiveness, the secret partner of learning. As you see more and more opportunities to practice your skills each day, you will make an important discovery: Learning to listen and express yourself in new ways involves trial and error – you will make mistakes along the way and sometimes feel clumsy. If you interpret every mistake you make to mean that you are a terrible person, you will probably want to hide from your mistakes rather than learn from them. Consider learning to play basketball as an example. You go out on the court and throw the ball toward the basket. Sometimes the ball goes in, most of the time it does not. If you concluded, the first time the ball missed the basket, that you were a terrible basketball player and deserved to be punished for your badness, then I guarantee that you would never learn to make the ball go in the basket. Focusing on your “badness” and your feelings of shame means that you are *not watching the ball*. It is only by carefully *watching the ball* (observing your own performance) that you can learn to throw better. Did it go a little to the left? A little to the right? What did your arms and legs feel like when you threw the ball? How could you throw the ball differently?

Embracing the trial and error of living. Self-forgiveness is an important part of learning because it allows us to calm down and pay more attention to exactly what we are doing and exactly how we are doing it. The only way to learn something new is to embrace your mistakes as learning opportunities. No human person is born with all the skills and knowledge they will need in life. No one can perfectly anticipate the thoughts, feelings and needs of others. And because life is full of utterly new situations, hardly anyone ever fulfills their responsibilities as well as they would like. Thus life is one long process of exploratory trial and error in which making mistakes is inevitable. We can learn an enormous amount from the mistakes we make, but only if we can face them and admit them. Two of the greatest temptations in life involve avoiding embarrassment by either

pretending that we never make mistakes or trying to justify actions that we ourselves know were or are mistakes. But if we fall into either of those patterns, we risk becoming entangled in a web of rigid artificiality that makes learning new communication skills nearly impossible.

Instead, I suggest that you adopt an attitude of compassionate forgiveness toward yourself for all the mistakes you have made *and will make*, and commit yourself deeply to learning what each mistake has to teach you about improving. If we get in the habit of learning from our many small mistakes by becoming more attentive and observant persons, we will make fewer big ones.

You can also announce to all your important conversation partners that you are trying new ways of talking and listening, and may have to work at it for a while to get good at it. Most of the people around you are in the same situation as you: wanting to function more successfully in life but afraid of looking or sounding clumsy when they try something new. So it would be a good idea, along with forgiving yourself, to create an atmosphere of patience and forgiveness at home and at work so that both you and others can start over as often as needed. (The attitude of forgiveness I am recommending here is central to the teaching of many great saints and psychologists. However, it is also true that if someone you are close to is violent or is abusing drugs or alcohol, you need to see a counselor right away to help you set

appropriate boundaries and work out relationship agreements.)

On the following page you will find my list (one interpretation, of course) of the basic situations in which people talk and listen, seen as opportunities to grow (*and make many fruitful mistakes!*). Each of these situations represents an open horizon: there is no limit to how much awareness, skill, and compassion we can bring into each of these communication activities. And there is no limit to how good we can feel when we do them well.

Our homework assignment for this Challenge is to continue the process that began at the moment of our births: to keep on learning about the life that lives between us. One way of helping that learning happen is to keep a journal of your experiences as you try new ways of listening and expressing yourself, new ways of asking questions and expressing appreciation. You can think of your journal as a patient listener who is available twenty-four hours a day! In addition to daily learnings, your journal can be a place where you make periodic reviews of your progress. For example, how do you feel about your overall level of skill, satisfaction and development in each of the activities listed on the following page? If you write down your answers to this life-inventory every year or two in your journal, you will begin to see more clearly the dimensions of your own life journey.

CONVERSATION: CREATING THE LIFE THAT LIVES BETWEEN US
(and within us, too)

**Talking about my thoughts, feelings, experiences and wants
with the people who are close to me in my life...**

directions of possible development>>> ...in ways that express more of what is going on inside of me and in ways that are easier for my listeners to understand and empathize with.

Listening to people share their experiences, thoughts, feelings...

directions of possible development>>> ...more carefully, expressing more acknowledgment, responding in ways that confirm to my partners-in-conversation that I have understood their experiences.

Talking with people to express my appreciation of them...

directions of possible development>>> ...in a richer and more complete vocabulary, that allows people to understand more of my satisfaction and delight with them and with what they have done.

Talking with people to resolve my conflicts with them...

directions of possible development>>> ...speaking in ways that express more of my needs without attacking my partners-in-conflict, listening in ways that help my partners-in-conflict express more of their needs without attacking me. Learning to forgive, and to ask for forgiveness.

Talking and listening to coordinate my actions with the actions of the important people in my life (at home, in work, in community projects, etc.)...

directions of possible development>>> ...by expressing myself more clearly and listening more carefully to increase the level of mutual understanding. Also, by learning to discuss difficult topics without criticizing my listeners, learning to translate my own and other people's criticisms into requests for action, and learning to ask questions more creatively..

Communicating with myself through journal writing and "inner conversations" ...

directions of possible development>>>

...in ways that allow me to get a clearer picture of what's happening in my life, to feel more present in my life, to accept and forgive myself more, to imagine and plan the next step in my life more creatively, and to become more courageous in facing my mistakes and learning from them.

Listening and clarifying the issues as a mediator between people in conflict...

directions of possible development>>> ...as an extension of all the above, listening in a more responsive way, that confirms to each speaker that I have understood his or her experiences and feelings; encouraging and coaching each of the partners-in-conflict to listen to the other and to express wants and needs as actions requests rather than attacks on the other. Acting as a mediator generally requires training and practice. (The skills described in this workbook are key elements in the process of mediation.)

Learning to bring out the best in myself and others in and through conversation.

