

COMMUNICATION!

A Radical
Philosophy
for
Life's # 1
Problem

LEE THAYER

WME BOOKS
a division of
Windsor Media Enterprises, LLC
Rochester, New York
USA

Communication!

A Radical Philosophy for Life's # 1 Problem

Copyright © 2009 by Lee Thayer

All rights reserved. Printed in USA.

ISBN-10: 1-934229-08-3

ISBN-13: 978-1-934229-08-8

Editor: Yvonne DiVita

Cover & Page Layout/Design: Tom Collins

Published by:

WME Books

Windsor Media Enterprises, LLC

Rochester, New York

USA

Available online at: www.WMEBooks.com, as well as other booksellers and distributors worldwide.

Special Sales:

This and other WME Books titles are available at special discounts for bulk purchases, for use in sales promotions, or as premiums. Special editions, including personalized covers, excerpts of existing books, and corporate imprints, can be created in large quantities for special needs or projects.

For more information, please contact:

Special Book Orders

Windsor Media Enterprises, LLC

282 Ballad Avenue

Rochester, NY 14626

1-877-947-BOOK (2665)

info@wmebooks.com

Contents

Forewarnings	1
Introduction – Changing Perspectives	9
1. What “Communicates”?	29
2. Purposes & Consequences	41
3. Identity	49
4. Fashion	59
5. Who’s Responsible?	69
6. Get with the Story	83
7. Games People Play	95
8. Explaining Things	107
9. Assumptions/Justifications	119
10. Candor	133
11. The Hypothetical Mind	145
12. Gullibility & Credibility	159
13. Questions & Answers	171
14. Power & Persuasiveness	185
15. Advice	197
16. Worldviews	211
17. Meanings & Definitions	225
18. Decisions/Choices/ETC.	241
19. Communication Competence	257
20. Performing Life	273
For Further Study	289

Chapter Annotations

1. What “Communicates”?

This gets into the knotty problem of what “communicates,” and of the everyday problems that get spawned there if you don’t have the right handle on “what communicates.” It was central to the concerns of Confucius and of Epictetus, among many others of the world’s great thinkers.

2. Purposes & Consequences

Most everyday communication has no specific purpose. The consequences of what is said or read are rarely considered. Many onerous problems emerge from our indifference to the consequences. Some scholars have dealt – lightly – with matters of purpose and agenda. Few have dealt with the inescapable consequences. The “Theater of the Absurd” dramatizes the effects of this indifference.

3. Identity

Sociologists – and psychologists – don’t often relate the concepts they are marketing back to communication – the infrastructure of everything human. Here are some of those familiar concepts, but uniquely grounded in communication.

4. Fashion

It has always been the case that most people will think like, feel like, dress like, and behave like their friends and acquaintances. This means that you have to have your radar on at all times to detect what is meaningful and what is merely fashionable on your part – or their. Such things are implicit, but very powerful, forms of communication.

5. Who’s Responsible?

Responsibility (for the consequences) is typically glossed by academic scholars, who have their own (often irresponsible) agendas. Unless they are after “the media,” which they demonize

– in order to make the media consumers into “victims,” and to picture themselves as saviors. Those who need such saviors deserve them.

6. Get with the Story

We must live our lives in the stories that we find ourselves in, or in our own story, if we can seduce others into playing supporting roles in our story (assuming we were capable of authoring our own story). Communication always occurs in the story we imagine we're in, and in the reciprocal roles people imagine they have in that story. You either have to play the story that's being played, or induce people into an alternative story.

7. Games People Play

If life is a game (an improvised story), you will either be compelled to play supporting roles in others' games, or making others supporting actors in your game. Which way you go will depend upon your communication competencies for doing so. Most people are “victims” because they are not good enough as communicators to get out of that game.

8. Explaining Things

People are typically more competent at “explaining” why they didn't do what they said they would than they are at simply doing what they said they would. “Explaining things” is a primordial communication game. Buy into it and become your own victim.

9. Assumptions/Justifications

We make all kinds of assumptions going in. If those don't work, we seek out someone who will “buy” our justification after the fact. It is easy to justify your own wrong assumptions as long as you can find a “buyer.” We persist in being as wrong as we can get away with.

10. Candor

Candor is not about “the truth.” It is about having the kind of rules that preclude the problems that occur wherever and whenever there is lack of candor. It is about the freedom to express what you

Chapter Annotations cont'd

think and how you feel – without fear of retribution. It begins with being honest with yourself – with how others see you. Most people don't have the communicative competencies to achieve this.

11. The Hypothetical Mind

People often assume that their own hypotheses are actually proven “truths” – if only proven in their own eyes. It is your own hypotheses that you have to disprove – not others'. Ingrained mental models that are not subject to correction are an infinitely rich source of “communication problems.”

12. Gullibility & Credibility

“It ain't what we know that gets us in trouble. It's what we know that just ain't so” – which was folklore long before Mark Twain. The more certain a person is that he knows everything, the easier it is for his predators to take advantage of him. You are always credible to the person who believes you. If that believer is you, you will be in continuous jeopardy.

13. Questions & Answers

If you ask a (relevant) question, you open up to the world. If you assert something to be independently “true,” you close yourself down. It is better to know just the right question to ask than to know all of the answers.

14. Power & Persuasiveness

People who don't know what they want to be when they grow up are the ones who solve the problem by refusing to grow up. So they are victimized by every pied piper who comes their way. Power begins with a purpose being ruthlessly pursued. To be persuasive requires the communication competencies to be persuaded to your own advantage. What you don't understand will forever be your Achilles heel.

15. Advice

“Take my advice. I'll never use it.” People who can't – or won't – are full of advice. We all take seriously advice more often than not from

ourselves. The challenge is forevermore knowing the difference between good advice and bad advice. It's a choice that daily seals our fate.

16. Worldviews

We all live in a prison of beliefs and attitudes through which we observe “the” world. What is observed is a refraction of the mind that observes it. There is no necessary correlation, as human history might reveal. We need our worldviews to navigate by. But however arrived at, they will take you where they go, not where you want to go.

