

# HEALING WITH WORDS



Dr. ROBERT McNEILLY  
& JENNY BROWN

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WITH
WORDS

Dr R McNEILLY  
& Jenny BROWN

Dedication: To Ella and Tom with appreciation

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As human beings we are constituted in language.  
This applies to all domains of human experience and  
underlies all human endeavour—from bringing up  
children to preventing global warfare.

Yet, because words are around us all the time, like the  
air, we take them for granted and remain largely  
unconscious of the way we use language to define our  
world and ourselves.

Changing our awareness of language is not a course  
in something new, radical or even complicated. Rather it is  
utilising a tool that is already within everyone's grasp.

This is both the simplicity and the elegance offered in  
this book as a method that works for life.

This is the healing power of words.

# Introduction

When I was in general practice, I began to wonder what people were coming to see me for. What could I offer to assist them with their dilemmas?

Listening to their problems was some help, but it didn't seem enough. What did seem to make a consistent difference was my being available as a human being—listening to the other.

I noticed though that listening wasn't enough. Advice was rarely welcome or useful, so I continued searching for what was missing—that something else.

Through the Australian Society of Hypnosis in Melbourne, I learned about hypnosis and was introduced to the sometimes amazing ways people can change their experience. But there seemed to be power issues which interfered with the process.

It was then I discovered the work of Milton Erickson and learned with him that therapeutic conversations can provide a gentle, respectful and effective form of communication so that these very conversations could become healing in themselves.

This was the right track.

In developing the willingness to use the language of an individual—to that individual's benefit, appreciating the uniqueness of each individual's way of expressing how and who they are—enhanced the responsiveness which followed.

It is this continuing fascination with language—the words and actions we use—that really excites me.

To witness someone literally changing who they are, as they talk—and along with it changing their action—is an awe-inspiring, moving experience.

I have also enjoyed sharing with teaching doctors, psychologists, and other health professionals how language is the key



which keeps the problem in place and also contains the clue of how to let go, to get out of the problem.

The key is language. The exploration continues

DR ROB McNEILLY MBBS, D. Obst. (RCOG)

As a writer ranging widely through print, radio and television I couldn't help but develop a very healthy respect for the awesome power of words. When 'published abroad' words can both inspire and destroy so I use and choose them with extreme care.

Recently, while working for a mainstream medical magazine I discovered a place where communication seemed in imminent danger of failing.

In medical circles, it appeared to me, there was a growing gap opening up in the language employed by those seeking help and those dispensing it. How telling was the fact that the average consultation time had come down to ten minutes and that only three of those minutes were allotted for the patient to talk?

I looked around for doctors who were doing it differently. Eventually I found a number of young, traditionally trained practitioners who were seeking to bridge that chasm of jargon so they could reach out to their patients and thereby become more effective healers in the classical sense.

These doctors were willing to incorporate the ideas presented by alternative therapies, psychology and Eastern medicines. They were also volunteering to step down from the lofty height of being experts who had some sort of divine knowledge to take a more equal and active part in the therapeutic process.

Listening and sharing experiences certainly demands more clinical time but it also makes their work more creative, challenging and mutually beneficial.

The referrals of these doctors led me on to Robert McNeilly who was teaching many how to use the language of therapy to gain better long-term results for their patients.

I went to see Rob McNeilly; I was inspired and challenged by what he was doing and saying, and after publication of a story on his work so were many others. A deluge of phone calls came in from people who wanted to know more about the potential of language as a healing force.

This book is the result of that groundswell of curiosity.

JENNY BROWN

## **Our Invitation**

The following ideas are not offered in the form of a scholarly thesis. We do not even claim they are universally true. Rather, we write in order to share our emerging understandings of just how we can enhance our use of language.

We therefore invite you, in reading this, to join in the conversation with us. We want you to stop, question, reflect, and consider where and how these ideas can be usefully applied in your own evolving.

1

# Evolving Language

# A Grounding in History

The everyday understanding of language is that it is descriptive. Habitually, we use language as if we were describing something—something beautiful or hateful, something of ourselves or others:

‘I’m a woman. I’m a confident person, I’m a winner. I’m depressive. I’m a loser. I’m peaceful ... frightened ... angry ...’

‘You’re a happy soul. You seem content ... frightened ... energetic ... or, you seem to be sad today.’

That’s how we use language at this time in our history, as a description. But it wasn’t always like that.

The idea of language as description began with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle in the fourth century before Christ. Before the luminaries of the School of Athens made their pronouncements, Heraclitus of Ephesus (500 BC) had talked about experiences ‘emerging or becoming’. Language as he used it was about transitory, temporary, growing, moving, evolving experiences. Heraclitus understood that language created a moving picture of life.

Aristotle (384–322 BC) stilled the action. He sought to freeze the focus on a particular moment in time in order to examine it. He and other Greek philosophers began to look at language, and therefore at life, in an abstract way.

Instead of looking at *loving*, they started to investigate *love*. This process separated and distanced us, the observers, from our loving. Instead of being present, love became an abstraction. Here

was the beginning of a progressive dissociation from life's experiences. We began to *talk about it*.

Interestingly, this change happened about the time of the invention of written language. With the transition from learning by stories and myths with all their rich texture and wonderful ambiguity, language started working with cold concepts that distanced some essence of life from us. It became something to be studied rather than to be in.

I notice how easy it is for me to lose touch with someone because I start interacting with my concept or definition of them rather than with who they really are. It is easy to put some expectation on how I expect my wife to be—what I expect her to do, and become irritated when she doesn't do what I want. The presumption on my part creates a distance and separation in our relationship.

When I open my eyes to how she is and who she is, the distance disappears and the relationship is suddenly close again. She literally appears again as if she'd come out from behind a cardboard figure, one which I've created.

The use of language as an abstraction persisted. Almost 2000 years later the French philosopher Rene Descartes (1596–1650) refined it still further by talking about the *isness* of things.

From this time we began to talk about 'love' as if it was a chair, something we can see, feel and touch. Descartes talked about love as if it had some independently concrete existence, as if it were fixed, immutable, set, solid.

If we want to change a chair we have to destroy it. But loving can be changed surprisingly easily. It is mutable, changeable, malleable, invertible, creatable.

The limitation of the Cartesian viewpoint is that it blinds us to all of those opportunities to be more creative in influencing our experience. It distracts us from asking what actions we might be able to take to be more flexible in creating our experience, and instead leads us into the human obsession with explanations—with the answer to the question 'Why?'

Human beings ask Why? Why is it so? We seem to crave the tranquillity of finding an explanation that fits.

**M**ovement in language was given impetus in this century when the German physicist Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976) began to fray the edges of these inherited concepts. He started to soften, melt, unlock and free language so that it could flow again and allow our experiences to begin to flow with it.

Heisenberg alerted us to the impossibility of ever being certain of our observations because, as he said, as soon as we observe something it is changed by our observing it. The observer changes the observed. This is a very disquieting idea for human beings who so love certainty.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) a countryman and contemporary of Heisenberg took another step in reclaiming the original use of language. He said the observer is part of the observing and used a marvellous German phrase *Dasein* or being-in-the-world to underline the idea that being-in and the-world are all part of a whole. They are indivisible. We cannot separate our being from the world we are in.

We can no more separate the being from the world, than we can the sitter from sitting, or the lover from loving.

Heidegger gives the example of a carpenter who is hammering a nail. Everything is going to plan. There is a carpenter, a nail, a hammer and it is all happening as a whole coordination of action. Yet when the carpenter hits his thumb, everything ‘appears’. The carpenter, the hammer, the nail, the thumb—those various elements which were indistinct when the action was co-ordinated literally ‘appear’, seemingly out of nowhere, and only when the co-ordination of action breaks down.

I remember walking around the edge of Central Park in New York with Peter, a friend, and we were lost in conversation to the point where I wasn’t even aware of being in a city.

Suddenly, on a jutting cobblestone, I stubbed my toe.

At that moment, my toe appeared, the sidewalk appeared, Peter appeared and New York appeared. Yet until I stubbed my toe, all of those things were so much in the background it was as if they weren’t even there.

We have all had a lot of experience at not seeing the most obvious of things. People tell me of buying a different car and suddenly, seeing so many of the same model around. Where were they before we got ours? Have they all just come out of hiding?

No. They were there all the time. We just hadn't seen them before.

To Heidegger we also owe the word 'linguaging', a verb. He insisted that language is a tool that shapes our existence, not merely something that describes it.

When I first had the opportunity to eat Japanese food, I knew that eating raw fish would make me sick. So I asked my friend to tell me that the fish was cooked.

Jeff said, 'This fish is cooked Rob. It's OK to eat it.'

And when I ate the fish I enjoyed it.

I said, 'It was really raw, wasn't it Jeff?'

He said, 'Of course it was.'

But by then, I knew I could enjoy it. I now know I can eat raw fish and really relish it.

I'd previously *linguaged* the eating of raw fish as being nauseating and if I had tried to eat it I probably would have had the embarrassment of vomiting. Having had the experience of enjoying the Japanese food, I continue to be able to *language* raw fish as something delicious.

Humberto Maturana, a Chilean biologist provides a solid, scientific, even biological basis for making language more accessible, more relevant and central for us human beings.

By giving a solid basis to language, that is, by giving language a root into the science of biology, he provides the flexibility for the upper branches. In short, a way that language can show us how to grow, develop, flower, fruit, branch out, diversify, change colour, shape and dimension.

Maturana states that as human beings we have a certain structure and that according to our structure certain actions are possible while others are not. The structure of our lungs allows us to breathe air and prevents us breathing water. The structure of our arms allows us to write with a pencil but not to fly by flapping them. Maturana says our actions are structure-determined.

A washing machine washes because it has a certain structure. A toaster toasts because it has a certain structure. We can't expect

a washing machine to toast bread because it doesn't have the structure to do that.

Even though it provides a very full and coherent explanation of what is possible for us humans, *structural determinism* is often seen as a controversial notion. It evokes indignation at the injustice of absolving any wrongdoers of responsibility, apparently excusing their actions as something inherent in their structure.

But this very indignation comes out of our human structure which embodies the importance of fairness and justice. It is our structure that determines our indignation.

*Structural determinism* can provide an opportunity for someone to change their structure so that their behaviour can change from that base.

By altering structure, language can heal.

When someone is experiencing fear the structure of their body, their physiology, their internal chemistry and thought patterns are all very different from when they are experiencing security. The change in structure that fear brings, forces the fearful behaviour. The fear takes over.

But by learning, by practising changing, we can bring to that previously feared situation a different body, a different psychology, internal chemistry and thought patterns, a different structure to that previously feared situation.

With this new structure it might not be possible to experience the fear that was previously there. We might instead experience relief or amusement, or feel incredulous that we were so frightened in the first place.

When I was eight, I was taken to a horror movie by mistake: *The Mummy's Ghost* starring Lon Chaney. Afterwards I had nightmares and I was scared of the dark for the next 25 years. Picture a 33-year-old man scared of the dark.

At 33 my body had kept the structure of a frightened eight-year-old and had no option other than to respond automatically, uncontrollably, around the dictates of the eight-year-old boy's structure.

When I saw the film a second time, at 34, I could see it very differently and was able to recognise that the horrible monster



was in fact Lon Chaney wrapped in bandages. That second viewing actually changed the structure of my body so that it could not react the way it had previously. The change in the structure changed the response. The fear had left permanently. Finally I had laid *The Mummy's Ghost*.

Before I saw the film the second time I had no choice about my body's reaction to the dark; the shaking, the sweating, the irrational thinking. And after the second viewing, however, I had just as little choice about the new comfort and enjoyment that I experienced in the dark.

Maturana provides a model of how the human being is immersed in language and uses language to bring forth a reality.

We've all had the experience of disliking someone intensely. Then something they say, something they do, shocks us into seeing a different aspect of them. It is as if they have become a different person and we can only wonder at how we had been able to dislike someone so multi-dimensional. Where had their good qualities been hiding?

Some people in stale relationships wonder what happened to the ideal person they fell in love with, that person who has now become a dragon or a bore.

In working with a couple it is always a pleasure for me to see them remember the person they are with, and to see them change as they discover who they are.

Working with arguing couples, it is a recurring experience to have them remind each other about how it was when they first met. When they stop their arguing long enough to see who they are with—to notice the other's eyes, eyebrows, nose, lips, hair and so on, they might laugh, cry, blush with mortification about just how they have been able *not* to see the other. It becomes impossible for them to argue in that experience.

Maturana lets us see that individuals, with their individual viewpoints, are bringing forth their own universes.

Every viewpoint will allow for a different view. Seen from above, a pyramid is square; seen from one side it is triangular. Measured with a spectrophotometer, light is seen to have wave-

lengths; measured differently, light is seen to be composed of particles of matter. Which viewpoint is correct?

The consensus among physicists is that light is wave patterns or particles of matter, according to which instrument is used to measure it, and how it is observed.

Maturana says each universe is legitimate in its own right. He talks not about *universe* but *multi-Versa* (an infinite number of versions) to emphasise that there are as many universes as there are individual observers.

As a biologist and scientist he reminds us of the importance of Action (with a capital A) for human beings. He says that communication is co-ordination of *actions* between individuals in their individual universes in order to generate some shared *action*.

Communication therefore is not conceived of as a transfer of information, as if there is some absolute and ultimate truth to be transferred. Instead, communication can provide an opportunity for inventing a new shared world for two or more people to interact in. Further, language can become an inventing of a new, shared world for two or more people to interact in. Language is the inventing of new shared worlds in which action can be co-ordinated.

For me, Maturana provided a key, a way of integrating, distinguishing and of being at peace with the myriad theories that attempt to explain human behaviour, emotions, problems, therapy and counselling. He gave me a way of using any of them without being limited by concerns about which was 'right'. This provides an opportunity to share another person's view or universe. It provides an opportunity to contact the other and to be sustained, enriched, encouraged and enhanced by the other.

The contemporary British philosophers J. L. Austin and his student John Searle said that language is always a committing to action. There are some language acts which are obviously, in themselves, action. 'I promise to do something'. The speaking of the promise is the action. Promising is action.

A judge declaring someone's innocence seems to be describing some attribute of that person. But we say innocence is declaring a future for that person in which he or she can rejoin family

and friends instead of being incarcerated. The declaration of innocence is a committing to a future for that person.

Language thus generates and prohibits certain actions.

Austin and Searle say that in speaking of a chair, although it might seem to be a description of a piece of furniture, we are actually generating the prospect of future sitting.

I notice that we only invent distinctions in language in order to coordinate our actions with other like-minded people.

Computer buffs talk about RAM, ROM, megabytes, gigabytes and such. This is not to describe what is actually there but rather for the sake of knowing what they can or cannot do with that computer or what needs to be done in order to do something different.

We say that a shopping list is not a description of what will be purchased but serves to orient the buyer to take appropriate action in the supermarket. Someone might write soap on their shopping list but while looking for soap might find a new shampoo which is biodegradable and then purchase that. The shampoo wasn't on the list but the list served to alert the buyer to what else might be possible.

When the petrol gauge on a car shows that the tank is nearly empty, we are not interested to calculate fuel economy or the litres of petrol that might be left. We use the gauge to take the action required. We fill up the tank so we can keep driving.

In a relationship, when someone says 'I'm feeling misunderstood', although they might seem to be describing their internal state of being, they're actually wanting some different action from their partners. They are requesting that others bring some understanding to them. And when they get the response they want; when they get that understanding and the actions that are consistent with understanding, communication has happened. This might include a hug, a change of behaviour, sympathy or help with the washing-up.

Austin and Searle add power to the function of language by including action so that we see language as action—so that language is about generating action.

That is its function. That is what it does.

So after millennia of dispossession, language is beginning to regain its original function and we are now on the brink of a new

understanding and use of language. We claim that people who recognise this will find themselves in a position of strength, clarity, resolution and flexibility in these times of increasingly rapid disruption, confusion, chaos and change.

The flexibility which this paradigm invites allows for a resilience in relationships, creativity in business and co-operation in society.

Fernando Flores was the Minister of Finance in Chile at the time of the military putsch against President Allende in 1973. When Pinochet took over government, Flores was imprisoned and while incarcerated began to study the ideas of his fellow countryman, the biologist Maturana. Flores said the day he met Maturana was the day he was no longer a prisoner.

Flores was freed after a campaign by Amnesty International and began to teach. He continues to teach, most notably how we can design language to be a powerful tool for generating future endeavours.

Flores invented the *language-action paradigm* which translates all of these academic ideas from philosophy and biology into everyday situations. He relates them to business, education, relationships, in fact, to all human interactions.

I've participated in two of his educational programmes in America. In my learning with his organisation, his ideas of work and management and relationships were transformed into *do-able* actions for me. A lot of the potential suffering and struggle was removed from me.

The first programme I did was 'The Career Course'. Before I undertook it, I didn't know I didn't have a career. As a doctor I had work, a source of income, a certain status or position in society. But through Flores' programme I discovered that my career was something that related not to me but to looking to see what was missing for other people.

