

Communication - Through the Masks of Worry and Fear

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Abstract

This paper lays out the role of worry and fear as communicators that shape the history of events, color relationships, and grow or destroy people. Worry and fear are explored through looking at their source and, in turn, their effect on the speaker, the listener, and the quality of the relationship that ensues. The assertion is made that there are communication strategies available for creatively directing worry and fear, rather than being under their pervasive grip. Emphasis is placed on listener attention, creating learning atmospheres, and the power of story telling as a means to carry the listener and the teller into greater states of knowing.

Introduction

“If you’re not nervous, you’re not paying attention,” Miles Davis, 20th century jazz master.

In listening to the words of another, how does this “paying attention” work? Attention uses all of our perceptual faculties. Ideally, our senses are fully open and clear. It’s an allowing rather than a narrowing down and resisting. Why then did such a perceptive man as Miles Davis imply that nervousness is interconnected with attention? The answer to this may be close to Yasutani Roshi’s comment (Kahawai Collective 1987) about *shikantaza* (just sitting) that it’s like standing in a clearing in a deep forest, knowing danger is about to strike but not knowing from what direction. If we focus too much ahead we will miss if it comes from below and so on. Total, uncluttered readiness for the unexpected is what we need. In holding on to emotions, thoughts, or concepts we may lose what is in the next moment.

In this paper, we will explore the self-images of worry and fear and their complex role in distracting us from this most vital act of human relationships – attention to authentic communication.

Attention

Life is relationship. Relationship stems from communication. Communication is carried through the energy of light, heat and sound. In speaking and in listening there is a message in the sound, and meaning that is carried in the silence. When you discipline the mind by saying, “I must not look at the others, I must listen to the teacher, I must pay attention even though I want to be outside,” it creates a division that is very destructive because it dissipates the energy of the mind. J. Krishnamurti, the Indian-American philosopher and scholar has commented, “Surely, to discipline the mind to pay attention is to bring about its deterioration – which does not mean that the mind must restlessly wander all over the place like a monkey. But, apart from the attention of absorption, these two states are all we know. Either we try to discipline the mind so tightly that it cannot deviate, or we just let it wander from one thing to another” (J.

Krishnamurti, 1964). He continues by saying that neither approach serves us. One should strive to be totally aware so that our mind is all the time attentive without being caught in the process of exclusion. It's a state of hearing fully what is being said, the surrounding sounds and the truth (or lack of) held in the space between the words – in Japanese, *ma*. If the mind is not over crowded then you can listen without resistance.

In communicating fully – listening, speaking, seeing, feeling and exchanging, a heightened alertness is called for. The attention may be on “being” with another or on selected information that is received through the senses. As is now being demonstrated in Physics labs all things in the Universe communicate with all other things. This communication, exchange of information, lies at the foundation of consciousness. All is in relationship with all. Certainly, on the human level, in communicating with one or with many, the nervous system is fully functioning and the mind acutely aware. To some, this may be construed as a state of nervousness or, at the very least, it's the nervous system fully engaged.

In observing someone expressing an opinion, revealing a previous action, or providing important information to another there tends to be at least two conversations going on. The intellectual conversation comprises ideas and concepts. The emotional conversation is reactive, unconsciously and consciously. One may agree with the other intellectually, but dislike the mannerisms, the high or low energy body movements, the sound of the voice, the other's distracted look and respond negatively. On the other hand, one may disagree with the other's opinion but like their mood and thereby feel that they are both agreeing. Worry and fear encased in the spoken word are going to draw an emotional reaction in the other. Remembrances of times past will inform the response. To turn it around, worry and fear already set in place in the listener, will color what is heard. I'm not sure I can trust him, she's trying to manipulate me, I can't do what's being asked of me. In a communications setting, what is one to do?

In a broader context, prior to presenting oneself professionally, or in a more relaxed atmosphere, a *nervous internal tension can serve in fulfilling one's intention*. Directing the energy is the issue. Without the excited internal state, a presentation, teaching, performance, negotiation, or true expression of feelings is flat...a possible key to Miles Davis's ironic statement. Or stated from a different perspective by Christopher Fremantle, “Boredom is simply a lack of attention.”

