

Speak For Your Self

A Path To Better Relationships Through Clear Communication

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Chapter One: Transforming The Cover-Up: An Owner's Manual

Michael grew up with an alcoholic father who would rage when he was drunk. Michael learned to protect himself by not being vulnerable; instead of feeling anything that might cause him to be hurt by his father's rage, he shut down that part of himself. In order to regain control, whenever Michael would experience vulnerable feelings--such as fear, anxiety, hurt, sadness, or being personally threatened-- in any way, he would get angry. After all, he learned to rage in order to protect himself from a master teacher, his father. This defense mechanism, which may have protected him growing up, became destructive to Michael's relationships as an adult. His anger and need for control would intensify whenever he felt vulnerable. Because of his raging, his three marriages failed. Ironically, the defense mechanism that Michael had set up to protect himself was itself the cause of his not being able to have the kind of love that he yearned for in his life.

We spend so much of our lives communicating, you'd think we would have gotten an owner's manual on how to do it right! When we communicate clearly and honestly, saying what is true for us while honoring another's experience, we are communicating effectively. This is a great art, and essential for making life workable and enjoyable. We need

to express what is in our hearts and on our minds in ways that others can hear. Communicating clearly enhances one's self-esteem and cultivates healthy, meaningful relationships and a sense of empowerment in one's life.

Being conscious is mindful awareness. Being mindful means being aware and awake to the range of outer and inner experiences in the different levels of existence - the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual realms. Mindful awareness is a process of getting to know ourselves, and of expanding our consciousness to become aware of what we are experiencing on the inside--our physical sensations, our feelings, our thoughts, our intuitions and needs. Our inner experience is a very powerful force in our lives. Whether we are conscious of it or not determines whether this force is a friend or foe. It can move us in positive, satisfying, healthy directions and become our wisest and most trusted guide on the journey of life. Or, if we are not aware of it, our inner experience can create physical problems, psychological blocks, and emotional lows like depression, anxiety, irritability and rage. I've experienced the difference between being bothered by a seemingly inexpressible emotion, and learning to express that emotion effectively. In order to live consciously we need to get to know ourselves and communicate this awareness in clear, reverent, and successful ways.

I didn't always communicate well. Growing up in a family where I rarely saw anger or needs expressed, it was difficult for me to deal with people when they were angry. I also felt uncomfortable expressing my own anger and needs. As an adult, I found myself in a relationship with a man who expressed anger whenever he felt anxious or vulnerable. I had to learn to deal with his anger and find ways of communicating my own anger in healthy ways. Life is our best teacher. This relationship made me find my voice; it taught me how to speak for myself. I had to discover ways to express feelings, thoughts and needs that would allow me to strengthen my sense of self and feel empowered. I eventually ended the relationship, but it was one of my best teachers for communicating clearly. This new model of how to *Speak for Your Self* comes from this experience and from work as a psychologist facilitating healthy relationships.

"THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED"

To really know ourselves we need to have a healthy relationship with our core sensitivity. It is this sensitivity that makes us human. It is a wonderful, precious, source of

truth, wisdom, awareness, strength and guidance whose home is in our hearts. It is our natural birthright. When we recognize and honor the experience of our hearts and learn to listen and feel safe enough to speak from there, our lives are filled with a sense of grace, a guidance from a deeper and higher perspective that brings light into our experience of living. This light guides us to make better choices and to feel in control, while loving and being loved. Listening to our hearts tunes us into a clearer awareness of our deeper needs. This awareness facilitates an expression of these needs so that they may be fulfilled, increasing our sense of empowerment, self-awareness, and self-esteem exponentially. So, if recognizing, honoring and allowing the experience of our hearts reaps such amazing rewards, why don't more people choose this path?

In our society, the consciousness that dominates the twenty-first century is outer-directed. The mottos by which we live our lives tend to be such things as "Keeping up with the Jones'," "Whoever dies with the most toys wins," and as Madonna sings, "we are living in a material world." Fashion and financial magazines dictate the need to accomplish and attain the quest for the holy grail of materialism, in order for there to be ego gratification. Our self-esteem is intricately tied to what we do and what we have. As Ram Dass has said, we are a society of "human-doings," not human-beings. There is no exit off the superhighway with its never-ending "if onlys" and the billboards flashing "mo' money" in neon lights.

