

Philip Harland

KEEPING IT CLEAN



How do we all differ and what has Clean Language to say about that?

Master Lieh Tzu asked gatekeeper Yin, *“How can I walk underwater and not drown, move through fire without burning, and pass amongst the multitude of forms of life without fear?”*

Gatekeeper Yin replied, *“You must move within limits which have no limit; be secluded within boundaries which have no beginning; and journey to where both the start and the end of all life is.”*

“How can I do this?” asked Lieh Tzu.

Gatekeeper Yin replied, *“You must nourish your original breath.”*

**A Personal Mind – The Influence of Others – Linguistic Revision –
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A Personal Mind

My thesis is simple: we each have a mind of our own. Any process aimed at changing our minds for therapeutic or developmental reasons must respect that fact absolutely or it fails. And if ever this unique, extraordinary labyrinth of neural networks we call the mind feels like what Virginia Woolf described as “the most unaccountable of machinery – always buzzing, humming, soaring roaring diving, and then buried in mud,” you may want to ask yourself, as she did, “Why? What is this passion for?”

Mind is for what the brain does. It is the word we give to our experience of the brain’s activity.¹ I shall use the terms ‘mind’, ‘brain’, ‘mindbody’ and ‘bodybrain’ more or less interchangeably in this article, and ask forgiveness of those who still believe that the mind is somehow independent of the brain. I think of myself, as I think of you, as one complete system, even if I notice bits missing occasionally. And I have no difficulty in believing that the inconceivably complex workings of the brain-in-the-body are perfectly capable of producing my experience of mind, consciousness, and self, although I am happy to define these as emergent properties of bodybrain processes until the day when nanotechnology allows us to upload our minds onto computers and survive without biology, as some scientists predict – at which time we might all have to reconsider our definitions of, and beliefs about, existence.

Meanwhile, how might my mind speak to your mind? Do we have enough in common? My brain contains about 100 billion neurons, or brain cells, which give me an enormous capacity for difference from the 100 billion or so in your brain. Every one of those 100 billion neurons has an average of 2,000 synaptic connections to other neurons. I don’t advise you to try this, but if you were to calculate the number of connections possible between 100 billion neurons with 2,000 synapses (100 billion times 100 billion times 100 billion and so on and so on), you would end up with a phenomenal sum greater than the number of fundamental particles in the known universe.² This might give you a hint of your capacity for difference. You live in an enchanted forest, a measureless web of brilliant threads both purposeful and capricious – at times dazzling, luminous, astute; at other times matted, knotted, pained, and perplexed.

The logic of natural selection would say that your mind evolved to replicate as many as possible of the genes that created it: to grow itself. It began life as an information processor that learnt to evaluate – to utilize, reject, or hold in reserve – a multiplicity of sensory inputs. And the natural outcome of this was your capacity to have preferences, to imagine, and plan. As a psychotherapist, a species that evolved long after natural selection had produced animals smart enough to be capable of self-reflection, I believe that the primary purpose of the mind now must be *to know itself*.

Our brains make a million new connections every second. As the activation of this multitude of intimate couplings varies enormously in any one person from one second to the next, it is clear that every manifestation of any particular combination in any one mind, especially when ninety-nine per cent of the activity takes place in the unconscious, conspire to make that mind wholly and unknowingly different to any other. You are, no doubt about it, exquisitely and exceptionally yourself. And one of the great challenges of life in the 21st century, perhaps its greatest, is to know more about who you are – and, knowing more, to make more of it. The Enlightenment

philosopher Voltaire declared that individuality mattered more than conformity. His was a voice of passion and reason challenging the mindless compliance and religious intolerance of pre-revolutionary France. The battle for minds is still being fought across the globe, but the *cri de coeur* of a civilized society is the same now as it always has been: let people be different!

I grew up in a part of the North of England that enjoyed a strong community feeling at the expense of an overwhelming compulsion to conform. Difficulties and differences were gently but effectively suppressed, resulting in a certain amount of what we might now call ‘deceit and denial’. My paternal grandparents lived just around the corner, but I never knew them. They had cut off my father when he married my mother, by all accounts because she was the daughter of a two-time divorcee and music-hall singer. I guess they couldn’t decide which was worse. In the meantime, my maternal great-grandmother would go to great lengths to ignore the existence of this sociable, extrovert woman, her own daughter, even though they lived on opposite sides of the street. I accepted the whole situation without question, as kids do. Then I began to wonder a bit. I read that the six billion of us who inhabit the planet are closely related genetically and that we only need twenty-four acquaintances to connect with every other person on earth. We should all be one big happy family. I was puzzled. We obviously weren’t. Only now, many years later, can I say that I find our individuality, our singularity, our multiple peculiarities, unquestionably real and endlessly fascinating.

