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A MOMENT IN METAPHOR

by Philip Harland



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Introduction

'Moment' is a metaphor for TIME ('in the moment'), SIGNIFICANCE ('moment of choice'), and MOVEMENT ('momentum'). Every moment of our lives is of infinite significance in that it has the potential for movement and change.

My purpose here is to **expand the moment** it takes for a client to process and communicate new information, and the moment it takes for a facilitator to respond. To make these fragments of time long enough to consider what happens consciously and unconsciously in the mind of both client and facilitator. And to consider how that may inform us as facilitators at the moment of our next intervention.

I shall suggest that the verbal and nonverbal information we have about the client at any given moment is **symbolic** information, and ask you to consider what happens when we respond to that using **Clean Language**, and what happens when we do not.

IN THE MOMENT

As a facilitator, what is your intention *in the moment*? Does it derive directly from your clients and patients as they are or indirectly from how you think they should be? More and more we are coming to recognize the importance of the present moment as the only time in which information is available and *in which change can happen*. Whether the client is remembering the past or imagining the future, their perception of it is always here and now. How does what we do reflect and honor our client's present perceptions?

Actually, none of us is living precisely in the present. We are all living half a second or so in the past. And what happens in that fraction of time has enormous implications for working with others.

At the start of each day, we wake and become conscious. We hear the birds or the traffic, see the clock, feel the pillow, have memories of yesterday and hopes and fears

of today. There is nothing mystical about any of this. All these awarenesses are created by a complexity of electro-chemical firings in the physical network of 100 billion or so neurons that we know as the brain. Yet everything in the brain – every sound and sight and thought and feeling – originated in the unconscious. It took the brain half a second or less to make a selective representation of our sensory experience available to consciousness. What happens in the time it takes unconscious computations to manifest as conscious information?

The process can be broken down into three stages: near infinite input; selective representation; and symbolic output.

Infinite input. Every half-second of our lives many millions of light waves, pressure ripples and chemo-sensory signals are crossing our physical thresholds via many millions of sensory receptors to trigger electrical impulses that travel to the sensory cortex of the brain for sorting ... an astonishing assault of sight, sound, and sensation-related items ... so many that for our minds to make sense, a kind of parallel neural processing has to take place involving billions of simultaneous computations. Sensory processors, time-space processors, and language processors all working away at the same time.

And our conscious minds tell us next to nothing of this remarkable activity, just as the audience for a film has little idea of the behind-the-scenes drama and technical complexity that went into producing what appears on the screen. If we attempted to hold every contributory factor in our heads as we sat there watching and listening, we would never be able to enjoy our popcorn or follow the story.

Imagine this nigh-on infinite number of **information inputs** entering the brain at any one moment. Bits that will combine or connect to become the pictures, sounds, and smells of everyday experience. Think of those billions of cells in the sensory cortex processing this uncountable input. How do they cope? “Not very well,” you might say, depending on your mood, or “Incredibly well, considering”. For what happens given the configuration of the brain is a physical interaction between the new information and historical information – a ready-made store of neural circuits predisposed for activation across an enormously large number of different levels of organization ... thus the present prompts the past ... and the brain (not always reliably) ‘makes sense’.

Selective representation. Every mental perception has to be *constructed* in our heads – we create a highly personal inner world, using our knowledge of everything we have ever seen in the past to imagine what is out there.

It is not really the past that is evoked by the present. The past is a reconstruction. Memory is a present experience. I notice a tree. I see its particular patterns of light and shade, shape and color, and almost simultaneously I am *re-minded* of other light, other leaves, thoughts of childhood, dreams of tomorrow, feelings of pleasure, nostalgia and pain ... conscious content arising at several levels. And that conscious content, whether it be a sensory representation of



external reality or a sensory representation of internal imagining, is a result of a process of ‘serial selection’ in the brain. Some neuroscientists call it the left hemisphere at work – a cognitive-linguistic, problem-solving machine that has evolved to make sense of sensory processing.

This stage of cerebral activity takes the complex coded output of parallel processing and generates a simpler, coded, selective output ... which allows me to see the tree, hear a voice, reconstruct or imagine other times and other places. I can only do this because my brain is forming **representations**. Correspondences. Billions of computations are being translated into explicitly symbolic form that *betoken* (signify/stand for/denote) the elaborate organization of the relationships between their component parts ... and as a result I can form and express complex feelings and concepts with relative ease. This serial selector acts rather like a committee that examines resolutions from around the country and cobbles them into a composite motion to put before annual conference. It is the coded information output of enormously complex input.