Conversations are one of most important activities in which we become deeper and more fully realized persons. (See essay on page 7-9.) In the short run conversations *express* our character, but in the long run conversations *create* our character as we continually practice particular ways of relating to others through listening and speaking. I am utterly convinced that each of us has it within our power to make each conversation an opportunity to listen, question and express ourselves in the following ways...

(directions of possible development>>>)

... *more awarely (of self, other and context)*

... *more skillfully, competently and wisely*

... *more honestly, sincerely, genuinely, congruently (inner matches outer)*

... *more caringly, compassionately, acceptingly, respectfully, warmly, forgivingly*

... *more creatively and “exploratorily” (with more creative openness to new experience)*

... *more courageously, hopefully and faithfully*

... *more generously and nurturingly, delighting in the happiness of others*

... *more meaningfully and expressively, organizing and expressing our experiences in coherent patterns of words, music, movement and imagery*

... *more gratefully and appreciatively, open to delight and the gift of each moment*

... *more engagingly, energetically and responsively*

... *more gracefully and beautifully (in the Navajo sense of beauty as cosmic harmony)*

Upward and onward! As you can see from the list above, the qualities of good conversations shade off into the deeper qualities of being a person. The adverbs that apply to conversations (honestly, courageously) become the adjective of someone’s character (honest, courageous, etc.) For some interesting explorations of the power of communication, please see the readings at the end of this chapter.

In the *Suggestions for Further Study* at the end of this workbook I have listed the books from which much of this workbook has been developed. Among the many approaches expressed in these books there are sure to be some that will help you continue your quest for better communication and conflict resolution skills. I urge you to study these books with friends and colleagues and I hope they will expand your life as much as they have expanded mine.

Perspectives on the power of communication –
Reading 7-1:

Keep On Singing, Michael

Posted on the Internet by Joan Levy, MSW, ACSW, LCSW
The Body Mind & Breath Center of Kauai,
PO Box 160, Kapaa, Kauai, HI 96746

Like any good mother, when Karen found out that another baby was on the way, she did what she could to help her 3-year-old son, Michael, prepare for a new sibling. They find out that the new baby is going to be a girl, and day after day, night after night, Michael sings to his sister in Mommy's tummy.

The pregnancy progresses normally for Karen, an active member of the Panther Creek United Methodist Church in Morristown, Tennessee. Then the labor pains come. Every five minutes ... every minute. But complications arise during delivery. Hours of labor. Would a C-section be required?

Finally, Michael's little sister is born. But she is in serious condition. With siren howling in the night, the ambulance rushes the infant to the neonatal intensive care unit at St. Mary's Hospital, Knoxville, Tennessee. The days inch by. The little girl gets worse. The pediatric specialist tells the parents, "There is very little hope. Be prepared for the worst."

Karen and her husband contact a local cemetery about a burial plot. They have fixed up a special room in their home for the new baby - now they plan a funeral.

Michael keeps begging his parents to let him see his sister, "I want to sing to her," he says.

Week two in Intensive Care: It looks as if a funeral will come before the week is over. Michael keeps nagging about singing to his sister, but kids are never allowed in Intensive Care. But

Karen makes up her mind. She will take Michael whether they like it or not. If he doesn't see his sister now, he may never see her alive.

She dresses him in an oversized scrub suit and marches him into ICU. He looks like a walking laundry basket, but the head nurse recognizes him as a child and bellows, "Get that kid out of here now! No children are allowed in ICU." The mother rises up strong in Karen, and the usually mild-mannered lady glares steel-eyed into the head nurse's face, her lips a firm line. "He is not leaving until he sings to his sister!"

Karen tows Michael to his sister's bedside. He gazes at the tiny infant losing the battle to live. And he begins to sing. In the pure-hearted voice of a 3-year-old, Michael sings: "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine, you make me happy when skies are gray --- "

Instantly the baby girl responds. The pulse rate becomes calm and steady. Keep on singing, Michael. "You never know, dear, how much I love you, Please don't take my sunshine away---" The ragged, strained breathing becomes as smooth as a kitten's purr. Keep on singing, Michael. "The other night, dear, as I lay sleeping, I dreamed I held you in my arms..."

Michael's little sister relaxes as rest, healing rest, seems to sweep over her. Keep on singing, Michael. Tears conquer the face of the bossy head nurse. Karen glows. "You are my sunshine, my only sunshine. Please don't, take my sunshine away."

Funeral plans are scrapped. The next day -- the very next day -- the little girl is well enough to go home! Woman's Day magazine called it "the miracle of a brother's song." The medical staff just called it a miracle. Karen called it a miracle of God's love. [*Workbook editor's note: Dennis Rivers calls it the power of appreciation expressed!*]

Perspectives on the power of communication –
Reading 7-2:

**Guy Louis Gabaldon --
a compassionate warrior
saves the lives of a thousand people**

(Excerpted and adapted from an 8/31/98 story in the Los Angeles Times by David Reyes. Copyright 1998 by the Los Angeles Times. Reprinted with permission.)

Pete Limon, a retired San Clemente businessman, has never met World War II hero Guy Louis Gabaldon, but he feels as if he knows him--so much so that he is on a personal mission to see that Gabaldon gets the recognition Limon feels he deserves.

Limon and others in the Latino community want to see Gabaldon awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for exploits that earned him the Navy Cross and that were depicted in the 1960 movie "Hell to Eternity."

"I feel [Gabaldon] should have been granted the Medal of Honor," Limon said, "but he was slighted because of his Mexican descent."

Limon, 74, and Gabaldon, 72, have much in common. Both are Latino, natives of Southern California. Both saw combat in the war--Limon is a Pearl Harbor survivor. Both became successful businessmen: Limon a hotelier, Gabaldon a seafood merchant.