To take this road which is less traveled means having the wisdom, awareness and courage to go against this heavy flow of traffic in the opposite direction--in other words, to go inward. I am not advocating an inner focus to the exclusion of the outer, but there does need to be a balance. The road less traveled is an inner road that takes us past the materialistic focus to an awareness of the emotional, psychological, and spiritual realms of existence as well. This road has a lot of exits where there is time to get off in order to value and support feelings, insights, spiritual understandings and experience. We need to take time to share these inner explorations with families and communities as they pave the way for deep, safe bonding, intimacy and love. What an amazing twenty-first century it will be if we can balance the outer, superhighway with an "inner-net" that allows access and acceptance of our core sensitivity into our lives.

THE COVER-UP

If, early in life, we experience that it's not safe to be vulnerable, to express feelings openly and to have needs met, then we develop a system of defense mechanisms to protect and cover over our core sensitivity.

There is a dangerous cover-up going on in our society that affects every segment of the population with devastating results. It is the covering over and negating of how, at our most essential level, we are all vulnerable.

We are born into this world in a state of pure vulnerability. A baby is totally dependent on its care-givers for survival, nurturance and love. If a baby's needs for food, water, protection from the elements, and touch are not met, it dies. If its emotional needs for affection, love, support, guidance and healthy mirroring are not met, the baby dies emotionally; its healthy emotions get covered over with an unhealthy expression of feelings. If there is a history of being hurt from abuse, neglect, or abandonment which makes the child feel fearful, anxious, lonely, out of control, or insecure, then the child may go into hiding. If the child doesn't feel safe, then a process begins where its core sensitivity is covered over by a proportionate amount of behavioral, emotional, psychological, spiritual and relational dysfunction. As children, we develop defense mechanisms which are set up to protect us, to make sure we don't get hurt, rejected or abandoned. So, instead of expressing hurt, fear, sadness, anxiety or any vulnerable feeling, we learn to rage, put up walls, be tough, or be sarcastic. We put others down to make ourselves feel better, become critical, irritable, or depressed. Many people either withdraw to protect themselves or get angry, pushing other people away to cover up their pain. Alcohol and drugs are also defense mechanisms used to numb out painful, vulnerable feelings. Some children learn to protect themselves by doing what they think others want them to do. By pleasing others and being good as a child, we might have been recognized and affirmed whenever we exhibited this behavior. If we grew up in dysfunctional families, these mechanisms often helped us survive as children, and may even have served to protect us emotionally and psychologically. In many instances, it was the role models we had in our early years that taught us these ways of relating to people. If we didn't like how our role models acted, or we were hurt by their

actions, we may have developed opposite patterns to what we saw. However, as we become adults, these mechanisms stop being effective and often create the very pain they were set up to help us avoid. In therapy, I can generally tell how traumatic an upbringing a person has had by how strong his or her defenses are. How healthy a person is depends upon how deeply buried their core sensitivity is, and how strong is their cover-up.

As in the case with Michael, many men who grow up in a dysfunctional family where there is alcoholism, often rage because it was unsafe to feel vulnerable. Many women direct any aggressive tendencies inward on themselves. Of course I am talking in generalities and the roles can reverse--for instance, some women learn to protect themselves by directing anger at others. However, I have observed most often that women turn the anger inward on themselves by developing a strong self-critic. They often have difficulty expressing so they swallow their needs, fears, hurts, and healthy anger. Unable to have a voice or stand up for themselves, they wind up depressed. Unexpressed hurt or fear turns into anger. Depression is often described as anger turned inward. This is tragically demonstrated by National Institute of Mental Health statistics, which state that nearly twice as many women as men are affected by a depressive disorder each year.

Margaret, a physician in her late thirties, has recently gotten married and is finding it very difficult to feel safe enough in her new marriage to develop the kind of intimacy she would ideally like to have. She has been experiencing a great many fears and feels like she is on an emotional roller coaster. At times she reacts critically, at other times she feels very depressed; and then there are occasions when she just numbs out.