Where do our differences come from? Charles Darwin declared that divergence of character derived from the process of natural selection, and with good reason: “During the incessant struggle of all species to increase in numbers, the more diversified these descendants become, the better will be their chances of succeeding in the battle of life,” he wrote.³ Evolutionary psychologist Steven Pinker notes the way that sexual reproduction results in a unique scrambling of the genes of unrelated people; how random variations in our neurology produce brains that differ structurally; how our inimitable biographical histories and unreplicable collections of memories and desires make each of us qualitatively unlike. Natural selection, says Pinker, is “the homogenizing force within a species that eliminates the vast majority of obvious design variants that are not improvements, while at the same time producing a proliferation of tiny differences between us that result in endless and enduring variety.”⁴

Identical twins are a case in point. They share the same DNA, but can have quite different personalities. The Iranian twins Ladan and Laleh Bijani spent twenty-nine years conjoined at the head. Their brains actually fused together, yet the twins felt like two completely separate individuals. “We have different world views,” said Ladan, “we have different lifestyles, we think very differently about issues.” They even managed to pursue different careers. Ladan was studying law and Laleh journalism when they died in a Singapore hospital in an attempt to separate them. They were buried in separate graves. In Lexington, South Carolina, identical quadruplets Grace, Emily, Mary, Claire, and Anna Mathias were born only thirty seconds apart, yet all developed unique characters. When they were four years old, their mother Allison said of them, “I have a leader, a – I hate to say – a whiner, and then somebody who thinks she’s the boss, and I have a teaser.” According to their father Steve, “They get along wonderfully, but fight famously.”

“Internal difference is where the meanings are,” wrote Emily Dickinson. The taste of wild blueberries, the smell of roasting coffee, my sensations of pain and joy, have a meaning for me that is mine alone.

Scientists are only now beginning to acknowledge the subjectivity of data gathered for scientific research, accepting that nothing can be known unless someone has observed it and that the fact of observation – this would seem obvious to anyone but a certain kind of scientist, perhaps – produces subjective rather than disinterested information. The biologist Francisco Varela made a plea for the validity of subjectively sourced science in a 1996 paper, ‘Neurophenomenology’. He called it “first-person reporting”, and suggested that the detailed phenomenological examination of human experience (that is, via the senses rather than by intuition or reasoning) required a revolution in scientific thinking and a complete change in the way that science was taught. “We need to introduce new first person methodologies way beyond those we have at the moment,” Varela observed in 1996. “We are extremely naïve. It’s like people before Galileo looking at the sky and thinking that they were doing astronomy.”⁵

The Clean Language facilitation of clients for therapy, healing, or self-development is directly related to first-person reporting. Personal information is elicited by the facilitator via the shortest possible route, without diversions, paraphrasing, or re-interpretation.

And then what happens?
I feel a little better.
 And for you that is like what?’

Non-assumptive questioning brings abstract or metaphorical concepts to phenomenological life by supporting the subject to access an inner dimension to their experience in a way they may not have done before.

It’s like riding a beam of light.

And what appears is ‘objectively subjective’ client information, different in kind to any other.

The Influence of Others

Acknowledging difference does not mean we are not open to influence. Quite the contrary. Being human puts our minds in relationship. And being in relationship – one person as the cause of an effect on another, especially in indirect or intangible ways – is entirely responsible for my becoming a psychotherapist and for my commitment to working in Clean Language.

What qualifies me to write about this radical new psychology of change? I could say that it is having witnessed its evolution over many years and thousands of hours of research, personal work, client facilitation, and practitioner training with a wide range of participants of many persuasions. I might also say that it is having witnessed its efficacy countless times in helping people resolve their problems and transform their lives in ways that traditional counselling would never have thought possible. And with all that, it might be nearer the truth to acknowledge that it is because – like so many others – I am the product of generations of equivocators who were taught to respect those above them, to accept their lot, and in effect deny the reality of their

own lives. To be anything other than content and compliant was to risk bringing shame on oneself, the family, and the community.