Instead of knowing what was right for other people I began to ask what they wanted. This produced more respect and a more human series of interactions. Students in my teaching programmes tell me I'm much more human these days.

I also learned from Flores the crucial importance of design-

ing. With a specific use of language we can actually design a different future for ourselves. (We shall look at this in more detail when we examine the question of education.)

There was more. I also discovered that if I wasn't good at something it wasn't a personal deficiency that I had to put up with but rather an indication of some competence that I still had to learn. This was a big relief. I didn't have to pretend that I was good at something if I wasn't. I was able to feel more settled about things I wasn't good at.

Usually when we are not good at something we feel bad, inadequate and either avoid it or try to cover it up. I used to say I was a slow reader but in studying with Flores I learned a totally different way of reading. It was not speed reading, but a different way of making sense of what was on the page so that I was able to comprehend the basic message of the book or article very quickly.

It wasn't a trick. I had previously thought reading was a matter of taking in all the words, understanding their meaning, and following the plot and story-line development. I used to get overloaded with information and words. Words! I was always left feeling confused, overwhelmed and unsettled.

Flores taught me instead to pay attention to what was happening to *me* as I was reading and to make sense of the work—as I went along—by relating it to me, *my* concerns, prejudices and hopes.

I used to start a book and read all the way through. Now, I will look at the cover, the list of contents, skim through some chapters of interest . . . go back to the beginning and read a bit more just to get the general drift of it. Then sometimes I might even read it through.

Now I read in a less rigid way and am more active in the process. I'm an active observer and in this more active observation a conversation develops between me and the text and everything comes alive in the process.

Flores invites us to be active observers and to become more active in authoring our own experience.

Flores has been described as the Deming of the twenty-first

century. (Deming was the guiding influence of Japan's post-war manufacturing boom.) Flores' language-action paradigm allows business to design management practices so that actions are generated which promote success. He advises educators to design educational experiences which produce competence in students, taking action so they are not just passively absorbing information but knowing how to implement effective actions.

In relationships, his language-action paradigm provides a readily usable way of avoiding problems by allowing a couple to design a future together which is dignified, respectful and loving.

All of this happens in designing the language we use for our interactions. It avoids the trap and the suffering caused by being *used* by language. We can design language to be useful or we can find ourselves being used by language that is not designed.

Because language is alive it allows us to design creative interactions. Human beings are changing throughout their lives, society is changing, and the issues that were central a hundred years ago are now totally redundant. We can't know what will happen next century. But by attending to the way human beings are constituted in language and the way language relates to action and interactions the possibility of designing a future becomes available to us.

There will be exercises in the later chapters of the book in which we will invite you to design the life that you would like to have, in learning, in relating to yourself and others.

**I**mportant contributions to my work and my personal life were a number of self-development programmes: Werner Erhard's EST Training and Forum, and more recently Bob Hoffman's Hoffman Process.

My family and friends noticed that I was more authentic as a person after those experiences and I felt more available as a therapist to my clients.

Although these programmes are not psychologically based, there is a growing emphasis within the therapeutic community on the therapist attending to the therapist—in other words, therapists attending to themselves.

As a crucial element in the therapeutic process, they made a

difference to me, one that continues to have its beneficial effects on me, my clients and my family into the 1990s.

It is hard even to know where to start in talking about Milton Erickson, the late American psychiatrist, because his influence on me is so global. I was privileged to spend some time with him in Phoenix, Arizona in the late 1970s, the last years of his life.

As a person, I found Erickson intriguing, terrifying, fun, extraordinarily flexible and respectful. I'd say he was the most playful and loving person I've ever met, in spite of, or, as he would say, because of, severe handicaps. He was in chronic pain from the long-term effects of childhood polio, yet he could still ask, 'Why don't people have more fun in life?' He was actually living that notion.

Erickson was an inspiration. In so much of his work there was a sense that he was on the same level of experience as the person he was working with. In stepping beyond the usual restrictions of his profession he was able to join *with* the other to work with them as a partner in *their* experience of changing.

A young woman with hysterical paralysis of the legs had been in a psychiatric institution for some time. Erickson told her that he'd have her walking within a week and took her to the physiotherapy department. Drawing on his own experience with electrical muscle stimulators, used in his own recovery from polio, he put electrodes on his legs and turned the current on.

It threw him to the ground.

He stood up and turned the switch a second time. He was flattened to the floor. He then turned to the woman and said, 'Right. Now it's your turn. When you come back tomorrow we'll turn up the voltage'.

The next day the young woman shuffled into the room with an arm around the shoulders of two attendants. She said, 'I don't think I need any treatment today, my legs are starting to work'.

Erickson replied, 'Well, we don't want to run any risks'. He put the electrodes on his own legs, increased the voltage and turned on the current. Again he was thrown to the ground. He repeated the process before saying, 'It's your turn next. Come back tomorrow and we'll up the voltage even more'.

The next day the young woman came into the room pushing a chair in front of her, saying: 'Look how well my legs are working. I don't need any treatment today'. Erickson said, 'We don't want to run any risks'. He put the electrodes on his legs, upped the voltage and met the ground. After getting up twice he said. 'OK, it's your turn.'

That afternoon the young woman walked unsupported around the hospital grounds.

Erickson was willing to take the necessary action to get the woman walking again. To achieve it he did not impose himself as some authority figure but rather shared some necessary learning with a fellow sufferer and human being. Erickson fostered healing by co-ordinating *with* the young woman. He invited actions she could take that would allow her to heal. That was characteristic of Milton Erickson and many who learned from him.

Erickson was profoundly respectful of the individual and insisted on doing what was relevant to individuals, rather than forcing some hypothetical theory on them.

Many have tried to explain his work and everyone has come up with a fascinating set of ideas. No-one, however, has been able to adequately contain what he did. Nor should they, because what he did was a function of his own experiences. He invited his students to use what he was offering and then to adapt it using their own experiences.

One of his major characteristics has been his insistence on attending to the uniqueness of each individual rather than trying to generate some overarching theory. He said to me, 'To think there could be one theory that adequately explains all human action of both sexes, all ages, all cultures in all circumstances is absurd'.

He often introduced an element of fun, enjoyment, puzzlement into the therapeutic interaction. 'People', he said, 'have enough problems without having to put up with serious therapy as well'.

Erickson said that people had a lot more ability than they knew and that part of our growing up involves learning to limit our abilities. Erickson would always approach someone assuming



that they had the answer. He encouraged practitioners to have a good time looking *with* that person to find what the person had that they didn't know they had.

He believed everyone brings their own solutions with them and yet they don't know it. He was very skilful in co-designing new futures with people but always in a very pragmatic, down-to-earth kind of way—probably a reflection of his early days on a farm.

He said that whatever *you do* as a therapist, get your client to *do* something. The purpose of therapy is not about getting information or insight but in generating new and more satisfying actions for the other's future.

He cured a woman who had been bulimic by asking her to put on her best red shoes just before she vomited. The introduction of that small, seemingly irrelevant disruption to the totally sequenced, tightly choreographed routine of her problem, succeeded in disrupting it. It seems magical or simplistic but it actually happened.

Another bulimic woman got over her problem when he suggested that she save all the effort of purchasing food, cooking it, eating it and throwing it up. Erickson advised her just to put the raw products directly into the toilet.

These apparently quirky ideas are not offered here as a cure-all for serious problems. Erickson used them with a deep sense of respect for the individual so they were never seen to be glib or condescending.

Erickson encouraged therapists and patients to work with an attitude and expectation that at any moment someone can change for no reason. He said if a problem can come out of nowhere for no good reason, why can't it disappear into nowhere for no good reason?

He urged therapists to be watchful for the very beginnings of some useful change and was an active proponent of the idea of labelling and explaining experiences in a way that was going to be useful.

For example, if someone has a problem with stress and seeks assistance, I always enjoy the surprise and delight when I ask them to notice what part of their body is the most comfortable at that moment? They've been so absorbed in the stress they overlook the comfort that has also been there, somewhere in their bodies,

all the time. It is a genuine and recurring pleasure to see the way that inkling of comfort can spread, often effortlessly, through their body until even a panic attack can sometimes give way to a comfort attack.

Working with couples who are complaining about recurrent arguments, I enjoy witnessing their rediscovery of what it is like to be peacefully together and how they notice the lack of effort in living those peaceful times. Being together harmoniously and respectfully they just seem to find themselves having more fun. So preferable, as they say, to arguing.

One couple were always contending because he was always putting up a brick wall between them. When I invited them to report to each other how each experienced the brick wall from time to time during the day, they began to enjoy sharing the experience of the brick wall because they were now both on the same side of it.

Erickson's approach has led me away from the trap of holding the idea of people *as* their labels, illnesses or conditions (in language). Along with others using this approach I've had the joy of seeing change begin to emerge and grow when previously it had just been a dormant seed.

Erickson said when you talk to, or listen to someone, listen to their language knowing that you don't know what they mean. You don't listen for *your* understanding, you listen for *their* understanding.

This extraordinary man helped to break the rigid limitations that people imposed on themselves by their use of language and invited a learning of new ways of living and interacting by the new use of language.

One of the main things I learned from Erickson was that all experience is more flexible than I had thought. I also learned how to design the concrete actions that allow for the flexibility to be expressed in the real world.

His contribution was confirmed at the First International Congress about the Ericksonian Approach to Hypnosis and Psychotherapy held in Phoenix, which was attended by more than 2000 people from around the globe.

Milton Erickson reminds us of Heracleitus's approach to language. It is not some fixed, permanent characteristic; It is about *becoming and emerging*. In the late twentieth century, Erickson's work continues to show us how to design the *being-in-the world* that we are *becoming*. It happens in language.

2

# Language as Action



# The Building Blocks

Some aspects of life which seem to be permanent and unavoidable for all of us include: *education; self, identity, dignity, aspects of the self; relationships; work, money, career.*

We invite you to explore each of these topics with us from four particular aspects: *communication, languaging, emotioning and conversation.*

We invite you to explore with us how to relate what we discover to everyday actions; how we can get past our limitations to design in language more satisfying options for ourselves and others.

What we are offering here is a map and we invite you to see how you might use it. We are not claiming to provide *the absolute truth, the map*, but we do claim that we are providing a useful guide to better find our way around our existence, our life and our relationships.

Following is a list of the terms we will be using and the meanings we will be ascribing to them. We emphasise that they are not the only definitions. We invite you to retain the ways that you might otherwise use those words but to put them aside for the time that you are in conversation with us.

## **Communication as the co-ordination of action**

Traditionally we have thought of communication as the transfer of information from one person to another or, from one place to another. But this misses the point.

We tend to think of communication as if it were a good telephone line. If you can hear every word that I am saying, without any

static or distortion then our everyday understanding has us call that good communication.

If I ring you to set up a meeting, we tend to think that when you hear the time and place of the meeting accurately, *that* is the communication.

We say the reason we communicate with another is to align our actions with that other. When we ask someone to do something for us the communication has happened when the action happens—not when the information is received. The telephone communication happens when the action happens. The occurrence of the meeting is the purpose and expression of the communication.

In a relationship, communication occurs when two people do something together. Sitting down and talking because there is a problem, can lead to further arguments, not to resolutions.

What is more likely to be useful is for those people in conflict to share some activity, some interaction—a walk, a meal, making love. It is the actions that are co-ordinated, shared, the interactions that produce the experience of communication, which we all want.

### ***Language as a way of co-ordinating new actions and generating future options***

We are using *language* as a verb, relating to verbal or written action. For example, a wife can say to a husband, 'Would you please squeeze the toothpaste tube from the bottom, not from the top.'

When he starts squeezing the toothpaste differently and his wife is no longer irritated, they might also avoid their recurrent arguing about who is going to cook dinner. Resolving the conflict about the toothpaste leads to learning about how to resolve conflict in other situations, not just in the bathroom.

This is the beginning of the process of designing a different future. The future is generated in language.

## **Emotioning as the domain of action, an arena or space where actions take place**

Emotions allow for some sets of actions while prohibiting others. The emotion of a fear of flying prohibits the actions necessary to get on an aeroplane comfortably. A true flying phobia prevents the sufferer from even approaching an airport, whereas an emotion of anticipated enjoyment makes flying pleasurable.

An emotion or mood of trust or curiosity allows co-operation between people, whereas an emotion of fear or shyness will prohibit and distort any interaction.

If there is trust in a relationship, a whole range of new interactions becomes possible. It is the emotion of trust that allows the wife to ask her husband to change his toothpaste squeezing behaviour. If she were frightened, the emotion of fear would prevent her making the request.

Most people are reluctant to make requests in case they are denied. If the other person says 'No' the person making the request interprets the refusal as a direct denial of them as a person. It hits like a bruise to the soul. So there is a natural human reluctance to make requests. But it is a habit that can be overcome. We *can* learn to ask.

Before the husband says to his wife 'Could you do something for me?' he checks out her mood to find out if it is safe to ask.

He is, in effect, testing out the emotional space. Depending on the answer, he'll either make the request or say, 'Don't worry, I'll do it myself'.

Emotioning thus defines what kinds of action can't and can be taken.

## **Conversation as the interaction of languaging and emotioning**

Maturana states 'Conversation is the braiding of languaging and emotions'. It is the movement back and forth, the interplay between languaging and emotioning which twist around each other, mutually influencing each other.

Language and emotions dance together in conversation.

For me, conversations continue to be among the most enchanting



and satisfying experiences a human being can have. The word conversation derives from the Latin *con-versare*, quite literally it means changing together.

When there is a mood of trust, a wife can ask her husband to squeeze the toothpaste differently and when she discovers he is willing, that generates an emotion of trust which can lead to further interactions which further add to the trust.

The languaging and emotioning interact together. This interaction we call conversation.

# Education

Education is the cornerstone of life, the basis of all human endeavour. The word comes from the Latin *educare* meaning to draw out or extend.

My education didn't feel to me as if it was drawing me out or extending me. Like many others I suspect, I felt that my education was an attempt to put something in. It paralysed me.

When I first graduated from medical school and started working in hospitals, I had a lot of theoretical knowledge but felt all fingers and thumbs; totally out of my depth. I was incompetent, terrified. Six years of hard study had left me floundering as were many other new resident doctors.

Like them though, I felt obliged to pretend I knew what I was doing; to act the role of the doctor. It was distressing and very unsettling. I just bumbled through and learned as best I could. I hate to think now that I might have done some unwitting damage to any or even one of my patients although I do know there were a lot I was able to help.

I had all the information on how to be a doctor. I knew how to diagnose illness, how to prescribe drugs and medications. But I was totally unprepared to deal with people. There were cuts, diseases, broken bones, infections or conditions, symptoms and syndromes but—no human beings. The senior doctors were experts but I didn't often think of them as other human beings and my feelings of incompetence in the situation resulted in a sense of fear and shame.

This was nearly thirty years ago. Now, medical schools around the world are starting to give much more attention to human skills—people skills. There is currently a growing awareness that while our education system at all levels is excellent at providing

technical and theoretical understanding, that is, information, education is actually letting us down in two major areas: practical competence and creative thinking.

Psychologists, lawyers and economists emerge from university with sound theoretical understanding of psychological explanations, company law, economic principles, and so on, yet when they come to apply this learning in the world they feel insecure and don't know where to begin.

Even clinical psychologists report a lack of competence and confidence in dealing with their clients' real life problems. They have difficulty in dealing with their clients as people. They often report an experience of stress or overload which too often results in burnout. And they *should* know what to do: they've got their post-graduate qualification, they have their theories. But they find themselves in their work dealing with people—not theories. They are also dealing with the individual responses of those individual people.

There is the temptation to grab on to some familiar theory and ride into battle against an opposing theory. But this leads only to a crippling of possibilities and the creation of difficult clients.

Even lawyers, after decades in their profession, still report difficulty in applying legal principles to particular cases involving people. How to communicate, how to do more than just provide the bare bones of some dry legal advice?

Economists also seem to be best at providing and defending their favourite economic theories. Yet, so many fundamental economic problems persist or perhaps even worsen while they chase a J-curve.

In the past these situations were repeated right through our education system. The way education evolved left us with a heritage that limits the effectiveness of everyone who participated in it, from new students to the highest echelons of power.

In the Western world it is estimated that 30 per cent of our population don't have competence in reading and writing. This points to past failures of our education system. It simply did not provide the fundamental skills and failed nearly one-third of the population.

Tertiary institutions expressed dissatisfaction with the rele-

vance of secondary education. People who finished high school, even with outstanding results, found themselves ill-equipped to begin their tertiary studies.

A lot of the stress experienced by students and much of the drop out rate (resulting in a tremendous human and economic waste) could be directly attributed to this; the students were simply not prepared by their education to be practically competent.

People are now realising that this staggering *failure* to provide even the basics is unacceptable. There is a growing drive to find out how the system can provide practical skills and how these aims can be achieved.

What is needed? Drawing out and extending.  
Education.