17. Meanings & Definitions

Minds don't deal in “facts.” They deal only in meanings. They deal only in human interpretations. All communication originates in someone's mind and has as its “target” some other mind(s). Both are opaque to the other. You can only guess – hypothesize – what the other means or how she interprets what you say. A dictionary definition is neither necessary nor sufficient to anyone's cause. A definition is a distilled version of what people are said to mean by what they say.

18. Decisions/Choices/ETC.

You absolutely cannot “have” a problem without your complicity. You can't “have” a problem that others do not validate or attribute to you. Problems and their solutions come and go like other fashions. Any choice leads to the choices you will face in the future. If you can imagine a solution, you will attract the problem that goes with it. Every solution creates future “problems.”

19. Communication Competence

The premier competency is being uncertain and curious. Curiosity creates life and growth. Knowing is a way of dying encounter by encounter. “Know thyself” begins by questioning what you know for certain. Your capacity for being-communicated-with in terms of your purpose is the mark of mastery over your life.

Chapter Annotations cont'd

20. Performing Life

It is challenging to think of life as a performing art. We are taught to assume we are “caused” by other forces, with little or no complicity on our part. But in life, we are compelled to play many roles. Those roles we fall into are a result of our own chain of previous choices. Life consists of how, when, and with whom we play those roles. If you don’t have the communication competencies to perform the life you want, you will go on performing the life you have.

Acknowledgements

There is hardly a page in this book that does not implicitly acknowledge the contribution of one or more of my intellectual forebears, sampled in the section “For Further Study.” As you might expect, if they were reading this book, they would say, “You should have done better – given it was my shoulders you were standing on.”

They would be right. We should all have done better as readers and writers. No mind has a virgin birth. Ours continues to be birthed by other minds, known and unknown.

Maybe I should have done better. But I am fortunate to have had intellectual intercourse with them. May you gain as I have from this book.

Forewarnings

Most books start with a “Preface” or an “Introduction.” Their purpose is to give you an advance perspective on what that book is about.

This book begins with some “Forewarnings.” That is different – for several good reasons.

You need to be forewarned that this book is not about communication as you probably understand it. It is about communication as it *ought* to be understood. The popular understanding of how communication works is not consistent with the facts. So we get all entangled in communication “problems” of our own making. If you understand something wrongly, you will frequently be perplexed, frustrated, and even angered. When the world doesn’t work according to your model of it, you will usually conclude that there is something wrong with the world. Our communication problems are not engendered by the world outside of us. They are engendered mainly because we have a conception of communication that just doesn’t fit the facts.

So **the first forewarning** is this: Do not undertake to read this book with what is likely your present understanding of communication. What I want you to consider – what I urge you to consider – is a very different concept of communication. You need to be open to some radical reconsiderations of the process

COMMUNICATION!

of communication if you want to understand and to be maximally advantaged by the way this book asks you to think about communication.

If you simply “read” it using your present perspective on communication, you will miss its almost infinite value to you. That would be a waste of time. You need to read this book from *its* different perspective. Not from the one you presently assume. If you can’t be open to how it reveals communication differently, you will be stuck with the same old predicaments.

Changing a deeply ingrained understanding to a new and sometimes contradictory understanding may be the most difficult thing that people ever do – no matter what the advantages.

So be forewarned. This book will likely challenge some of your deepest taken-for-granted assumptions.

You must open your mind to this superior – because more empirically-grounded – understanding of communication. You will not gain by merely adding these perspectives to your toolbox. They constitute a different toolbox.

Forewarning #2

For the most part, our cultural and popular and even scholarly perspectives on communication treat it as a means to more or less immediate ends. This is okay, because we can use communication in that limited way. But it *trivializes* our understanding of what’s really at stake.

Communication is not just something else we humans *do*. There is never a waking moment when we are not in communication – with ourselves, with others, or with the world of nature or of the media.

Forewarnings

What we miss in our mainly utilitarian view of communication is this:

- It is *in* communication that we create each other as sentient human beings;
- It is *in* communication that we create, maintain, or alter our minding of the world;
- It is *in* communication that we create and modify our minds – and the minds of all others with whom we have the intercourse we call “communication”; and
- It is *in* communication that we become who we are, and the world comes into the existence it has for us in the ways we talk about it.

These are far beyond being merely utilitarian. Communication is the creator and the infrastructure of every human mind, and thus of the worlds we create in our images and our other ways of representing them. In trivializing the process, we miss seeing the fundamental – nay, the inescapable – role we play in making ourselves, and in making the only world we can ever know.

Forewarning #3

Science literalizes. Science cannot deal with anything that is not, at least, literal. “Freedom,” like “love,” cannot be literalized. What people talk about is not “out there.” It is “in here.” What people talk about is what it means to those engaged. There is no way to reduce what they are talking about to something “out there” in the world. You can neither utter nor comprehend what you are talking about except in terms of what it means to you. The world

COMMUNICATION!

of communication is the world of the meanings of things – of human interpretations. We use metaphors, double entendres, irony, humor, and 63 other ways of creating worlds with words. Nothing humans see or say can be literal. You say something. But you don't have to mean what you say. And the meaning I give to what you say is usually not what you meant. Sometimes close enough to enable us to take another step down the road we're on.

Communication cannot be a “scientific” discipline. What people talk about cannot be objectified. All meanings are produced and consumed by individual minds. Meanings are a function of those who engage in communication. And that is one-on, not repeatable, not reducible to something literal. It has to do with how those particular individuals interpret what they see and hear.

People create the worlds they live in by how they talk about them. This will indeed have consequences in the real world. Science itself is not something that came from the real world. It was created as a human truth, just as religions were. It is an extended metaphor. It is a superior way of doing our human business in the world only because we say so. It has no mandate from the natural world. It has consequences. The worlds we create with words cannot be warranted to be good for you – or me. They merely have the consequences they will have.

