Sensory & Instructional Structures

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> Most of the people I know are handicapped in terms of sensory ability. There is a tremendous amount of experience that goes right by them because they are operating out of something which is more intense than just "preconceived notions." They are operating out of their own internal world and trying to find out what matches it.
>
> —Richard Bandler and John Grinder; *Frogs into Princes*[1]

> You will always get answers to your questions insofar as you have the sensory apparatus to notice the responses. And rarely will the verbal or conscious part of the response be relevant.
>
> —Richard Bandler and John Grinder, *Frogs into Princes*[2]

Our minds, devoid of collaborating evidence from the actual world, tend to spin their cognitive wheels. Our minds, without understanding from within and sensory information from without, remain in darkness.

Sensory Structures

How frequently do people enter a mediation therapist's office, eyes squinted, brows strained, saying, "Oh, I am so confused; if I do X, I shall lose Y; if I do Y, I will certainly lose X. How will I ever know what I should do?" They are frequently surprised to hear the mediation therapist say something like:

You are *thinking* too much. Open your eyes and ears to perceive, to observe what is really happening around you. You seem to be turning your eyes inward, viewing the conflicts going back and forth in your head. It appears to be an evenly matched tennis game, with you as the ball. You may decide it is time to give your mind a rest, to open your heart to experience your own true inner feelings and to be in contact with your intuition and your inner wisdom. You look as though you believe you *only* have a mind from which to receive information. Tune into the sound of your other fine senses. They will inform you at least as well as your mind.

As a mediation therapist, I take the view that sensory information is highly valuable. I agree with Joan Erikson, who said in *'Wisdom and the Senses,* "All that we do have that is genuinely our own is our personal, accrued store of sense data. That is what we really know[3]." To quote further: "The sense information we have accrued through experience is the most personal and valid content of our minds. What we store up in our heads is the accumulation of experience made available to us through our senses. All the other information we select and gather might legitimately be classed as indirect knowledge based on what someone else has said or written[4]." Erikson captures the point of congruency that one experiences when the senses and the mind come together in solid understanding: "For the first time my mind and senses collaborated and made the idea manifest. I understood. I knew[5]. "

It is this kind of integrated understanding that mediation therapists strive to help clients achieve—an inner knowing that the decision that they have reached is the right decision, even when it isn't what the person would want if he or she could choose to control all circumstances. Adding sensory information to what the mind knows may be a decisive factor enabling a person to round a corner from confusion to inner knowledge. In *Women's Ways of Knowing,* Belenky et al. stated this concept well: [Women] are aware that reason is necessary, but they know, too , that it is insufficient, that to ignore the role of feeling in making judgments is to be guilty of something like 'romantic rationalism[6].'" What is needed is not reversion to sheer feeling but some sort of integration of feeling and thinking [and sensory information]. The authors talk about listening to a "voice of integration...that prompted her [a woman] to find a place for reason and intuition and the expertise of others[7]."

Verbal, conscious feedback is the stuff of the rational structures, described in chapter 4. If, as Bandler and Grinder say in the chapter epigraphs, we tap into the least informative part of the person with our rational queries and responses, we need to learn to tap into other parts of the person.

The sensory structures that concern this chapter are visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and intuitive; they ask people to tap into their own inner wisdom.

Consciously, through being asked and answering the queries of the rational structures, people will have added a wealth of information about themselves. By acknowledging and opening up their senses, people will become more aware of what they know outside of their conscious minds. Not every person will be able to access all kinds of sensory information and need not be required to do so. A man who repeats that he is not a visual person, and does not see any image relating to the discussion, should be asked about what Bandler and Grinder call his predominant sensory "representational system": [8] "Which of your senses is most keen; touch, taste, sound, smell?"