Margaret grew up with a very controlling, critical father who was a physician. Her mother was emotionally unstable and at times was hospitalized for nervous breakdowns. Margaret was the oldest of five children and felt responsible for taking care of her siblings and keeping her father from getting angry.

Clearly, it wasn't safe in her family to express feelings or needs. She did whatever she could to appease her father, including become a doctor. If Margaret could have independently made the choice for her career, she would have been an artist. As she becomes aware of the price she has paid for having to develop a defense mechanism to please others at the expense of her own needs, she has understandably experienced depression. She named this protective mechanism or

sub-personality, “the Appeaser.” This part of the personality that developed to protect the Vulnerable Inner Child, learned early in Margaret’s life that it wasn’t safe to experience or express feelings of vulnerability or needs. After all, look what that did to her mother.

In therapy, we talk a lot with the sub-personality she calls her “Inner Critic.” This is the part that criticizes Margaret before anyone else does. She learned from her father how to be angry and critical, and she learned early on that when she criticized herself first, her father didn’t become as angry and critical. One of the times the Inner Critic comes out in her marriage is when Margaret is feeling anxious and out of control. Margaret was accustomed to her father being in control and therefore, is attracted to men who initiate and are controlling. This was what Margaret knew; this was what was familiar to her. Even though her father was often emotionally abusive, being with a strong, controlling man is what is familiar to Margaret. When someone else is in charge, she doesn’t have to make decisions,--and then be terrified that she will be criticized for being wrong. She feels less vulnerable.

Instead of marrying someone like her father, Margaret married an artist, a man who is laid-back and not interested in initiating or controlling. So, when Margaret gets anxious or overwhelmed because she has to initiate and make decisions about her business or their home life, the only model she has for “wearing the pants” is her father. The Critic becomes resentful, irritable and critical of her husband, creating a war of feelings, a barrier to the love, intimacy and safety which could be felt if her feelings and needs were allowed to be expressed.

Margaret is working hard in therapy. She has been experiencing the terror she must have felt as a young girl. As she has experienced the fears that she didn’t permit herself to feel when she was younger, fears that created her particular set of defense mechanisms, she has begun to take the risk of sharing with her husband some of her feelings, anxieties, and needs.

Margaret describes her growth and transformation: “Even though I still catch myself being critical of him or criticizing myself (so that my husband won’t), I am able to share the anxieties that are just below the surface and that seems to help them dissipate. I am also getting better at listening to my heart, expressing my feelings and asking for what I am needing to feel safe and loved. Unlike my father, my husband is able to hear my fears and support me when I am vulnerable. I am feeling more intimate, more connected to him and safer than ever before. When

I have to make decisions myself, I'm not as afraid of being wrong. I am able to see mistakes as lessons to learn."

SOUL HOLES

It is important for children to have their appropriate needs met at the different developmental stages growing up in order to feel good about themselves. In this way, they develop a strong ego. However, if they come from a dysfunctional family system (where there is alcoholism, a hostile divorce, sexual, emotional or physical abuse, parents who are critical, controlling, raging, etc.), often their developmental needs are not met and they grow up with a "hole in the soul."

Many parents are wounded themselves and therefore are not able to truly nurture their children. If children aren't loved enough, they tend to feel like it must be their fault. They believe there must be something wrong with them, which can cause a hole in the soul. They try numbing out if the pain is too great, with addictions like alcohol, sex, eating or even shopping; or they try getting their own needs met at the expense of others. People who have a "hole in the soul" often become alcoholics, rage-aholics, shop-aholics, sex addicts, drug addicts, food addicts, or narcissists.