Limon said he has been fascinated for decades by the story of Gabaldon, whose heroics Mexican American veterans regard as equaling those of Audie Murphy, the most decorated U.S. soldier of World War II.

"I got involved in this project because, as a survivor of Pearl Harbor, I had this tremendous hate for the Japanese," Limon said. "Then I heard about Gabaldon and I softened."

Gabaldon, who served in the Western Pacific, was commended for having captured hundreds of Japanese prisoners -- mostly by persuasion.

His citation for the Navy Cross reads: "Working alone in front of the lines, he daringly entered enemy caves, pillboxes, buildings and jungle brush, frequently in the face of hostile fire,

and succeeded in not only obtaining vital military information but in capturing well over one thousand civilians and troops."



Guy Louis Gabaldon at 18.

Gabaldon's most effective weapon was his command of the Japanese language, which he learned as a child in East Los Angeles. One of seven children growing up in a tiny house, Gabaldon spent much of his time on the streets, where he was befriended by two Japanese-American brothers. Fascinated by their customs, he began spending time at their home and eventually moved in with them. He lived with his foster family for six years, learning their language and traditions, until the war broke out [in 1941] and they were sent to an internment camp. Gabaldon, then 17, joined the Marine Corps.

He was ... [sent to fight in the battle for] Saipan, one of the Mariana Islands [and a scene of some of the most intense fighting in World War II]. That is where he lives now, having owned businesses in California and Mexico over the years but finally returning to Saipan.

Speaking by telephone from there last week, Gabaldon related his wartime experience: On his first day in combat, he killed 33 Japanese soldiers but was then overcome with remorse. He took a new tack: He began going out alone and [speaking the Japanese he had learned in his adopted family] persuading Japanese soldiers to surrender to him, telling them they would be treated well, given food, water and medical care.

He would capture six soldiers at gunpoint but release three, telling them to spread the word

about fair treatment as POWs. He would release them with a warning: “If they didn’t come back, I would blast the hell out of the three left behind.”

That was a ruse, but it worked. That was how he managed to take 800 prisoners in a single day.

Gabaldon harbors some bitterness over the Marine Corps’ decision to award him the Silver Star instead of the Medal of Honor. Though his citation was upgraded to the Navy Cross after “Hell to Eternity” spawned a letter-writing campaign on his behalf, he has questions.

Gabaldon said he doesn’t want the award “because I’m a Latino,” but does feel that an explanation is in order, given his military record.

Gabaldon said he captured more prisoners than Sgt. Alvin York, who received the Medal of Honor after he killed 25 German soldiers and captured 132 in France in 1918.

“No Mexican American was awarded a Medal of Honor” in either World War, Gabaldon said. “I think it was blatant discrimination by the Marine Corps.” Since then, 37 Latinos have received the Medal of Honor for bravery in combat in all branches of the service, but Gabaldon, though nominated in 1944, has yet to be chosen. Limon says that is an injustice, especially because Gabaldon used wiles, rather than weapons, to take his prisoners.

“He used their own language and he didn’t kill them,” Limon said. “In the process, he saved the lives of the Japanese but also probably thousands of GIs who would have had to face them in battle.”

Workbook Editor’s Notes:

I included this story because it shows how even under extreme circumstances the power of communication can transform a situation. This is a complex story for many reasons, one of which is that Gabaldon used deception, coercion, compassion and truthfulness all at the same time! I would not recommend that anyone lie or threaten others with injury, but I am not in a battle zone, and since the conduct of war almost always includes deception, Gabaldon would probably have deceived these same soldiers in the course of trying to kill them, if that had been his goal.

My feeling about this story is that by living with a Japanese family, Gabaldon not only learned to speak Japanese, he probably also learned to see and to love Japanese people (his adopted family) as real people. That made him willing to risk his own life to save the lives of the Japanese soldiers (who were probably seen by the other American soldiers as only “the enemy”). Why did the Japanese soldiers believe him? His sincere concern for them might have been expressed in his bizarre behavior (going out alone to talk with them) and in his tone of voice, which is something that would have been difficult to fake, and difficult to adopt as a mere strategy.

One lesson that I draw from this story is that making peace demands more skill and mental effort than making war. Another is that more things are possible than we usually imagine. What lessons do you draw from this story?

Perspectives on the power of communication –
Reading 7-3:

What Kind of Person am I Becoming? What Kind of People are We Becoming Together?

by Dennis Rivers, MA (May 2001 Revision)

The journey toward compassionate skill

Over the past decade I have taught a series of courses in communication skills to groups of university students who were about to volunteer in social service agencies, prisons, county jails, and juvenile halls. We have focused on topics such as the power of supportive listening and how we come to know ourselves better in the process of explaining our experiences to someone. In their role as peer mentors they will be both using their communication skills and encouraging their mentored companions to develop better ways of communicating their way through everyday conflicts. The focus of my course is pragmatic rather than psychological or philosophical: how to listen more empathetically and express oneself more competently.

There are, however, larger issues connected with interpersonal communication and subtle but important transactions going on between coach and trainee, between the giver of support and the receiver of support. I would like to be able to tell my students, all of them headed toward challenging encounters, just what these issues are, but it has taken longer than I imagined to put these issues into words. In this essay, I will be exploring how the way we talk and listen is related to the way we live, so that coaching a person to communicate differently is at the same time inviting a person to live differently.