Be forewarned that *rationality* is also a human construct. To try to impose on communication a rationality it rarely has will take you down all sorts of dead-end paths. The world is neither a rational place, nor an irrational place. It is what it is. The best rule of thumb here is this: To understand, you must believe. This is as much the case for quarks as it is for love. If

Forewarnings

you believe in what you say to yourself, or what others say to you, you will find evidence to justify your belief. If you don't, you cannot find that evidence. Try talking about something that has no existence for you.

Forewarning #4

The study of communication begins and ends with its consequences. To study the process is to study the means as if the consequences did not matter. The reigning "theory" of communication is a theory of the wheel, as if where the road takes us does not matter.

Forewarning #5

What is said – or pictured or otherwise put into play – could be a *necessary* cause of any response to it. But the *sufficient* cause is always what it means to some person. And we can't know in advance exactly what that is going to be. So the "effect," if you are looking at communication from a "cause-and-effect" perspective, is ultimately unknowable until it occurs.

"I love you," the engine of real population growth, is not a generic issue. It is a statement addressed to a specific individual by some other specific individual. Only they know what it means. And they don't know what "it" means. They are merely playing one of the most universal games in our culture.

In our culture, status comes from how much stuff you can accumulate, as in "conspicuous consumption." In another culture, status may come from how much you give away. The acts may be similar. But the meanings are far apart. Life is had in meaningful interpretations. And the meanings a person can

COMMUNICATION!

attribute to what happens, or to what is said, vary greatly – not only individually but collectively.

Communication is minds at play. What they play and how they play it depends on their capabilities for doing so. Like human hearts, human minds are different. The brain may be the infrastructure for some of what minds do. But the mind is not *in* the brain. It exists only *in, and in the service of, communication*. The mind is created and maintained there.

In communication, which is not and never could be a scientific discipline, the “cause” can be created by the imagined “effect.” What you say to another person has only the effect that emerges from that person. An observer is looking for clues that “make sense” to her. But that “sense” (the meaning of what is going on) is not “out there.” It is “in here.” It will be, at best, what makes sense to her.

The observer, on which science depends, makes no sense in the study of communication. It merely epitomizes the third-person fallacy. What we say and how we say it depends upon who we’re talking to, and our communicative resources.

Forewarning #6

The popular conception of communication in our culture is that

A sends message **Q** to person(s) **Y** with **X** result.

This is modern (from the 1940s) thinking. But it doesn’t seem to vary much from the Greek mythology, which had the wing-footed god Hermes moving faster than the speed of light from the person who wanted to send a message to the designated receiver, whom he

Forewarnings

pierced in just the right place with the “message” that was his spear.

At least the Greeks had a mechanism. Our view is far more mystical than theirs. Either way, it’s the wrong tack. The “message” the receiver gets is a function of that receiver. If you objectify “the message,” you gloss the fundamental condition of human communication.

Either way, how could you deceive a “receiver”? We say we “fall” in love. In much the same way, perhaps, we fall into understanding. It may be that you could play me with your tropes. But not necessarily the next person.

It may also be that we want to be just like everyone else. But we can’t. That’s because we have minds of our own, and they work sometimes in the strangest ways.

Your present conception of communication may be disadvantageous to you. If you can change the way you conceive of communication, so that it is more empirically-grounded, that will not magically change your life. But it will save you a whole passel of problems simply because you have been laboring under a faulty conception.

If you feel sufficiently forewarned, you have everything to gain, and nothing to lose beyond what has not served you well up to this point.

Introduction – Changing Perspectives

For the reasons about which you have just been forewarned, my subject in this book will be difficult to explain to you. And it will require a special effort on *your part to appreciate* how different and how powerful it is. There are two reasons why this will challenge both of us.

- One is that the process is so much a part of who you are and your everyday life that you no longer even have to think about it. You take it for granted, like breathing.
- The other reason is that the textbook explanations you got in school are simply ... wrong. They may have connected you with a “theory.” But not with much in the way of useful reality.

In this book, I will attempt to give you good reason for rethinking this taken-for-granted process. And I will also attempt, with your collaboration, to provide you with a far more realistic and useful understanding of communication, the fundamental process of all conscious life on earth.

You are who you are because of it. The world you see is what it is because of it. This is not merely something that you do. This is an exploration of where you came from and where you are going that can – if

COMMUNICATION!

taken to heart and fully understood – revolutionize your life.

It is not easy to see rightly something we have seen wrongly for a few – or many – years. It is exceedingly difficult to consciously change something you have been doing unconsciously for all those years.

Enabling you to do so will require my best efforts. And it will require your diligence in thinking through what you have not thought much about at all.

Assumptions will trump intentions every time.

When everyone around you makes the same faulty assumptions about communication, you will be hard put to see the reality that is at stake. But it will be worth every effort you put into it. You will see yourself differently. You will see others differently. You will see the world around you differently.

And when you do, the problems that may have sometimes plagued you will evaporate. The path from who you are to who you want to be will become clear. You will be enabled by this radically different way of understanding this fundamental process of mind, no longer disabled by a faulty conception of it.

Strange as it may seem to you at the outset, this is the tool of self-empowerment that so many have sought for so long. It has never been a secret. It is there for all to see. You just have to be able to see it. That will be our mutual purpose in this book, if you are open to the change.

Introduction

Much of it is bafflingly obvious. For example, the almost universal model that we westerners carry around as a master assumption is that communication is *sender-centric*. That is, it is assumed that the sender controls the process.

It doesn't require much reflection to see that it is the receiver and not the sender who is in control. It is YOU who interprets what you see and what you hear. The world is meaningful to you in the way YOUR mind works. The sender may have put something out there for you. But what you do with it is ultimately your prerogative (always within the limits of the way your mind works).

So all of the consequences for the real world come from how people interpret what was said – or how they collectively interpret the communicable world they share.

It is fairly easy to see historically how this mistake came about. Academic interest in “communication studies” (and by other names) emerged in the 1940s and 50s. That interest in studying communication “theoretically” emerged in the context of the early years of such fields as telephony, radio research, and “information theory.” Those all sounded and were treated as if they were “scientific.” Science was riding high in those days. So the fledgling communication folk, lusting after status and relevance, borrowed freely from those more “scientific” disciplines.

