

Philip Harland

THE GOOD MIDWIFE

Notes on the Need to be Clean

Your job is to be a good midwife. David Grove



The intention to help – The limits of expertise – Assumption and supposition – Implication and inference – Presumption and privilege – Interpretation and insight – Power or protection – The little word ‘is’ – Suggestions from below – Paraphrase and conflation – The language of control – Intention and means – End notes

The intention to help

‘Midwife’ is an ungendered word. Mid originally meant ‘with’ and wife ‘woman’. A midwife works with the mother, taking their cue from the baby’s need to be born and the mother’s need to give birth to the baby.

The intention of the good midwife is not to ‘help’, but to facilitate. There is a difference. Many of our words have outdated associations and help is no exception. Its general sense now is to aid or assist, but it still carries traces of its earlier operational role, which was *to cause things to be otherwise*. Helpers are heirs to an obligation to make

change happen. It is what many health and personal development professionals still believe to be their principal duty.

'Facilitate' carries a fine distinction. It comes from the Latin *facilis*, 'lessening the labour of'. Two thousand years ago, 'to facilitate' meant to disburden, alleviate, make easier, and it means much the same today. We ease the birth of a baby, ease the revolutions of an engine, ease the helm of a boat a few spokes in a head sea. To facilitate is to allow strain to be less severe so that the system works more efficiently and effectively. 'Facilitating' a person has fewer implications of direct causality than 'helping'. Once the helm has been eased in a gale, the rest is up to the boat.

The delivery of therapeutic resource does not require its midwife-facilitators to be overburdened with theoretical knowledge or to have conventional ideas about 'strong leadership', or to feel responsible for making change happen. It does require them to be unusually receptive: sensitized to small, sometimes subliminal, indications. That said, people need less direct intervention than many psychotherapists, coaches, and the rest of us of like to think.

My wife is telling me about the evening she has just spent with a girlfriend: "She was late again. She didn't say sorry. She just smiled and said 'hi', and I had to smile back and say 'how great it is to see you'." I am indignant on my wife's behalf. "She obviously doesn't respect you," I say. "You should confront her over this." My wife responds in a flash. "I don't need you to tell me what to do, I just wanted sympathy!"

In the documentary film 'Etre et Avoir', the teacher is comforting a young boy who is upset at having been teased by another pupil. "We just have to take no notice of these things, eh?" The boy nods in agreement as he weeps. "We can rise above this, can't we?" The boy nods again. "Come on. Can you show me what a strong little boy you are?" The boy says nothing, but breaks into tears again.

A Downing Street spokesperson is at pains to inform the nation that "Intelligence chiefs fully controlled the content of the September 2002 dossier." A couple of hours later, an Intelligence chief demurs: "Ownership of the dossier lay with No. 10." The next day, a government lawyer attempts to bridge the gap: "Control of the dossier passed from the intelligence community to Number 10 after its contents were finalized."

None of these is an example of responding to information in a facilitatory way, but all were intended to be helpful. Help turns out to be the sunny side of control. I wasn't consciously trying to dictate to my wife ("You should confront her over this"), but in expressing my dismay rather than reflecting hers, I was hardly facilitating her to find her own solution to the problem. The schoolteacher seemed genuinely touched by his pupil's distress and may have believed that as long as he sounded sympathetic, it hardly mattered what he said. In fact, he denied the boy's feelings ("Take no notice of these things," "Show me what a strong little boy you are") and ended up asking counterfeit questions ("We can rise above this, can't we?"), of the sort that are worthless in a genuine transaction, because the value of the answers has been decided in advance. And I'd like to think that the servants of the people were not trying to fudge the issues about going to war in Iraq, but in using such apparently unequivocal

expressions as “control” and “ownership” of the dossier, they were obscuring what happened. Words like these are context-dependent metaphors that can mean (and did mean, and almost certainly were intended to mean) different things to different people.

The problem is that our minds were designed by natural selection to surmount the obstacles our foraging ancestors faced. More often than not, this meant outwitting things – wild animals, natural hazards, other people. We are still at it. How often have you upset a loved one because you were intent on managing their response rather than making it easier for them to find their own? How often have you alienated a client or colleague because you were intent on prevailing in the situation rather than listening to them, really listening, and asking the right kind of questions?