To give just one preliminary example of what I'm talking about, one of the largest issues in moment-to-moment interpersonal communication is that many people do not express their thoughts, feelings and wants very clearly, perhaps out of

fear of rejection. That vagueness prevents people from getting their needs met. But this particular issue, that surfaces in conversational coaching, is also, on a larger scale, the main issue addressed by Rogerian psychotherapy: that in hopes of winning the approval of others, we learn to present a stance to the world that can be totally disconnected from our own deepest feelings (our "organismic experiencing," in Rogers' terms), with which we may have lost touch altogether. In this light you can see that something sounding as simple as "communicating your needs more clearly" can have several levels of significance in a person's life.

In the course of teaching communication skills, I have tried to make the subject easy to grasp by keeping the focus on short-term goals. There are many helpful books that do the same. But the communication training encounter is also an encounter of persons exploring more satisfying ways of becoming persons together. The challenge for me as a trainer is to get people engaged and motivated at both levels. In this essay I concentrate on our desire to unfold as persons, and our urges to become more fully human.

Motivations for learning new communication skills

My experience has been that what brings most people to communication classes is usually an immediate need to have more satisfying conversations with a particular person or in a particular setting. These reasons are perfectly good ones as far as they go, but they are often not very deep or long-term. The problem here is that developing one's speaking, listening, questioning, reflecting and negotiating skills takes a fair amount of effort. In my view, the short term motivations that people bring to the process may not keep them involved long enough for them to reach their goals. No one expects to become an athlete or a violinist in a single weekend, but many people hope to make major improvements in their communication style with a minimum investment of time and effort, only to be disappointed at the meager results.

What seems to be needed in communication training are motivations that are deeper and perhaps encompass entire seasons of a person's life, or perhaps one's entire life. Whenever we find examples of high competence and excellence in human life, we also find examples of deep, long-term motivations. I fully encourage (almost) all of my students' pragmatic motivations. But in order to get my students inspired with more of the motivation they will need to reach their competence goals, I have begun to introduce them to such life-long questions as:

- "What kind of person do I want to become?" (or, alternatively, "Who's life inspires me?")
- "What kind of person do I enjoy being?"
- "How can I deepen my relationships with the important people in my life, *how can we nurture the life that lives between us?*"
- "What kind of world do I want to create with my conversations and actions"

These are tough questions but they are also powerful questions. They challenge a person to develop more inner and relational goals, rather than being only outer-directed by the immediate needs of coping with work and family situations. Again, I am not saying that there is anything bad about such immediate goals and I do everything within my power to help people reach them. My only reservation about these goals is that they may not be energizing enough to provide for their own fulfillment.

What I propose, both to my students and to you, my reader, is that developing better communication skills can be a central way of becoming more of the person one wants to be, and creating more of the world one wants to create. To explain this idea, I will first explore some of the things we mean when we say someone is a "person." Then I will present a kind of synthesis of what many deep thinkers have agreed are the qualities of personhood toward which we are all growing (some of us

more willingly than others). From there I will present five arguments suggesting that our personhood emerges largely in and through our conversations, which means that we can have some influence over how we develop as persons. Finally I will discuss some of the formidable challenges we face in trying to steer both our conversations and our lives toward the qualities-in-action that make all of us more fully human.

Three meanings of personhood

While legal personhood is something we achieve simply by the fact of being born in a particular country, psychological or familial personhood seems to me to be much more like a set of muscles. Our psychological personhood grows by being exercised in the classic human relationships: parent, child, sibling, friend, enemy, coworker, supervisor, teacher and student. And within these relationships it is exercised primarily in an ongoing stream of interpersonal encounters that include talking, listening, fighting, cooperating, making and keeping commitments, turning our experiences into coherent stories, and so on. Just as a baby struggles to stand up, we all struggle to develop the awareness and skill that will allow us to function fully as a person among persons. While both the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights assert that we are all born with certain inalienable rights, unfortunately we are not born with the skills we need to exercise those rights wisely or the skills we need to make a happy life with others. We start out with a big gap between rights and capabilities.

Discussions about being a person can be confusing because they can mix together several different meanings of "person," especially:

- the unfinished and evolving personhood of family, psychology and literature,
- the already achieved personhood of law ("You are a citizen.") and
- the already achieved personhood religion ("You are a person because God created you with an immortal soul").

With each of these meanings we offer respect to other people and we ask for respect from them. In my experience all three of these meanings offer something special and worth pondering, but no one of these meanings is a very good substitute for either of the other two. For example, one may be able to fulfill many of the requirements of being a citizen (for example, don't steal, pay your taxes, vote, etc.) without being a very well-developed person (for example, being a friend to your friends in times of trouble, being an influence for reconciliation when conflicts arise, etc.).

This sorting out of meanings is necessary in order to make a kind of separate and accepting mental space for our perpetual un-finished-ness as persons, to disentangle the "already given" from the "continuously created." To say that we are continually learning, growing and evolving as persons is not to say that we are less than full citizens (or that we are less than children of God, for those who think in religious terms). While being less than a full citizen would be an insult to one's dignity, to be a not-yet-fully-completed person is simply to be human like everyone else. Each season of life offers us a different set of lessons and skills to learn. (I thought a lot about this a few years ago when I became like a parent to my frail and elderly father.) The fact that being a person is an ongoing process of *becoming* makes it possible to live hopefully: no matter how we may have succeeded or failed in the past, each day allows us to start over with a new set of challenges.

The possibilities of personhood

At this point you may be starting to feel, "Enough with these abstractions! If life is a process of becoming, *what is it that we are trying to become?*" To provide a working answer to that question I offer you the following list of the qualities of what one might call a "fully developing" person. This list is drawn from many sources, ancient and modern, among which there is actually a lot of agreement. You will recognize the influence of Jesus, St. Paul and St. Francis on this list, along with Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, Martin Buber, Erik Erikson, Rom Harré, and Gautama Buddha. In compiling this synthesis, it has helped me a great deal to think

often in terms of styles of engaged action (such as "honestly" and "compassionately") rather than only in terms of fixed qualities of character (such as "honest" or "compassionate").