Those were all *sender-centric*. They were all command-and-control systems. They were rational in the extreme. So most educated folk got caught up in the appeal of the “scientific” disciplines, and tried to emulate them. Thus we began the study of communication with the *transmission* model of

COMMUNICATION!

communication: somebody said X to somebody else with Y result.

In a closed system, such as air traffic control, this is exactly how it is supposed to work. But that is not a communication system. It is a control system. It was all about control. But human communication is not a control system. The lesson in our book of Genesis is that God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They talked it over, with the help of the serpent (who does not appear in the story until a later telling), and decided that it was okay to disobey a direct and clear order from above – if *they* wanted to.

Human communication is like that. It is how people *interpret* a demand, a comment, or a happening that makes it work at all. In fact, human language itself is a denial of the “real” world. The word “elephant” is not the same thing as an actual elephant on the savannah. The word means whatever we people agree it means.

Because we are language-users first and last, we are not controlled by any actual reality. We can create our own. And the worlds we create with our various languages for doing so – from cave art to music to satellite and salon images – can only mean that we live in open systems. Advertising experts would love to be able to control us with words and images. But, like Adam and Eve, we insist upon the freedom to interpret things as we wish to do so – individually and thus collectively.

Computers can't handle irony – or insinuation, or fakery, or language tricks. We humans live there.

Information theory is not a model of human communication. In fact, it belongs to a whole different paradigm.

Introduction

What all of this means to you is not what it might mean to someone else. So we humans live (necessarily) in a *receiver-centric* world. What something means is what it means to that person. “I love you” is not a message of the sort, “To whom it may concern.” It is directed to a specific person at a specific time in a specific way. *They* decide what it means.

It’s hard to get from a sender-centric to a receiver-centric view of the world. That’s a real change. But it is far more consistent with the everyday reality of communication. Most of our so-called communication problems come from this faulty “sender-centric” model of communication. In this book, we will attempt this radical change of paradigm by shining a spot-light on different aspects of being in the world communicatively. We are not robots.

Let us add one very compelling proposition. Human communication is largely about feelings, or about the thoughts particular people have.

It is inescapably the case that all such feelings and all such thoughts are private. No one else has access to your thoughts, except as you describe them. When you describe them, it is the other person who has to assign meaning to what you say. They mean something to you, of course. But the only meaning they have to that other person is the meaning he or she is able (or inclined) to attribute to what you describe.

This fact may suggest that it is very difficult to get across something that is totally private to you, totally inaccessible to the other. Experience cannot be shared. It can only be described. So it comes down to how capable you may be of describing your experience, and how capable and/or sympathetic the other person may be. Neither of you controls the other. You can’t control

COMMUNICATION!

something you can't see. This is what makes it possible for either one of you to deceive the other. Everyday life is like that. It all depends on how you interpret what others say, and vice versa.

We can't comprehend any of that with a sender-centric model of communication. We need to radicalize our understanding of the very process in which we become and maintain ourselves as human – communication. That paradigm shift is, again, the purpose of this book.

This may be a good place to start that fundamental change.

Communication is first of all about interpretations. Nothing comes to us with its *meaning* inscribed on its back. What something means to you or to me is always an interpretation.

We accept the universal illusion that we are dealing with “reality.” But we aren't, because we can't. There are two good reasons why this is so:

- “Reality” is far too complex for us. We have to condense it, simplify it, rationalize it, circumscribe it. The world any one of us knows is not *the* world of “reality.” It is *a* world comprised solely of our interpretations of it.
- Our minds are not equipped to deal with “reality.” Our minds can deal only with interpretations of it. Whatever we say of it, or believe about it, is ultimately an interpretation. The mind traffics solely in meanings.

Introduction

Everything we humans can think about, or speak of, is an interpretation. As you read this, you are interpreting what I have written. As I wrote it, I was interpreting a lifetime of thinking about communication, of studying it, of researching it. Beyond that, I was faced with how best to package my interpretations so that *your* interpretations could possibly be of optimal value to you. No mean trick.

If you and I are to “communicate,” each of us has to reach across the chasm that separates us to consider how to deal with the interpretations you might make of what I write. What I have written here is my interpretation of communication – the most complex and vital process we humans ever engage in. What you make of it is your interpretation, which will derive from many things, some of which neither one of us may be aware of.

You and I have no choice. We have to interpret each other and everything else in what we know as our world. Because of how we do so, the results may be good for us, or not, as we will see.

Communication is the process that creates (and maintains or changes) the minds we have. And our minds are the source of all of our ways of “minding” the world – all of our ways of seeing it and dealing with it, all of our ways of being affected by it and by each other. That process is not self-correcting. By and large, we go where our minds lead us, where and what they make possible – and necessary. We could remodel our minds, but we would have to do so with the minds we have. That’s a challenging enterprise. It is our minds that control what we see and feel, not us.

What we can remember, and what we can imagine, are enabled and constrained by our minds. Everything

COMMUNICATION!

of which we are conscious got there via communication with others or with ourselves. We can understand only what we are capable of understanding, and only in our ways of doing so. We will understand something as our minds make possible – and necessary.

Our minds, having the structures and functions that they do, mediate the world for us. They interpret the only world they know about ... on our behalf. And they translate us for the rest of the world. Our minds are in the communication business, delivering interpretations, insofar as they are capable of doing so. They are the sole source of what we know, what we say, and how we do what we do. They scan the world and interpret what is said or done on our behalf, as they are capable of doing so. They are our window on the world. And the world we know arrives in its interpretations through our own minds, the only window we have.

We humans are born twice – once biologically and once communicatively. The first time as capable of a few sounds or of that puzzled look you often get when babies look at you, as if to say, “Who or what the hell are *you?*!”

Babies and toddlers are literally *talked into* having a mind. They can’t participate in our world until that has happened. Those around the babe talk her into having a fledgling mind, which will grow wildly in the early years, then slower, and finally ossify (referred to as senility).