In my home state of Victoria, as a result of conversations between secondary and tertiary institutions, the providers of secondary education are redesigning their methods to encourage students' resourcefulness to learn in relation to the real world; a world that they are a part of, and that they will continue to be a part of. As well, these pupils are being encouraged to create, invent and discover new ways of thinking, working together and learning.

There is evidence that the attention to relevance is spreading down through the education system. Kindergarten teaching is no longer a job of passive baby sitting. Kindergarten teachers are now looking to how they can establish the building blocks to better prepare young children for primary school and beyond.

This is truly an extraordinary time in our history. There is growing dissatisfaction with persisting and outmoded relics of the past. The rate of change is increasing exponentially, new alliances are forming locally, nationally and internationally.

In all areas of life, people are looking to generate new futures, new ways of co-ordinating action together, of interacting—of living together peacefully, with dignity and mutual respect. Education, as we have said, is the cornerstone of this our future world.

## **Education and communication**

We have said that communication is not exchanging information but is concerned with co-ordinating action, so that education programmes will be deemed effective when there is a co-ordinated interaction between a teacher and student so that skills can be applied in real-life situations.

A kindergarten child has learned the difference between a triangle and a circle when, as a result of interactions with the kindergarten teacher he or she is able to match up a circular block and a circular hole and a triangular block with a triangular hole. The kindergarten teacher has communicated the distinction successfully when the child accomplishes the task consistently.

Primary school students have learned addition, subtraction, multiplication and division, not when they can regurgitate the seven times table but when they can work out the cost of seventeen oranges at 21 cents each or when they know how to divide a birthday cake between their twelve guests.

Education is not about theoretical concepts but about adequate action. There is an enormous difference between being able to pass a spelling or reading test and being able to apply reading and writing skills to fill out the form on the back of the cereal packet to win a trip for two to Disneyland.

In secondary school, understanding of differential calculus comes alive when someone can create a computer program to design the car of the future. Although knowing the theory of computer configurations may be important, it is more vital to know how to interact with that computer so that it can perform all its various functions.

I wish I had been given the opportunity to learn how to interact with patients, as people, when I was in medical school. Had I been able to communicate with my teachers and the patients I was learning on I would have been less frightened, more open to learning, more flexible and a more effective doctor. It might have saved decades of my life.

Communication has been thought of as being an attribute that people are born with. Some people are thought to be good communicators, some bad. Bad luck. But by looking at communica-

tion in relation to co-ordinating action we start to see that it can be learned.

When we stop paying attention to ourselves and to trying to get our message right or clear, and even directing our attention to the other person and the response, it allows us to look for the action that follows our speaking or writing; the interactions occurring between us. Effective communication has happened when we see the result as action, as interactions. As an actual observable event in the real world.

Teachers know they have communicated learning when the student is able to apply that learning in some practical way. When a teacher sees that the student is able to apply the learning in some practical way then the teacher knows the learning has been communicated.

## **Education and languaging**

Languaging is about creating new sorts of interactions—interactions that didn't exist previously. It is about inventing.

We saw that in communication, a communication takes place when we get a predictable, consistent result. But as times change, circumstances change, and people change. It is going to help to be responsive in designing new interactions or even new kinds of interactions.

With the invention of the internal combustion engine, new interactions had to be invented for motor mechanics, for designers of new car engines and for methods of reducing exhaust emissions. Languaging allows for this openness to design into an ever-changing future. So, if we do find ourselves in the next century driving electric cars there will be a whole new set of learnings; interactions for designing and repairing those electric cars and for dealing with the waste emissions at the site of electricity generation.

Languaging is the action that allows us to reach into the future. It is about future design.

Education has traditionally been a study of descriptions of past practices. While no-one will deny the importance of these, they are a history of where we have been.

Education that is going to be relevant to our fast-approaching

future will respect and build-in these past practices but will concern itself primarily with inventing new practices to deal with new circumstances. So we say the purpose of education, clearly, is to prepare students for their future participation in a world that hasn't happened yet.

Much of the information students are learning now will be obsolete by the time they leave school. Much of what they need to know will be in the application of technologies, skills and situations we can only dream about today.

Language is what makes that design available.

## **Education and emotioning**

Emotioning specifies certain domains where some sets of actions are encouraged, others inhibited.

We've already said that an emotion of fear prohibits the interaction between teacher and student that we call communication, the very heart of learning, and that an emotional space of mutual respect allows interactions to be fostered and nourished.

The old school practice of caning and punishment that taught compliance and a rigid perpetuation of attitudes such as self-righteous attachment to parochial, nationalistic ideals gave way long ago to encouraging the student—to drawing out flexibility and inventive capacity.

In my secondary education I was awed by the size and authority of the traditional school I attended. And while my marks were good in some subjects, I failed to develop competence in responding to everyday circumstances. People said that I lacked common sense but it wasn't a lack. I was just too scared to respond to the world as it actually was because of the emotional space I found myself in. I was in a space of fear and, again, I wasn't alone.

Most people in recalling their schooling remember some teachers with fondness and gratitude. Usually, these teachers were people who acknowledged and validated our individuality and treated us with respect. Most students did well in their work with teachers they liked because that teacher set up an emotional space of respecting the child: they feel respected, they like the teacher, and they learn.

In the learning to drive a car it is common for someone to pay

for driving lessons rather than taking them free of charge from a parent. This is often prudent because the learner driver can't learn in the emotional space set up by a well-meaning though frustrated and impatient parent.

Mood, or emotioning, is the invisible space that we all live in.

We are familiar with the experience of being in an up, or joyful mood and finding that everything goes swimmingly. If, however, we get into a mood where everything is a struggle then even finding a parking space can be a major drama.

Both the dilemma and the opportunity inherent in moods are that we live in them so profoundly we don't see them. We are brought up with certain moods. Just as certain houses have smells, moods are the family smells we breathe in and exude through the pores of our skins.

We breathe air, we live in air and are so much in it that we can't see it, much as a fish lives in water but doesn't see it. So it is with moods we find ourselves in—resignation, openness, joy or antagonism. They feel as if they are internal but they work as if by external constriction.

Wordsworth said: 'In our youth heaven surrounds us . . . shades of the prison house surround the growing boy'.

We all have prison houses. We are all imprisoned by these invisible bars called moods. We all have some awareness of the limitations negative moods impose on us, like feelings of helplessness, unworthiness or that somehow we're not as good as we should be.

All moods influence the kinds of actions that can and can't take place. So an awareness of these previously invisible moods can provide an opportunity to shift them. We can't shift something that we are not aware of.

When my wife, or one of my children asks 'are you grumpy?', my usual reaction is to be surprised. I didn't know I was grumpy. When they do me the service of asking, it gives me the opportunity to do something to change.

If they hadn't told me, I would not have known because when I'm grumpy, I'm not aware of it. It is only when I am interrupted, only when my eyes are opened by some outside interaction that my grumpiness *appears*. And then I have an opportunity to allow it to shift, as it usually does.



## **Education and conversation**

The emotions we feel influence the kinds of actions we take and the actions we take influence the emotions or moods we find ourselves in.

They are inter-dependent and inter-responsive. They influence each other and are braided together like the warp and weft of woven cloth. Each helps to shape and form the other.

Children may feel terrified when they first go to school. Soon however, all the new experiences and situations dissipate the fear because they begin to interact with other children, their new teachers and new surroundings. A child crying on the first day of school might very shortly be crying because it is Friday and they can't go to school until Monday.

The languaging or interactions in the classroom and playground have shifted their emotion from fear to fun. The action shifts the emotion. But how can the emotion shift the action?

In the schools of last century, the fear that was intentionally imposed by the authority figure of the teacher must have paralysed some students until they felt they couldn't learn anything. One can imagine how this would have further infuriated the teacher, which would have led on to more authoritarianism, resulting in an even greater paralysis of the student's ability to learn. The emotioning (or mood) of authority in the teacher and fear in the students were locked together in a downward spiral.

A teacher expressing an emotion of compassion and patience with a child stuck in trying to puzzle out the answer to some problem allows the student to take new initiatives to solve the problem, and then to feel good at the achievement.

One can imagine how this would further encourage the teacher and lead on to even greater flexibility in the student's ability to learn. The emotioning or mood of compassion or patience in the teacher and learning in the student can lock together in an upward spiral.

The teacher's mood influences the child's action and the student's achieving influences both their moods. They both feel satisfied. There is mutual positive influence.

This is the conversation of effective education.

These days progressive secondary schools are implementing the

ideas of encouraging students to do their own learning, encouraging their self-reliance, self-respect and self-motivation and preparing them, within that emotional space of self-confidence, to take action and interact meaningfully in the world.

Look at something as seemingly mundane as learning to cook. It too happens in a conversation for if the mood is one of wanting to learn how foods and flavours work together with the catalyst of heat, there is an ever-renewing opportunity to vary the ingredients and alter how they are put together to design an endless smorgasbord of original, delicious meals. But in a mood where cooking is viewed as a burden, inventiveness will stop and the process will become a mere repetition of stale, uninspired menus. Sausages and mash forever.

Many older people look at learning the process of computing with an initial emotion of fear that significantly inhibits their ability to learn. The emotion will limit the interaction even with an inanimate object. Yet in beginning to manipulate the keys and getting to know the computer, the fear disappears and can be replaced by a sense of wonderment. A shift in the emotion allows the person to relax into the process of interacting with the computer and to learn computing. The emotions and the interactions braid together in action.

This happens also in relating to other people. Relationships are a process of learning how to co-evolve with the other—learning who the other is becoming—learning who the self is becoming in conversation with who the other is becoming.

If I get involved in an argument, the mood, the emotion of denial of the other person's point of view, closes down any real contact and interaction. Yet if we just do something together it shifts the emotion of self-righteousness and criticism.

I notice that any time I start to relate to my wife or any of my seven children as a fixed entity I lose contact with who they have become and are becoming. And when they say something unexpected, it wakes me up again to who they are evolving into and the connection is there again. The relationship becomes lively, vital and the previously static picture comes to life. The conversation continues.

These are moments that I cherish. In fact, conversations are recurrently the high points of my life. I continue to be delighted,

moved, enchanted and charmed in experiencing them.

My wife and I had an argument on our way to a dancing class one night. But later, as we were dancing together not only did we completely forget about the argument but the actual dancing together shifted the emotion from combative to co-operative. The combative mood limited the interactions that were possible but in the actions of dancing the mood was shifted to cooperative and that further freed up the way we were able to dance together.

If you ask a professional dancing partnership who is leading and who is following they just look at you as if you are crazy because they're just dancing together.

Conversation is a dancing of emotion and language.

## **Exercises**

### **Education**

In this exercise, and those that follow, we invite you to be interested, curious and to wonder about your response to any or all of the questions we offer.

We invite you to write your responses in a notebook, or keep a daily or weekly journal of your observations, thoughts and reactions to the questions, or, to simply have them in the background of your awareness as you continue reading, exploring and living. We also invite you to consider that there are no right or correct answers, just ones which will be less or more useful.

1. What skills do you have that you are already using?
2. What skills do you have that you would like to enhance?
3. What skills do you not yet have that you would like to acquire?
4. What actions might be needed?
5. Who could you co-ordinate (communicate) with?
6. What mood is most helpful to your learning?
7. What are you doing when you are in that mood?
8. What interactions, with what kinds of people, have you found most helpful so far in your learning? What have you found best to avoid?
9. Now that we've come this far, what's next?
10. What conversations are you already having with yourself, or

with others, that you now feel more confident, more willing, more curious, more passionate about?

11. What new conversations with yourself, or with others, are beginning to emerge.
12. Having read whatever you've read of this book so far, what new possibilities begin to appear?

# The Self

I had a little tea party  
This afternoon at three.  
It was very small,  
Three guests in all,  
Just I, myself and me.

Myself ate up the sandwiches,  
While I drank up the tea.  
It was also I who ate the pie  
And passed the cake to me.

*Popular children's rhyme*

## Self-identity

Who am I? Who is the 'I' referred to?

Is it the I that asks the question? Is it the I that attempts to answer the question? It can be hard to know where to begin with this. But it is a question human beings have been grappling with since the beginning of time.

Human beings seem to want an identity, to have some idea of the self, of who I am, in order to know how to behave or what to do in different situations: When do I stand up or sit down? Who flies the plane or drives the tram ...? Without those identities no-one would know how to behave. We want to say here that the labelling of the self is an inevitable human necessity.

These identities live in us and shape our activities in ways that we are very unconscious of. When a passenger gets on a plane it doesn't even occur to him that he is not the pilot. When the tram

driver gets behind the controls of the tram, it doesn't even occur to him to sit in the body of the tram and let someone else drive, it is automatic behaviour that just happens.

Traditionally we've looked for our identity as if it were some characteristic or quality that we could find through self-exploration, self-discovery or self-awareness. We've been looking for this identity as if we were searching for something tangible, like a book in a library or a reference in an encyclopedia. But with so much rapid change happening around us, the traditional ways we have gone about identifying ourselves—to ourselves—are also changing. Now even the certainties of self that once seemed to be chiselled in granite; 'I'm the son of ... I'm a nurse ... I'm an athlete, artist ... blacksmith, taxi driver' ..., are much more fluid. In all the changes it seems as if our identity is as impermanent as a sand-painting, altered by the merest wind. And in the winds of change it is easy to have a sense of despair or anxiety when the self is thought of as having a fixed quality.

Here then is the gift of language. Language offers us a way of mapping this constantly changing terrain because language offers the possibility of a radical reconstruction of the self—away from investigating what it is, towards designing what the self could become.

Language provides a key for unlocking, for any human being, a future which is more satisfying and nourishing.

When we say that who the self is, is constructed in language and that language can be more flexible than we previously understood, there is the potential to relieve suffering and conflict to a tremendous degree.

When Macbeth said '[Life] is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing', was he giving a prescription for doom and pointlessness, or was he actually presenting the possibility of a clean slate, a fresh start? Clearly, when he said life is a tale he was pointing to the way life is constructed in language.

In his writing on Sisyphus, Albert Camus grapples with the absurdity of existence and concludes that to commit suicide because of that absurdity gives an importance to the absurdity that it doesn't warrant.

In Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* '“If there is no

meaning in it', said the King, 'that saves a world of trouble you know, as we needn't try to find any'.'

If we think of the self as something fixed, solid and permanent, this creates a prison of rigidity, conflict and despair. Trying to change the unchangeable will inevitably produce a mood of resignation and suffering.

We want to re-emphasise that if we are already creating the self in language, then this allows the possibility of designing a self which will be more flexible, resolved and open to future possibilities. Consider the Irish dilemma: 'You are Catholic. You are Protestant'. These are labels which can result in people killing each other.

Labelling Catholic or Protestant can imprison generations in unresolvable conflict that might compel the killing of the other-as-enemy. Seeing that Catholic and Protestant are just labels that we humans have given other humans provides the possibility of some freedom to adapt our joint identity to an identity called human beings. With this overarching, mutually inclusive identity it is literally not possible to kill the other.

Widows of Ireland are a group who have gone beyond those labels by saying, 'We have lost kin. We are widowed'. Their collective identity immediately creates a different self—a self beyond secular concerns, beyond Catholic and Protestant; a self as a human being.

Changing the label to 'We', points to the idea that by such simple means future bloodshed could be avoided. When we say 'I am', we are defending the past. When we say 'I am' and 'you are' in a relationship, we are creating a separation. This division of my self as an entity from your self as an entity invites mutual damage and destruction. Arguments may disappear when we get past my self and your self to we.

The 'we' can then move us towards the spiritual because it is a concern beyond the body or emotions or intellect of the self and includes aspects of the other.

It is well known in teaching circles that when a child is labelled difficult or troublesome, that identity is likely to precede the child into the next class. It is only when the teacher starts to work *with* and interact *with* the individual child, that a change in identity becomes possible.

The difficult or troublesome child takes on a new identity of co-operative, responsive and this label then precedes them into the next class.

We have all heard of children who have undergone a transformation when they get the right teacher. There are some teachers who recurrently communicate with children so the children feel better about themselves; have a different experience of themselves—become a different self. The self is literally changed in the interactions of the communication with such a teacher.

A person who says, 'I'm shy', speaks as if the shyness were a genetic or chemical characteristic that possesses them. Yet, the shyness can disappear gradually with practice at speaking in front of groups of people or even suddenly, because of compelling necessity—a bigger event or issue than the shyness.

Suddenly something comes along, a crisis perhaps, that takes us past our self. A previously shy person might have to direct a group in an emergency situation. As a result, the shy self is permanently changed. That person does something they previously couldn't have believed possible.

There are many reported instances of people showing physical strength beyond their capacity in dire emergencies: a parent picks a car from on top of a child or someone scared of heights scales to a precarious position to rescue a precious cat.

So we are saying that we construct a self in language. The self up to this point in time has been an embodiment of life experiences, of social experience and the history of that individual encompassing family and culture.

We are saying that we can construct the future of that self, built on the foundations of the past, and redesign a new self in language.

## **Aspects of the self**

To further develop the idea that we can actually construct the self in language, we can distinguish different aspects of the self as intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual. We can further distinguish dignity as the coherence, the fitting together in a balanced way, of all of these aspects.