Taking Advantage of Worry and Fear

One day in my early adult years, I asked my mentor, a well-known TV and radio human potential commentator, “How do you speak so eloquently to tens of thousands of people and not become a bundle of nerves before speaking?” He simply told me “It's a matter of controlling the energy that moves through you and around you.” Intuitively I knew this to be true, but what did it really mean? Reflecting upon this over the years I came to understand that ‘the energy moving through me’ was a matter of directing my emotions and intentions. ‘The energy moving around me’ was to influence the atmosphere in the space, the room, where I was present. The surge of energy through our system allows us to

become more alive, more present, more animated. Worry and fear can be mollified.

As the famous comedian Woody Allen is so often quoted as saying, “Three quarters of success is just showing up.” Showing up in life, presenting oneself, often requires courage. This does not mean the absence of nervousness. Courage is the ability to pursue what is necessary even in the presence of fear. In true acts of courage something is always lost and something gained. The loss could be as extreme as life, or as subtle as arrogance. The gain could be a life saved or coming into a deeper maturity.

In communications, the 2 sisters of **worry** and **fear** stumble, fall, contract and tremble through-out our body thereby preventing us from reaching our goal of effectively and authentically connecting with an audience, or with another.

The Roots of Fear

Fears generally fall into 3 primary groups:

1. Innate – loud noises, falling, and walls closing in on oneself.
2. Psychological – traumas imbedded in our memory stemming from painful experiences associated with past events
3. Spiritual – a sense of crisis surrounding biological and possibly soul extinction resulting from death

In communications we are concerned primarily with psychological fears, though some may argue that, at times, it can feel like impending death. During the presentation of our thoughts, ideas, plans or intentions the listener(s) could respond in a variety of ways to what they are seeing and hearing. Many speakers then react to this listener reaction in a George Bush kind of way, ‘You’re either with me or against me.’ Ideally, the audience respects the presentation and the presenter acknowledges it and is, in turn, fed by it. Often though, the *speaker isn’t speaking to the audience* but is consumed by their own internal insecurities. Fear arises that *‘they are looking too closely at me. They can see who I really am: incapable, not smart enough, unattractive in appearance, not fully prepared, too immature, unable to speak clearly, not easily understood, lack of humor, poor posture, knees that won’t stop shaking, heart that is beating too loudly, lack of social skills, a mind that keeps going blank, nothing worthwhile to share, just a plain and dull person, or maybe even an ogre.’*

At this point, the speaker wants it all to end, become invisible, or have the emergency alarm scream for all to evacuate the room.

Consequences of Fear

Studied initially by Walter Cannon in the 1920’s, the “fight of flight” response raises blood pressure, increases heart rate, and shunts blood away from the digestive system and muscle. The speaker feels sick to his stomach, his voice is choked and he can hardly stand.

*Other than **fear** creating a reservoir of available energy for the presenter, does it **play a role for the listener?***

Laura Simms, story teller and writer, has given us a broader perspective of fear and its role in story telling, "Fear is the uncompromising companion of the hero and heroine in story-as well as in life. She shakes loose the walls of our fixed ideas and conceptions, waking us up trembling and alert, in order to experience the reality of our inner world and the invisible realm of spirit and ancestors which lay locked behind thick chains of conventional logic. Fear is not to be avoided, repressed, or conquered. For from the very depths of fear itself arises fearlessness, awareness, and wisdom. The acknowledgment and experience of fear is the door that opens us to heightened presence and perception through which we learn to live in the world as it is" (Simms,L. 1998).

The Roots of Worry

Fear has within it the power to coax awareness, which, in turn, would lead to more authentic communication, but how about its partner...*worry*? "**Worry** is a psychophysical state of consciousness in which you are caught in feelings of helplessness and apprehension about some trouble you don't know how to get rid of," or an upcoming event that will cause you pain or embarrassment (Paramahansa Yogananda, 1940). Worry is a state of restlessness and agitation, producing mental disturbance, uneasiness, foreboding, anxiety, and painful uncertainty.

Worry, as its sister *nervous fear* has shown, can serve our communications in a most positive way. Worry can alert us to take the necessary action to prepare us for an important upcoming communications exchange. Worry can also light up our creative imagination. The other side of an active imagination though is triggering thoughts and realities that don't really exist.

Consequences of Worry and Stress

Worry, prior to a presentation, causes a shutting down of the mind/body complex. There is a physical contraction that takes place in the lungs, the stomach, the throat and the brain. The flow of blood and oxygen to your brain and skeletal muscles is increased. The blood clots faster as the body is preparing for a physical emergency.