To engage in communication of any sort requires exposing your mind to other minds. These mutual challenges/influences go on throughout life. Some

Introduction

people continue to grow their minds. Others assume they have nothing left to learn. To grow one's mind has risks. If your mind gets changed in its content or its workings, you can't be the same person you were. Our minds are identity central. Most people are reluctant to take that risk. No matter how bad, the status quo almost always wins over change – no matter how beneficial that might be.

The point is that the mind is a living thing – utterly pliant and eager to grow at the outset, often utterly intractable later in life. For most people, the quest is always for confirmation of their minds. They seek out people who think like they do, acquire media that confirm their beliefs and their interpretations, and avoid those communication encounters that would challenge their mental status quo.

For many people, senility begins to take over slowly from about age 13 or so.

Communication – how the mind engages in encounters with other minds – is seemingly not subject to the laws of evolution. How good a mind has to be to survive depends on how dangerous is the world in which it has to maneuver. The most vigilant, smartest, fastest learning critters are those that are up against life-and-death-situations daily.

We humans insulate ourselves from such environments – social and physical. We prefer our comfort zones. Most of us prefer the familiar, the predictable, the effortlessly comprehensible. So we arrange our social worlds that way. And we arrange our manmade worlds that way, usually to the fullest extent

COMMUNICATION!

possible. Our communication is therefore only rarely vital to our lives.

We can indulge in entertainment to titillate us, but not challenge who we *are*. We may like games whose outcomes we cannot know. But we prefer them to be on television or play station. We may flirt with danger, but only if we feel secure.

We rarely want to put ourselves at risk. That requires that we not put our minds at risk.

For most people, the race is to get out of the learning mode as quickly as possible, and arranging our lives so we can live comfortably in the knowing mode. We figure out how to kill time, which kills our minds.

What we *could* know is infinite. A different interpretation of some aspect of the world changes the way we see that world. We may say we want to be different. But we avoid being different by being and doing whatever is fashionable amongst those with whom we regularly talk about the virtual world we assume we share.

The mechanism at the heart of everything we do – or are – is communication. We go out to see those who want to be seen. A thought that cannot be validated by the others who matter most in our lives is a thought we assiduously avoid. Who we “are” is a precarious thing. We can only be what we have become in communication. If that were to fail us, we are at risk. We have to maintain ourselves, and our sense of who we are, in communication.

Communication is not about telling each other stuff. Our minds are supported only in communication. We have to do whatever is necessary to maintain a reasonable continuity. Our invariant need is to be

Introduction

tomorrow who we were today. That's why we mostly talk to the same people in the same ways, read the same news, watch the same television programs, and do most of the other things we do, day after day. The perpetuation of our minds is vital. In that sense, our communication is far more consequential than you may have imagined. At risk is the way our minds work. As they go, so goes our lives, and our destinies.

Communication is no trivial subject.

It is the phenomenon that underpins all other human phenomena – including all of us people – as causes or consequences. Putting the mind back at the center of the process of being human (as it was in the beginning) has remarkable advantages. To talk about communication without including its source (our minds) and its consequences (for our lives and our destinies) is to trivialize the most fundamental process of human existence and human destiny.

To trivialize the process of communication, as we have for many years, is to trivialize – or even to marginalize – people.

Communication is the means, not the end. It is the means of making us what we are and what we will be, both individually and collectively.

More recently, there have been many attempts to reduce all feelings and behavior to the architecture of the brain. Such research and reporting bypasses the mind because the mind is not tangible enough to be dealt with “scientifically.” But science itself had to be invented. It was invented rather recently by human minds, not brains.

COMMUNICATION!

If it were about brains, we would still be ... well, chimps. “Evolution” is itself a bit of imaginative fancy. We can say that we evolved. And we can believe it. But we could never prove it beyond our interpretations of things. Still, it is a belief that continues to have remarkable consequences for our destiny as human.

We have to ask not just What? Not just How? But Why? And to what intentional and worthy ends?

If we don't control our own communication, it will control us. If we don't know where we intend to go – to BE – then it makes little difference how much we trivialize the process.

Communication is not an academic subject (and we made a huge mistake when we permitted it to be treated as one). Communication is the process by which we make our lives, by communicatively maneuvering our way through them.

We may know how to build a house. But no theory of how to pound a nail would enable us to build the house. That's what we have done with our modern conception of communication.

We have to first know what the house is supposed to look like. Then we have to know how to put it together so it looks like that, and can stand against the buffeting of wind and snow and sun and cold.

Life is like that. And we can build worthy lives only in communication.

Introduction

It has its light side, as does life. The widely syndicated author of “Wit and Wisdom,” Evan Esar quipped as follows:

“The advance of science has enabled man to communicate at twice the speed of sound while he still acts at half the speed of sense.”

The same point made more seriously, perhaps, comes from the 20th-century mathematical logician and founder of cybernetics Norbert Wiener, who wrote,

“The future offers very little hope for those who expect that our new (electronic) slaves will offer us a world in which we may rest from thinking ... The world of the future will be an ever more demanding struggle against the limitations of our intelligence....”

The point being (my interpretation of course) that the communication technologies that extend our reach have not – can not – extend our grasp. They do not make us smarter. If anything, they may have contributed to our getting dumber, less capable mentally.

For one, we are duped into thinking that faster is better. Faster is simply faster. There is a reason why the drug is referred to as “speed.” The means may contribute, but they cannot transform the ends.

For our present-day ease of communication, we are paying an increasingly hefty price. We have even been conned into thinking that giving every child a laptop will enhance their intelligence. There is no substantial evidence for this. The sheer technical ability to use a laptop is no substitute for the intelligence Wiener wrote about. Not unless we change our concept of intelligence, as we now often refer to it as facility with

COMMUNICATION!

electronic devices, which (it is implied) will in turn do our thinking for us.

There is, further, an old proverb that applies even in this electronic age:

“Speech is the picture of the mind.”

Given what passes for speech in the pop culture, the prognosis for the mind doesn't appear to be very good. As Lily Tomlin put it:

“You are what you think ... jeez, that's frightening.”