Looking at the self as constructed in language, every aspect of the



self becomes more available for design. If we don't know how to write or speak a different language or how to use figures or a computer easily, then these can become areas of the intellect where learning becomes possible. Limitations become pointers to what can be learned.

### **Emotional**

'I'm over-emotional. I'm under-emotional. My emotions are blocked. My emotions take over ... I can't understand my anger. I can't relax when I'm close to someone ...' All of these emotional aspects of the self become opportunities to learn what actions are going to cause effective emotions.

'What can I do instead of losing my temper and getting violent? What can I do when I get close to someone, instead of running away or clamming up?'

'How can I learn these things?' becomes a question that will lead to learning about more effective actions, greater flexibility and choice.

### **Physical**

'I'm too tall ... I'm too short ... I'm too ...' Any of these physical attributes can either be changed or not. Learning how to change the changeable, learning how to accept the unchangeable, learning how to distinguish one from the other can provide tremendous relief from suffering.

### **Spirituality**

Spirituality is an evocative word. In using it here we are really just referring to some part of our experience which isn't merely individual. We are not meaning to restrict it to religious connotations, we're using it to speak about any of our experiences that go beyond our own individuality. This includes concern for the other, another person, animal or cause.

In our Western culture we've become very personally isolated. The me generation which was fixated with the desires and emotions related to the individual self is giving way to a new generation who are opening their eyes to the joys of being part of something bigger than the individual self.

Spirituality is part of the self. Spirituality takes us beyond the self.

## **Dignity**

Dignity is a central concern for the integrity of the self. The loss of dignity is one of the hallmarks of our time. In our modern era human dignity seems to be so easily over run by unemployment, financial hardship, family breakup and technological and social change.

Civilians are caught in the crossfire of regional conflicts; whole villages evaporate with famine. The ghastly agonies of trying to survive monumental changes in political ideologies threaten human dignity.

Domestic violence, child abuse, and the everyday raised voice of frustrated parent to a bewildered child threaten the dignity of everyone involved.

Fernando Flores says that we experience dignity when the identity that we declare in our private self is consistent with our public identity, which shows up as actions in the world. The lack of dignity or the disparity between the two identities is a cause of massive suffering for men and women.

When we think of the self as something concrete it sets up stress and conflict because we are then faced with the problem of how to cover up our inadequacies, to pretend that we can do what we are expected to do.

As a doctor, having to pretend that I knew everything about every condition caused suffering in me and probably detracted from the effectiveness of my work. Increasingly family physicians, surgeons and psychiatrists are struggling with the knowledge that they don't know all the answers and that they don't always have a theory or a drug treatment which is effective.

Teachers too are starting to complain that no-one has taught them how to teach. We said earlier that education isn't just a process of the transmission of information; it is more like coaching. Where and how do they learn to coach? Who coaches the coaches?

The status of politicians has also been called into question. What is the difference between their election promises and what they are doing in office?

There was a time when a woman going out to work was jeopardising her dignity. The conventional wisdom was that she should be at home with her children. Yet, with the feminist movement

and the consequent changes in our culture, a woman could now find that her dignity is threatened if she doesn't go out to work. Once, if a man expressed his emotions publicly his dignity was jeopardised. Now, in the post-feminist era, if a man is unwilling to express his emotions, he is likely to be thought of as uncaring and may be criticised for that.

If we see the self as changing with time and recognise the concept of dignity as expressed in language as consistency between the private and public self, then there is an opportunity for us to restore our dignity by aligning who we *say* we are with actions that we are taking or, taking actions consistent with who we say we are. A housewife going to work in the 1950s could reclaim her dignity by saying, 'Who I am as a woman is someone who can go to work. What I am doing by my declaration fits in with who I am and I am at peace with that'.

The woman of the 1990s can say 'I am going to work'. Another can say 'I am staying at home with the children'. In the saying, they are creating a self in language which is consistent with what they are doing. So the conflict disappears. Dignity is restored. The same opportunity is available to men.

When I was first asked to write this book I thought, 'If I try to write it myself my dignity will be damaged because the self that I have constructed so far doesn't have a lot of competence in writing'. So by saying I wasn't going to write it, my dignity was maintained. Then Jenny arrived and this conversation began. I could again maintain my dignity because the book could be written without my needing any pretence.

If at some future time I have learned to write more effectively the possibility of writing a book myself could occur. If my future self were to include being a writer, it would require me to take different actions that would allow me to become a writer.

### **The self and communication**

'I could never talk to that person'.

This expression of limitation is embodied in the I. The I that can't talk to that person embodies a certain set of characteristics, beliefs, prejudices and competencies.

But when some enterprise includes the other person that I couldn't talk with; when I begin to co-ordinate action with them,

communicate with them, then there is a shift in my beliefs and prejudices that shift the I from an identification with the past to a different set of evolving possibilities.

The self is changed in the interaction or communication.

I have been told recurrently that what I write is difficult to read. Yet this book is happening. This book is evolving as we communicate. It is intended that as you read it some of the things that you thought that you were—or weren't—may become less certain and more flexible and responsive in different situations.

I have found in working with couples who want to repair or improve their communication skills that it is useful to have them sit facing each other, and begin to co-ordinate their blinking and breathing patterns to a shared rate.

This exercise can often lead to two different selves, as well as a positive change in their relationship. The intellectual certainties, the emotional frustrations, the physical tension and spiritual estrangement give way to an appreciation, a peaceful, warmly relaxed reconnection.

Another exercise I've found useful that we will invite you to try out for yourself, is for a couple to stand facing each other silently, with fingertips touching, and playing with the movement that happens when one of the other leads or is led.

Couples report that there are ways of moving their hands together which generate an experience of connection; and if one or the other pushes or feels pushed it produces resistance in the individual and conflict in the relationship. Thus the experience of conflict is generated.

Both exercises invite action, they invite the co-ordination of action, the experience of connection. This allows for a shift in the self from its attachment to all of the past opinions, emotions and embodied learnings, to inventing a new self.

### **The self and language**

We are saying that language is about designing future interactions.

I was born during the Second World War and had an irrational fear of anyone Asian. I wasn't the only person in Australia at that time with that fear.

Who I *was* was someone who was unable to interact with Asians and it felt like an integral part of my self.

During residency in hospital however I lived next door to a delightful family and made good friends with Peter, a Malaysian. From that time on I enjoyed many charming interactions with people of many different races, including Asians.

The self that had previously limited my interactions because of that fear was permanently changed in my friendship with Peter. I am now a different self.

It is probably not possible to be certain about what changes can happen because of, or independent of, reading this. But some directions could begin to emerge from doing something different in the future, as distinct from what you have done in the past. And those different actions will inevitably change the self who is performing those actions.

Someone might say 'I couldn't be a teacher', and then allow the changes of that self to begin by asking, 'what skills do I need to acquire to become a teacher?'

Someone who has difficulties with relationships can ask the question, 'What do I need to learn in order to have the relationships that I want to have?'

A questioning *of* the self *for* the self and *by* the self allows the change to begin.

This is the enlivening action of designing our future living experience in language.

There is a preoccupation in our present society with slimness and fatness. Rotundity and obesity are equated to mortal sin. To be fat is to risk social ostracism and there can be a loss of dignity for people who have an unacceptable body image. A fat person can be made to feel different. They should have another body shape. Dignity can be reinstated when someone says 'This is the body I have. It might not look like the bodies in fashion magazines but when I think what it does and what it allows me to do, I can begin to appreciate how useful it really is. In any case, I'd be in a lot of trouble without it.'

From that base, a person can ask what body they want to have and what changes might be possible through diet, exercise, surgery or whatever. New possibilities about the shape of the body might be available if they are willing to take the appropriate

actions towards it. Accepting their body as it is provides a very solid foundation for changes to be built on.

### **The self and emotioning**

We are using the word emotioning to speak about certain spaces or arenas for groups of actions to occur in.

Emotional spaces of conflict or war, the *other's* intellectual position, beliefs or thoughts can become reasons to kill and to risk being killed.

The emotional space of acceptance of the legitimacy of an other's intellectual position, beliefs and views allows for a very deep appreciation of the other's point of view—whether it is agreed with or not.

The medical profession has enjoyed an emotional exclusiveness. Having to belong to a *club* has led to a crisis in the health industry. It is being said that doctors have lost the art of communication. They have become technicians and slaves to repetitive procedures and prescription writing.

As this emotion is shifting to be more inclusive, the values of meditation, acupuncture and other effective therapies are being incorporated and appreciated. The traditional healing ethos of appreciating another and extending compassion towards another who is suffering is being hauled out from behind the dusty cupboards of medical science.

The emotional response of accepting and appreciating one's body, whatever differences there might be between it and how it should be according to prevailing fashions, allows design changes to happen more easily and naturally.

Our usual emotional response to the concerns of other people (an expression of our spirituality) is to feel that we *should* do something. It feels like an obligation or a duty. We find ourselves resentful, because given the choice we really don't want to do it. We act out of guilt because we feel obliged. We *should*.

We've all had the experience of feeling an obligation towards a family member or a spouse or a cause. How can we let those starving children die for lack of food when we have a rubbish bin full of scraps and a weight problem? The dilemma is universal and potentially paralysing. It is a massive source of suffering. Sometimes changing the emotion or mood from resentment to

acceptance and simply saying 'I am going to' or 'I am not going to' actually dissolves the conflict. For some, just saying it is enough; for others it takes practice.

Learning to say no to another person, in a mood or emotion of openness and truthfulness, allows for the future possibility of saying yes to that person with equal truthfulness and openness.

Guilt is what nice people feel while they are not fulfilling an obligation.

Resentment is what nasty people feel when they are fulfilling an obligation.

Even when we see that resentment and guilt are the very emotions that cause our suffering, there can be a lingering reluctance to let ourselves off the hook. Is it really all right just to say No? Can it really be that easy?

In an emotional space of openness and flexibility, saying no can be a skill to be learned and used respectfully to everybody's satisfaction. Dignity is restored because there is a putting aside of pretence.

We all know people, nice people, who never say no. They fear we probably wouldn't like them if they said it. We often find ourselves not trusting those people because although they are well intentioned, we know they will not keep their promises.

We also know people who are always saying no. They say no to everything including life. They have the mood of a London fog about them. They are boring, barely alive and we avoid them.

We also know people who say no when they mean it, peacefully and calmly, and yes when they mean it. These people we trust and want to be around because there is something genuine about them and their mood or emotion or genuineness allows our interaction (language) also to be more authentic. We somehow feel more ourselves in their presence.

### **The self and conversation**

Conversation is the interplay between language (or the future design of actions) and emotional environments where these actions can happen.

In a court of law, speaking about past actions (evidence) is used to create future actions; either declaration of innocence or guilt, with fines, gaol or other consequences. There is an emotional

space of justice which is unconcerned with right or wrong, good or evil, moral or immoral. It has as its purpose a coherence with the law as it has been declared.

The court of justice is an emotional space of two opposing forces, each claiming to have clues or access to true interpretation of evidence.

This atmosphere contrasts with a symposium held for lawyers about the future of the law. How can they make it more accessible or accountable? In this environment there is a genuine putting aside of prejudice—of already knowing. Instead there is an emotion of mutual respect of differences and an inquiring into new procedures. There will be good to all. The outcome of such a symposium is mutual benefit, with no individual winners or losers.

In relation to the intellectual aspect of the self, how does conversation fit in?

In the court situation, the inherent mood of opposition compels participants to become combative. As they start to fight there is a shift in the interpretation of evidence. This further shifts the emotion, so the fight heats up. It is a downward voyage into increasing discord.

In a symposium, on the other hand, if any differences arise they soon subside because the mood of the gathering is inquiry and community. Any differences or issues that arise lead to questions that can be explored and resolved to everybody's benefit. This is an upward progression into increasing concord.

**H**ow do conversations influence the emotional aspects of the self?

Issues of pretence and genuineness are human concerns.

In our present time in history we are wary about the genuineness of what we are told. Advertising and business claims are often spoken of as being untrustworthy, as if they were covering something up.

As children, we are taught to behave in certain ways, to have good manners and to behave as if we like someone when we don't, or to pretend to be a certain way so that someone will like us. This is the obsession of teenagers, wanting to like, and to be liked.



They emerge as the expression of peer pressures.

Young men and women might feel pressure to pretend to be interested in drinking, smoking and exploring sexuality.

Growing up in poor surroundings, the pretence may even go as far as killing other people and pretending not to mind, just to gain acceptance.

Couples fall in love. In the natural ebb and flow of human feelings, if the emotion subsides and they find themselves temporarily bored with the other they feel obliged to pretend. And when they are asked 'Do you love me?' they bite their tongue, cross their fingers and hope they get away with saying 'Of course!'

So another web of pretence about love covers up the natural return of the feeling of loving. This could lead to the tragedy of layer upon layer of pretence, and finally losing touch with the genuine loving feeling.

How many children, of whatever age, say 'Of course I love my mother or father', through tightly clenched teeth, pretending that they don't feel enraged, violated, intruded upon, limited, damaged as well as enhanced, appreciated, contributed to and loved?

How often is the genuineness of our feelings, which as human beings will fluctuate, covered up with the pretence that we should always feel a certain way?

When someone says 'I don't know whether I love you or not' and says it genuinely—in an emotional space of genuineness—the love can emerge, naturally, spontaneously and authentically.

When I tell my wife that sometimes there are some things about her that I can't stand, it allows her to say, just as genuinely, that there are some things about me she can't stand either.

An emotion of genuineness and appreciation of the other predictably leads to a mood of lightness, fun and spontaneous emergence of all the things that *I can more than stand* about her, and that she can more than stand about me.

It would be terrible if I couldn't tell her that. It would be terrible if she couldn't tell me, because sharing those experiences, whatever they are, good or bad, pleasant or horrible, is the conversation, the interplay and interaction that constitutes the relationship.

Sometimes she says 'How do I look in this dress?' If I can say

genuinely, 'You look horrible', she can reconsider whether something else suits her better. Otherwise how can she ever believe me in future when I say that she looks wonderful?

People can almost smell when someone is being genuine or pretending. It seems to be some kind of primitive instinct.

Because, pretence (pre-tense?) involves a covering up beforehand it is, not surprisingly, very stressful. Putting aside that tension beforehand, daring to relinquish the pretence, allows for the emergence of whatever the self is becoming.

**H**ow do conversations influence the body?

Someone tells their partner they want to lose weight. If that partner says 'about time you fat slob ... don't like your chances' or, 'if you lose weight you'll just put it on again', an emotional space of discouragement is set up.

The weight loss intention is more likely to succeed if the person who wants to reduce weight can develop a healthy rebelliousness, such that any criticism spurs them on to greater achievement.

If someone says they want to lose weight and their partner says 'I don't need you to, but if you want, I'll do whatever I can to help you', then any achievement can be jointly celebrated and any setbacks can be jointly acknowledged and overcome. Achievement of the goals will be strongly influenced by the emotional support or lack of it, and may in turn lead to a change in the emotions of both partners when the goal is reached.

The doubting partner might become a true believer when he sees the evidence of a different body or a different attitude.

If an overweight person decides they are not going to lose weight, that they have the body they have and it is serving them very well, they are generating a mood or emotion of acceptance in themselves. This mood can shift the interactions and opinions. Someone who complained about their partner being overweight starts to say they like things just as they are.

Someone with chronic physical pain can set up a lot of tension in themselves and unwittingly add to the pain by their well-intentioned attempt to protect themselves against it. The emotion of fear, an avoidance of the pain, actually increases both the fear and pain.

Many people report that when they can relax themselves or somehow allow a softening of themselves around the pain, the pain is significantly reduced and may even subside entirely. As the pain subsides it becomes easier to relax and the softness further eases the pain.

**H**ow do conversations relate to the spiritual aspects of the self? On the first Christmas Eve of World War I, fighting stopped and both English and German armies could hear the other side singing Christmas carols—same tunes, different words.

Before long, they began to throw bits of Christmas pudding across no-man's-land and very soon, they were emerging out of their trenches exchanging hats, buttons and mementoes.

There was a real risk of peace breaking out. I don't know about the German soldiers but I was told by a relative of one of the English soldiers that following those peaceful exchanges his battalion was no longer able to continue fighting. They had to be given home-front duties.

The only way human beings can kill other human beings is through conversations in which the enemy is spoken about in an emotion of hate and bitter condemnation. They are language as being sub-humans of a different species. Indeed, the propaganda machine does its worst work in language.

When the English and German soldiers experienced their enemy as belonging to the same species, with the same number of arms and legs, the same hopes and fears, the same Christmas carols they were unable to continue fighting. The shift of emotions from hatred to community shifted the potential actions from killing to sharing Christmas puddings.

## **Exercises**

### **The self**

In this exercise, and those that follow, we invite you to be interested, curious and to wonder about your response to any or all of the questions we offer.