There is a dilemma at the heart of all helping: how do you encourage others to be the best of themselves in ways you believe to be best for them? It is a conflict that few agents of change have ever satisfactorily resolved. Should I be guiding my client from behind, hauling them from ahead, or urging them from alongside? Or is it really enough just to be there? Psychotherapist Lorena Chamlee-Cole quotes a maxim that should be tattooed on the forehead of every facilitator:

All human unease can be reduced to four causes: incomplete communications; unfulfilled expectations; thwarted intentions; and people who try to help.

Claiming the right to help others on the basis of our competence or beneficence is giving in to a baser instinct, says psychologist Steven Pinker. It is an effect of the drive to dominate rather than collaborate. There are times when it can be useful to depend entirely on others – being rescued from drowning, having the house re-wired, getting a hand with the washing-up, etc. External events. And there are times when being helped is not helpful at all – having someone telling us what we should think, feel, or do to relieve inner suffering and be the best of ourselves. These are internal affairs. The body-brain is a highly sensitive instrument whose job is to keep us alive and at critical times it can be vulnerable to the attentions of experts and charlatans alike. Sometimes it can be difficult to tell them apart.

The limits of expertise

“If you want to understand the deepest malfunctions of a system,” said U.S. environmentalist Donella Meadows, “pay attention to the rules, and to who has power over them.” Health self-management changes the rules. Studies show that patients with chronic health problems do not want help, or even advice, but *access to information*. A pioneering medical practice in Oxfordshire makes information available and encourages people to take charge of their own health care under the slogan, ‘Trust me, I’m the patient.’ Yet we still like to idealize our health professionals and put them in the role of experts who know all there is to know about the human condition. What experts do is make intelligent guesses. And when they guess wrongly, we accuse them of incompetence or of abusing their professional position. The real incompetence appears some time before that. It lies in not taking the guesswork out of the system by teaching people to trust the true authority, which is internal and personal. It might

mean that psychiatrists and psychoanalysts outlive their usefulness to society, but their analytical skills will not be lost to us. They will be encouraged to apply themselves to the study of history, literature, or global warming.

Inevitably, many professionals will continue to confuse their expertise with personal opinion and their opinions with personal prejudice. They will remain ignorant of the unconscious influences that affect their opinions, yet they will rarely *feel* ignorant. There is a lesson here for all agents of change: *beware compelling feelings of competence and zealous inclinations to beneficence*. They are signals that it is time to monitor your relationship with reality.

Even with access to the most sophisticated brain imaging technology possible, I will never know how it is or feels to be you. The tangled web of your mind can only be known from within, which means it can only be helped from within. This means that the only person who can help you directly – cause you to be otherwise, make change happen – is yourself. You can be helped *indirectly*, however, via ‘Clean Language’ questioning,¹ and that is the province of the Clean facilitator, the good midwife.

Before a word is uttered, there are important distinctions to be made between facilitatory language and ‘helpful’ language.

Assumption and supposition

Assumptions are things we don’t know we’re making, yet we believe (assume) that we use them helpfully. We make inaccurate guesses from incomplete information from the client and call them ‘first impressions’, ‘intuitive judgments’, and even ‘common sense’. Malcolm Gladwell, in his book ‘Blink’, suggests that making intuitive assessments by “thin-slicing” our experience is an effective strategy for getting where we want to be with less agonizing, yet the book is full of instances where people did just that and got it wrong. Our minds are not, after all, computers. The assumptions that underlie and inform our language and behaviour are not the products of programmes designed to produce consistent or reliable results.

The problem is that we have little idea of the provenance of the assumptions we make. We rarely know where they come from. We find it impossible under normal circumstances to introspect them when they appear. Yet as ambitious, intelligent beings, we like to be ahead of the game and that leads us, and through us, others, to conclusions based on unknown and implicit, rather than verifiable and unequivocal, evidence.

“Common sense”, said Einstein, “is nothing more than a deposit of prejudices laid down in the mind before you reach eighteen.” In July 2005, less than twenty-four hours after the London suicide bombings, anti-terrorist police shot and killed an innocent young foreigner, Jean Charles de Menezes, because he fitted their prejudgment of how a suicide bomber would look and act. In an equivocal situation they made a number of gross assumptions, panicked, and made a series of what turned out to be fatal mistakes.