Not so long ago in our human history, humans were commonly confronted by the dangers of local war, wild animals, and life threatening exposure from natural disasters. The body systems were primed for physical action. In moments of high alert the body immediately produces many fight or flight chemicals, such as adrenaline, for heightened physical performance. In today's world, worries and emergencies are often of a different nature: preparing for tomorrow's speech, meeting a work deadline this afternoon, going for an interview at lunchtime, negotiating a business deal that makes or breaks your company, or resolving conflicts with a partner. The brain feels this stress and responds. But our need is *mental clarity* and the abundance of hormones pumped into our body systems specifically for *physical action* become toxic. Over a long period of time, damage is created in the body.

Dr. Dorothy McCoy (2002) a psychotherapist and diplomat with the Academy of Traumatic Stress and crisis counselor has reported, "Every system

in your body is affected by *worry*. In addition to raising blood pressure and increasing blood clotting, *worry* can prompt your liver to produce more cholesterol, all of which can raise your risk of heart attack and stroke. Muscle tension can give rise to headaches, back pain, and other body aches. *Worry* can also trigger an increase in stomach acid and either slow or speed up muscle contractions in your intestines, which can lead to stomach aches, constipation, diarrhea, gas or heartburn. Worry can affect your skin (rash or itch). It can impact your respiratory system and aggravating asthma. Growing evidence even suggests that chronic worry can compromise your immune system, making you more vulnerable to bacteria, viruses, perhaps even cancer.”

Stress and worry not only stop the production of new brain cells, but also cause existing ones to shrink as clinically shown by Dr. Elizabeth Gould, Princeton University and Dr. Tracey Shors, Rutgers University (1999).

“Worry and stress literally do make you stupid,” said Dr. Bruce McEwen of Rockefeller University (2002) who pioneered studies showing long-term exposure to stress hormones can damage and kill neurons.

Worry-free Steps

In preparing for a demanding communications event, instead of worrying, calmly analyze the situation and prepare your course of action. Inaction and laziness breed more worry.

Fear-free Steps

There is a series of steps that have proven to be effective in moving through one’s fears when giving a presentation or involved in an important communication. Like in the *worry* arena, preparation is paramount. Organization of thoughts leading to a logical conclusion is imperative.

A great fear among speakers is “WHEN I TALK, IS ANYONE LISTENING?” This question is more of a concern in Japan. I have often been asked to critique Japanese speakers. On one occasion, when listening to the vice president of an international semiconductor manufacturer, I was also observing the audience’s response. *After five minutes into his speech the audience was closed-eyed and drifting off into other states of mind. The material was too boring, the flow was illogical and the style was like a hypnotic drone.* Suggestions follow:

1. Communications require heightened awareness when listening, and when in front of a group a natural, straightforward and energetic style. ***A speech, demonstration, interview, or teaching is a performance*** that when well practiced becomes natural in its presentation and holds the attention of the audience...all adding up to confidence building.
2. Communicating with one person or in a small group setting, though, is not so much an outer vocal and physical demonstration but ***a higher level of internal focus***. Metaphorically it’s like the stage actor in Noh theatre who seamlessly glides across the stage, stops, and releases his deeply gruffled dialogue of ancient Japanese. It all looks so easy. Yet, it has been

shown that Noh performance greatly elevates the pulse rate of the actor; so calm on the outside, so focused on the inside...demanding alertness by the audience.

3. Creating the APPROPRIATE ATMOSPHERE

This leads to one of the finest skills to be developed in communications – ***creating the atmosphere for authentic communications and learning.***