We invite you to write your responses in a notebook, or keep a daily or weekly journal of your observations, thoughts and reac-

tions to the questions, or to simply have them in the background of your awareness as you continue reading, exploring and living. You might want to define a particular concern in framing these questions or perhaps, as you read them, or between readings or after, something may come to mind.

We also invite you to consider that there are no right or correct answers, just ones which will be less or more useful.

1. What answer comes back when you ask yourself, 'Who am I?'
2. What descriptions do you have of yourself which are helpful? Which are not helpful?
3. What do you say about yourself, to yourself, that shows up in the world; that could be recognised by your actions? We are calling this dignity. What changes for you when you recognise this?
4. What do you say about yourself, to yourself that *doesn't* show up in the world as actions?

What actions might you take to align these? This might include restating to yourself what you say about yourself, to yourself, or, taking some new actions.

5. If there is someone you would like to communicate with, would you be willing to invite them into some shared activity? A walk, a talk, a film ...? If you do this what changes for you?
6. If you were to begin to practise saying no to someone, where might you begin? What do you anticipate the response will be?

After you have said no what did you notice about the response and your response?

Is this something you might find useful in other interactions?

What can you do to keep a balance here; to say no as a choice, when it works for you, rather than always or never?

7. What aspect of yourself, your body, your emotions, your thinking, your spirituality, might you want to change, accept or further develop?

What actions could you design, and with whom, to further that process?

8. When you consider question 7, what is your mood? Is that mood likely to be helpful?

What has it been like for you when you have had that helpful mood in the past?

9. What kinds of conversations might be helpful to achieving your objective?

Who could you have such a conversation with? Who else?

What other conversations do you now wonder about as being useful?

10. Having read whatever you've read of this book so far, what new possibilities begin to appear?

# Relationships

In this chapter we will look at relationships, at couples and families.

Relationships are so much a part of our experience that it is easy to take them for granted. They are part of our background, enmeshed in our concerns—past, present and future. No matter what else is going on in our lives, we have many primary concerns about our relationships.

We are either looking for relationships, enjoying a relationship, worried about a relationship, coping with a relationship or ending a relationship. These concerns shape our identity, actions and career; in short, our very being.

The relationships that we are born into unwittingly but powerfully shape the very foundations of our being. We are born into a family that speaks a particular language, so we find ourselves speaking that language as our mother tongue. We don't choose the language; it is more that the language chooses us.

Similarly, in relationships that we are born into we find ourselves learning very deep patterns of relating, behaving, believing and understanding.

Being born into a family where the shared ethos is of struggle, leads a child into absorbing the struggle then embodying it and living it out. Someone born into a family where fear is the predominant background mood (emotioning) will have no choice about being frightened.

Such people find themselves living their life in a mood of fear, thinking that the fear is theirs, related to them. They remain unaware that it is as if they have literally absorbed the family mood and live it as if it is their own.

It follows that their children will almost certainly follow the

family tradition. It is well known that children of angry parents grow up with anger and experience an automatic, overpowering, out-of-control expression of that anger with relationships including their own children.

Domestic violence is becoming increasingly unacceptable and men are beginning to learn how to deal with the rage that previously had taken them over and turned them into violent robots, some kind of vicious machine.

People describe their experience before they've learned to manage the anger as 'something taking over'. They lose control, slip into an automatic mode and only wake up when the damage is already done.

One of the ways we can begin to reclaim our autonomy and freedom from these patterns is to heal the relationship which was the source of the unwanted angry behaviour. Once that relationship is healed, the pattern may lose its grip and we are less likely to be triggered.

Until we can loosen the grip of these patterns, they have power. We can't see them, we can't recognise them and therefore, can't do anything about them. We can't change a situation we can't see.

People who find that life is a struggle speak about their experience as if they can't help themselves. The struggle is there, the fear is there and the anger is there. Just like the character Bluto in the Popeye cartoon, they frequently see red.

Another possible response to these patterns is to rebel against them and do the opposite. People can get stuck in rebellion for the duration of their lives—still rebels in their old age.

As the Buddhists teach us, the irony is that if we resist something strongly enough, we actually bring it about. Adults are horrified to discover that their efforts to get far away from the behaviour of one or other of their parents has actually caused them to go the full circle and arrive back where they started. They find themselves exhibiting those same dreaded characteristics.

Someone brought up in a violent household can be so determined never to be violent that they do anything rather than lose their temper. But one day the effort is just too much and there is a violent explosion. Something snaps.

This person might also insist that no-one in their household

raise their voice. This interferes with the household's learning how to deal with normal emotional responses.

Peace marchers, despite their best intentions to demonstrate without violence, find themselves behaving anything but peaceably.

We bring all the learnings, fears, hopes, determinations and dreads of the past into a present relationship. It seems that often we hope that we can correct or make good any past transgressions.

I experienced my mother as a rather domineering ambitious woman and my father as a somewhat passive, more contented person. The two women I have been married to could each be seen to be somewhat strong-willed. They have both complained about my lack of direction or decisiveness. Both have also complained at various times that I'm dominating, selfish, intrusive and ambitious. In other words I fit the description of the maternal character I rebelled against in my youth. It is like a repetition of my parents' relationship—hauntingly similar to their patterns.

I am sure my experience is not unique. Most people have their own variation of this story. It can apply to the most trivial as well as some of the largest issues of life.

It still intrigues me to watch the relationships of my children as they are growing up and as they come to terms with their own issues of domination or passivity.

It is disheartening to think that we might really be in some kind of endless remake of the same film, from generation to generation; only the names change to protect the patterns.

Approaching these patterns of behaviour from the point of view of actions we can take, within moods and emotions that are all constructed in language, provides us with a key to unlock the chains that bind us so tightly to the wheel of unconscious repetition.

Instead of asking 'Why am I like this? Why is my life so difficult? Why do I have problems with relationships?' Instead of blaming parents, 'It's my mother's fault, my father's fault', we can begin to ask: 'What might I do to make my life work and to allow for my relationships to nourish me? What's missing for me? What can I begin to do differently? What am I already beginning to do differently?' We can ask what actions we can take to shift these emotions or moods.



## **Intimacy**

According to Greek mythology there was a time before male and female; the utopian age when creatures were self-sufficient.

When the Gods divided them into male and female, people began the experience that a part of them was missing and spent their whole life looking for their other half.

Many people are looking for the other who will provide the completeness they feel they are missing. The self seems so acutely incomplete. Hence the expressions 'my better half' or 'my other half'.

We could say that one of the driving forces of relationships is seeking, sometimes frantically, for intimacy. To make contact and to be contacted by the other. Lovers speak about their desire to get into the other, or to merge with the other. 'I've got you under my skin'.

But as usual with many human endeavours, complexity appears. We live as if intimacy is a necessity of life, like air, water and food. We need it. Without it feel we face the risk of shrivelling up and dying.

Yet irony intrudes here again. With any experience of intimacy there is the simultaneous fear of being vulnerable or too unguardedly open to others. Our very existence could be threatened. We need intimacy to live and yet, if we have it, it might kill us. This is a source of conflict in relationships. How to be close without disappearing? How to be vulnerable and receptive without being hurt?

We see, though, that intimacy can evolve as two individuals grow together in a relationship. It provides the emotional space for co-ordination with another. This is a skill that can be learned.

We envisage two people dancing together without one specifically leading or being led. The dancing emerges, expresses itself, evolves, responding to the changing rhythms of life, moods, individual reactions and music.

Clearly though, intimacy will be expressed differently in different situations, different cultures and at different times. People forging intimate relationships at the beginning of this century tended to approach each other cautiously and to take their time over a pro-

tracted period of courtships and betrothal. A hundred years back the whole pace of life was slower.

As we approach the end of the century the pace of life is increasing. We now demand fast food, swift service and instant intimacy. The pace of intimacy is keeping up with the pace of life. This inevitably brings on problems.

Problems with intimacy are perennial. They are expressed differently in different eras but the core concerns are the same. How can we give and receive the closeness that we need in order to survive, without either destroying or being destroyed?

People talk about their intimate moments to include not only their sexual experiences but also to embrace the subtle moments of revelation of the other. Intimacy can be created by just sitting down with someone, sharing that sitting; walking together, sharing the walking; listening to music, watching a football match, a movie, a soaring bird. Intimacy can be created simply by sharing the moment together.

It seems so obvious, and yet it can be such a delight to discover those moments and to cherish them rather than let them slip by unnoticed.

Intimacy is an emotional space where we open up the possibility of interacting genuinely and authentically with the other. It is a trusting experience.

### **Intimacy and sexuality**

Intimacy implies an opening of trust. So it is not surprising that in some circumstances this finds sexual expression. Two lovers exploring, opening, trusting and sharing can experience the intimacy of sexuality.

Sexuality without intimacy is one definition of pornography. But friends, mates, brothers and sisters, parents and children, can also experience opening, trusting, sharing that has no sexual component and is no less intimate because of that.

When sexuality and intimacy are not delineated and become blurred in interactions then it can lead to the massive pain and suffering of incest and rape. When the distinction is made it can provide a way out of the mire, a way back to respect and dignity.

Intimacy has other expressions: as a teenager I remember at an

Easter service feeling as if my whole physical state dissolved. It felt as if I became a part of the Easter experience.

Decades later, I was looking out over the sea and experienced an overwhelming feeling of connectedness. I felt as if I was a part of the sea, the sky and that it was all a part of me.

I don't think those experiences were very extraordinary. Many other people experiencing an intense religious ecstasy report 'intimacy', of being at one with the other, who is in this case, the godhead or the universe. And although there can be a build-up of intensity, some release and a feeling of peace, it is no more sexual than mundane satisfaction with a day's gardening or painting a room. Sex can even be used to avoid intimacy, such as when sexuality is used as a way of dominating or controlling or being dominated or controlled. It can also be a way of escaping from direct contact with the other. This perhaps reaches its extreme expression in rape, an act of primary aggression which is only secondarily sexual.

Within the emotional space of aggression, sex shows up as actions which are agonisingly destructive. This contrasts with the emotional space of intimacy which leads to an experience of sharing that is nourishing and satisfying for both individuals.

In our present society there is a preoccupation with sexuality; of being oversexed or undersexed, incompatible, or having difficulties in sexual performance. These are issues for both men and women. But focusing on the actions of sexual performance misses the underlying emotional need simply to be whoever one is with the other. The preoccupation with sexuality can actually blind us to the intimacy of just being with the other.

Individuals frequently report a new level of intimacy and personal satisfaction in their relationships when they stop trying to live up to some artificial external standard of sexual performance and simply share the sexual aspect of who they are becoming.

## **Loving**

What is love? Or more relevant, what is loving?

This is another question that has perplexed and intrigued mankind through the millennia.

What is love for a parent? What does it mean when a parent says they love their child?

What does it mean when someone says they love their partner? Is it a collection of physical responses? Is it a sentiment? A feeling? What is it to be in love, or to fall in love?

It is almost expected in our society that over the life of a couple's relationship they will fall in love but that it will soon dissipate and get lost in all the mundane concerns of daily life; paying the gas bill, cooking the dinner, cleaning the toilet and mowing the lawn.

Yet, there are some couples who seem to keep the magic alive. How do they do it? Is it just a gift some people are born with. Are some people just lucky in love?

Werner Erhard, founder of EST, said that many relationships are like a cartoon of a person sitting in front of an empty fireplace saying to the fireplace 'First you give me some heat, then I'll give you some wood'.

How often do we hold back our loving of the other until we have something from them. We wait to get something that makes us feel less vulnerable, less at risk, safer. We might then tentatively choose to give a little of our love. But we will be ready to withdraw it at the first sign of uncertainty or insecurity.

When someone asks their partner 'Do you love me?', the partner often looks into their internal experience to see if they might have within them that 'love'. But how to find it?

If two lovers fall asleep in each other's arms, what happens to their loving? Does it disappear when they are asleep? Is *it* asleep? Love is not a thing. It is not a characteristic or property that we either have or do not have; that we might once have had but have now lost. 'I used to love you but I don't any more. I've fallen out of love with you'. Even when we've had the experience of loving and being loved we want to know how we can hang on to that experience. How often have we heard of a second honeymoon falling flat on its face despite the romantic location?

Instead of thinking about love as a thing, we take Maturana's definition as being much more useful. He said that 'loving lets us see the other person and open up for him or her, room for existence beside us ... the acceptance of the other person beside us in our daily living'.

So 'I love you' can then become an active permission, an active appreciation of the other as they are without alteration.

This then gives us some say in our experience of loving, instead of just hoping for it, as if we were hoping for a sunny day to arrive. By simply *accepting* the other something wonderful happens within that genuine space or emotion of loving.

The other's genuineness is called up and brought forth and can experience nourishment. In turn, we might then find ourselves interacting with a nourished other; this nourishes us.

This is the conversation that *loving* invites.

**M**aturana says that love is the fundamental human social emotion.

It is what allows a society of relationships to function. Without it, we are left with competition and a threat of mutual annihilation. In our Western culture relationships have a natural history of exciting, all consuming, passionate beginning that slowly disintegrates into the murky sludge of mundanity. It is not uncommon for someone to wake up one morning next to their spouse and think 'My God. What have I done?' And yet this is the object of their once insatiable desire. It is the same person, no doubt about it.

'How did he change so much? How could I have been that stupid?'

There seems to be a natural tendency somehow to get stuck with an image of the person we first met and fell for, and then to continue having a relationship with that image; with our projection of how that person was or how we know they should be. The inevitable result is conflict and disappointment.

Recognition that the person is evolving beside us even as we evolve, opens a spectrum of possible futures. By the action of accepting, enjoying, celebrating they can bring forth a wonderful new conversation. Criticism, disappointment, conflict and suffering can all give way to acceptance, peace, resolution and joy. It all happens in language, in our thinking, speaking and interactions.

The emotional space of loving, with its intrinsic permission for the other to become whoever they are becoming, allows for an expansion of possibilities.

'If you love me, you would do what I want . . . what I say', becomes 'If I love you, I'll let you be who you are'.

All the manipulative controlling, limiting, constraints of 'love' which many people are wary of, seem to dissolve and give way to liberating, expansive, open-hearted loving.

I love you and so I accept you does not mean that I agree with you, or that I necessarily condone your actions. Nor that I applaud them. It is simply that I accept them. 'You are who you are and you are doing what you are doing'.

This allows me, if I don't like what you are doing, to freely ask would you please do something differently. I have no authority to demand it and I grant you the obvious authority to change or not. The request is mine. But the authority remains yours.

It would be awful to tell someone that we love them as a way of obliging them to us. Loving you doesn't give me the right to imprison you in my wishes or standards. It doesn't include rights of ownership.

Loving you gives me the privilege of appreciating your freedom to honour your standards and your rights to own yourself.

## **Committing**

I've noticed that committing is often spoken about in relationships, most commonly as a way of reprimanding someone when they haven't kept a commitment. It is usually talked about when there is some sort of a threat to a relationship.

People who have trouble establishing or maintaining a relationship often say they have trouble with commitment so this word is usually an expression of the co-ordination of action (language) in an emotional space of control, restriction or duty. The everyday use of this word generally calls up all of these associations.

Most people contemplating commitment become very stern, sombre, even fearful, thinking they won't be able to do it. 'Will I have the moral fortitude to see it through? Am I up to the struggle and the temptations?' In a background of fear, it is no wonder commitments seem to be problematic.

If we look at commitments as co-ordination of action in an emotional space of loving, openness and flexibility, then commitments actually strengthen a relationship and produce a sense of ease, settlement and clarity.

Committing is promising. It lives in language and so is in a constant dance of becoming. Committing is an on-going promising, something to be created and generated. Not some dead thing.

I notice that in an emotional space of duty or obligation, any time I feel a commitment to my wife, my children or my work, that commitment is accompanied by a heavy sinking feeling or something at least tinged with despair. And so these people who are so dear to my heart become alien and problematic—the enemy. On the other hand, when my experience is in an emotional space of appreciation, my very actions then are an expression of my committing my self to their selves. Our shared future we can then build together. This tends to produce an emotion of lightness and joy which is mutually nourishing. It is living.

### **Conflict**

We can think of relating as co-ordination of actions within a certain emotional environment. The way the interactions and emotions braid together (conversation) has a very great influence on the other.

When relationships are working there is a great sense of fun, a mood of mischief, play and lightness. Interactions that take place seem to blend into the background. We don't even notice what we are doing. Things are just humming along.

When relationships are not working we become acutely aware of all the interactions, all the words, spoken and unspoken, all the actions that happened or didn't happen; all the actions that are present or absent.

When things aren't working we start to notice all the aspects of the other. They stand out like neon lights, so blatantly obvious that we wonder how we overlooked them. How could we have been so blind or stupid?

Seeing these undesirable characteristics produces a mood of separation, opposition and distancing which further accentuates the negative attributes.

Communciation is co-ordination of action. When there is lack of co-ordination it is not so much absence of understanding or speaking but of interaction together in mutual co-ordination.

Many times I have had an argument with my wife which has disappeared permanently when we have done something together;

worked in the garden, gone for a walk or made love. It is not that the fight is papered over. Rather, the shared interactions actually shifted the mood from one of conflict to one of relationship.