I find it helpful to indicate to people my belief in the strength of their inner resources. I share with them my conviction that their knowledge, through their senses, is as important to them as their rational minds. "I believe that you have many inner resources for decision-making and can choose to be more aware of them than you have been to date" is the type of statement a mediation therapist may make to help an individual become aware of all that he or she knows on any level, to, as Brandler and Grinder put it, "induce impetus in the unconscious."[9]

Visualization

If at least one member of the couple has access to visual, metaphoric imagery, then the mediation therapist may ask that the quality of the

relationship be visualized. For example, a mediation therapist might present a couple with the following sensory exercise: “Imagine you are together, opening a window on yourselves in the garden of your relationship. What do you see? Where are you sitting, working, lying, courting? What is growing there? How many weeds require uprooting? What is the general ambience—relaxed, stimulating, stagnating, desertlike? What little roots are underground just waiting to grow into the daylight?” In this metaphor, viewing the garden is taking an assessment of what is truly there in the relationship, as well as seeing what potential there is for growth. Mediation therapy requires the couple to own how they feel about being in the relationship, what constraints their togetherness puts on the individuals, as well as what spurs there are to growth.

As was stated earlier, sometimes people can acknowledge the reality of their relationship by putting it out in front of them, where they can see it more objectively than by simply using words. All the senses are brought into the picture by the use of the questions asked. People who cannot say that their relationship is floundering may be able to describe a garden that has become a silent desert of sumac trees or a bedroom in which there is no living thing. One woman described opening a door into her relationship. There she saw no people, only junk everywhere. Her husband described the relationship as a small picture that was clearly in the past. His wife appeared dressed in pink, svelte and self-assured. From this picture he commented that it

appeared as if the relationship was in the past and that he had idealized his wife, refusing to see and accept her as she is now.

Seeing Clearly

From time to time individuals might be asked to remove any veils they have over their eyes in order to see clearly who they are, who the other is, what transpires within the relationship. A couple might be asked: "How much do you believe you distort how things actually are?" And if they do so a lot, does this *not seeing clearly* make aspects of their life appear to be more congruent, to be more whole, to make more sense? In other words, do they not see things clearly partially because to do so would be inconsistent with how they have told themselves things really are? If she doesn't see that he is spacing out most of the time, she won't have to acknowledge that his drug habit has probably recommenced.

Uptime is Bandler and Grinder's term for only being aware of sensory experience, and not of "internal feelings, pictures, voices, or anything else."[10] This is the opposite experience from creating a mental, visual picture that describes the relationship. This uptime is consciously, deliberately defocusing from all internal experiences to be aware of everything around. Uptime in my view is seeing without judging, labeling, or distorting. Both types of seeing, internal visualizing and external pure seeing, or uptime are helpful for

mediation therapy clients to know about. Visualizing the relationship can put it into sharper focus for the visualizer and the partner. Seeing what really transpires in the day-to-day world (not judging, labeling or distorting—just simply observing) may open up untold revelations to individuals who have not been using information that has been readily available to them: how thoughtlessly the partner behaves to everyone, how the partner virtually never acknowledges what others say; how agitated the partner has been about her or his work for some time.

Usually the mediation therapist will want to discern for her or himself when it is appropriate for clients to attend to internal cues, to internalizations or visualizations, and when it is most appropriate for individuals to tune out internal thoughts and feelings in order to be acutely aware of what is happening around them. When the mediation therapist understands the value of both types of seeing, he or she will be able to share the value of seeing clearly with his or her mediation therapy clients. Inasmuch as language and words have tremendous power, pictures—both internal and external—may be worth the proverbial thousand words in this intervention. Drawing what they see on a large easel in my office seems to help couples improve their pure seeing and visualization abilities, and the products are typically used as information in the creative problem-solving process.

Dream Images

The pictures that individual members of a couple generate in their nighttime dreams often indicate their inner concerns, contemporary and past. Dream interpretation, often assumed to be the province of individual psychotherapy or psychoanalysis, has great power in a couple forum such as mediation therapy. Long the road to discovery of one's interior wisdom, wishes, and intuition, dreams may be interpreted by mates in the context of mediation therapy in the same way visualizations are.

Deborah Luepnitz, in a recent talk, alluded to encouraging partners to interpret or guess at meanings and symbolism in one another's dreams.[11] These nighttime pictures are often very valuable in the mediation therapy context. Drawing pictures of dream sequences on the large easel is a fantastic medium for helping individuals translate dream images into understanding.