People go around looking for a mommy or a daddy to fill them up and give them love so they will finally feel lovable, worthwhile and whole. They have the illusion that if they can just find Mr. or Ms. Right, they'll be healed (this misconception is described well by John Bradshaw, author of Homecoming). If someone who isn't whole themselves - let's say they are half - finds someone else who isn't whole, instead of them getting filled by each other, the reality is that $1/2 \times 1/2 = 1/4$. It is important to realize that we don't heal by getting this love from outside. Even if as adults we were to find a mommy or a daddy, it wouldn't totally heal the wounds of the past. Once we become adults, healing these wounds becomes mostly an "inside job." It helps to have a stable, loving relationship, but, healing the hole in the soul doesn't happen by someone just loving us enough. We have to do the inner work to heal the wounded core sensitivity, which is what created the "hole in the soul" to begin with.

Shawn's father left when he was two years old. As an adult, he grew up feeling shame that he didn't have a father and guilt that he must be unlovable--otherwise, his father wouldn't have left him. He had a hole in the soul which he unsuccessfully tried to fill with one relationship after another. In therapy, I did a guided imagery exercise with him, bringing him back to the scenes in his life where his needs weren't being met, causing him to feel unlovable. One of these scenes was at the dinner table when he was four years old. We talked with little Shawn and asked him what he was feeling. At age four, he had already developed a tough guy sub-personality who said, "I don't need anybody." I asked Shawn to visualize being with this little guy and to imagine nurturing him. As he gained little Shawn's trust, he was able to put his arm around him and let him know he was there for him. Shawn had a transformative experience as he poured love into little Shawn. He experienced a feeling of being filled by the love and nurturance that he was giving to little Shawn. He realized for the first time that by giving love he actually received the love that he had been looking for from all his failed relationships. His "hole in the soul" was getting filled by the love that was inside himself, rather than by all his attempts to get love from the outside.

SOUL HOLE TO WHOLE SOUL

In order to transform ourselves and society, we have to move from a state of "soul holes" to "whole souls." This is the paradigm shift that our society is so desperately needing. It's a transformation of how we are in relationships. People need a strong self-esteem in order to care about themselves, other people, and the planet. Instead of believing in the fallacy that relationships can fill your hole in the soul, it is important to realize, as in Shawn's case, that your soul hole gets filled by allowing yourself the experience and healthy expression of your vulnerable feelings. In order to heal your "hole in the soul" and feel yourself as whole, it is important to recognize, honor, separate from and transform these protective mechanisms into a more honest experience of your heart, and a more balanced expression of your growing self-awareness. This chapter is The Owner's Manual on how to transform the cover-up so you can learn to *Speak for Your Self*.

PART 2: IN PRACTICE

Try the following exercise. You might want to write out your answers in a notebook or journal. Journaling helps develop clarity and awareness. By recording what you are thinking, you free your mind to release the previous thought, knowing that what's important has been written down, allowing the mind to focus on the next thought or feeling. This facilitates a deepening of experience by allowing you to peel off layer after layer of thought and feeling until you get to the core awareness. Now ask yourself the following questions:

1. What is your particular way of protecting your core sensitivity? How do you regain a sense of control when you feel like you are losing it? What is your defense mechanism of choice? Write about this protective mechanism. As you think about your protective mechanisms, do this in the spirit of self-exploration, not self-condemnation. These mechanisms served you well as you were growing up, otherwise, you wouldn't still be using them today, even though they may no longer be effective. So, be gentle with yourself. You don't change by being criticized or by being self-critical. What we get from criticism is a lowered self-esteem. Begin to get to know the ways that you protect yourself. Change happens by becoming more aware.

2. Ask this protective mechanism the following questions: What is its job? Who trained it to do its job? When does it come out? When did it first come into your life? How did it protect you when you were younger? Give this part a name (i.e. pleaser, appeaser, rager, etc.). Become aware of the energy of this part.

3. It may be helpful for you to think of how you use this same protective mechanism in different relationships or situations. Does this defense mechanism still work well to protect you today, or do you wind up resentful, or feel hurt or abandoned?

You can go back and do this same exercise with other protective mechanisms. Allow each part to speak for itself. It is important to realize any anger or shame you might feel toward these modes of personal defense are only further cover-ups. Try to appreciate the capacity of your mind to create an inner resiliency as you needed these mechanisms to protect yourself. Now, however, we need to transform these cover-ups and commit to recognizing, valuing, loving, nurturing, and truly protecting our core sensitivity.

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