Thus translated into adverbs (and grouped into related clusters), we can say that at every stage along life's way we are challenged to act (and converse with one another)...

- ... **more awarely (of self, other and context)**
- ... **more skillfully, competently and wisely**
- ... **more honestly, sincerely, genuinely, congruently
(inner matches outer)**
- ... **more caringly, compassionately, acceptingly, respectfully, warmly, forgivingly**
- ... **more creatively and "exploratorily" (with more creative openness to new experience)**
- ... **more courageously, hopefully and faithfully**
- ... **more generously and nurturingly, delighting in the happiness of others**
- ... **more meaningfully and expressively, organizing and expressing our experiences in coherent patterns of words, music, movement and imagery**
- ... **more gratefully and appreciatively, open to delight**
- ... **more engagingly, energetically and responsively**
- ... **more gracefully and beautifully (in the Navajo sense of beauty as cosmic harmony)**

It is interesting to note that, along with overlapping and interweaving, all these qualities of action are open-ended. There is no limit to any of them. No matter how much we had achieved in any of them, creativity, for example, we would want to go on and develop more. For another example: because there is no upper bound to kindness, I imagine that most people who are very kind would not admit to being so, but might admit that they were "growing toward kindness along with all of us."

Every now and then you will meet someone who embodies the opposite of many of these qualities (fearful, miserly, hostile, resentful). What you will notice about such people is that they are usually also very unhappy and isolated. I am not arguing here that we should practice these styles of action in order to be “good” as defined by some external authority. That would imply that if we could get away from the all-seeing eye of that authority, we could just relax and go back to being deceptive and resentful. I am arguing instead that *these qualities appear to be the inherent directions of human fulfillment*. They are our own built-in recipe for becoming fully human persons. Where this recipe originally came from I will leave to theologians and evolutionary biologists, who have filled many volumes discussing the source of human virtues. The unfolding of these qualities in people seems equally miraculous to me, whether I think of these qualities as the flowering of a billion years of evolution or as the gradual revelation of God’s presence in our own hearts.

Wherever these qualities have come from, what is clear to me is that *these are the qualities of successful and complex long-term human cooperation*. And successful cooperation means better survival for the group that practices it, although the emergence of successful cooperation is not at all automatic. It is not like growing hair. It is much more like searching for food, a process which, although it has life and death biological significance, may or may not be fully realized. Consider for a moment that the speech folds of our brains contain no specific language when we are born, but await completion from human culture. In a similar way, our capacity to develop all the cooperation-facilitating qualities-in-action just listed awaits actualization in nurturing families, schools and cultures. *(That is what communication training is about: to improve the chances that people will be able to cooperate with one another to meet life’s challenges.)*

Following in the very large footsteps of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, I believe that each human being is born with both a capacity and a gentle yearning to grow in these many directions: toward awareness, caring, creativity and so on. The more actions we perform that

express these qualities, the more we have feelings of coherence, community, integrity, and well-being. We like ourselves more. The fewer of these kinds of actions we perform the more we have feelings of fragmentation, alienation, self-dislike, and perhaps numbness. Unfortunately, our “gentle yearning” to grow in these directions is easily overruled by harsh circumstances. Thus we need to work together to nurture those impulses in ourselves and others and so create a social world that feels good to live in.

Focusing on the qualities-in-action that I have compiled into the list presented above is one possible context for understanding *where are we going and what are we doing together*.

The story of my life, in this context, becomes the story of my journey into awareness, kindness, insight, courage, and so on, perhaps as exemplified by the heroes and archetypes of my culture.

And my deepest way of relating to you is to encourage your development in these directions, first by my own embodiment of these qualities, and second by becoming your companion on this journey of development. Such companionship, whether in parenting, friendship or psychotherapy, contains a powerful creative tension between, on one side, a vision of and a hope for the best that you can become, and, on the other side, a profound acceptance and forgiveness of all the trial and error along the way. We give and receive crucial forms of this kind of developmental encouragement in conversation: receiving the story of another person’s struggles and sharing the story one’s own successes and failures.

Seven arguments in favor of the centrality of conversation in human development

At his point you might quite reasonably be thinking, “Well, that we should all strive to act in ways that are more aware, caring and skillful is a nice idea but not a new one, and furthermore, what do these various noble qualities have to do with communication?” The answer that I offer to this question is already implied in the last few paragraphs. As I see it, *the world of conversation*

between us is a uniquely important and available arena in which to adopt more of these qualities. Since this is a weighty proposition, allow me to present several arguments that support it.

First of all, it is in our conversations that we rehearse our actions. Therefore, the more skillful and creative our rehearsals, the better our actual performances will be. If we can't imagine doing something, we probably won't be able to do it. Conversations, both inner and outer, are where we do most of this essential imagining ("I wonder what would happen if I..."). So the qualities of our conversations spill over into our actions, for better or for worse, which we then remember as part of our life story, which is an important component of our personhood. Our actions and society's reaction to them become a significant part of our personhood. (Rob a bank and you've just transformed yourself into a "bank robber.") We become the qualities of what we do, after we talk ourselves into doing it, or don't talk ourselves out of doing it.