Symbolic output. What it means in essence is that *I am only conscious of information that has been constructed and represented symbolically*. This explains how I can be aware of the outcome of mental computations, but not of the computations themselves. The operations of unconscious processing are not accessible in consciousness because they work sub-symbolically; whereas the processor for consciousness works – *and can only work* – at a symbolic level. There is no actual picture of a leaf in my brain. The ‘leaf’ I perceive is a **metaphor** that helps me make cognitive-linguistic sense of that which it is a metaphor for. Similarly, every word I utter or gesture I make is a metaphor: it stands for what I am feeling and thinking; for what is really been going on in there.

The brain does not differentiate between ‘real’ and ‘imaginary’ metaphors, by the way. The mental image – what neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux calls “that most ghostly of cognitions” – is the product of an unconscious process indistinguishable from the process that results in our perception of an external object. Researchers have shown that if you look at a scan of someone’s brain while they create an internal picture of a room they know well, you will see activity in the same vision and recognition areas that would be activated if they were actually looking at the room. There is a small difference, in that more sensory neurons tend to be activated in response to external stimuli than in response to self-generated sensory experience, which would account for the fact that the internally-generated symbols we see in our imagination – tree, clock, pillow, say – are often fuzzier and less well defined than the externally-generated symbols we see in reality – tree, clock, pillow, etc.

Often, but not always. Every kind of sensory experience can be generated internally and seem vivid and real. On numerous occasions, I have heard clients in therapeutic metaphor process describe one of their self-generated symbols in such evocative detail – the consistency of moss, the fragrance of a rose, the sound of a fountain – as if these imaginings were present. Which, indeed, they are. Medical writer Rita Carter quotes research with hallucinatory patients, which demonstrates that the voices they hear are in fact their own – they generate speech in one part of the brain and experience it as auditory input in another part. It is a facility exercised to some degree and in every sense by all of us.

How metaphor works. To summarize what happens in these three stages of information processing:

1. *Infinite input.* The **unconscious** mind works like a series of primary parallel processors, constantly computing a limitless number of information inputs sub-symbolically, in codes neither accessible to, nor decipherable in, consciousness. And since not all sub-symbolic coding feeds into the consciousness processor, some – even most – sub-symbolic processing will remain inaccessible to direct experience.
2. *Selective representation.* Next in the **unconscious** is a secondary selection process which manipulates (or generalizes, in NLP terms) the coded output of parallel processing to create **symbols** – representations of our experience – in a way that is neither *directly* accessible to, nor *directly* decipherable in, consciousness. As the threshold to the **conscious** mind is crossed, we become introspectively aware of these symbolic representations – a stage that *is* accessible to, and *may* be decipherable in, consciousness.
3. *Symbolic output.* Thereafter we give nonverbal indication of, and verbal utterance to, our symbols. We gesture, articulate, express ourselves, and in so doing **give form in the here and now to who we are.** A stage that is clearly accessible and decipherable (though not necessarily readily) in consciousness. We do not know *what* has happened in the unconscious, because our awareness comes deeply coded, but we do know what it is *like*. These likenesses cannot be modelled directly. They *can* be modelled via their symbols or the aggregation of those symbols in metaphor.

There is a moment at the end of stage 3 that has particular significance for facilitators.

MOMENT OF CHOICE

Immediately after the client has spoken and just before we respond, we have the opportunity as facilitators to remind ourselves that *the same mental activity* that is going on for the client as they process and express information is going on for us as we listen. Exactly the same. Nothing can prevent a multiplicity of meaning-making processes being activated in us as we absorb information. And this making-of-meaning is happening so quickly and is so out of our control that we can have no sense of what is happening until we have already made symbolic sense of what we have heard. The nonverbal and verbal language of the client is entering our brains as physical input, and over the next half-second as it is processed, many millions of electro-chemical neural firings are making physical connections to existing neural circuits in our brains. Connections that are evoking internal representations which are uniquely our own.

Only a small part of these activities will be in our consciousness, yet the *whole* of our reaction – not just the conscious part – is shaping our response. And here is our moment of truth. A moment in which we can further our co-dependency with the client or advance the cause of their autonomy.