Denial derived from shame in turn begets shame and in the process reinforces itself:

shame → denial → shame about the denial → more denial →

A familiar example of a neat and pernicious self-reinforcing ‘loop’. Circularity of this sort causes huge and hidden bewilderment in families. Children face exceptional difficulty in breaking out of it. You will know for yourselves the monosyllabic menfolk of the family who could fudge any issue, the self-righteous women who would say one thing and mean another, and the prolonged domestic arguments – uncivil wars – that raged between them around who was right and who was wrong, and who said what to whom, and why. When I was young, the communications of those around me contained a code I never quite managed to crack.

Clean Language does an excellent job of unravelling the knots and binds of shame, fear, deceit and denial, but is more about veracity than honesty. It elicits and facilitates the subjective truth, an internal reality uncontaminated by the assumptions, presumptions, and manipulations of others. This is not the absolute truth that Plato tried (and failed) to define and nor is it the empirical truth about patients to which Freud and his followers aspired. It is personal intelligence that no-one but the person concerned may retrieve. Only when I trained as a therapist did I begin to appreciate the depth, richness, value and exceptionality of this information that we hold behind the closed doors of the unconscious. And then was frustrated to find that the analytic, cognitive, and humanistic models of therapy I was studying were intent on interpreting people in ways not dissimilar from the ways I had always interpreted them: ways that stemmed more from the limited perceptions of my own world view than from the limitless possibilities of theirs.

In 1995 when I came across David Grove and Clean Language, all my familiar escape routes from the difference of others were cut off. There was no going back. I could no longer be satisfied with guiding clients by my own lights when honouring and facilitating theirs turned out to be so much more demanding and fulfilling. The principles of Clean Language gave me a framework for facilitation and change that was simple, chivalrous, and subversive. Simple in that anyone can engage in it at a basic level after no more than a day or two’s training.⁶ Chivalrous in that it is, I suggest, one of the most respectful and companionable of all language-based methodologies. And subversive in that it constitutes a radical challenge to our traditional, directive, manipulative, habit-of-mind methods.

Linguistic Revision

As long ago as the fifth century BCE, the moral philosopher K’ung Fu Tzu (Confucius) was reminding the rulers of the Chou Dynasty that the harmony of the state depended on the value it placed on the individual: “From the emperor down to the mass of the people, all must consider the cultivation of the person the root of everything besides,” he declared. But how might this be achieved? A century later, the Seven Sages of ancient Greece attempted an answer when they gathered, it is said, in the temple of Apollo at Delphi to agree on a number of maxims for inscribing there. The first and what was to become the most enduring of these was *‘Know thyself’*.⁷

Foremost among the seven was the philosopher-scientist Thales of Miletus, the first to propose natural rather than theological or mythological explanations for the phenomenon of the cosmos and the accommodations we are obliged to make to it. It has taken us another twenty-six centuries to develop a scientific and pragmatic means of fulfilling Thales' first maxim that does not depend on the gnomic utterances of an Oracle or its contemporary equivalent the suggestions of a therapist. Clean Language is about eliciting and facilitating self-knowledge in a way that works more consistently and ecologically than either of these hit-and-miss and frequently contaminated methods.

Fifty years before Grove, the language theorist Alfred Korzybski was declaring that almost all progress in human affairs depended on radical linguistic revision. It was obvious to Korzybski that Planck's formulation of quantum theory (1900) and Einstein's theory of relativity (1905) could not have emerged without revolutionary departures from the structural and semantic conventions of the day. New languages had to be created, and this meant rejecting old attitudes and practices. For language and mind-set to transform together there had to be a fundamental paradigm shift. This happened, and every line, letter, dot, and molecule of what we know about the world was transformed.

A paradigm is a set of metaphors that suggest a certain world view. Freudian psychoanalysis was based on a world view that became so deeply embedded in the cultural unconscious that its figurative basis – those metaphors of 'defence mechanism', 'Oedipal complex', 'repression', 'transference', and so on – went unchallenged for over seventy years. In fact, Freud's heart was not in treating individuals, as psychologist Steve Ayan points out in 'Psychotherapy on Trial' (2006),⁸ but in refining his theories. He took the knowledge he had gleaned from certain (atypical) patients and applied it to humanity in general. The ideas in 'The Interpretation of Dreams' (1899) were as influential and became as familiar as Darwin's and Einstein's, but Freud would later come to revise and discard many of them. He recognized that the new sciences of biology and neurology would one day blow away his earlier work.