Body Signals

Words, images, dreams, pictures all convey knowledge to individuals and to partners, but only if they are attended to, only if they are respected as givers of knowledge. Many people respond favorably to learning how to recognize their internal cues and feelings. They enjoy learning to bring clues/cues to awareness as a first step in understanding the messages in their dreams, images, and body (kinesthetic) signals.

Questions such as the following may help people contact their body

cues:

When you think about the difficulties in your relationship over the past X years, do you notice any feelings in your body?

Are the knots in your stomach fear, for certain? Could they be conflict, or tension, or even a sense of adventure?

When you visualize a future together, how do you feel?

Can you leave the past and the future visualizations out of awareness, for the most part, now, and be present with your awareness of the just now?

What does your body tell you about yourself just now?

These questions are invaluable inspirations from neurolinguistic programming. The questions include specific requests to have the part of the person with the internal feeling communicate to the rational mind the message of the feeling. In Bandler and Grinder's words:

> One of the ways people really get into trouble is that they play psychiatrist with their own parts without being qualified. They interpret the messages they get from their own parts. So they begin to feel something and they name it "fear" when it may be some form of excitement, or some kind of aliveness or anything. By naming it and acting as if that is the case, they misinterpret communication externally.[12]

One mediation therapy client learned to listen to the numbness, the nothingness, not of a body part, but of his whole experience. As a soldier, he

had seen a lot of conflict in Vietnam and talked about having blanked out his war experience upon return home. This dissociated sense of himself estranged him greatly from himself, his wife, and others. When asked by the mediation therapist if he could be in touch with the parts of himself that were aware and alive during those years, the veteran said that he could. Asked to speak to that part of himself, he said, crying, "I am so damned glad that you're alive." It was the beginning of his regaining lost aspects of himself.

People in difficult situations—war or bad marriages that feel like war—do tend to overlook, deny, and distort the traumatic experiences. Helping them contact aspects of themselves in a limited way through the body is a part of mediation therapy that is often excluded from traditional interventions for assisting couples and families in crisis. Psychoanalysis, devised in Victorian times, often behaves as if patients or clients have no bodies to check in with, only psyches and the unconscious.

Emotional Sharing

The business of mediation therapy is to help people become aware of the many cues readily available to them, including those within their bodies. Although mediation therapy may appear to be predominantly a rational or cognitive intervention, with a great deal of structure and control by the mediation therapist, emotional sharing, sensory discovery, and discharge of

intense feelings occur frequently and often at considerable depth. When one of the rational structures is being employed, intense feelings of loneliness, abandonment, or rage may surface, and it is appropriate to deal with these feelings then and there. For example, the rational impertinent question "What bothers you most about your partner?" may be answered. "X works seventy-five hours per week." Along with the expression of dissatisfaction, a surge of intense emotions may accompany the rational response being worked on.

More often than not, emotional sharing and discharge occur with certain of the rational structures. I believe one of the chief reasons for the evocation of strong feelings in mediation therapy is that the rational structure bounds the feelings. It is clear to people that they won't be overwhelmed or swept away by the intensity of their emotion. They are allowed, even encouraged, to feel the emotions—rage, sadness, disappointment—sharply and deeply, and they sense that they will be returned to rational understanding.

Not only do our clients need to be aware of the emotions within themselves, they need to interpret them as accurately as I they can. Acquiring sensory information through eyes, ears, bodies, intuition, and inner wisdom is a necessary precursor to communication with any other person. Lack of inner awareness, of self-knowledge, can only lead to distorted and faulty communication. If a person isn't aware of him or herself, he or she can only speak about the other or the self from a place of incomplete awareness and

self-knowledge, rather than from a positive place of self-knowledge.