We give little heed to the commonplace. Everyone “communicates.” Most of us can talk and be talked to. We are drowning in talk. In words, images, opinions, and interpretations. Open the door and advice in some form will come in. We live in a bombastic world, because we have not taken the consequences of communication seriously. Bombast produces ... bombast. We must know we're losing ground when, as the old saying goes,

“A word to the wise is enough.”

Apparently wisdom is not one of our target goals for ourselves or for humanity. People don't leave home without their cell phones and their ipods. It's as if they would be terrified not to have a constant din going on around them. We talk more, but say less. The daily gruel is getting thinner. We have not nurtured our minds. We take our minds for granted and fill them with junk food.

Introduction

We separated communication from the mind and now it's all about communication, not about its potentially untoward consequences – both individual and collective.

In this small but tightly-packed book, my aims are –

- To provide readers with GPS-like maps for locating a better and more effective understanding of communication, no matter where you are or what you are doing.
- To provide careful readers with a radically different perspective on this never-simple process, so that you have a whole toolbox of conceptual tools to draw upon no matter what the circumstances.

What you have available to you here is ***a series of short essays*** about the lives we engage in and dream about in communication. Once you get a glimpse of how different this perspective on communication and life can be for you, you can skip around as your interests may lead you.

The essays overlap a bit, necessarily, since they are all part of one subject. While each will be enlightening and useful by itself, it is when you build a conceptual framework that calls upon several – or even all of the essays – that you will be most advantaged.

This is powerful medicine. The book does not lend itself to grazing or skimming. You need to read carefully and think hard about each of these perspectives in order to alter your current and,

COMMUNICATION!

if you're like most people, probably impoverished understanding of communication.

You can use a whole array of these perspectives to look at one conversation you are about to engage in. Or you might find a perspective that solves a tough problem at work or at home.

They are as applicable to family life, or one-on-one relationships, as they are to situations at work, in school, or running a surgical ward. Preachers use them, as do college and professional coaches. For lovers or for leaders, they are equally indispensable.

You can use them for minor encounters, or for life-making. They are equally pertinent for either.

Communicating – inputting or outputting – is what we humans do. If we can do it better because we understand how it *really* works, we will have both immediate and long-range advantages. At the end of the day, the measure of your mind will be how good you get to be as a communicator. And vice versa. They are, ultimately, two aspects of the same thing.

And this might be a good place to start tracking those common problems that you want to think your way out of. Or, better, to *avoid*.

Common problem #1:

Most extended arguments are usually about who's right and who's wrong. Once you see that both sides are based in fallible interpretations, the problem goes away. Every interpretation can be justified by the person who stands by it. It's not a matter of right vs. wrong. That's a waste of time and emotion. It's about what the two (or more)

Introduction

of you are trying to accomplish. Pick a third interpretation and get back on the path to what you are together trying to accomplish. Start by offering not your “facts,” but your interpretations. You’ll be amazed by how this changes things. Maybe the other person will take the same position. The “problem” is eliminated by how you attack it.

Tip: *If the problem was created by how you understand communication, it can be eliminated by how you will have an almost infinitely better understanding of communication after incorporating the ideas in this book into your ways of being in the world.*

This book can be your guide. But, before we move on from here –

Here’s what you (may) need to know to maximize your take from the challenging “lessons” that follow:

- You do not live in **the** world of people, things, and events. You live in **a** virtual world of the **meanings** of those people, things, and events. This is the circumstance for all of us humans.
- What you know is limited by what you can talk about. If you don’t believe that, tell me about those things you know that you cannot talk about, or represent in some other way.

COMMUNICATION!

- What you can say about the world is not the way the world **IS**. It is the world according to you. You and the people you have communicated with regularly have created and now maintain that virtual world – the one you can talk about to others, **IF** their virtual world coincides with yours.
- Your mind is not a product of nature. It is a product of communication. It cannot deal directly with the stuff of the natural world. It traffics only in meanings. And they are created in communication.
- You are related to the people, the things, and the events of the world solely according to what they have come to mean to you. Change the meanings, and **you change the world**.
- Your mind is necessarily colonized by other minds. And vice versa. There is no option.
- You dwell in the **virtual world** of your mind.
- In our human world, it is therefore either influence, or be influenced.
- The only truths you have available to you are human truths, created and maintained in communication. You may say there are “truths” that are independent of you. Get someone to agree with you, and you now have a human truth.
- You will **assume**, with others, that the world you see (because of who you are) is the world that **IS**. That collective delusion has all sort of advantages in it.

But it also produces many of the orneriest problems we have with communication.

- Your ways of knowing, being, saying, doing, and having are the ingredients out of which you improvise your life. Change the communication that confirms those, and ***you change your life.***
- You have to be constantly “auditioning” for any identity you want, or want to keep, in life. You become who you are in ***others’ minding of you.***

What follows is a set of personal essays, based on my more than a half-century of studying and writing about communication. They can be read in any order. One essay does not lead into the next one, textbook style.

Every portion of every essay is intended to function as a provocation. It is written in this way to stimulate your thinking or rethinking about how to understand the ubiquity of communication in our personal and collective lives.

It is not intended to solve any of the typically mundane problems people have with communication. It is intended to provide you with a superior way of conceptualizing communication anew. It is also intended to provide you with superior tools for thinking about communication.

It is not about how better to engage in the process. It is about how to think about communication, so you can navigate the destiny you choose.

COMMUNICATION!

Communication is the infrastructure for everything human. It has been trivialized, much to my chagrin. As will come clear to you in these pages, ideas and concepts about communication should address it as a hygienic, certainly not a “scientific,” field of study. There has been no integrated philosophy of communication, because many young scholars think it is all a matter of academic opinion.

This is not your typical “textbook.” I’ve done those. It is a very unique guidebook. It will in the end, of course, be what you make of it – as all communication is. So that part of it is up to you.

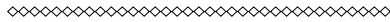
*“The real voyage of discovery consists
not in seeking new landscapes
but in having new eyes.”*

– Marcel Proust

1.

What “Communicates”?

This gets into the knotty problem of what “communicates,” and of the everyday problems that get spawned there if you don’t have the right handle on “what communicates.” It was central to the concerns of Confucius and of Epictetus, among many others of the world’s great thinkers.