Assumptions are the unseen traps that life sets before us daily, hourly, every minute of the day. They are tricky neuro-linguistic states compounded of a little reasoning, a measure of ignorance, and two kinds of belief: one cognitive (about what we think we

know), the other affective (about what we feel is right). It makes for an unstable mixture.

The difference between an assumption (a mixture of reasoning, ignorance and belief) and a supposition (a mixture of belief, ignorance and reasoning) is that suppositions contain a smaller proportion of reasoning. When I suppose something, I am even more convinced that I am right. It can be a dangerous game for that trio of fraudsters, ignorance, belief, and reason to play. In a speech to Parliament in 2003, Prime Minister Tony Blair insisted that:

Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.
He would not hesitate to use them offensively.
He was prepared to use them offensively without prior threat.

A former Deputy Chief of Defence Intelligence remarked at the time that Blair was piling supposition upon supposition – even if Saddam had such weapons, it did not make him the immediate threat that Blair implied and that many of us inferred. “A speaker implies,” says Bill Bryson in ‘Troublesome Words’, “a listener infers.”

Neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux emphasizes that the information we receive is processed by brain systems that give rise to *conscious and unconscious content simultaneously*.² It is a reminder not to give our assumptions and suppositions anything but temporary house room, because they cannot be taken on trust. A supposition that leads to an inference resulting in a conclusion that happens to fit the original fantasy is a delusion. Alfred Korzybski declared that suppositions like these were qualitatively no different from the delusions of the insane.³

A ‘Clean’ facilitator may have any number of fantasies about what a client has said, but will paste them into a mental drafts file until the client, and only the client, updates the information. An ‘unclean’ agent of change will have no such qualms and may give voice to whatever happens to be feeding their imagination at the time.

Implication and inference

The technique of creating and delivering ‘implication’ – verbal interventions that *imply* the outcome the therapist wants the client to *infer* – is a difficult one to unpick, because clients tend to process the inbuilt assumptions of the therapist unconsciously and imagine that they have made the inferences themselves. NLP theorist Steve Andreas quotes the example of the hypnotherapist who says to a new client, ‘Your conscious mind may be very confused about what I am about to say.’ The client cannot identify the implication unambiguously from the therapist’s statement. The *implication* is generated by the client *inferring* – from their trust in the therapist and their general world view – that whatever their conscious mind gets up to, their *unconscious* mind will not be confused, but will understand perfectly.⁴

Assumptions, suppositions, and implications may be slight in themselves, but as part of a pattern of influencing the client in the light of the facilitator’s personal values and unconscious bias, they can affect the work fundamentally. No implication exists unsupported. Systems theorist Fritjof Capra reminds us that there are no parts in this interconnected world: “Whatever we call a part is merely a pattern that has some stability and therefore captures our attention.”⁵

The larger self-justifying pattern of which dodgy suppositions and debatable implications are part-patterns is likely to be related to a therapist's presumption of entitlement.

Presumption and privilege

It is a short step from supposing something to be so without proof to behaviour we might deem to be vain or improper. Bryson declares that "to assume" means "to put forward a reasonable hypothesis" (I would qualify 'reasonable' with 'seemingly'), whereas "to presume has more an air of sticking one's neck out, of making an assertion that could be contentious."⁶ I agree, though I would put it more strongly. There is a lot of contention about. "I generalize with intrepidity from single instances," said Mark Twain. "It is the tourist's custom." The tourist makes instant judgments based on *prima facie* evidence. It is all too easy for highly educated therapists in positions of privilege to feel entitled to do the same.

An eminent psychiatrist of my acquaintance specializes in epic generalizations that sweep all before them. "All men with tattoos are psychotic," he announced having seen several psychotic men with tattoos. "The Chinese/Scots/Norwegians" (depending on who is in the news at the time) "are very obsessional." You can take exception to remarks like this as silly or racist, or even tattooist, but an assertion does not have to be so crude to be presumptuous.