- *Direct the attention to the listener, not to oneself.*
When standing in front of an audience, demonstrating a product, interviewing for a job, or counseling another shift the focus from 'How am I doing?' to 'How are they doing?' Consider ways in which they might feel more comfortable, at ease, and interested in the exchange.
- *Take control of the energy moving through your body*
Prior to your presentation do some stretching exercises. It will energize your body and voice, calm your nervous system, stimulate creative thinking and pick up your presentation. Long deep breathing will have a similar effect along with preventing a shortage of breath caused by anxiety. A shortage of breath also dampens your voice projection and can result in the words trailing off at the end of sentences. This certainly weakens a confident projection by the speaker and, in turn, detracts from the necessary assurance needed by the audience that the speaker is credible.
- *Visualize a successful outcome*
Anytime, before speaking, sit with eyes closed (if possible) and go through each stage of your presentation. Visualize yourself as walking and standing with strength and conviction, and speaking with eloquence and clarity. See the faces of the people, their bright eyes shining with deep respect and appreciation for you and your message. Upon completion, completely absorb into yourself these feelings of gratitude expressed to you through their smiles and applause. Thank them for being with you...and open your eyes.
- *Remove the separation between speaker and listener*
Talk to the listener(s) one by one, as an old friend sharing life's experiences. Establish a rapport, sincerity in your intention, and a conviction in your words. Grow the trust that has begun to allow for an honest response in the listener. Be receptive to these changes in mood, facial expressions, and posture - all invoked by the words spoken and your manner of speaking.
When collecting research materials in Seville, Spain I asked a local storyteller to share with me 'why the Spaniards like bull fighting.' With a deep breath that set the stage he began to weave the history of *el toro* - the Spanish bull. After 6 to 7 years of running and roaming freely through the rugged southern Spanish countryside, eating from the richest of pastures, this powerful *el toro* will meet his destiny in the bullring. *El toro, so independent, proud, fearless, graceful and handsome will face his counterpart, el torero - the famed bullfighter. Written into this script, set in the ring, one will die and the other will live. Each actor feeds the emotions*

of the other. One challenges. The other charges. The roles will change. They look into each other's eyes. It electrifies the audience. The drama lifts them to their feet and thrills the performers. Two dancers, erotic in their movements, soon to become one.

This transcendental oneness in spirit the Spanish call *duende*.

Within the physical space of a presentation learning, excitement, and inspiration appear when there is *duende* created by the *magical dance*, the uplifted exchange, between the speaker and the listeners. Each becomes an active participant in what will emerge from this visceral pool of energy. Professional speakers, performers, dedicated teachers, advisors, loving friends and the audience, each feeding into the emotional content of the field, create an atmosphere where differences are respected, difficulties are understood, problems are solved, wounds are healed, and the unthinkable dream is made possible. It begins with honoring and respecting the listener.

- *Enchant the listener(s) with a well-crafted story*

The teller's use of phrasing, timing, and "story phonemes" – motifs, relaxes random thinking and encourages imagining. People live in their imaginations all the time through night-dreaming and day-dreaming. When giving a speech or teaching a class for much of the time the listeners are actively involved in their own internal mental and emotional outpourings. A well placed story of elevating transformation (tales of courage and life changing themes) is entertaining and insightful and adds to the collective atmosphere for learning.

Robert Bela Wilhelm (2001) scholar of storytelling and master teller has written, "Stories teach, not Literally but Laterally. That is, a story does not lead us from story to teaching, as "A" *Literally* leads to "B." But the story creates a world of images that evoke a similar set of images from our own life. These images sit together...story images and life images...side by side, Laterally, and we associate them together. Stories do not teach inductively nor deductively, but analogically and metaphorically."

Storytelling – Fear and Worry

Much has been researched and written about the effect of storytelling on the listener. The effect of stories on the teller is as important. Just as the listener is taken into the land where all is possible, the teller is also transported. *Telling has immediate benefits for the presenter.*

- Shifts the attention away from the teller, who may be experiencing stage fright or terror of public speaking, to focusing on the story telling. Many presenters will use props for the same effect, e.g. masks, chairs on stage, demonstrations
- By moving into the imaginative state, creativity and spontaneity are induced within the speaker
- Stories that are personally meaningful energize the teller.

- The safe atmosphere created by story allows the teller to be more honest in expression and not be controlled by fears and worries, but instead to re-direct these feelings to enhance the telling.
- Removes the presenter from the often anxiety inducing task of presenting an over-loaded, fact filled, information jammed talk that requires too much memorization and organization.

“The successful storyteller focuses on images rather than ideas.” (ibid p. 17) Wilhelm has noted that stories invoke (1) *Images*, pictures in the mind- that evoke (2) *Emotions*, which in turn provoke (3) *Interpretations*, which finally effect an (4) *Application* of the speaker’s theme.

Guidelines for the telling: (1) Hear the story rather than Read it, if you can. (2) Tell the story from the heart rather than Recite it from the text, if you can.