I can't have a decent argument with my wife these days. If I try, she gets an amused look on her face and says 'If only you could see yourself'. After an initial hit of embarrassment we tend to fall about laughing. Not having to argue is a mutual relief.

I have noticed that well-meaning couples often try to get to the bottom of their problems by talking about them at great length. They find that the more they talk about their problems the bigger they become. And although there are no golden rules about what works in each situation it can be a relief when the phone rings in the middle of a shouting match.

After the interruption the couple look at each other and wonder if it is worth the effort of restarting the argument. Some people do muster the energy.

But all our conflicts are fundamentally absurd. I have sometimes suggested to couples who have the problem that since every argument is just a re-run of the last one, why don't they videotape one. Then the next time they feel like arguing they can sit down and watch it on TV. I'm not sure if anyone has ever followed my advice but a number of couples seem to have benefited.

A conversation might take place in a mood of openness and inquiry. But then, one of my beliefs is challenged or threatened. If I harden my position to defend it, in the process of maintaining the rightness of belief, I generate conflict.

Any time I am in conflict with another, it helps to soften my belief, or their belief, just to bear in mind that it is only a belief. In that frame, the conflict disperses and the conversation continues as communication. Our actions have co-ordinated once again.

A colleague once told me that in her experience she was either right or relating, but never both.

How many relationships are sacrificed at the private altar of some belief about how something ought to be. This can be as trivial as whether the toothpaste is squeezed from the top or the bottom or whether the toilet seat is left up or down.

How many endangered relationships could be resurrected if the beliefs, and not the people, were sacrificed?



## Problems

What is a problem?

Relationships are renowned for having them. It is almost a prerequisite. Even relationships that aren't problem relationships have problems.

What is a problem?

I had a flat battery and I couldn't take my children to a tennis lesson. That was a problem for me, and for them. The battery had been totally invisible to me. But when it went flat it 'appeared' for the first time in months.

Was the flat battery, in itself, a problem? I called the mobile car mechanic and when he got me going I bought a new battery.

Was the flat battery a problem to the car mechanic? Was it a problem to the service station that sold me the battery?

It was the same flat battery that was a problem to me, but it was a source of opportunity for the mechanic and the salesman. So clearly the problem was not in the battery. The battery couldn't have been the problem.

When Tom Sawyer couldn't go to the river with his friends and he had to whitewash the fence instead, he was able to say that it's not every day that a boy gets a chance to whitewash a fence. He soon had his friends paying for the privilege of helping him. Was whitewashing the fence a problem for Tom Sawyer or not?

Clearly, the flat battery was a flat battery and the whitewashing of the fence was whitewashing a fence.

If we hold something in the emotional space of resentment, we can see circumstances in the guise of problems. But when we view them as circumstances or occurrences that just happen, we can generate opportunities from them.

There are no problems as such. We turn a circumstance into a problem when we don't accept it.

How many devastating problems experienced in relationships would simply disappear if we accepted that what is happening is simply happening.

To misquote Paul Dell, an American family therapist; 'Difficult people aren't really difficult. They are just doing what they are doing. We call them difficult because they are not doing what *we* say they *should* be doing'.

## **Relationships—the larger picture**

Biology shows us that a living cell in the skin of the left foot is, at the same time, a separate entity and a part of the body. We can talk about the left leg as a leg, and as part of a larger entity, the body.

The leg is not the body. It is different from the right leg and every one of its cells is slightly different from every other cell. They are all individual but interdependent. That skin cell in the left foot contributes its part to the integrity of the body. But it could not live independently of the body.

We can think of the individual human as an even larger entity. An individual with individual characteristics can become part of a larger whole called a couple. In structuring a coupling with the other, a new entity called the couple is generated.

Just as the cell is a cell and part of the leg, and part of the body, so an individual human is an individual entity, but part of a couple, a family, a community, a nation, the planetary family and the universe.

Just as the individual cell is nurtured and has increased opportunities as part of a larger entity, so the individual human can extend its and others' survival potential and life options by being part of a couple, a family, a community, a nation. It is a two-way flow.

We could say that each individual is in some sense confined as an individual to their own boundaries. But at the same time any individual needs to depend on a larger structure for its survival.

The experience of falling in love with someone is often described as a merging of two individuals. Yet there is not so much the loss of two separate entities as the creation of a new entity, the couple in love.

Western culture particularly seems to caution us against losing our individual identity, exhorting us to maintain the rights of the individual. It is not surprising that there is a resurgence of interest in spirituality, connecting with something beyond the self.

I remember when my ten-year-old son heard about the forty-hour famine, a voluntary fast to raise money for the Third World. He saw it as a great way of getting some extra pocket money.

My twelve-year-old daughter was wide-eyed as she explained to

him that it was really about raising money for the benefit of someone else.

After my son had wrapped his brain around that totally new idea, he looked wistful. But twelve months later he wanted to be part of the experience solely to contribute to those other people with whom he was able to connect, even though they were strangers. He had the experience of expanding his boundaries to include those of another country. It was extraordinary for a ten-year-old to perceive, perhaps for the first time, that there was a world beyond his own individual self.

Lao Tsu invites us to 'Yield and overcome. Bend and be straight. Empty and be full' and he points to the importance of flexibility in relating:

'Green plants are tender and filled with sap.  
At their death they are withered and dry ...

'The stiff and unbending is the disciple of death.  
The gentle and yielding, is the disciple of life.'

## Death

Milton Erickson was asked by a student if he was dying. He said 'I think that is entirely premature. I have no intention of dying. In fact, that will be the last thing I do!

'I think you ought to bear in mind that the day you are born is the day you start dying. Some are more efficient at it than others and don't waste a lot of time dying. There are others who wait a long time'.

Why is it we mortals seem to have such a problem with death? We know that it is at least fairly likely that it will happen to at least most of us. I notice, now that I'm in my fifties, some of the humor of death seems to be more brittle than it was. For some reason the idea of death isn't quite as funny.

I had a potentially lethal illness as a teenager, and despite my recovery it could have limited my life expectancy. I did not expect to make old bones. Perhaps it was that illness that posed a certain fascination for me, that I attempted to deflect with humour. Now that I'm expecting to make old bones, has the

need for humour subsided or is it just the grim reality approaching?

A lot has been said about death and dying, so how is it that we seem to struggle, that we fight so hard against the inevitable?

It seems the most common emotion around death is fear and yet conversations around death can be transformed by a shift in the emotion that people report in near-death experiences.

People who have died or nearly died and been brought back to life report a new appreciation for what was previously hum-drum. They feel they are living instead of just surviving or going through the motions.

Carlos Castaneda's teacher Don Juan instructed his students to solve any dilemma they might find themselves in by turning and speaking to their own death, which is following just behind their left shoulder; a very sobering invitation.

I remember watching my father take his last breath and then realising that what was there, after that final breath, while it had some appearance of my father was not my father. My father had died and I was glad to have been there to see it.

When I was in general practice I saw many people die and I always felt moved in some way by the experience of death, just as I was always moved by the experience of a child being born.

I notice that different people deal with their own approaching death, or the death of some other, in their own way. What is it that has some people frightened and other people peaceful? What is it that allows some people to cope with death and causes others to fight against it?

In being with people as they were dying it was often helpful to set up a mood or emotion of compassion and acceptance within myself that this death *is* happening. Because it often allowed a shift in the emotions of the other, as if the conversation changed both of us.

For all of that however, I don't expect I will ever get used to seeing children, young people, middle-aged people or even elderly people die.

My personal preference is that we should look to see what we can do to enrich and more fully develop the experience of living rather than just using up time or trying to stave off the inevitable. Attention to living might be of much more relevance. So what

moods can contribute to our aliveness? What actions can generate our liveliness and liveliness of others.

What conversations could we invent to have this happen?

It seems that awareness of death can actually add to the appreciation of life and a more active participation in living can allow dying to be less fearful and more satisfying.

There are books written about previous lives—life before life. There is some attention being given to life after death. Perhaps, though, we should be more interested in the question—is there life *before* death?

## **Relationships and communication**

In this book we are using communication to mean co-ordinating action. There is a lot of talk about the importance of communication in relationships. People say repeatedly that relationship problems are a breakdown of communication or a failure to communicate. And in exploring *action* in communication we try to avoid emphasising communication as a form of transfer of information, of getting the facts.

How many times, in trying to get the right information do couples actually begin to argue? The attempt to communicate actually causes difficulty in communicating.

We want to emphasise that communication in a relationship is the delightful, subtle, often unnoticed dancing of interactions over a whole range of experiences, from the most mundane to the heights of shared ecstasy.

In the exercise at the end of this section we will invite you to explore this and see what you can discover yourself.

Several years ago in a business meeting I had a fiery argument with one of the other parties. I am grateful to the chairman of that meeting who said, 'Let's put the argument aside for the moment and just get on with the business of this meeting'.

If I'd stayed in the argument the meeting would have been a waste of time for me and the others and I could have left despising that other person as the enemy. But as we continued to interact and to get the business of the meeting handled, the mood changed from antagonism to work. The relationship was repaired and continued for some time, until the project was completed.

The argument could not have been solved by getting the right information. It was a disagreement *about* the information that was the source of the conflict and the argument stopped when the issue of correct information was put aside and we began to co-ordinate our actions in a joint project.

I'm surely not the only person who has had important, even crucial arguments with a spouse in which the longer the argument went on the more deeply entrenched the positions of the two opposing parties became. Surely I'm not the only person who with the other, putting the argument aside, *doing* something different together (communicating) has actually regenerated the core of the relationship.

An excruciating, embarrassing example for me, is when my wife and I managed to have a two-hour screaming match over two wire coathangers. Our children are still enjoying the relief of discovering how stupid their parents can be. A cup of tea together allowed the coathangers to find their rightful place in the deep recesses of obscurity.

The embarrassment is that at the height of the argument, it wasn't about coathangers. My wife and I both knew that we had married brain deficient, emotionally stunted, permanently handicapped creatures so the cup of tea provided such an instant transformation it must have been made from the water of Lourdes.

I can't help but wonder how many arguments about coathangers and such, which could lead to emotional, physical damage or actual separation in a relationship could be so simple and effectively repaired?

## **Relationships and languaging**

In our writing we are wanting to get away from the idea of language as a description mostly related to the past and to alert ourselves to the way languaging can be a way of generating or designing future interactions.

So many conflicts are constructed of criticisms, personal disappointments about past interactions which have a chilling tendency to repeat themselves with just enough variation to give the appearance of freshness.

When we recognise that languaging provides a way of generating

a future together, we can look with our partner at what we would like to design together and share the satisfaction of achieving jointly.

A couple who'd already made appointments with lawyers, to preside over the final destruction of their marriage of seventeen years, wondered if there might be some fragments that could be salvaged.

They were each very vocal about the faults of the other and their personal disappointment at repeatedly being let down by the other over the years.

When I asked them independently, whether they stayed together or not, how they would like their relationship to be, they were each bereft of words. They really didn't know.

And when I asked each of them to tell the other, one or two (but they probably wouldn't be able to think of three) attributes that they really appreciated in the other, they were, surprisingly, able to each give a long list.

They were also able to list many experiences where the other not only hadn't let them down or disappointed them, but had actually been very supportive.

As they continued, their puzzlement increased. I was reminded of a colleague, intent on selling his car, who repaired his car, got all the dents out of it, cleaned and polished it and prior to selling said, 'This is the car I've always been looking for'.

The couple decided to go on a holiday together to find out who they'd been married to all that time but somehow had managed not to notice. Their language of criticism was transformed into a languaging of discovery and sharing.

## **Relationships and emotioning**

We are using the word emotioning to alert us to the different groups of classes of actions which can be allowed or disallowed in our interactions.

At the height of our argument about coathangers the emotional space my wife and I were in was one of disdain, anger, perhaps even disgust. And as long as that mood persisted there was nothing either of us could have said to convince the other.

Once the mood had changed to one of acceptance of the other,

tinged with some embarrassment at the self, there was nothing either of us could have done to restart the argument.

Many relationships break down in an emotion of denial of the other.

If we were to pay attention to how we might correct our moods from criticism and denial of the legitimacy of the other, towards acceptance of the other; ... if, rather than trying to correct the other, to change what they're saying and doing, there would be a massive decrease in conflict and a massive increase in peaceful relating.

## **Relationships and conversation**

We are using the word conversation here as a way of reminding us that the future actions we design together influence our emotioning and moods. Emotioning and moods influence the kinds of interactions that we can design together in the future.

We are using Maturana's notion of conversation as a braiding of language and emotion.

We could say simply that what we do affects how we feel. How we feel affects what we do.

As long as I resented the way my mother always seemed to be interfering in my life I was creating a distance between us. She said that she didn't want to interfere, she just wanted to help. Yet the more distant I was as a way of protecting myself from her so-called interference, the more helpful she felt obliged to be.

In a self-development programme that I took in the early 1980s, I discovered to my shame that I'd always loved my mother but that I'd denied that love for fear of being swamped by her.

The decision to admit to myself, and to express to my mother that I did love her was one of the most difficult experiences of my life. I can still remember vividly, the voice inside my head screaming at me 'You don't have to do this'. It continued right up to the point where I actually said it; 'I love you'.

Saying it led to a falling away of all kinds of constraints and tightness all through my body. I was able to appreciate her, with all her strengths and human weaknesses, and to express my appreciation for all that she'd done for me, including giving me life. There was mutual relief.



There was a peace between us. Mutual acceptance allowed us just to enjoy each other's company. The comments and actions that previously had triggered an emotional response in me of distancing were replaced by a feeling of mild amusement and a rather pleasant warmth.

I'm speaking about this as an example of how limiting conversations which had just been a rerun of old complaints and disappointments gave way to conversation we could look forward to sharing.

I am so glad I was able to have that conversation with her before she died because finally we generated the kind of relationship we had always wanted to have.

We had done it in language.

## **Exercises**

### **Relationships**

In this exercise, and those that follow, we invite you to be interested, curious and to wonder about your response to any or all of the questions we offer.

We invite you to write your responses in a notebook, or keep a daily or weekly journal of your observations, thoughts and reactions to the questions, or to simply have them in the background of your awareness as you continue reading, exploring and living. We also invite you to consider that there are no right or correct answers, just ones which will be less or more useful.

1. What is it about your relationship as it is that you would like to retain, exactly as it is? You might want to list these.
2. What would you like to do differently in your relationship?

What skills might *you* need to acquire to achieve these changes?

3. What is it about your partner that annoys you? If you were to list these, which of them could be changed by you? Which ones would you be unable to change even if you wanted to?

What is your mood as you review your list? Is there any resentment? What shifts as the mood becomes one of accepting that the unchangeable isn't going to change?

4. How have you found the best way to sort our conflicts in the past?
5. We invite you to share the following experience with your partner: sit facing each other, and without saying anything at all, begin to blink in time with your partner's blinking. Have your partner begin to breathe in time with you.

After several minutes, change roles.

What did you notice as you did this exercise?

What were you thinking?

What was your mood?

Did you feel embarrassed or appreciated, intruded upon or close?

What do you notice now?

What did you learn from this experience that you might want to experience again by repeating the exercise or by simply having the experience?

6. How do you allow yourself to be intimate or close in your relationship?

How do you manage when your partner wants more—or less—closeness than you do at any particular time?

If you wanted more closeness, or less, without pressure, how might you invite your partner?

7. How is it for you and your partner to share a sexual experience when you are feeling particularly close as people?

What mood do you find yourself in in such a situation?

How do you feel when you think about it now? Is it useful, embarrassing? Do you feel diffident? Enabled?

If this is something you would like to experience more of, how would you go about it?

8. What is it like to discover something about your partner which you can appreciate or cherish? You might like to list these.

How do you feel when you find yourself appreciating your partner?

If this is something you would like to experience more of, how might you go about it?

If you look at your partner's face, what details can you notice which are pleasing to you?

What happens when you notice that you are pleased?

How does your partner respond?

What begins to happen when each of you share this experience?

9. What interactions have you found most helpful so far when your relationship is most how you want it to be?

What have you found best to avoid?

10. What is your mood when you think about death, or when it is discussed?

What other mood would you rather have?

What conversations, with whom, might be relevant here?

What has happened in thinking about death now which allows you to feel more alive?

11. Now that we've come this far, what's next?

12. What new conversations, with yourself and others, are beginning to emerge?

13. Having read whatever you've read of this book so far, what new possibilities begin to appear?

# Work, Money and Career

So much of our life is concerned with work; preparing for it, doing it or spending money from it. But what is work?

When they are at work people are obviously performing some action: digging a road, speaking into a telephone, typing a letter, planning. Our work involves actions. Work is about getting something done.

## **Work**

### **Work and communication**

Getting information, statistics, compiling reports, telephone conversations and board meetings all have as their purpose co-ordination of actions (communication) and generation of future actions (language).