Korzybski's theory of 'General Semantics' (1933) called for a new world order in which everyone would be taught to question the familiar and to re-evaluate the limits of their language for themselves. General Semantics is more than a scientific treatise, it is an impassioned plea for the transformation of society. In quantum theory in particular, Korzybski found a parallel to his notion of psychological individuation. I interpret his reasoning this way: if the particles of which we are made have no fixed form or position, if they are able to spin clockwise and anticlockwise at the same time, if they can exist simultaneously in two places at once, then every component of the cosmos, and particularly we human beings, have immensely – immensely – more potential than we know.⁹ Not so long ago, the laws of physics were thought to be fixed and immutable. Today we are learning new narratives of fluidity, ambiguity, and possibility. The assembly of conflicting factions of which our bodybrains are composed is capable, we can see now, of subtle and flexible internal negotiations. We have more capacity and possibility for change than ever we realized.

I believe Korzybski would have embraced the propositions and practice of Clean Language without reservation. Clean Language calls for a leap in imagination from the old psychology (re-interpreting others in the light of our own 'wisdom') *at the*

same time as a procedural leap from the old language (making endless assumptions and generalizations of the sort that encourage our so-called wisdom to intrude). The old language is a severely limited system. We can never quite say what we mean, or mean what we say, so we circle endlessly, like flies around a shuttered room. The old psychology had a strongly supportive role in this scenario. In his pioneering book ‘Against Therapy’ (1988), former psychotherapist Jeffrey Masson advocated the abolition of the authority-driven psychotherapies of the day. “No matter how kindly a person is,” he wrote, “when that person becomes a therapist, he or she is engaged in acts that are bound to diminish the dignity, autonomy, and freedom of the person who comes for help.”¹⁰ I have to agree. Yet many health professionals will argue that their training equips them to ‘know better’ than their clients, that confronting a client’s ‘erroneous’ belief system is the best way to change it, and that the loss of a little client dignity and autonomy on the way is a small price to pay. To this end, a therapist’s language patterns are designed to interfere fundamentally with the client’s experience. There is little understanding of the delicate effects of difference and pluralism.

Freud’s one-time collaborator Carl Gustav Jung readily appreciated the uniqueness of his patients’ inner worlds, however. He used to say that it required him to invent a new language for each patient. What he meant was a language of his own. It did not occur to Jung that the new language he might listen out for, and listen *to*, existed already. It was the patient’s own.

The Search for Information

Most people who seek help with healing believe they have to choose between interpretative methodologies, which are at odds with their inclination to self-help, and prescriptive drug treatments, with their crude impact on the delicate balance between brain chemistry and psychology. Before David Grove, no school of psychology other than Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) had approached information gathering and change from an integrated structural and semantic standpoint. NLP cut through a lot of the waffle of 1970s humanistic psychology, and it did so by *systematizing our mental representations* – the symbols we employ to capture and communicate what is really going on in the unconscious. But the techniques of NLP are not in themselves a complete therapy. They might reach many of the underlying constructs that hold a client’s unwanted behaviours, beliefs, and feelings in place, but at the critical point of contiguity, the boundary between cause and effect, stimulus and response, input and output, they oblige the NLP practitioner to hallucinate what the best interests of the client require. In this important respect they do not deliver ‘cleanly’.

The first principle of Clean Language is to ease the client’s entry into the organization of their subjective experience untainted by outside influence or interference and into an altered state of their own creation. That is, *to know themselves in their own way*. When Grove was refining his process in the late 1980s, this was a revisionist concept, and his means of achieving it were novel and original, even, some thought, bizarre. ‘Clean’ interventions follow the empirical structure of the client’s own language, exactly as expressed. What the client says is repeated back to them without re-interpretation, without challenge, without comment, suggestion, paraphrase or subtle re-wording. Attention is drawn to the whole or a part of what the client has said. Then a Clean question is asked of it. To put things as simply as they deserve: the client hears themself back to themself and is invited to embark on the search for more

information. The less attempt there is by the facilitator to change the client's model of the world, the more the client will get to know it for themselves. And what happens next is inevitable and not complicated: *the self-system learns from itself*. Change emerges organically. And power returns where it rightly belongs.