The celebrated psychoanalyst Irvin Yalom admits to presumption in his interpretation of patients' dreams: "Sometimes it is useful to react spontaneously, to express some of your loose associations to the dream," he writes in 'The Gift of Therapy', and goes on to subvert his own case: "Of course, that may bias the work, since it is the patient's associations, not yours, that lead to a truer vision." Has the therapist been selling his patients short? In my dictionary, the word bias translates as 'unfair influence'.

Interpretation and insight

Yalom goes on to confess that "*Therapists place a far higher value than patients on interpretation and insight*" [the italics are his] and, further, that "*we grossly overvalue* [these are mine] the content of the intellectual treasure hunt; it has been this way from the very beginning, when Freud got us off to a bad start." The author reminisces about "the search for insight" as "the perfect therapy mating task" that keeps patient and therapist intimately connected "while the real agent of change – the therapeutic relationship – is germinating."⁷ All very well for those patients who are content to keep mating until the relationship germinates, but doesn't offer much to those who can't afford the time and money that analysis typically takes.

Therapists with access to the deepest needs and fears of others pursue insight too easily. We add one perception to another to create a third that follows from neither and from this hallucinate 'causes', imagine 'effects', come up with plausible explanations and draw questionable conclusions. I wager you are not able to name me one counsellor, coach, psychologist, lawyer, probation officer, filing clerk or long-distance lorry driver who has never made meaning on behalf of someone else in this way. Yet

meaning is a subjective, not a shared, experience. It is not *conveyed* by speaker or author, but *evoked* in the mind of listener or reader.

Power or protection

Agents of change can get carried away with the thrill of the chase. We track our clients, stay up-wind, and if a glimpse of a behavioural or an emotional pattern comes within range – bang – we’ve got ‘em. We need to remind ourselves constantly of the hidden arrogance of power. It’s not easy keeping a critical eye on oneself when the whole of one’s whole attention is meant to be on the other, but everyone I know who works cleanly with clients finds it appreciably easier. The rules of the Clean exchange are unambiguously protective of both parties. Most change modalities aim to maximize their influence and to establish a relationship with the client in which the balance of power is tipped heavily in favour of the agent of change. Clean methodologies work differently: *they protect client information from outside contamination and protect the therapist from getting it wrong.*

The therapist who presumes to express judgment on the quality of that information compromises the quality of the therapeutic relationship. No therapist or coach in the exercise of their profession is making normal conversation, after all. Every intervention has intention and effect, and deserves critical analysis. To bring the clumsy presumptions, judgments, inconsequentialities, and tautologies of everyday language into a facilitative exchange is to put the delicate balance of the client’s psyche at risk.

Therapists who are aware of the danger employ modest linguistic tricks in an attempt to temper their interventions: ‘I wonder if ...’, ‘Let me put it this way ...’, ‘You might want to consider ...’ Or they create a limited list of options, possibilities, alternatives in an attempt to give the quarry the illusion of choice: ‘You could do this ... or that ...’ Or they insert hypnotic embedded commands of the ‘I wouldn’t want you to *feel obliged* to consider’ kind that work at an unconscious level in the prey without ever ruffling its feathers. Indirect interjections soften the edge of presumption and lure the client into easy agreement. Clients will usually collaborate without question.

The little word ‘is’

A sophisticated presumption is the *equivalence* therapists often make between what the client says and what the therapist supposes them to mean. ‘Your reluctance to see your father is a denial of your anger towards him.’ ‘Your drinking is more than an unwanted habit, it’s an addiction.’

Philosopher-poet George Santayana warned us of the perils of equivalence:

The little word ‘is’ has its tragedies: it names and identifies different things with the greatest innocence; and yet no two are ever identical, and if therein lies the charm of wedding them and calling them one, therein too lies the danger.⁸

The conventional language I use in this paper is, I trust, adequate for its purpose, but if you were to dissect it for some other purpose, you would find it riddled with equivalence – generally benign, given the conventions, but occasionally, I’m sure, less so. Korzybski would not have approved. I ask you to make allowances and to read

with the appropriate scepticism. The point I want to reiterate in the context of *facilitative* language is this: every intervention has intention and effect, and deserves critical analysis. Men with tattoos, take heart. You are not to be easily categorized.