Communication Skills

Paraphrasing

As previously touched on, paraphrasing is one is the most powerful tools of mediation therapy; it is a way of helping people become aware of what they know, think, and perceive. Paraphrasing may be viewed as taking the probable essence of what someone has said and repeating it calmly to the partner—without menacing gestures or intonation—all the while checking out with the communicator if what you've said was his or her intention. Metacommunication, or the implied message conveyed through tone and body language, is often included in the paraphrase.

Paraphrasing literally translates the person's intended message. In contrast, reframing, another therapeutic tool, attempts a *positive* translation of the message. At the beginning of the mediation therapy, it is a requirement for the mediation therapist to explain the process of paraphrasing, indicating that it involves guesswork on the part of the mediation therapist: "If the words fit, wear them and nod or say yes; if they don't, shake your head or say no." In mediation therapy two critical ways of helping couples begin to hear one another are:

1. paraphrasing

2. staying focused on individuals—that is, not allowing a couple initially to jump into their repetitive patterns of communication.

Early on in mediation therapy, people will frequently mention an inability to communicate effectively. This is an ideal time to begin teaching them communication skills. The first part of teaching communication skills is always to attempt to assist the individuals to become aware of themselves, using both rational and sensory structures. Only when they have contacted some essential parts of themselves can individuals begin to think about learning communication skills. The object of knowing oneself within the partnership, at the time of the mediation therapy, is to be able to share one's realities with the other, to be known and understood.

Gender and Communication

In *Love Is Never Enough* Aaron Beck talks about communication training. Never is he more compelling than when he speaks about the "different meanings of talk." Every couples therapist, every member of a heterosexual couple, cannot help but resonate to Beck's description that many women's attitudes are that "The marriage is working as long as we can talk about it," contrasted with many men's views that "The relationship is not working as long as we keep talking about it."[13]

What bridges does one build to breach this gap between these paradoxical meanings of talk? Bridging the differences between "subcultures" must start with making these differences apparent to the members of a partnership. It seems critical to me that men and women understand that talking means something like connectedness, reassurance, and viability to some women, while it may be a threat to some men, meaning that the relationship may not be viable. When he views her talking, and talking, he must learn to see that she is trying to connect, to be reassured; when she views his being silent, she must understand that he is content, there is nothing critical to discuss.

Beck states, "Women frequently want their partner to be a new, improved version of their best friend[14]." He says that men view their partners often as their best friends. He calls attention to men's propensity toward finding solutions, while women ofteh desire to be emphatically listened to and so feel hurt and slighted when presented with solutions. A tremendously important gender difference, cited by Beck, is in what men and women regard as important in what their mates tell them. The example Beck gives to illustrate this is a lawyer friend of his

> whose wife works in an art gallery, complains that she always wants to tell him the trivial details of who said what to whom while he would like to hear more about the kinds of paintings she is dealing with, her evaluation of them, and specific business details, such as purchasing strategies. He wants the facts and does not see the importance of his wife's conversations

with her colleagues. To his wife, however; what happens between her and her associates at the gallery constitutes the fabric of her working life[15]."

If these differences between men and women make them like different subcultures, different nationalities, or even different races during different epochs, bridges between them would seem to be to understand those differences and pay respect to them, rather than attempts at conversion. Bridges might be created by joining with the other in his or her rituals—for example talking or not talking. Equality between subcultures is not sameness of the subcultures. Although some qualities may be voluntarily adopted by men or by women from each other, they are unlikely to be adopted through coercion. Certainly, when a man or a woman makes the gesture to communicate in a way that is specific to the other gender, that act may well have positive effects within the partnership.

Understanding and respecting gender differences, in general and in communication in particular, seems critical to good communication between members of different subcultures. Women need to respect men, to understand how they communicate differently. Likewise, men need to respect and not fear the differences in their partner's communication. These seem to be necessary first steps to effective communication between the sexes.

Listening

Another, sometimes invisible, step in really learning how to communicate is to perceive the immense power of listening to hear, to understand, to connect. Merely saying what one thinks and what one feels (so overvalued by novitiate therapy clients and sometimes by their psychotherapists) does not connect a person to any other person.