The business and the public sector are now concerned with productivity. The concern is about action, co-ordinating action, getting work done with maximum efficiency. Productivity is effective production of actions. The more effectively those actions are co-ordinated the greater productivity will be.

Businesses that thrive are businesses which give attention to co-ordination of actions. This is perhaps expressed at its peak in the Japanese car industry's just-in-time policy. A multitude of automotive options are produced with almost no lead-up time, resulting in tremendous cost savings and customer satisfaction.

### **Work and languaging**

Henry Ford's comment that 'You can have any colour car you want as long as it's black' has given way to minute attention to customer choices.

The success story of the Lexus, a luxury car produced by Toyota in the early 1990s, rests on that company's extraordinary attention to detail and to satisfying customers. For instance, customers find a red rose on the seat when their car returns from service. Attention to such small, welcome details has luxury car companies scratching their heads with concern.

In the area of health, too, traditional health providers; doctors, surgeons, pharmacists, nurses, hospitals, are re-examining their actions. Increased use of so-called alternative therapies is threatening the very existence of some of the venerated systems.

Doctors were long ago forced to step down from their position of high social status. Increasingly they are working *with* their patients (communication) and also looking to see what is really going to be effective. This is not only about new drugs and investigation techniques but new *actions*. The doctors themselves can reinstate their own humanity in human interaction with their patients.

Many new medical graduates want to provide whatever is going to be effective for their patients. This can include meditation, concerns about health rather than illness and prevention rather than Band-aids. Increasingly, doctors are looking to generate well-being, something that was unthinkable fifty years ago. Who knows what medicine might be doing in another fifty years?

If medicine is going to continue to be relevant, it will be useful to look at what new actions practitioners can generate (languaging) in line with the evolving needs of that future society.

### **Work and emotioning**

In Dickens' writings about workhouses or children down mines last century, it is very easy to summon up a mood of despair and suffering.

This contrasts starkly with a picture of working with people you like, doing work that is personally satisfying and feeling that your work is appreciated—work that results in you feeling enlarged as a person, work that contributes to others. These emotional spaces have a profound influence on the sort of work that is possible.

A child working exhausted in a black mine is not in a position to invent a better method of extracting coal. Inventing new techniques will only be fostered by the right environment, one that promotes and encourages original thought, design and curiosity, all factors that are crucial to any new invention.

Fernando Flores says that thinking *is* inventing.

Workers filing down the subway escalators in Melbourne, Moscow, Manchester or Minneapolis have many visual similarities to those miners of the last century going down into the earth. With pale lifeless faces they chip, chip, chip away at the coalface of endless trivia. One can't help wondering what work is done by those people.

On a recent trip to the dentist, the soft music, the muted colours and the dentist's genuine concern made the experience an unexpected pleasure for me. It was as if I was there not to get my teeth fixed, but rather, within the gentle mood, that the dentist was actually concerned with contributing to my well-being. I felt better as a person for having made the visit and could almost look forward to going back there again.

### **Work and conversation**

We've said repeatedly that conversation is an interweaving of generating future action (linguaging) and mood (emotioning).

It is easy to imagine that the mood in eighteenth-century mines would have limited the kind of work the miners were able to do. The pick would have been unbearably heavy and the agony of the interminable repetition would have diminished the efficiency of the work. From that image of repetition it is easy to imagine a mood of black despair.

Late in this century, however, enterprising companies are recognising the importance of the people in the company. They are valued as the primary asset of the firm. And through a variety of training programmes, they promote opportunities for participants to learn new ways of interacting (communication) and new ways of planning future interactions (linguaging). These new actions and interactions shift the mood of the company to one of openness, responsiveness and invention.

This new mood further promotes better communication. A smoother, more effective range of interactions shows up in the

personal health of all company workers from cleaners right up to the chief executive officer. They also, incidentally, show up on the balance sheet.

### **Unemployment as a conversation**

My father began work for a large insurance company when he arrived in Australia from Scotland at the age of fifteen. He retired from that same firm fifty years later. How many people at the beginning of their working life could envisage working for the same company ten years—even five years—from now?

The prospect of such long-term commitment to one company has certainly been made more remote in the climate of our ongoing unemployment crisis. With such a significant proportion of the populations of most Western industrialised countries out of work, the whole nature and structure of work is in a state of flux.

Unemployment is a real concern for a significant number of individuals. Governments around the world have to attend to the needs of people who find themselves without work for long periods.

Insecurity about continuing employment, anxiety about finding employment, uncertainty about ever being employed again, all add to suffering. That translates into relationship difficulties and breakdown.

Our work has formed a significant part of our identity. If you ask someone who they are, they might tell you their name. And then, if you ask them more, the next thing they'll probably tell you about is the work they do. 'I'm a plumber, an engineer, a doctor'. Many people who lose their work report a loss of identity. Their very self is damaged. And although unemployment benefits are essential, they bring with them the risk of dependence and the threat of a further loss of dignity.

Disruption of the interactions (communications) of work easily leads to an emotioning of fear about future possibilities. This emotion of fear can add to the disempowering of conversation about actions that might lead to future employment.

An emotional space of anxiety in a workplace under threat of takeover can also impact on the way any person does their work. It impacts on their effectiveness and may inadvertently jeopardise their future with the company. The interactions (language)

braid with the emotion, fear and insecurity. Each serves to make the other worse.

Someone who is unemployed can easily take their emotional space of resignation into a job interview, and appear as uncommunicative, thereby inadvertently jeopardising the outcome of the interview.

People who are successful at obtaining re-employment report that the emotional space of the possibility of a successful job interview (and not having a particular attachment to the outcome), seem to help their communication with the interviewer, and make re-employment more likely.

The good news for someone whose company is being taken over is that by generating a mood in themselves of being curious about how they might fit in with the new structure and by continuing open communication, there is increased likelihood of being seen as worthy to be part of the new company. They show up as employable.

When my eldest son left a job a number of years ago, he decided to have a break from employment for a while. Within 48 hours, three different people had approached him with offers of work. He found he didn't have the determination to remain unemployed for more than two days.

What was it about him? Was it just luck? Just that he smiles a lot? It certainly wasn't his appearance because although his hair is short, he wears an earring. He had the mood of being employable.

There are some people, however, who no matter how hard they try to pursue work, don't seem to find it. No-one would choose to be in that situation. It would be easy for that person to feel patronised if told they just have to accept their plight.

The simple fact is that when someone accepts or recognises they have genuinely done all that is humanly possible to secure work, then surely they have earned the recognition that they have done their very best. Such acceptance can resolve their conflict and restore their dignity.

Part-time work used to be the scrap-heap of the employment scene. But in the late twentieth century it is becoming a significant part of the jobs structure. Just like everything else, work practices change as our culture continues to change.



Two possible reactions to working part time rather than full time, are resentment or taking the opportunity to make use of the extra time. 'Now I'll have more time to be with my children and pursue my hobbies'.

A number of people do succeed in using the free time to generate new projects or a new closeness with their families. A young, ambitious executive who used to work sixty hours a week, suddenly found himself relegated to part-time work. He was told by his wife that although she had appreciated the executive comforts of the company car, she much preferred his extra time with her and the children.

In the time that has been given back to him he is also thinking of designing his own consulting business. This will probably deliver more personal satisfaction than his previous job.

Some people find that the loss of full-time employment actually becomes a gain for their future. Having a mood (emotioning) of accepting what is happening allows for the design of effective action (language). Taking effective action in turn influences the mood of acceptance. These two braid together and provide one more example of the value of conversation.

They are a key for designing the future of work for individuals and companies.

## **Money**

The subject of money often promotes some kind of emotional response, be it fear, resentment, anxiety about not having it or guilt about having it. But money is another key concern for human beings.

We tend to think of it as concrete, an object, but anyone who has lost money in a failed company or lived in a country with hyperinflation, experiences first hand the illusory nature of money. It is not as solid as it seems.

Money exists in a social conversation. It is the part of the conversation concerned with exchanging goods and it forms a token for bartering. It allows me to acquire things from someone when I don't have any things of my own to barter. Money is used as the barter substitute.

It also allows for an extension of bartering through time. I can

barter some things now for money and barter that money in future for other things.

Money has a value by social declaration, whether as bank notes, cheques or credit card. Stories are told of wartime currencies becoming so worthless that citizens had to push wheelbarrows full of notes to the bakery to buy a loaf of bread. The value of money is transitory.

Money however, transforms co-ordination of action and allows for future interactions (language). It extends future possibilities.

Most people have a strong emotional reaction to money. They feel frightened in the presence of it, hence the expression, 'It burns a hole in my pocket'. And there are people who report a feeling of relief at having gone through all their lottery winnings. They feel relieved to have got rid of it. And yet, so many people want it.

Money frequently evokes an emotion of conflict: 'I want it but I can't have it. If I get it, I shouldn't have it. If I spend it, I wish I had it still. If I have it I want to spend it' ... These are just some of the convoluted conversations that happen around money.

But money can also form a significant part of our identity.

I am wealthy. I am middle class. I am poor. All of these comments help to limit who we are and what we can and cannot do. Some of these limitations are very real.

Someone without money is unlikely to be able to buy a Rolls Royce. But a super wealthy person might find it difficult to settle for a Bentley.

Someone who has been in the habit of having very little money might find it hard to buy something that they can actually afford. They think of themselves as being too poor, and literally feel unable to buy it.

Why do some people born into poverty feel constrained and limited in their ability to break out of that poverty while others seem to accumulate massive wealth because of their previous poverty?

### **Money and communication**

Money speaks.

Money is a source of actions and the more money anyone has, the greater the potential variety of actions are available.

If I had not been able to afford the airfare to Phoenix in 1977, I would have missed out on all the learning that happened in my interactions with Milton Erickson. Without that money, the turning point in my life's work would not have happened. I would not have learned what I've learned. I would not have been able to help so many people, or have shared my learning with so many other health professionals. I can't help but think what a terrible shame it would have been had I not had the money that unlocked all those possibilities for me and others.

If my parents hadn't had the money to send me to medical school, I wouldn't have had the privilege of a medical training. If my father's parents hadn't had the money to send my father to Australia, from Scotland, he would not have met my mother and I wouldn't exist. If all of those things had not happened, it probably would have been just fine for the world. But it would have had a very big impact on me.

In those interactions money was an important component. It fuelled the actions and allowed the possibilities, the ideas, to become real and manifest as actions in the world. My very existence proves it.

### **Money and languaging**

As the cartoonist Ashley Brilliant said, 'All I ever want from life is a bit more than I'll ever get'.

Why is it that we want more? Is it just a habit? Often, as soon as we get something, we begin to want the next thing. Craving for more seems to be an attribute of human nature.

Absence of money is one of the potent forces which reduces the full colour spectrum of life's opportunities down to the black and white monotone struggle to survive. Lack of money in itself can create a conflict that obscures ways of acquiring it or of dealing with its absence in a dignified way. In an economic depression many people literally feel depressed.

It would be difficult not to feel compassion for an anguished parent unable to afford food or medical help for a sick child. The almost total lack of opportunities for that parent and that child would be very difficult to witness.

Aside from any question of morality or social justice it seems clear that money can provide opportunities for health, nutrition, edu-

cation and exposure to other cultures and countries.

A child living in a house where the parents can afford a computer has the opportunity to become competent with that computer and to access the latest computer educational programs, CD-ROM and telecommunication networks.

Money can expand that child's life options.

### **Money and emotioning**

We notice that the most common emotions expressed about money are insecurity and conflict. We want money so we'll feel secure; to know that we have the money to pay the rent and the gas bill and to buy food.

How much money is enough though? How much do we need in order to feel secure?

Is it enough to be able to pay today's gas bill? What about next month's or next year's? Holding money as a source of security can add to our insecurity and set up a conflict. Needing money as security is an expression of the emotion of fear—fearing life without money.

How often do we work to earn money, in order to acquire things, telling ourselves that only then will we be content, secure, happy or fulfilled? And then we find ourselves wanting more.

We feel compelled to do more work, to earn more money, to have more things so that we'll be *really* secure. The cycle continues and in an emotional space of fear and insecurity money turns into the problem, not the solution.

But, start from an emotion of security, knowing that what we have is sufficient for the moment. This proves that being secure, content and happy allows us the possibility of working, earning more money and acquiring things.

If this happens, it adds to what we already have because it is additional. If we happen to lose it, it is not a loss to ourselves or our identity.

Just as youth is wasted on the young, so I say money is wasted on the wealthy. If only I could have the money wealthy people have, I know I'd be able to do much more with it than they can.

How often do we hear people say, 'It's not fair. They've got money and I haven't'. But the conflict lies in the statement 'I don't have it and I *should* have it because I deserve it!'

In an emotion of envy, resentment can actually impede or interfere with actions that might allow money to be acquired. A potential employee might get so angry at the sight of the potential employer's expensive car that he could turn away from the job interview at the last moment, unwilling to work for some fat cat. The disgruntled potential employee might even think that if the employer has that much money he must be dishonest. 'All wealthy people get rich by cheating'. Poverty, not cleanliness, is next to godliness. This thinking allows us to remain unsullied by contact with the dirty stuff called money. But it doesn't stop us wanting it.

The other side of this tangle is 'If I have it, even though I want it, I shouldn't have it because I don't deserve it'. This is the conflict around money we call guilt.

The same employer, with his imported car parked by a chauffeur, but feeling awkward and embarrassed at telling a potential employee what the part-time salary will be, still doesn't experience enough guilt to offer an income equal to his own.

Perhaps the most difficult emotion to tolerate around money is the arrogant assumption by some people that money is their god-given right. They have it and they deserve it. They are the hardest of all for us to forgive, because they don't have the decency even to have a conflict about it.

### **Money and conversation**

We are using conversation to describe the way mood or emotioning and designing actions have a mutual effect on each other.

Envy and resentment about money can work against taking steps to acquire it. Envy actually helps to keep up the lack of money.

I heard a story about a truck driver who was very resentful of people who had money. Then he won a large amount of money in a lottery. He immediately went out and bought an expensive car which he didn't insure. He managed to crash it and the result was a total write-off.

His wife, taking care of the rest of the winnings, lost heavily at a race meeting the next weekend. Within three weeks of winning hundreds of thousands of dollars, they had lost the lot and were back where they started. He was able to get back to complaining about wealthy people.

Every now and again we meet someone who seems to have an ample supply of material things and a sense of generosity about them. They share their possessions and themselves. It seems that the money they have is something that they dare to own. Instead of having a conflict about whether they should have it or not, they are able to mobilise the energy to ask, 'How can I best make use of this?'

If money is about action, then the highest form of money, as a conversation, will be a conversation which will generate future actions that will benefit the most number of people.

Part of Australian folklore is a fairytale about 'The Magic Pudding'. 'A-cut-and-come-again-kind-of-pudding.' Nothing made the pudding more angry than if it couldn't get someone to eat lots of it. The more it was eaten, the happier it was because then, it could magically replenish itself. No doubt this myth finds expression in many different countries.

## Career

What's the difference between a career, a job, work or a source of income? Obviously all of these are related but what is it that makes a career distinct?

I used to think my career was a matter of finding out what I was good at, what pleased me, what I liked doing, then doing it and expecting other people to like what I was doing and pay me for it.

I used to think my career was about *me*, about *my* skills, *my* likes, *my* achievements, even *my* desires or dreams. It was a shock to me when I took part in a programme, the Career Course, designed by Fernando Flores in the US in the late 1980s.

The shock was discovering that there was something more important than what *I* thought about my work. That was what other people, potential clients or customers could see that I had to offer *them*. What could I offer to *their* needs and problems?

In that programme I discovered that as long as I was paying attention to *my* abilities, *my* likes and dislikes; as long as I was focused on *me*, I was isolated. I was engrossed in finding out what was right and defending it, often with the effect of distancing other

people who didn't appreciate my point of view, or what I had to offer.

Looking back, I could be embarrassed by my arrogance and presumption in thinking that I had the answers for other people's problems, without even needing to ask them what they thought. I'm told this is not an uncommon experience.

### **Career and communication**

I discovered in that programme—and it continues to be an ongoing fascination—that talking with people in my role as a counsellor, doctor or teacher, was a way of finding out what it is that *they* can do; what new actions *they* can take. The possibilities in the client, the patient or the student emerge in the most delightful way—a delight that is shared by both of us.

The co-ordination of action (communication) that occurs between us follows from focusing my attention on *them* and *their* issues. I notice that since I've been doing that, the direction of my career is much more fluid and creative. Career then is about other people.

It was when I started to look for more effective ways of helping patients that there was a shift in my career from doctoring towards counselling. It involved learning new skills, finding new teachers, acquiring competence in new areas of action. Not just talking to people, not just listening to them. It was about having that communication that really focused on the patient.

### **Career and languaging**

As I began to study and practise these new learnings and as I talked with a network of teachers in this field, a whole new range of future actions began to emerge.

My experience with the late Ainslie Meares, an unconventional Melbourne psychiatrist who was prominent in introducing meditation into therapy, led to further learning about hypnosis. The communication that happened with this new learning process led to other interactions with Milton Erickson, Fernando Flores and Humberto Maturana. Who knows what future interactions are still in the pipeline waiting to be explored?