Suggestions from below

A suggestion is an attempt to impress an idea on the mind of another. The word actually means ‘brought from below’, a conflation of the Latin *sub* ‘from below’ with *gestus* ‘brought’. I wondered how this came about and was not entirely surprised to find that in the 17th century, a suggestion was nothing less than ‘*an incitement to evil, an insinuation into the mind of the false idea that ...*’

Recently I saw a television hypnotist leading suggestible subjects into believing that the virtual reality computer game they were playing was real. He impressed on the subjects the false idea that unless they shot and killed the other people who appeared in the game – supposedly avatars, but in reality actors – they would themselves be shot and killed. I am not suggesting that the average hypnotherapist gets up to equivalent tricks, but there is a fine line to tread in the hypnotic exchange between acceptable suggestion and unwarranted incitement.⁹

One of the co-developers of NLP once told me, “The notion that one should not make suggestions to a client is hoo-ha.” He maintained that suggesting was an honourable practice if the rapport was good, the suggester wise, and the intention constructive. Leaving aside the question of how one gets to be wise enough to be sure of it, let us say that the suggester’s intention is constructed from the best possible guess of the client’s requirements. The inescapable fact is that the intention of the construction of the constructive intention arises from within the unconscious (that is, unknown and generally unknowable) world of the constructor, with all its unconsciously-derived desires and distortions. To make any suggestion, a suggester first has to construct an internal model of *what the suggestee should be* rather than figuring out or accepting how distinct and original the person concerned actually is.

Of course, some clients will seem to solicit suggestions, whether they really want them or not. Suggesters need to remind themselves that the power of suggestion carries heavy responsibilities and these apply to many more people than advertising copywriters, headwaiters, and hypnotists. Suggestions are double agents who serve two masters, the conscious state and the unconscious state, neighbouring nations who may be at odds and have conflicting demands. In such circumstances, the assessment of the most experienced therapist becomes open to question. ‘Let me offer you a choice ...’ they might say (meaning ‘Here is a suggestion related to my outcome for you’). Or ‘I understand what you say, let me put it in my language...’ (‘I don’t understand you and it would be easier if you accepted my view instead’).

I shall stick my neck out here and generalize: it is *always* a bad idea for a therapeutic or personal development professional to come up with something that has the effect of making decisions for the client.

Double agents cover their tracks by making suggestions one stage removed. They compose stories that are isomorphic – alike in form – to their perception of the problem in the hope that the client on hearing the story will see the same light. ‘Once upon a time, there was a young prince ...’, ‘I know a woman of your age who ...’ The client is

faced with the chore of working out the relevance of this fictional character's experience when they have work enough of their own to do. And what if they get the analogy 'wrong'? Expert storytellers maintain that an anecdote or metaphor introduced skilfully into a narrative operates at an unconscious level in the client – thus increasing the risk of complicating or contaminating a process that only the client's unconscious truly understands. In any case, why go to the trouble of making up metaphors when clients generate their own all the time?

I feel churned up inside..

And where inside?

It's like I'm behind a glass wall and I need to break through.

And what kind of glass? And what happens next?

Suggestion-free questions reduce the contamination factor and at best eliminate it entirely. The philosopher-scientist Thales of Miletus was once asked for advice. He answered, "What is difficult? To know oneself. What is easy? To give advice."¹⁰ I'd like to think he left it at that, though he was only human.

Paraphrase and conflation

"So what you are saying is ..." declares the coach, using words of their own (paraphrase) to summarize what the hapless executive has said. "Did it upset you to have a mother who cared more for your sister?" asks the therapist, using words of their own (paraphrase plus 'affect suggestion'¹¹) to evoke an emotion that the client may or may not have felt. "Given X followed by Y, we may then surmise Z," says the philosophy teacher, creating a condition that did not exist before by combining two or more of the student's statements into one (conflation).

Para derives from the Greek meaning 'amiss, faulty, irregular, improper'; conflation from the Latin *flatus*, 'an excess of air'. The facilitator who conflates or paraphrases a client's words is generating surplus gas and introducing improper ideas into the client's process.