Second, conversation itself is an action, and it is the context in which we both encounter essential human tasks and practice many significant human virtues (understood as qualities of action). For example, major forms of honesty, kindness, awareness, and creativity are utterly conversational. To begin with the first of these, one of the primary forms of honesty concerns speaking truthfully in conversations with others. "Thou shalt not lie." This is not a warm-up for some other more fundamental virtue, this is a virtue itself that lives (or dies) in conversation. For another example, think of the kindness involved in listening supportively to a friend who is going through some great trial, perhaps having just learned of the death of a loved one. The kindness of listening caringly is not some lesser kindness, some practice for the real thing that will come later. This conversational kindness is the real thing.

Continuing with the qualities that I noted at the beginning of this paragraph, if we look at awareness as a virtue, we see that our horizon of awareness is shaped by the possibilities allowed by our vocabulary and grammar, which are elaborated in our conversations. It's hard to pay

attention to something until we have a conversationally-transmitted word for it. With regard to creativity as a virtue, stringing words together into unique sequences is one of the primary forms of human creativity, and a form that nurtures many other non-linguistic forms of creativity. My illustrations could be expanded to show how all the other qualities-in-action I have listed (hopefully, courageously, beautifully, etc.) find a major form of expression in conversation.

Third, we use conversation both to assert ourselves and to commune with others, the essential tasks of human development. According to the developmental psychologist Robert Kegan,³⁸ two overarching tasks, *communion and assertion*, stand out as being equally at the core of a fully human life. Communion means understanding, empathizing with and nurturing the people around us. Assertion includes our ability to press for the fulfillment of our own needs and our gradually unfolding ability to conceive of and guide our own lives. Although Kegan does not especially emphasize conversation as a central part of the developmental process, conversing is the main way most people assert themselves and commune with others. The conclusion I draw from Kegan's work is that the way we learn to converse, clearly or confusedly, creatively or dully, compassionately or demeaningly, will have a giant impact on how well or how poorly we accomplish the central tasks of personhood he describes.

Fourth, conversations are small enough units of behavior that we can, with effort, steer them toward the qualities we want to embody. It is very difficult to make direct changes in one's character or overall attitudes, but conversations provide us with endless opportunities to move in positive directions. The adverbial qualities of our conversations (wisely, honestly, awarely, acceptingly, etc.) become the adjectival qualities of our character (wise, aware, accepting, etc.). The qualities-in-action adverbs are a sort of gentle "on-ramp" of personal character: conversations are an accessible starting place for working on the

³⁸ Robert Kegan. *The Evolving Self: Problem and Process in Human Development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 1982

kind of persons we would like to become, one that allows us to begin again and again. The same can be said for communing and asserting. We learn to balance these competing pulls one conversation at a time.

Fifth, we use conversational story-telling to recognize ourselves and others as persons to be loved and protected, or as objects to be used and broken. This is true throughout life, from the baby's emerging sense of self-and-other that grows out of the gradually unfolding mother-infant dialogue, to the mythic themes that peoples and nations use to define themselves in relation to other peoples and nations. We have been told many times that words are not objects or people, but merely words. That is true as far as it goes, but I submit to you that such understanding does not go far enough. A lot of current thinking and research suggests that how well we recognize others as people depends on our memories of nurturing conversations, the richness or poverty of our vocabulary of experience, the labels we are taught to use, and how we use that vocabulary and labeling to weave our experiences and expectations of others into coherent stories shared and reinforced in further conversation.

The war that accompanied the breakup of the former Yugoslavia provides a tragic example of this story-making at work. Both the Serbs and the Croats used stories of World War Two atrocities to whip up hatred against the other side. This created a coherent context in which new atrocities could be committed in the name of just revenge. Such processes of demonizing and vilifying are strongly rooted in conversation and storytelling, as are the processes of honoring and appreciating.

Because we use story-making and story-sharing to organize our experience of other people and define our relationship to others, we are especially vulnerable to manipulative story-tellers, whether they are advertisers, cult gurus, or demagogic politicians. The story that I tell you to express and justify how I see other people is an important part of "me," my personhood, as we all realize when we meet someone on the street who is convinced that half the people in town are malevolent agents from outer space. How

different this is from the "all children of the same loving God" theme elaborated by The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and what a different sense of "me" this latter theme evokes. The qualities of these kinds of conversations both reflect and create the qualities of our lives.

Sixth, conversations are the primary medium through which we heal the emotional wounds of living. As Judith Viorst so eloquently states in her book, *Necessary Losses*,³⁹ even in a life full of advantages and good health, every step of human development is accompanied by and catalyzed by deep experiences of loss. We leave the womb to gain the world. We raise our kids only to have them leave home just about the time when they could become our friends. By the time we reach middle age and can truly understand our parents, our parents often die, leaving us with a complex burden of grief at the loss and gratitude for life, fragile and finite though it is.

In addition to these sufferings that are built into life, many lives, perhaps most, are marked by some degree of trauma and deprivation. Several of my close friends, for example, had in childhood a parent who was mentally ill or a violent alcoholic. Other friends participated in the Vietnam war, to their eternal regret. And for others, who protested the war, the Vietnam war era was so disorienting that they lost confidence in being able to have a normal life of fulfillment in family and work. I want to make two points here that are unpopular in an optimistic culture: first, that life includes suffering, and second, that much of the suffering and loss in life has nothing to do with our misbehavior (although it is also true that we can cause our-selves enormous suffering). That is to say, being wounded by life and learning to heal are central, inescapable parts of becoming a mature person. And, it is through many heartfelt *conversations* that we engage in this healing process, that we bring these painful experiences into focus and create a meaningful life story out of a seemingly random sequence of sorrows and disappointments. Sometimes these conversations are called,

³⁹ Judith Viorst. *Necessary Losses*. New York: Fawcett. 1986.

“psychotherapy,” but even more often we call them “deep friendship” and “good parenting.”