A seductive time. We know that the language of the client is a symbolic notation of a hugely complex sub-symbolic reckoning. And we know that many clients are confused by their internal processing.

There's so much going on, I don't know if I'm coming or going.

As counsellor, coach or therapist, what do you say? It may be tempting to nod and murmur, "I know what you mean", and feel virtuous, or to hallucinate what is happening for the client before coming up with any number of sophisticated suggestions.

This moment of pre-intervention is a seductive time in a significant relationship – an inviting, precarious moment when a facilitator may allow their symbolic expressions and the client's – their language – to become hopelessly entangled. Feeling wanted or wise can be a pretty good fix for a facilitator and feeling rescued or reassured can be an equally good fix for a client. Is it any wonder that one may become addicted to helping and the other to needing help? Much depends on intention. As facilitators, do we want to change the client, or to be thought of as nice guys, or to support our clients in modelling themselves?

And there's so much going on, you don't know if you're coming or going.
And when you don't know if you're coming or going, **that's like what?**

Like a shuttle bus with the driver asleep.

And when like a shuttle bus with the driver asleep, **what happens next?**
I go over a bump and wake up and take the wheel.

A political decision. How we perceive language as facilitators largely determines the way we work. I would like to suggest that our choice of language is first and foremost a political decision. A decision based on a judgment about where power properly lies.

The 16th century reformist priest William Tyndale challenged the orthodoxy of the day by translating the Bible into English for the first time. His motivation was political: to take this key instrument of ecclesiastical authority out of the hands of monks and scholars and make it available to all. Tyndale became known as "the man who taught England to read." The 20th century psychotherapist David Grove could be said to have taught the world to listen. Grove developed a language – or more accurately a philosophy and methodology of communication – that obliges the learned facilitator to listen very carefully indeed to the lay client and in so doing to cede authority back where it rightly belongs.

Clean Language has been rightly identified as a revolutionary technology, both for turning traditional therapy on its head, and for its accessibility and efficacy across a wide range of other applications. Anyone can learn the basics in a day or two. There is no need for years of certified training to start using them right away. Yet the disciplines of Clean Language are not temperamentally suited to everyone. In every moment before we intervene as facilitators, we are required to consider two questions: does power properly lie with the expert facilitator or with the inexperienced client? Will the choices we make further the cause of the client's self-determination?

MOMENTUM

Over the last twenty years or so, the work of the creator of Clean Language, David Grove, has become one of the determining factors for the future of client facilitation. The immeasurable importance of his contribution to the politics and science of

psychotherapy, counselling, and the rest is that for the first time we have a language that equalizes the balance of power between client and therapist; eliminates the possibility of abuse-by-suggestion; removes the confusion of having to negotiate between two sets of metaphorical perceptions; and ensures that the client's attention is wholly, appropriately, and purposefully on themself.

Clean Language does not seek information for the facilitator; it prompts the client to locate the information in themselves. The responses to Clean questions do not require an 'understanding' of content by the client, but rather invite their discernment and decoding of pattern and process. And the special syntax of Clean Language concentrates the client's attention on the higher organization and deeper meaning of their symbolic perceptions. A set of determinants that optimize the conditions for self-generated change.

And it all happens in a moment. After all, it is not the past that keeps us from having what we want, but the way our perceptions are organized and facilitated *here and now*.

Conclusion



During the split second it takes our brains to process new information, we make a multiplicity of unconscious connections. The simplified output of this highly complex processing is represented in consciousness in symbolic form. Thus all information output, whether sensory, emotional, or conceptual, is metaphorical. It tells us not *what* is happening in the unconscious (there's too much, it's too complex), but what it is *like*. As client output becomes input into the facilitator's system, every inference the facilitator makes about the client's perceptions arises from the facilitator's own unconscious processing. The facilitator's conventional (unclean) language will therefore be no less metaphorical than the client's, so that the facilitative relationship becomes hostage to a negotiation between two distinct sets of metaphorical perceptions, with all the potential for misunderstanding, distortion, and contamination that entails.

Use of Clean Language by the facilitator disentangles client and facilitator perceptions, focuses attention on client pattern and process, and honours the client's in-the-moment experience – the only time-space in which information can appear and change can happen. And as the client's perceptions become clearer, every moment in metaphor is of infinite worth.

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