The language of control

The deeply held intention of all assumption, supposition, presumption, implication, interpretation, suggestion, paraphrase and conflation in any field of activity is the conscious or unconscious desire for control, a means of maintaining a precarious hold on fugitive reality. And the basic tool for the manipulation of reality is the manipulation of words. The footballer Danny Blanchflower used to tell a story of his time as captain of Barnsley. One day he asked the manager if the players could be allowed to practise with the ball during training, only to be told that denying them the ball during the week made them hungrier for it on Saturday. This is the kind of hollow logic employed by those who wield arbitrary power. Eventually a new breed of manager would come along emphasizing technical skills and psychological fitness. Players today are routinely told to go out and enjoy themselves rather than to get stuck in and wallop the opposition. Unfortunately, the instinct of many health professionals is still to get stuck in and sort 'em out ("I can sort out grief in an hour," an NLP

practitioner once told me), which can work for a while but by the end of the season is likely to have confined clients to the lower leagues of achievement.

"What would authority look like if it acknowledged itself to be driven by the unconscious?" asks Jacqueline Rose in 'Psychoanalysis and the Modern World'.¹² The judge who conducted the inquiry into the death of weapons expert David Kelly found himself unable to rule out the possibility that Prime Minister Blair's desire for a convincing dossier on Iraqi weapons had "subconsciously influenced" his Intelligence chief's wording of the dossier. This was the judge whose faith in the benign motives of government may have subconsciously influenced the writing of his own report, which exonerated the government completely. The commentator Max Hastings observed at the time that the judge, Lord Hutton, "might have done well to consider that precise legal minds such as his own have inflicted some colossal miscarriages of justice in modern times, not least because of judges' willingness to swallow official evidence"¹³ ... 'as a consequence,' one might add, 'of an unconscious desire to enhance their own official status.' Once authority acknowledges itself to be as driven by the unconscious as the rest of us, it might look and sound (indeed, it might be) a lot less presumptuous.

These undeclared assumptions concealed in the manager's baggage, the tacit presumptions that the doctor knows best, the pencilled suggestions by the therapist that leave an indelible mark on the client's psyche, all signify nothing less than an unresolved need for control. A need that produces guesswork and phoney logic on the part of the controller, who requires the respect and compliance of the controlled; that invites exaggeration and the manufacture of evidence on the part of the controlled, who wishes to live up to the controller's expectations; and that provokes the vague dissatisfaction of both, because it consistently fails to deliver the most important outcome of any client/facilitator exchange, which is genuine, self-generated, self-validated information *for the client*.

Helpers share an unspoken belief that the people they help cannot be trusted to know what is good for them. Those who come for help must be unstable, obtuse, or inadequate – an all-too-routine presumption that justifies the helper's determination to keep a tight grip on information that the helped 'will not understand' or which might 'upset' them.

The language of control is easily institutionalized. American educationalist Judy Yero writes critically of the language teachers use in the classroom and in particular of their unconscious metaphors. 'My classroom is a zoo today!' suggests that the learning space is the teacher's, not the students', and that the students' behaviour is perceived to be primitive and negative. Metaphors of authority quickly become self-fulfilling descriptions of reality.¹⁴ 'Our classroom is a beehive!' would characterize the same space as shared, argues Yero, and the same behaviour as positive and productive. The cause of education would be even better served, of course, if teachers were to elicit and facilitate students' personal metaphors for the learning experience instead of composing and imposing their own.

Another example of manipulative language was the British government's dossier on Iraq's so-called weapons of mass destruction (sorry for going on about this, but it does keep coming up). The debate that went on behind the scenes in Whitehall about the exact wording of the dossier seems to have been driven less by a desire to clarify the facts and allow Members of Parliament to make up their own minds about going to

war than by a desire to inflate the information – a tragedy of exaggeration, one commentator called it – to fit a political decision that had already been made.

One of the devices that therapists, teachers, politicians, and second-hand car salesmen rely on is the unspoken assumption that meaning is shared with the listener. In 'Painting as an Art', the critic Richard Wollheim contends that the painter's intention is to be inferred by the viewer from the painting itself and that this intention "presupposes a universal human nature in which artist and audience share." Hoo-ha, as my NLP colleague might say. It is not the responsibility of the non-artist to interpret the intention of the artist 'correctly', according to some presumed universal determinant. Nor is it a believer's duty to interpret the message of scripture 'correctly', a trainee's duty to interpret the instructions of the trainer 'correctly', or a client's duty to interpret the suggestions of the therapist 'correctly'. It is a view that devalues the citizen/believer/trainee/client's individuality and subjective perceptions.