A good place to start is with a common misunderstanding about how communication actually works.

Most people – and many “experts” – are all entangled in the notion that communication has primarily to do with “senders” sending “messages” to “receivers.” For example, the word “communicate” above is a verb. So it assumes that there is someone who is doing some “communicating” to others.

Although this happens, as when the control tower personnel give instructions to the pilots of incoming and outgoing aircraft. This is very much a closed system of command-and-control. If it worked that way in general, most communication would be problem-free.

But it doesn’t work that way.

The misunderstanding leads many people to believe that when they have said something, or written something, they have “communicated.” Not in most situations.

In a closed system, the “receiver” is designed or constrained to interpret literally what is said. Computers work that way. So does the thermostat on your wall. So does the accelerator pedal in your car.

COMMUNICATION!

But people are not computers or furnaces or carburetors. People operate by the meaning of things – to them. If you are a pilot, you are not permitted to wonder, when given specific orders, “I wonder what he means by that.” If you don’t know, you lose your license. When someone says to you “I love you,” you just have to wonder what he or she *means* by that.

If we cut to the chase here, what all of this means for communication is that *what communicates* is the interpretation that someone makes of a happening, a situation, an image, or an utterance.

A person may be listening to you. But what that person is hearing is not what you said, but her own interpretation of what you may (or may not) have said. All of the actual consequences of any communication encounter flow from the interpretations that people make of things. That may or may not be what you intended. But the power player in any communication situation is the “receiver,” not the “sender.”

You can tell people how you intend to be interpreted. But even that will be interpreted by them. They won’t be listening to you. They’ll be listening to themselves listening to you. They’ll be playing with what all that means to them. What it means to you can never be a part of what it means to them. They have no access to what you are thinking or what you mean by what you said, except as you might explain. And then they will interpret that – from their point of view. It’s the only point of view you or they can actually exercise.

Keep in mind that what you heard (or read) is *your* interpretation. You have no access to what someone else meant by what they said, or wrote. You can only guess. And that is your interpretation.

1 - What “Communicates”?

Never mistake what is going on in your mind with what is going on in the world. Those are two different worlds. They bear no necessary correlation. We humans have to live in the world of interpretations, the only reality we will ever have. And we have to bear the consequences of how we talk about things – our interpretations. Our lives – personal and social – evolve out of how we interpret things.

Never mistake your interpretation for reality. Just know that you have to live with the *consequences* of how you, and others, interpret things.

“What ‘communicates’” is whatever a person pays attention to and however she interprets it. You do not control her interpretations, nor does she control yours. That’s how the process works. If you have a different conception of the process, you may want to consider this one.

It has far fewer bumps in the road, fewer problems.

Common problem #2:

In three familiar scenarios:

- *You’re the parent. You tell your child it is time to pick up toys etc. and get ready for bed. She continues to do what she was doing. You know what you meant by what you said. Apparently she didn’t interpret your “telling” the way you intended. It could be done with one directive. But if she ignores you twice and gets away with it, you’re now in a struggle of wills. She may have decided to pay no attention to what you said, because you didn’t mean what you said on*

COMMUNICATION!

*prior occasions. You have to **say what you mean and mean what you say**. Otherwise you are actually encouraging some other interpretation.*

- *The happy couple:*

He: "But that's not what you said!"

She: "That's exactly what I said. Besides, you know what I meant!"

He: "How could I know what you meant when that's not what you said!"

*And so on, and on. When people get emotional, they assume that their interpretations are reality. And that **you** are dealing with arbitrary interpretations.*

- *You're the manager. You make a request of a subordinate. The subordinate does not do what you expected. So you assume there is something inadequate about that person.*

Big problems often evolve out of small misunderstandings about how communication actually works.

What Gets Interpreted

When they really think about it, most people get the point about how interpretations are always the rock bottom of all forms of communication. But many people then assume that interpretations have to do only with what people say.

That's just the starting point.

1 - What “Communicates”?

What gets interpreted includes (but is not limited to) –

- The total *context* in which the communication occurs. This is not as it is interpreted by another person or by an observer. It is as interpreted by the person who is engaging in the communication. It includes everything that the interpreter takes into account in order to optimize his or her “understanding” of what is going on, and thus what you or the situation will mean to that person.
- This person – the “receiver” in the antiquated sense – can “cherry-pick” anything as a part of the context which she interprets as a part of what it all means – to her. It can be some historical recollections from past encounters, it could be her fantasies about the future, it could be the shoes the other person is wearing. It could be anything or everything that the person is capable of “minding” at the moment. The “picture” is hers, and the way she frames it is hers. If it is a conversation, she is not restricted to whatever is present. If it is an email or a memo, she is not restricted to what is on the page. If it is a book, she can make of it whatever she is capable of and, within that, whatever occurs to her.
- You don’t even have to be there or be represented. She can imagine you. She can creatively concoct a story in which you are merely a bit player. She can rearrange the furniture, the past, or the present in anyway that suits her fancy at the moment.

COMMUNICATION!

The point is that your words (or whatever) never land on a blank slate. They land, as interpreted, on a very active mind. She puts your words, as interpreted, wherever and however she deems appropriate. She literally co-authors the “message” she gets. But she becomes, in that role, the primary author. She is the one who determines what anything and everything in this milieu *means* – to her.

What the “context” means to you is secondary at best.

What it might mean to an observer is purely academic.

What gets interpreted is whatever the person who is playing the role of the “receiver” puts into play as being pertinent to her framing and the meaning of what is going on – to her.

It is from the way the “receiver” contextualizes and attributes meaning to whatever she takes into account that all of the consequences flow. As the “sender,” you are merely an accessory to all of this. It might be her thoughts about you last night that colors everything. You have to know that you are addressing the mind of the other person (or the minds of other people). And those minds don’t exist in your world. They exist in their own world.

All two or more person communication is “cross-cultural” in this sense. If the other person refuses to buy your take on things, this requires you to be a more competent communicator. Or to fail. The power player is always the “receiver.”