Reading a story silently from a written page requires us to provide our own inner voice for spoken narration. Why? Wilhelm answers “Because we cannot experience Images and Feelings without the resonance of an exterior or interior human voice. And what of speaking? To read a story aloud from the written page (technically to “recite”) dims in comparison to telling the story in our own words from the depths of our imaginations and or hearts” (ibid p.30).

It is common within the cultures of traditional people to tell stories to their children of myth, legend, fairytale and personal experience, all in preparation for how to learn and survive in the world. Fear in stories is important as it is so visceral. Joseph LeDoux (1996) states that life associations affect unconscious emotions that trigger physical responses that bring out conscious emotional outpourings...“we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble.” Or as Antonio Damasio (1994) considers in his book *Descartes’ Error* the necessity of emotional input for appropriate human thought and behavior, and for the direct perceptual sense of self...“an emotion is a collection of changes in body state connected to particular mental images.” From his study of his patients he concludes that this inner sensation of bodily state is required for the experience of feelings, for appropriate behavior, and for the sense of self. Christian Wertenbaker (1998) a researcher of emotional states concludes that external stimuli of sound, the expression of a face, smells...joined with ensuing body sensations give rise to higher states of consciousness.

In the experience of Hearing a story it becomes real in the body and then consciously moves to the forefront of consciousness. In the stories that bring clarity to life, the terrors of danger or despair are confronted. For the listener, the embedded fear patterns that have remained in an unconscious state, yet have been informing our communications, relationships and responses to life, are looked at directly, face to face. The story shows the way to the light, how to outwit monsters, and overcoming perceived weaknesses. The lessons learned are physically absorbed thereby mitigating the fear response. The listener’s journey moves towards wholeness. Bettelheim (1991) has suggested that by way

of working out conflict inherent in fairytales the listener is shown “what the next steps in the development toward a higher humanity might be.”

“Of all the stories that pierce to the heart of fear, the fairytales succeed best, second only to the telling of long-unspoken personal narratives born of crisis or bliss. The direct involvement in becoming the story makes it an experience, one that occurs at the moment of the telling” (Laura Simms, 1998, *ibid*). Simms goes on to explain that a story is *not* an explanation but a transformative event that takes place between the teller and the listener. This is not possible from reading the text only. The listener is drawn out of their self-consciousness. Meaning takes root, not merely from content but the dynamic intuitive, creative process of listening.

Within the telling atmosphere there is an awakening, an alertness that takes place in the listener. The story provides passageways leading to life’s inner secrets. Meaning is derived from what happens to the listener. ‘Don’t open that box, or turn that key, or open your eyes.’ When the monster comes, when the darkness falls, when the pain becomes unbearable all skills, cleverness, creativity, intuition, strength and courage must be keenly brought to the fore. The whole person must act in an integrated, focused, unrelenting way. The way is found that had *seemed to be beyond* one’s ability. Logic is suspended. Fear awakens what must be done. As in the Native American Modoc myth of *Kokolimalayas* (the Bone Man), the young warrior boy must destroy the monster that killed his parents and demolished his home village. Armed with bow and arrow and pushed out the door by his grandmother to fight the monster, the young boy says, “Grandma, I’m afraid.” Knowing that danger lurks on the other side of the door she answers, “A good warrior is always afraid.” The face of death appears. Within this confrontation is found the source of fearlessness. When the story is integrated into the child’s psyche, often from telling and re-telling, the child can then walk with a more confident step and speak with greater assurance. And then proclaim to the world, “It’s kind of fun to do the impossible” Walt Disney.

Conclusion

Fear and worry are pervasive. When embedded in communications the extreme result is war and, the very least, hurt feelings by both parties. In presentations, they shut down within the speaker novel and spontaneous additions to the pre-set program. Both of these additions are required to enliven and inspire the audience. For the listener, their own fear and worry color what is being understood. Honest intentions are never received. The words heard sound threatening to one’s well-being.

An acute alertness and presence is demanded of both the speaker and the listener, free from pre-conceived notions, expectations and negative emotional over-lays. Often times though, within the speaker or the listener, such a giving or receptive state is not present. The party who is aware and attentive must take the responsibility, and thereby take the initiative, to create an

atmosphere whereby trust and understanding can flourish. For the teacher in the classroom, this environment invokes the spirit of curiosity, learning and wonder.

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