The interpretation of client-derived information by therapist/priest/teacher in any circumstance is a wilful act, like leaping a stream in the dark without knowing the depth of the water, the distance to the opposite bank, or conditions on the other side. Yet many experts and agents of change aver that their interpretations hold if the client hears them 'correctly'. Clients who 'resist' the expert's interpretation are deemed to be 'in denial', defending themselves from admitting an unacceptable truth into consciousness.

The Clean facilitator's questioning springs from a fundamental conviction that all client-generated information – every word, metaphor, emotion, gesture – has personal meaning *only* (though that would not prevent it being *construed* by the client as 'universal' or 'shared'), and that it is neither the facilitator's role to interpret the client 'correctly' nor the client's to interpret the facilitator 'correctly'. Rather it is the midwife-facilitator's duty *to facilitate the client's perceptions, whatever they are*. Clients who find themselves unable to answer a question are not thereby 'resisting' their interlocutor, but merely – as Grove would say – teaching the facilitator to ask a better question. The concept of 'resistance' was invented by a sex-preoccupied Viennese researcher alone in his study with a lady on the sofa. Any self-respecting client might have resisted some of his more outrageous suggestions.

One of the reasons art critics, astrologers, and analysts get away with so much is because the language they use is so familiar. Its generalizations, deletions, and distortions are handy tools we all operate daily. At best, they help us adapt to the new and unknown, manage information overload, and cope with what might otherwise be bewildering difference. But they also turn the interpretation of meaning into an indolent habit. We generalize mentally about people we meet for the first time, for example. We take in their appearance, hear them speak, and immediately, unconsciously, delete everything we cannot compute, generalize the rest to what we presume to be its essentials, and distort it this way and that until it fits our individual preconceptions. Then *we add our own conditions*, things we have neither seen nor heard in respect of the subject or the situation, and convince ourselves that we do all this with complete respect for the other person's integrity: self-deception on a grand scale.

The 'unconditional positive regard' of Rogerian counsellors towards their clients is a key tenet of person-centred counselling, yet person-centred counsellors regularly

introduce alien conditions. Here is an offer that the average patient might find difficult to refuse: “If I can make observations about you that might throw light on what happens between you and others, I’d like to point them out. Is that okay?” The client who can say ‘no thanks’ to this apparently anodyne offer is likely to be tagged as ‘difficult’ or ‘resistant’, while those who answer ‘yes’ or ‘mm’ give the counsellor carte blanche to colour in the picture any way they choose. They are like the salesman who puts a foot on the step as you open the front door – he is half-way to crossing the threshold before you can say ‘not today, thank you.’

Intention and means

Every facilitator has to mind the gap between intention and means. My intention might be to expand your awareness as client, but if the means I offer is an undifferentiated diet of assumption, suggestion, paraphrase and so on, you will need a highly evolved talent for picking out the best bits. Most clients find it impossible to be so selective, particularly when they are under stress, and should not be expected to try. What they merit instead is respect – not flannel, not waffle, but honest process: a specific means of honouring their idiosyncrasies, of reflecting the way they express themselves, and of fostering their innate, if not always readily available, ability to affirm, explore, or improve whatever it is they wish to affirm, explore, or improve. Clean Language (see notes 1 and 15) does all these things and it does them transparently. It has the capacity to bridge any gap between intention and means.

§

It is the singularity of our minds that creates the world we inhabit. To encourage our unique perceptions to work for us, we have to learn about them from within and to communicate that in the best way we can. Frequently it will be in symbolic or metaphorical terms. Yet if you tell me that your heart is ‘stirred’, or you are ‘heavy with sorrow’, or at your ‘wits’ end’, you will not find it helpful, however virtuous my intention, if I use words of my own to celebrate what you have said or to refute what I believe you to mean. Your heart is not in fact ‘shaken’, you are not ‘grief-stricken’, ‘overwrought’, ‘dispirited’, or ‘out of sorts’. These are my metaphors.