In all these contexts, according to Carl Rogers, healing conversations have the same qualities.⁴⁰ The helping partners in these dialogues communicate honestly, caringly, respectfully, understandingly, expressively, and in a way that is open to new experience. In the company of such supportive conversation partners we reconcile ourselves to the sorrows and losses in life, and find the strength to start over, to meet life anew. (Although it is certainly possible for many people heal their life wounds through art and dance, for most people the focus of emotional healing is in conversation. Even therapies centered in art, movement or music include the kinds of conversations just mentioned.)

Finally, seventh, there is a good deal of evidence to suggest that just plain thinking itself is internalized conversing. It is in the styles, themes and cognitive challenges of our conversations that we help our children learn to think. (The scholar I find most inspiring on this topic is Jerome Bruner.) While spatial perception and motor skills are absolutely essential dimensions of human development, the same must be said for conversation skills (which are usually referred to as the dis-embodied abstraction, “language”). Daily conversations challenge the growing child to perform ever larger and more complex feats of memory, logic, creativity, and understanding the experience of others. The sentence is the seed of the story, and the story is the seed of an autobiography: a story about myself and others that allows me to imagine my own life and thus think of myself as a person among persons.

The mind unfolds in conversation and story-telling, which remain major forms of mental exercise throughout life. But not only do we learn to think and imagine in conversation, *we learn to think and imagine in a particular personal style* shown to us by our earliest caregivers. Appreciatively or resent-fully, hopefully or cynically, honestly or deceptively, creatively or routinely: our styles of making contact with one

another and making sense of life are the gifts or curses we bestow upon our children. And it will be largely through their conversations that they will keep alive and deepen whatever style of thinking we have passed on to them.

Here, then, in recapitulation, are my seven arguments in favor of the proposition that we become persons largely in and through our conversations with others (and with ourselves, also, after we have absorbed early in life a large amount of conversational interaction):

- 1) In conversations we conceive and rehearse the important actions of our lives, including cooperation with others.
- 2) In conversation we can embody all the fundamental human virtues (or faults).
- 3) We use conversation both to assert ourselves and to commune with others, which are the two essential tasks of human development.
- 4) Conversations allow us to approach and practice all those virtues and tasks in small steps.
- 5) In conversations we learn and put into action our understanding of ourselves and others as persons to be loved and protected or as objects to be used and broken.
- 6) Conversations are the primary medium through which we heal the emotional wounds of living.
- 7) In conversation we learn and renew our fundamental style of thinking.

In light of these seven arguments, it is a mistake to imagine that our “real” life takes place beyond all words, and we then have “mere” conversations about it, as if life and conversation were two were separate circles. A truer picture, I believe, would be to locate the conversation circle *inside* the life circle. Our conversations are real life activities, as real as running or swimming or planting food.

For me, these seven arguments are deeply important because they all imply that by improving the way we talk and listen we can

⁴⁰ Carl R. Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. 1995.

create gentle waves of change in both our relationships with other people and our inner relationship with ourselves. In much the same way that the smallest part of a fern has the same shape as the entire fern branch, the moment of conversation holds the shape of a lifetime. Although from the “whole life” perspective we can speak of moments combining to make a life story, the whole giving meaning to each of the parts, this point of view can tend to devalue each moment. From the “eternal moment” perspective, our lives unfold one moment at a time and *the quality we give our present moment is the quality of our life*. The life we are given is given to us one moment at a time. Therefore we would live more fulfilling lives if we cultivated each moment (and each conversation) as an enormous opportunity to live more awfully, compassionately, courageously, appreciatively, and so on. (I advocate using both of these points of view, the whole life and the eternal moment, and alternating between them, as a way of thinking about one’s life.)

Because we converse with one another day in and day out, it is easy lose track of how significant all these individual moments and everyday conversations are in our journey of becoming. I hope the arguments I have just presented will inspire you to *see the familiar as strange*, to see your everyday conversations as full of wonderful possibilities. No matter where we find ourselves on the spectrum of development, I believe, *each of us was born to embody all these qualities-in-action and the capacity to grow more fully in these directions lies within each of us at every moment*.

Challenges we face in striving to become more fully human

That we have within us these wonderful capacities does not mean that it will be easy to develop them. Having brain folds for speech does not automatically provide us with language, and being born with lots of muscle cells does not provide us with fully-formed muscles. Similarly, my experience has been that developing more of these inherently human qualities and nurturing them in others is the most challenging task in a

human life. (I actually believe that task is what we are here for.) So in concluding this essay, allow me to share with you what I see as some of the most significant challenges and barriers to this kind of human development and possible responses to those challenges.

THE MOMENTUM OF THE OLD WAYS. First of all, however we talk, listen, interrupt, fight, nurture and/or demean one another has a great amount of psychological ‘momentum’ behind it. We have been practicing doing it that way for a long time. We identify with our current conversation style as an important part of our being. And the style connects us to the people who taught us to talk this way (usually our parents). Not all of this momentum is bad. If we did not have some established patterns of our own we would be led astray by the first pied piper or cult guru who passed through town. But the momentum of the styles we learned as children and developed up to now can keep us trapped in ways of relating that need changing, that will never bring us any real fulfillment or happiness. For me, the answer to this problem is not to try forcibly to break a person’s identification with his or her present pattern, as is the case in Marine boot camp, cult indoctrination and some drug treatment programs. From my perspective that still leaves a person completely other-directed, without an inner compass to follow. For me the answer to the problem of momentum *is to raise the issue of momentum*, to challenge people to wrestle with that issue consciously and to choose consciously the people they want to emulate, the heroes they want to follow and the qualities they want to embody.