What gets “communicated” is not a function of what you said. It is a function of how the designated “receiver” creates a meaningful message out of whatever bits and pieces she draws from – the past, the present, the irrelevant, the fantasized. People forget this.

1 - What “Communicates”?

There is a technical term in psychology that may be useful. It is *gestalt*. What that points to is the whole world “receivers” utilize in making sense of anything, including what you said or didn’t say. When you aim to communicate with someone, you are sending an arrow into their *gestalt*.

Common problem #3:

It stems, obviously, from assuming that the world from which you are “sending” is the same as the world in which the other person is “receiving.” Can’t be.

We may share what we take to be the “same” physical spaces, the “same” happenings of the day. But our actual habitat is our own minds. What goes on there is private, shareable only by talking about it.

The problem is that most people assume that the world consists of what is going on in their own minds at the moment. It is common practice to address another person as that person exists in our own minds. We mistake what is going on in our own heads as what is going on in the world.

If we mistake what is going on in our own heads (our “virtual reality”) for any reality outside of us, we make problems for ourselves. If we mistake what is going on in our own heads for what is going on in other people’s heads, we make problems for both of us.

This is the source of most problems between and among people. And it is the primary

COMMUNICATION!

source of problems in relationships, in families, and in organizations. The problems are compounded by the number of people involved in doing this.

What gets interpreted is given in whatever a person makes of what is going on, inside or outside.

The Anti-Science of Communication

Most people assume that the message is somehow “in” the “message.” It is not. To assume so assumes away the very processes that make communication problematic – the processes that make communication work, or not work. The message received is a creative process on the part of the “receiver.”

Science has no way of dealing with a process that is determined by the “receiver.” Communication defies the rational, control orientation required by science.

Communication lies outside of any scientific perspective. To make it “scientific,” as many scholars have attempted, destroys what it is that makes us human. Science likes robots. They do what they’re told. People often don’t.

Humans understand humor. They understand irony, and metaphor, and all of the social games that can be made out of the mistakes, misassumptions, and the sheer fact that the “sender” does not control the process. The “receiver” does.

Some misguided technology types have been enamored of the notion of what they call “artificial intelligence.” Trying to make humanlike intelligence out of machines where the “sender” controls the process misses the point.

1 - What “Communicates”?

People tell each other stories. Machines don't. People lie, mislead, involve others with their intrigues. Deceive one another. We can do all of the things we humans do *because* others have absolutely no access to our minds. What is going on there is always hidden from others.

This is what makes poker, or golf, or love so compelling for those who want to get lost in the game.

It is not that science is not useful. But what scientists call “theories” are, as Einstein himself cautioned, naught but science-community-accepted interpretations. Historically they have **all** turned out to be wrong. But that's to be expected.

Scientists themselves are supposedly human, after all. People start with a theory, and pursue facts. You cannot make a theory out of facts – unless, of course, you are human. We make sweeping theories out of a paucity of facts. But that's what makes the world go ‘round.

It's possible (in “theory”) to make a robot out of a human. But it is not possible to make a human out of a robot. It's been tried, many times. And the sci-fi about such a world is fascinating.

We may be doomed by communication. But that's the world we have to live in. We have minds. And to make a controlled society out of people would require eliminating communication as we know it.

Art defies reality, as does fiction. We are enchanted by stories, especially the most enchanting versions. A word is not the thing. The word “snake” is not the creature. It's a word. And what people can do with words defines our whole existence – including science, which is made out of representations of what we take to be “reality.”

COMMUNICATION!

The human mind is complex beyond anything science can represent. And, even at best, a theory of communication would have to be created by human minds. It would have the same flaws as our civilizations have had. Because they were created and maintained in communication, just as our individual minds are.

Communication Is Not a Rational Process

When we humans try to figure something out, we approach it rationally, or literally. But communication is not a rational process. It is rarely, if ever, a literal process. The world happens. We have to try to make sense of it – to make it meaningful to our own minds.

Minds do not trade in the reality of the world. They trade only in the meanings attributed to what happens.

We can never refrain from or withdraw from being the translators of the world as we take it into account. We live from moment to moment in our translations, in our interpretations.

What we make of the world becomes what it makes of us. It is a life process, not a natural process. There are no built-in constraints. We are free to be as perverse as we wish, or as may be possible.

If we want others to “understand” us, we have to resort to the logic they are uniquely going to apply to us and our utterances. Life is no more rational than is poker – or love. These are games, as is life. There is not a reality behind what we do communicatively. There is only the meanings intended, the meanings translated.

1 - What “Communicates”?

A couple of things worth wrestling with: In his novel *The Moon and Sixpence*, W. Somerset Maugham wrote:

“We seek pitifully to convey to others the treasures of our heart, but they have not got the power to accept them....”

In other words, their minds are not our minds, their attitudes are not our attitudes. And vice versa.

And in his 1919 book *My Man Jeeves*, P. G. Wodehouse captured the predicament as follows:

“What ho!” I said.

“What ho!” said Motty

“What ho! What ho!”

“What ho! What ho! What ho!”

After that it seemed rather difficult to go on with the conversation.

But life goes on. In lieu of engagement, we get Rap. We can make sense of things that don’t make any sense. We forge ahead, explaining the inexplicable.

Common problem #4:

Like all human understandings, our conventional understanding of communication carries embedded in it the sources of all of the problems we encounter as a result of it. If we change our understanding of it, as is the aim of this book, we will not eliminate all communication problems forever – a utopian dream. We simply change the problems that accrue from this changed understanding. But

COMMUNICATION!

those can be more humanizing than the ones we deal with now. It is in communication that we have to make our conscious lives.

*If how we understand communication is the source of so many of our communication problems, let's change **that**.*

A conventional way of understanding something (or a “philosophy” of something) that does not enable you to do a better job of life-making, or can't be utilized to improve the prospects of our civilization, needs changing. This is especially so for something as crucial to your life, and our civilization, as communication is.

If your life is as you would have it, then there is no problem. If our civilization is headed in the right direction, then there is no problem. But the impetus for this book is that there are serious and significant problems in both arenas.

What you can expect, minimally, is to gain some tools for making a better and richer life.