For any friend or facilitator to presume that they know what is happening in the mind or metaphor of another and to intervene on that assumption, supposes a kind of innocence or arrogance. Even at its most naïve, it is egocentric and limiting. “The therapist’s role”, said the personal construct psychologist Jay Efran, and he could have been talking about any agent of change, “is not to treat people or heal them, but to encourage their curiosity about themselves.” And the simplest way of doing that – simple in principle, exacting and demanding in practice – is to listen, really listen, to what people say; to draw their attention to what they have said; and to ask non-assumptive questions about it with the intention of eliciting more information. These are the three key precepts of Clean Language.

I try so hard, but I come up against so many obstructions.

And you try so hard, but you come up against so many obstructions.

**And when you try so hard, but you come up against so many obstructions,
what kind of obstructions?**

Stone walls.

And stone walls.

And when stone walls,

how many stone walls?

Three.

And three.

And when three stone walls

is there anything else about three stone walls?

*Well I may be able to climb over the first one, and get round the second,
and the third is anyway crumbling ...*

The secrets of the precision of the Clean Language syntax are revealed elsewhere.¹⁵ Meanwhile, how much do we help and how much do we hinder our colleagues and clients by our decisions about how and when to engage in their process? Is it possible to distinguish between intervention and interference? Can we really keep it clean? We may not be able to avoid the tension of never quite knowing what is right for another person – the continuing conflict that is at the heart of being alive and in relationship – but Clean algorithms offer us the means to get very close indeed.

© 2006, 2012 Philip Harland

Philip is a psychotherapist specialising in Clean Language, Therapeutic Metaphor, and Emergent Knowledge. This paper is based on his article, *The Good Midwife*, first published in 2006 in *The Model* magazine, and on material from his book, *Trust Me, I'm The Patient* (Wayfinder 2012).

End notes

1 'Clean Language' facilitation: for more on Clean Language, see the books and articles on the Wayfinderpress.co.uk, powersofsix.com, and cleanlanguage.co.uk websites.

2 *Conscious and unconscious content simultaneously*: Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1998, p. 33.

3 *Assumptions as delusions*: Alfred Korzybski, *Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics*, International Non-Aristotelian Library 1933.

4 *The delivery of 'implication'*: Steve Andreas, *Verbal Implication*, March 2004 edition of *Suppose*, the journal of the Canadian Association for NLP.

5 *No parts, merely patterns*: Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, Shambhala 1991.

6 'Assume' and 'presume': Bill Bryson, *Dictionary of Troublesome Words*, Penguin 2001.

7 *Therapist bias and the over-valuation of 'insight'*: Irvin Yalom, *The Gift of Therapy*, Perennial 2003, pp. 176, 240.

8 "The little word is has its tragedies": George Santayana, *Skepticism and Animal Faith*, NY 1923.

9 "I am not suggesting that hypnotherapists get up to equivalent tricks": note how a denial can unfairly insinuate into the mind the item denied. The little word 'not' is almost lost in a handful of more colourful concepts. Try not to imagine an elephant.

10 *"What is easy? To give advice."* Thales of Miletus quoted by Diogenes Laertius in *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, 2nd century ACE. Thales is also quoted as saying: *"Of all things that are, the most beautiful is Cosmos, because it is God's action. The largest is Space, because it holds all things. The swiftest is Mind, because it speeds everywhere. The strongest is Necessity, because it masters all. The wisest is Time, because it brings everything to light."* Aristotle credits Thales as the first philosopher to develop the scientific method. Twenty-six centuries ago, Thales asked a question we are still seeking to answer: *'What is the basic material of the Cosmos?'* Even the Higgs boson is unlikely to be the final particle.

11 *'Affect suggestion' inserted into ostensibly reflective counselling:* thanks to David Grove's former partner Cei Davies Linn for this example.

12 *Authority driven by the unconscious:* Jacqueline Rose, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World*, Vintage 2004.

13 *Judges' willingness to swallow official evidence:* Max Hastings, *The Guardian*, 31 January 2004.

14 *Language of control in the classroom:* Judith Lloyd Yero, *Teaching in Mind: How Teacher Thinking Shapes Education*, MindFlight 2002.

15 *Secrets of the Clean Language syntax:* see Lawley and Tompkins, *Metaphors in Mind: Transformation through Symbolic Modelling*, Developing Company Press 2000, p. 58 and Philip Harland, *Trust Me, I'm The Patient*, Wayfinder Press 2012, chapters 11-15.