Even as Clean algorithms enter the psychological mainstream, they are still resisted by some professionals. How can over-anxious or mentally unbalanced patients be trusted to know what is best for them? How can trained professionals admit to ignorance of what is best for their clients? In fact, Clean questions are asked, as David Grove has said, "so that the client can understand their perspective internally, in their own matrix. Our questions will have given a form, made manifest, a particular aspect of the client's internal experience, in a way that they have not experienced before."¹¹ Information is gathered *for* rather than *from* the other person.

When we explore the inherent logic of our models of the world without re-interpretation, the metaphors that represent our internal experience are honoured. We hear ourselves back to ourselves, we re-create ourselves, and somehow, sooner or later, there comes a moment when something unexpected, even magical, happens.

Light beyond Angela's cloud

A middle-aged woman is weeping as she describes the "black cloud of despair" that has enveloped her for months. Angela has a sense that there is "light beyond the cloud", but it is "too bright, too harsh" to venture into. It is a moment when the conscientious counsellor, doctor, coach, colleague or friend might come up with any number of ideas aimed at moving Angela out of her despair and making things happen. Instead, we ask a question that suggests nothing:

And when black cloud of despair, and light beyond that is too bright, too harsh, **what happens next?**

There is a long pause. Again, we might be tempted to intervene, to move things on, to do or say something to 'help'. After all, Angela has been in this situation before, stuck in a cloud, aware of nothing but darkness and despair. This time something new happens. Her tears stop and when she speaks her voice has a quality of curiosity:

I make a little hole in the cloud. It lets diffused light through and I see a little blue sky.

It is at this moment that the client brings metaphor and reality together, and discovers a new way of perceiving herself and the world. And she does so in a way that only she knows how. Without revisiting trauma, without years of analysis, without a single suggestion from the therapist, she has learnt to trust her own unconscious.

The 17th century writer Cervantes made his protagonist Don Quixote a new kind of hero, one who was neither over-introspective nor at the mercy of others. He was "one who wills to be himself." As 21st century heroes, neither self-consumed nor subordinate, we almost certainly have more will to be ourselves than any generation before us. All we have to do is keep it Clean.

Philip Harland is a Clean Language psychotherapist and the author of 'Trust Me, I'm The Patient: Clean Language, Metaphor, and the New Psychology of Change', www.wayfinderpress.co.uk 2012. An earlier version of this article appeared in 'The Model' magazine in 2006.

Notes

1 *Mind is what the brain does*, etc.: Steven Pinker, 'How The Mind Works', Penguin 1999. Neuroscientist Susan Greenfield ('Sensational Minds', New Scientist 2 February 2002) characterizes the mind as "your personalised brain" that requires you to see the world in terms of things that have happened to you already and to you alone.

2 *Brain capacity*: Edelman (1992), Greenfield (1996, 2000), Pinker (1997), Carter (1998). Those who like numbers have calculated that there are about 10^{70} particles in the visible universe, a modest sum compared to the 10^{100s} (googols) of different words, sentences, meanings, feelings, melodies, objects, ideas, places, chess games etc. etc. that the brain is capable of processing and distinguishing between. Pinker calculates that in addition to whatever incalculable *inexpressible* thoughts we might have each of us can entertain something like a hundred million trillion different *expressible* thoughts, or about a hundred times the number of seconds since the birth of the universe!

3 *Divergence of character*: Charles Darwin, 'The Origin of Species' 1859.

4 *Endless and enduring variety*: Steven Pinker, as before.

5 *First-person reporting*: Francisco Varela in an interview with Susan Blackmore, 'Conversations On Consciousness', Oxford 2005. Varela's paper 'Neurophenomenology: a methodological remedy for the hard problem', was published in the Journal of Consciousness Studies in June 1996.

6 *Clean Language training*: the basics can be taught in a day or two; more advanced training takes several weeks; the experience to practise intuitively takes as long as it takes.

7 *Maxims of the Seven Sages*: 'Know thyself', 'Nothing to excess', 'Seek one sole wisdom', 'Choose one sole good'. 2,600 years ago, Thales of Miletus was asking 'What is the source of all things?' a question we are still trying to answer.

8 *Freud's heart not in treating patients*: Steve Ayan, 'Psychotherapy on Trial', Scientific American Mind April/May 2006.

9 *Progress via linguistic revision*: Alfred Korzybski, 'Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics', International Non-Aristotelian Library 1933.

10 *Client dignity and autonomy*: Jeffrey Masson, 'Against Therapy', HarperCollins 1989.

11 "*Clean questions are asked to...*": David Grove & Basil Panzer, 'Resolving Traumatic Memories', Irvington 1989.

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