Genuine listening, with acknowledgment, is necessary before the spark of communication may take place. I make the following kinds of statements to a couple in the service of education about hearing, the very active, paradoxically receptive part of a communication:

> "To listen is to have a quiet mind, to focus on what the other is saying and how he or she is feeling; not associating to your own concerns."
>
> "To hear is to understand what has been said, especially when you don't agree."
>
> "One should not avoid listening when one anticipates that the other is going to say something with which the listener disagrees." "If I know that circumstances will require my onging interaction with another person [ ] then I should continue to deal with them now even if I disapprove of their conduct."[16]
>
> "And it is critical that we acknowledge what we have heard."

Determination to keep a clean channel open to hear what is going on around one is a learned skill. People may be reminded that it may be over many years that they have been partially listening to, or listening very little to what is going on around them and that great efforts at concentration may be required in order to relearn the simple art of hearing.

Nonverbal Signals

As stated previously, in *Frogs into Princes* Bandler and Grinder talk about sensing, in addition to pure hearing: "If you clean up your sensory channels and attend to sensory experience, when you make a statement or ask a human being a question, they will always give you the answer non-verbally, whether or not they are able to consciously express what it is."[17] If an individual is open, he or she should be able to receive what has been said and to connect to the speaker; if the speaker has no understandable words, good "seeing" powers may often allow a listener to receive a powerful communication nonetheless. Listening to hear and sensing the answer when words don't come are the simple, yet complex tasks initially taught in the communication instruction sequence of mediation therapy.

Some questions may enable people to access sensory information:

"What strong feelings do you have at the present time?"

"What is the most compelling thing you have *heard* from your partner in the last several weeks?"

"If you gave yourself permission to use your intuition, what would you know?"

"If your relationship had little tension and conflict, how would you feel?"

"What do you know from a place *deep within you* about yourself, your partner, the relationship?"

"Do you feel responsible for the life, the health, the well-being of your partner?"

The mediation therapist, asking these questions to evoke her or his clients' sensory observations, also uses her or his own senses to receive information that mediation therapy clients are not yet ready or able to put into words.

Anger

More often than not, in addition to learning how to access sensory information, couples need specific instruction in anger management and in assertiveness. Uncovering their thoughts, feelings, and sensory observations gives them a wealth of information about themselves. Conveying what they've learned to their partners requires good communication skills, including the

deft handling of anger and the positive assertion of thoughts and feelings.

Given that a couple has learned the modicum of communication skills taught in the first part of this chapter, the mediation therapist will often suggest that a couple read a short book by John Sanford, *Between People: Communicating One to One* or a longer one by Aaron Beck: *Love Is Never Enough.* Those people who don't feel they have time or predilection to read the suggested books and articles will not do so. However, people frequently express great recognition of themselves in the reading and great pleasure in recognition, however painful.

Asking each individual what, in particular, he or she resonated to in the reading seems to reveal some areas the individuals need to work on in themselves or in the relationship. Individuals frequently raise issues for discussion from the reading. If not, the mediation therapist might ask a couple what they think about Sanford's notion that hurt feelings, not expressed at the time, become larger.

The mediation therapist may point out her or his agreement with Sanford, that unexpressed emotions become larger and interfere with communication. Sanford says that rather than just *having* emotions, people frequently behave as if they had *become* their emotions. Mediation therapists try to teach clients to keep their feelings in proportion, remaining much

larger than their emotions.

While giving instruction about communication to couples, some instruction about anger is helpful—for example, sharing the notion that there are many situations in which anger is a genuinely appropriate, normal response. In spite of what children may sometimes understand from parents, being angry does not, in any way make someone bad, undesirable, or unworthy. What one does with one's angry feelings, if socially unacceptable or hurtful to others (for example, hitting and harming one's siblings), is what parents often try to indicate is unacceptable. Unfortunately, children often perceive their angry feelings as bad rather than their subsequent behavior. Mediation therapists express the inevitability of having angry feelings and the necessity of expressing legitimately angry feelings in appropriate ways.