Flores says that career is a commitment to prepare oneself to act

throughout one's lifetime to provide possibilities for people to take care of their concerns in some domain.

This might seem altruistic but I and others have noticed that it is what works. It is what allows a career to become solid and yet lively.

As long as I thought that my career in general practice was about earning a living, convincing patients to take the correct pharmaceuticals and to do the right thing according to my experience, my work was boring, repetitive and of limited value.

There is a growing awareness now in family medicine that in talking *with* our patients we need to communicate, not just to tell them what might be worthwhile. It is useful to pay attention to *their* individual style, personality and characteristics so there is better rapport which in itself can be healing and more importantly, new actions are generated in the patients themselves.

The pertinent question is: what did patients need to do for themselves in order to take care of their concerns? This leads to the patients following through with their own action. The solutions they come up with are theirs; the patients' solution, the patients' action, not the doctor's. This is the sort of action that is more likely to be followed though.

The doctor might be advising someone to lose weight, talking about diets, what they should or shouldn't eat. The patient might realise, as they talk, that what they really want to do is to have more physical exercise. Not necessarily some boring routine, they might discover as they continue interacting, what is going to be useful for them in the future.

'I could walk my dog, or do the mowing. I could kick a football with my children in the afternoon or I could go for a stroll in the evenings with my husband'. All these appear as future possibilities. Approaching career in this way relieves the burden of having to be perfect, of having to be right, with all of the isolation and separation that state implies.

When I used to believe that my career was about me, all my questions were about how I could interest people in me? How could I sell myself better? This felt somewhat pretentious.

Now, looking at my career as being related to others has me asking a whole different set of questions (linguaging). What are their concerns? What skills do I already have that can be relevant



to their concerns? What skills might I need to acquire that I don't already have in order to address their concerns? What do they think I might be able to contribute to them?

I find it very challenging to leave the solid, secure ground of being right, and the comfort of knowing that anyone who doesn't agree with me deserves to suffer, and to move out into the uncharted territory of being uncertain about what future actions (language-ing) can be invented.

It feels like a shift out of the past and into the future. It feels like a 180 degree reorientation. Like getting my eyes off the rear vision mirror and instead looking forward at all the approaching hazards and opportunities.

### **Career and emotioning**

We're using emotioning to mean a domain or set of possible actions.

What were the kinds of emotions that were part of my previous experience of work, and what are the emotions of this new inventing of career as future actions?

When I look back at the need that I had to be right and to convince others of it, of my need for them to do what I said as a way to further my sense of self-importance, I notice that I was in a mood of arrogance. I was the founding president and the full membership list of an exclusive club of one.

But hiding not too far behind those ideas was an emotion of fear. At the same time as saying I was right, I was frightened that I was wrong. And there was plenty of evidence for that.

That emotion of certainty, of self-righteousness and self-importance allowed for a very limited set of interactions and excluded a massive range of others.

As long as I was a capital 'D' Doctor, I could only prescribe tablets, order tests or refer to specialists. After a very limited time allowed for talking—with most of that being done by me—I found myself restricted to lecturing and sermonising.

My identity, 'the Doctor', acted like a shield for me to hide behind, to protect and isolate me from the patient. I don't think I was the only person hiding behind a professional name on a door. But that shield seemed to be so fixed and unchangeable that it felt like death.

What I've noticed since shifting my attentions to the other is that my mood has shifted from fear and self-righteousness to curiosity, inquiry and flexibility.

Speaking out of his lifetime of inquiry into mythology and spirituality, Joseph Campbell invited his students 'to follow their bliss'. Flores, a Latin, talked about bringing passion. The Anglo-Saxon intellect talks of intention, commitment and each of these emotions provides a space for generating future actions (language) which are a world away from the moods of resignation, apathy and isolation that define careers for so many of us.

What a difference it would make to a budding anthropologist studying different cultures, to be gathering data, recording statistics, testing some theory or other by 'following their bliss' and simultaneously bringing themselves to that culture. How much more lively that would be for them. What new observations might they make?

A manager in business 'doing time', waiting to retire and all of the emotions that torpor suggests could be contrasted with someone who brings passion or heart to the project they're managing. What new standards or results might that person achieve? A teacher could find herself in an emotion of grappling with disputes about working conditions in schools or teaching out of the intention to have students attain their full potential.

Concerns about conditions, pay and so on, while of course being an issue, would no longer interfere with the teacher's career; that role of addressing concerns for the student, and by logical progression the family, society and the world.

In an emotional space of fear and self-interest, the language of career as providing for the concerns of the other leaves us feeling insecure and anxious about losing our identity, of disappearing, of giving over our precious individuality.

I remember a Sunday School hymn, 'Jesus First, Myself Last, Others In Between'.

In the emotion of fear, serving the needs of others seems to force us into an inferior role, passively servile, subservient. If however we generate a mood of respect for the other, a partnership with the other, relationship with the other, then our individuality, our personality, our self, can be continually created anew in a mutual dance of becoming.

It is like going back to before Aristotle, where the picture of the self begins to move and dance with the becoming of the other. This mood invites us to become more of who we are, to expand our potentials, our possibilities in relation to the evolving concerns of the other.

Again it is a shift in focus. The self is still there with all of the concerns of the self. We're not wanting to take those away, but rather to invite a view of career that comes out of commitment to the other as being of much greater value to everyone.

### **Career and conversation**

This shifting of mood (emotioning) towards relationship is much more likely to produce new actions and new interactions (languageing).

Since I've been less certain about who I am and more attentive to what concerns I can address for the other a whole new set of interactions (languageing) have appeared. My career is now about what use I can be in the world. I find myself looking at the possibility of contributing to the education of therapists, psychologists and doctors and maybe for primary, secondary and tertiary teachers too.

What would it be like to have a teaching institution where the emphasis was on acquiring academic theories as well as developing practical competence in actions in various domains of human concern.

To have doctors, when they graduate be competent at interacting and taking care of people, their health and wellbeing?

For lawyers to come out of the universities competent to deal with people and their concerns in relation to their rights and opportunities under the law?

For accountants to be competent to deal with people in their concerns about financial planning?

For businessmen to be competent to deal with the concerns of people in the area of creating and managing commercial projects?

For veterinarians to be competent to deal with animals, but also the concerns of the people bringing those animals?

What would it be like to have politicians who have as their career, taking care of the concerns of the people in their constituencies,

rather than themselves and their own political standing?

If world leaders had as a career taking care of people's concerns, co-ordinating actions (communicating) designing future interactions (language), designing moods (emotions), in respect and mutual benefit, there might be a better future.

Does all this sound too idealistic? Or is it simply a matter of designing language so that we begin to have conversations that can achieve these mutually beneficial goals?

Flores states: 'What is crucial here is that we get away from career as a conversation about *me*—about my self. Career is a conversation about who you are, what possibilities you provide in the world of people's concerns'.

## Exercises

### Work, money and career

In this exercise, and those that follow, we invite you to be interested, curious and to wonder about your response to any or all of the questions we offer.

We invite you to write your responses in a notebook, or keep a daily or weekly journal of your observations, thoughts and reactions to the questions, or, to simply have them in the background of your awareness as you continue reading, exploring and living. We also invite you to consider that there are no right or correct answers, just ones which will be less or more useful.

1. If you were to ask yourself 'What am I doing when I'm working', what might be your answer?

What actions are you taking when you are working, without recognising you have been taking these actions?

2. What is your mood when you are working or thinking about working?

Is there a mood you would prefer to have?

What is it like for you when you have that mood?

3. When you allow yourself to accept your work, or enjoy it, how does that influence the work itself?

When you allow yourself to become absorbed in working, what happens to your mood?

What happens to your mood and thoughts as you consider these questions? Do you become resentful, frustrated, eager to do something or peaceful?

4. What actions does your present financial situation allow? What does it prohibit?
5. What would change in your life if you were to accept that you have what you have, and don't have what you don't have? We invite you to ponder this, not just to notice the first response?
6. What conversations would be useful in accepting the present situation? Who might you speak with to look for possible changes?

As you contemplate this question, what changes begin to emerge in your thinking, your feeling?

7. When you contemplate working in the future, whose needs, other than your own, are being met?

If there were some other needs, whose might they be? What might they be?

Are you interested in providing something for those needs?

What skills would be needed to provide them?

Do you presently have those skills?

How could you acquire them or refine them?

Who could assist you in deciding, in learning?

How would you know?

8. When you think about your future career, do you feel excited, frightened, confident, patient, settled or curious?

What would be a useful emotion?

What is it like, specifically, when you have that emotion?

9. What do you notice about the interplay of your mood and your thinking?

What thoughts and actions are associated with the kinds of moods you find useful in creating your future?

What moods do you notice are useful to generate new thoughts and actions about your career?

10. Having read whatever you've read of this book so far, what new possibilities begin to appear?



3

# Actions Speak





# The Future

Martin Heidegger said that our future calls out and beckons us and for most of us our future is our past.

We've said in this book that as human beings we are constituted in language: in actions that we take and co-ordinate with others. In the emotions that we generate we influence those actions and are influenced by those actions.

We say that human experiencing is a conversation. We can look back from this point and examine what actions we, as individuals, couples, groups, nations, as a human race, have taken individually and collectively. We can look at what we have done that has been harmful or helpful.

We have a long history available to us. We can look back at the emotions that have prevailed, and speculate about the emotions that have not been there, in ourselves. We can speculate about the emotions that were there in others. We can begin to ask: what emotions were useful? What emotions were not useful?

We can examine conversations we have had; conversations that others have had. We can examine conversations that we haven't had; conversations that others haven't had. We have a very rich resource of learning in our history.

We can look at our history as a source of information to validate our favourite theory. But because, as the late Australian historian Manning Clark says, history is always written by the victors, all historical interpretations will have a bias.

So instead of asking what was right, instead of asking what was good, if we were to ask: what have we or others done in the past that has been useful? We might find out what to do more of in the future.

If we were to ask: what hasn't worked in the past, we could

perhaps begin to be curious and to speculate and to wonder together about what new future actions (co-ordinated actions), what new domains of actions we could invent. Then there is a very bright possibility on the horizon—the possibility of influencing the design of our shared future.

We are at a unique point in human history. Perhaps for the first time there is the possibility of inventing a future—not hoping or pretending or wishing in the manner of some cargo cult but really, for the first time, co-ordinating our actions through language in an emotional space of acceptance of mutual respect.

Our future seems to approach us at increasing speed. We can't put it off, we can't slow it down. Whatever happens, we're going to have some kind of a future.

The question is, what kind of future are we going to design?

Now that we have the tools, how are we going to use them?

Some years ago a colleague said that we are like a group of people journeying on a train. Someone looks out of the right-side window and says, 'This train is headed for disaster'. The group hold a meeting and decide to move to the left side of the train carriage. After a time, someone else notices that the train is still headed towards disaster so they hold another meeting and decide to shift again to the right-hand side. Clearly, what is needed is a willingness by the group to get out of the train, to go to the front and lay some new tracks.

Language is the track to the future. Conversation gives us some say in designing the direction we take.

We therefore invite you, because that is all that we can do, all that we have the authority and capacity to do, to be curious about what it is that you find yourself willing to design for your future, for yourself, your partnership, your family, your community, your country, your world.

## **Exercises**

### **The Future**

In this exercise, and those that follow, we invite you to be interested, curious and to wonder about your response to any or all of the questions we offer.

We invite you to write your responses in a notebook, or keep a

daily or weekly journal of your observations, thoughts and reactions to the questions, or, to simply have them in the background of your awareness as you continue reading, exploring and living. We also invite you to consider that there are no right or correct answers, just ones which will be less or more useful.

1. What of your past do you want to continue to do in the future?

What of your past can you notice is already persisting?  
How could you have that happen with more certainty?

2. What of your past do you want to change in your future?

What of your past can you notice is already changing?  
How could you have this happen more?

3. What actions might be needed to achieve this?
4. With whom could you co-ordinate (communicate)?
5. What mood is most useful in achieving this?
6. What are you doing when you're in that mood?
7. What sections of this book have you found most affirming?

Which sections have you found most challenging?

Which sections do you want to know more about?

Which sections do you now more clearly know that you wish to pursue?

8. Now that we've come this far, what's next?
9. What conversations are you already having with yourself, with others, that you now feel more confident, more willing, more curious and more passionate about?
10. What new conversations, with yourself and others, are beginning to emerge?
11. Having read whatever you've read of this book, what new possibilities begin to appear?

# Postscript

The writing of this book has taken place in a conversation that has occupied us for one day each week over seven months.

These conversations actually occurred while we were sitting beside a fireplace in Robert's home. And now that the writing has come to an end we find ourselves mutually bemused by what has emerged: a sort of fireside chat between two armchair philosophers.

As the book took shape, we noticed that the mood that allowed the writing sometimes flowed easily like a mountain stream, sometimes more tardily, like glue.

The writing however, became a further example of the interplay between emotions and interaction.

Because the creation of the book was a living process, we would like to share with you some of the changes that we noticed were taking place within ourselves.

*Jenny:* The first time I met Rob McNeilly and sat down for a serious chat, I had to acknowledge that something very strange was happening. The sensation was very like a loss of gravity. Suddenly, many of the things I thought I was so sure of started to dissolve, like mist in the morning sun.

The horizons of my thinking started to change. I couldn't quite grasp it at the time because I was simultaneously charmed and enervated by a feeling of being reoriented towards the future unknown.

In the course of the long conversation from which this book has been constructed I was to undergo the same experience time and again. My pragmatic mind would rebel with an endless stream

of questions designed to nail down the specifics: Why? How come? But?

Rob simply smiled back. I finally figured out the process. He was preserving the mood from deadly definitions. We would move on.

With each new topic I was challenged. But later again, as I worked on the text, transcribing, rewriting and editing, subtle layers of meaning would begin to emerge, bringing with them a sweet taste that I was learning something new about life and the world.

The very fact of a change made me feel much freer and it started to show up very graphically in my own writings. Living language, I finally realised, is expressed as *present continuous*.

Conversation means 'changing together'. See—present continuous.

As I consider myself to be the first privileged reader of this book and indeed experienced this delicious changing first hand and over a long period of time, I endorse for any other reader who may join us, not to expect to *know* by having mechanically read the text from start to finish.

When the mood is right, review your own thinking in relation to the book—braid your ideas and experiences in here with ours, because that's your authentic changing.

The seeds of these ideas do keep emerging and unfolding. I'm utterly intrigued by how often they find agreement in the world that is arising.

*Robert:* The most noticeable learning I've had is that the difficulty I'd previously experienced in writing by myself was transformed into a mostly easy flow in the conversation.

In revealing some of my human frailties to myself and to others, things that I knew about would become much clearer. There was a sense of relief at getting past some of the embarrassment in being who I am.

My mood of vacillating from fear—that this book is not worth reading—to excitement about the importance of what we have written gives way to a feeling of peace when I remember that the readers will have their own conversations.

I'm left with a strong sense of being privileged to be part of this conversation and to have been in personal conversation with Flores, Maturana and Erickson and, through a network of colleagues and writers, to an even wider audience.

As human beings we are constituted in language.

This applies to all domains of human experience and underlies all human endeavour—from bringing up children to preventing global warfare.

Yet, because words are around us all the time, like the air, we take them for granted and remain largely unconscious of the way we use language to define our world and ourselves.

Changing our awareness of language is not a course in something new, radical or even complicated. Rather it is utilising a tool that is already within everyone's grasp.

This is both the simplicity and the elegance offered in this book as a method that works for life.

This is the healing power of words.



# Further Reading

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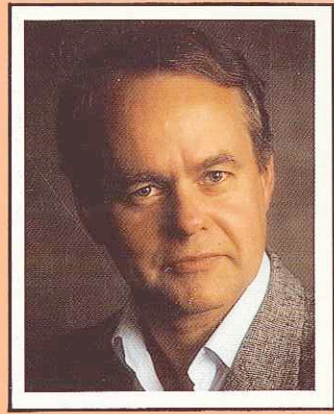
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Change is everywhere – personal relationships, employment, the very shape of society. Everywhere there is talk of stress, struggle, difficulty coping with change and awareness that we need to cope with it.

HEALING WITH WORDS stands apart from the many books published on these problems. The author, **Dr Robert McNeilly**, leading therapist and teacher of the use of language in effective therapy shows the reader how language can be utilised in therapeutic conversations to provide a gentle, respectful and effective communication so that these very conversations can become healing in themselves. The reader is invited to become part of the conversation and learn how these ideas can be applied to everyday living.



**Dr Robert McNeilly**, a family doctor for ten years, and therapist for seventeen years has trained and taught locally, nationally and internationally. His teaching programmes for health professionals are sought after because of their humanness and relevance.

In a twenty year long career in print, radio and television journalism **Jenny Brown** has specialised in presenting creative people with pioneering ideas. Currently she is fascinated by the potentially potent meeting of mainstream and alternative healing therapies.