THE MENTAL WORKOUT OF PAYING ATTENTION. Second of all, aside from the effort it might take to change our ways of communicating, it takes a considerable amount of mental effort just to focus one’s attention on conversations and the qualities they express. In contrast to an object or a single event, each conversation is like a little novel: a complex sequence of events, each one of which is meaningful because of its relationship to all the others. As each new conversational event takes place, we have to imagine the many possible meanings it might have in relation to the various conversational and life events that came before it.

Beyond the mental workout demanded by the need to remember and interweave long sequences of actions, paying conscious attention to the qualities of those action sequences requires that we exercise our capacities for abstract thought and self-observation. Forewarned of these mental demands, we can develop more realistic expectations and make a place for more practice in our lives (more discussions, support groups, long talks, less TV).

THE TENSION AMONG HUMAN VIRTUES. A third challenge is that many of the qualities-in-action that make us most fully human are in deep and creative tension with one another. For example, while we are told from an early age both to be kind and to tell the truth, it takes years of practice to learn how to bring both these qualities into the same encounter. The same can be said for the many problem-solving situations in life that require us to think both honestly *and* creatively. The developmental theorist Robert Kegan has gone so far as to describe the human personality as, figuratively speaking, stretched into existence by the tension between our need to commune with others and our equally strong need to assert ourselves. It appears that our personhood is like a living fabric which grows by being simultaneously pulled strongly in many directions. Knowing that our development will be a challenging balancing act rather than a placid flowering, we can adopt a more forgiving attitude toward the setbacks in our own development and the development of others.

RESISTING THE SHORT-TERM APPARENT BENEFITS OF DECEPTION AND COERCION. A fourth challenge might be called, “the eternal temptations.” In the course of living, it often seems much easier to tell less than the whole truth, both to others and to ourselves. It also can seem much easier to try to get what we want by threatening other people rather than by negotiating with them and honoring their needs. While lying, self-deception and bullying may give a person some momentary advantages, relying on such maneuvers will make it impossible to form long-term relationships of trust and cooperation. And the lack of such warm, supportive relationships is one of the deepest wounds a person can experience. If we deceive or bully our friends and

partners in life, we soon will not have any friends or partners. The sooner in life we figure this out, the better off we will be, but resisting these temptations is a deep lesson and we may or may not get the help we need to learn it.

One measure of a culture is how it helps its members outgrow these temptations by developing a long-term sense of relationship-building and community-building, how it helps its members make the journey from coercing to cooperating. Since most societies rely on quite a bit of coercion to maintain social order we are, in general, more likely to learn how to obey than how to cooperate. This leads us to the final challenge in my list...

AN ENVIRONMENT HOSTILE TO PERSONHOOD. To me, a fifth challenge to our development as persons comes from the particular social world in which we live. Although our fulfillment as persons may depend on our cultivation of the qualities-in-action I described in the opening pages of this paper, the society we live in may not want its members to be all that aware, honest, creative or courageous. Consider, for example, the social pressure during almost a century of American history (1776-1860) for many Americans to ignore the glaring contradiction between the institution of slavery and the national ideal that “all men are created equal.” Or consider the pressure on ordinary Germans to look the other way as their supposedly refined and highly civilized nation descended into bloodshed and madness. Or contemplate the current culture of violence-as-entertainment, which, in countless movies, books and video games, celebrates and idealizes cruelty, injury and murder, making kindness more and more unthinkable.

As Arno Gruen points out in *The Insanity of Normality*,⁴¹ our struggle for integrity is often, unfortunately, partly a struggle against the socially accepted world around us. Following Gruen, I see us encountering this taken-for-granted insanity in many forms: as lying bosses, alcoholic parents, dramatized murder as daily entertainment, programs to build weapons of mass destruction

⁴¹ Arno Gruen, *The insanity of normality: Realism as sickness - Toward understanding human destructiveness*. New York: Grove Press. 1992.

that are really collective suicide devices, and state governments that supposedly save their citizens' money by running lotteries that take even more money from those same citizens, to name only a few of many issues that come to mind. In terms of living more honestly and awarely, and developing more of all the other qualities-in-action I have discussed in this essay, one would have to admit that we are surrounded by bad examples

If and when we numb ourselves enough to blot all of this out of awareness, we numb ourselves enough to lose track of our own lives, the very lives we were hoping to protect and cultivate. If we could consciously acknowledge that some aspects of our world are going to be hostile to our fulfillment as persons, we might be able to find healthier ways of protecting ourselves. (Spending less time in front of the TV and more time in nature with friends and family, for example.) Becoming a person would be a challenge even if we did not have large companies offering us 24-hour-a-day kick boxing to stir us up and alcohol to calm us down, an endless stream of large-screen bad news to depress us and then Prozac to cheer us up. Between the blind faith that everything is all right, and the paranoia that the world is out to injure and destroy us, lies the realistic acknowledgment that we will probably not get much help in becoming persons from the dominant institutions of our culture. This realistic disappointment could bear good fruit. We might get more actively involved both in creating the life and personhood we want to live and creating the kind of world in which we would like to live it.

Conclusion

As much as the seven arguments presented in the middle of this paper have convinced me that we become persons largely in and through the qualities of our communication with others, these last five considerations just given convince me

with equal force that steering one's conversations and one's life toward genuineness, creativity, compassion, etc., will probably never be easy. But this struggle is what will allow us to feel more fully alive and more deeply human. The good news is that we can approach all the virtues of full humanness one conversation at a time. Our lives are, among other things, a series of conversations, and therein lies one of the most significant doorways to personal development. We vote with each conversation, both for what kind of person we want to become, and (to borrow a phrase from Ram Dass) for what kind of world we ourselves want to live in.



Reconciliation by Meganne Forbes