The mediation therapist suggest that people need to experiment. They need to discover what modes of expression satisfactorily discharge their emotion and enable them to move forward. Presenting a two-stage process of expressing anger—the toxic/ affective part first, then getting to an effective expression of the emotion—is productive. Does a person need a physical, visual or auditory outlet to express the toxic/affective part of anger? This stage of anger occurs when adrenalin is running high and a physical or a forceful release seems imminent. In private, some people need an auditory outlet such as screaming or making jungle noises; others need to write or

draw their angry feelings, seeing them "out there" to gain perspective. Still others need physical, recreational, or a punching-bag outlet.

After the private outlet of the toxicity, when the adrenalin was running high, a verbal or written expression of anger is much easier and evolves into the stage of an effective expression of angry feelings. Role playing effective methods of expressing angry feelings provides an excellent learning experience.

During this time of instruction about anger, the deliberate physical, visual, or auditory expression of toxic/affective levels of anger is encouraged but clearly differentiated from the non- deliberate acting out of one's feelings by behaving in avoidant, hurt, and angry ways.

Assertiveness

Instruction in assertive communication may be blended with some of the structures in mediation therapy. For example, the mediation therapist may ask the couple one of the rational structures: "What are the aches, gripes, conflicts, and anxieties between you at this point?" The therapist may then add: "Think about the ways you now know to *assertively* communicate your message so that your partner may genuinely hear you."

Many of the rational structures, described in detail in chapter 4, are

interesting, sometimes provocative questions that the couple answers individually and together. Since they are naturally engaged in mutual questioning already, interweaving principles of good communication is like jumping aboard a moving sidewalk.

Talk of assertiveness is interwoven with the discussion of good communication. Unfortunately, many people associate assertiveness with aggressiveness, which may mean to be actively hostile. One of the meanings of assertiveness is to express or state something positively—even though the expression may involve unpleasant, angry, disappointing messages. Assertive messages are received more kindly, by far, than aggressive messages. Alternative modes of expression are the passive, do-nothing response, and the passive/aggressive, wait-to-see or get-even response. For example, a prominent person in your church or temple asks you, a woman, to bake cookies for a youth group coming from out of town. The range of responses follows:

An assertive response: "I would like to be able to bake cookies. Right now, while I'm working on this book and helping my son get off to college, I am totally focusing on these things. I would be happy to buy some cookies."

An aggressive response: "I don't bake cookies, for anyone, church or temple, not anyone!"

A passive response: Bake the cookies at 2 A.M. while writing and crying.

Passive/aggressive response: Bake the cookies. Later spread the word widely that the person who asked you is an anti-feminist throwback to a bygone era.

Not surprisingly, many people haven't an inkling about composing assertive responses, relying heavily on the other three alternatives to communicate with one another.

Education about assertiveness and communication, negotiation, disagreement, and decision making are vital components of mediation therapy. I tell couples that to be assertive is not to be hostile, but to be self-confident, clear with oneself and others, and respectful of others. Assertiveness is stating what one needs to say, positively, in a way the other is able to hear. Assertiveness is not an attempt to control, it is being firm, forceful, noncritical, affirming of oneself and the other, positive, and even tempered. In mediation therapy couples are taught to be assertive, to use all of their senses and taught a wide range of communication skills—as a part of assisting them in making sane, important decisions.

Notes

[1] Bandler and Grinder, *Frogs into Princes,* 46.

[2] Ibid., 17.

[3] Erickson, *Wisdom and the Senses,* 26.

[4] Ibid., 25.

[5] Ibid., 79.

[6] Belenky et al., *Women's Ways of Knowing,* 129-130.

[7] Ibid., 133.

[8] Bandler and Grinder, 15.

[9] Ibid., 184.

[10] Ibid., 55.

[11] Deborah Luepnitz, "The Therapist and the Minotaur" lecture.

[12] Bandler and Grinder, 142.

[13] Beck, *Love Is Never Enough,* 83-84.

[14] Ibid., 84..

[15] Ibid., 84-85.

[16] Fisher and Brown, *Getting Together,* 5.

[17] Bandler and Grinder, 17

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