

# Keeping It Clean

By Philip Harland

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*Who translates, corrupts.* Anon

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."*

My thesis is simple: we each have a mind of our own. A 'personal mind', the American psychologist William James called it. A unique, extraordinary labyrinth of neural networks to which no-one else can have real access. Any process aiming to help us change our minds for developmental or therapeutic reasons must start from the premise that the choice must be ours alone.

## What is this passion for?

Mind is what the brain does. It is the word we give to our experience of the brain's activity.<sup>1</sup> I shall use the terms 'mind', 'brain', 'mind-body' and 'body-brain' more or less interchangeably here, 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 believing that the inconceivably complex workings of the brain-in-the-body are perfectly capable of producing my experience of mind, consciousness and self, though I am happy to define these as emergent properties of body-brain processes, at least until the day when nanotechnology allows us to upload our minds onto computers and survive without biology, as some scientists predict, when we may all have to reconsider our definitions of, and beliefs about, existence.

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.<sup>2</sup> This may give you a hint of your capacity for difference. You live in an enchanted forest, a measureless web of brilliant threads that are both purposeful and capricious: at times knotted, matted, pained and perplexed; at other times dazzling, luminous, original. And if ever your brain feels like what Virginia Woolf once called "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?"

The logic of natural selection would say that 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 or reject information - and the logical outcome of this was our 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 suggest that the primary purpose of the mind now must be *to know itself*. As best it can.

Our brains form a million new connections every second of our lives. As the activation of this multitude of intimate couplings varies enormously in any one person from one second to the next, it is obvious 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. We are, no doubt about it, exquisitely and exceptionally ourselves. And one of the great challenges of life in the 21st century, perhaps its greatest, is to know more about who we 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 district of Yorkshire that enjoyed a strong community feeling at the expense of considerable social conformity. Differences were, to put it mildly, undesirable, and this resulted in a certain amount of what we call in the trade 'deceit and denial'. Although my paternal grandparents lived in the next street I never met them, because for some reason that was never discussed they had cut off my father when he married my mother. Meanwhile my great-grandmother would have nothing to do with her daughter, my maternal grandmother - who lived in the house opposite - because she was a music-hall singer and divorced (I don't know which was thought worse at the time). Good material for local gossip, you would have thought, but no-one even mentioned these interesting things. I grew up on the premise that everything was fine and that everyone was alike. Later when I began to wonder a bit I was reassured by geneticists who pointed out that the six billion of us who inhabit the earth are in fact very closely related, and by mathematicians who calculated that we only need twenty-four acquaintances to connect randomly with every other person on the planet. After many years of re-education - bless the poor people who were a part of my learning - I can happily say now that I find our individuality, our singularity, our multiple peculiarities, 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."<sup>3</sup> 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.

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 fused together, yet the twins said they 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. Sadly, they died in a Singapore hospital in 2003 in an attempt to separate them.

In 2001 in Lexington, South Carolina, identical quadruplets Grace, Emily, Mary Claire and Anna Mathias were born only thirty seconds apart, but 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 blueberries, the smell of coffee, my sensations of pain and joy, have an embodied meaning for me that is mine alone.

Scientists are 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 objective, 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 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 naive. It's like people before Galileo looking at the sky and thinking that they were doing astronomy."<sup>5</sup>

Clean facilitation is directly concerned with first-person reporting. Information is elicited directly, without paraphrase or re-interpretation.

### **And then what happens?**

*E=mc<sup>2</sup>*

### **And for you that is like what?'**

The non-assumptive questioning brings abstract or cognitive 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. And what appears is 'objectively subjective' information, different in kind to any other.

*It's like riding a beam of light.*

### **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 - was entirely responsible for what became my

vocation as a psychotherapist and what led to my commitment to Clean Language.

What qualifies me to write about this new psychology of change? I could say that it's 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's having witnessed its efficacy countless times in helping people resolve problems and transform their lives in ways that traditional counselling or coaching would never have thought possible. And with all that it might be nearer the truth to say that it is more like the effect of a lifetime of lies - several lifetimes, in fact. I am the product of generations of prevaricators who learnt to deny the reality of their own process: their own lives, relationships and responsibilities. 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 deadly, self-reinforcing 'loop'. Circularity of this sort causes bewilderment in families, and children face exceptional difficulties in breaking out of it. You will know for yourselves the monosyllabic menfolk of the family who could fudge any issue, the hypocritical women who would say one thing and mean another, the prolonged domestic arguments - uncivil wars - that raged around who was right and who was wrong, and who said what to whom, and why. When I was young the communications of those close to me contained a code I never quite managed to crack.

Clean Language does a good job of unravelling the knots and binds of deceit and denial, but is really 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 unbiased, empirical truth about the patient to which Freud and others aspired. It is personal intelligence that no-one but the person themselves may retrieve. Only when I trained as a psychotherapist did I begin to appreciate the depth, richness and uniqueness of this information that we hold behind the heavy 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 the information owners 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 infinite possibilities of theirs.

When I came across David Grove's work in 1995 all my familiar escape routes from reality, from the difference of others, were cut off. And there could be no going back. I could no longer be satisfied with guiding clients by my own lights when honouring and facilitating theirs was 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,<sup>6</sup> chivalrous in that it is, I believe, one of the most respectful and companionable of all language-based modalities, and subversive in that it constitutes a fundamental challenge to the old, directive, manipulative, habit-of-mind methods.

### A new language

As long ago as the 5th century BCE the moral philosopher K'ung Fu Tzu 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 every thing besides." A century later the Seven Sages of ancient Greece took the principle further 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*'.<sup>7</sup>

Foremost among these seven wise fellows 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. In our wisdom 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 gnomonic 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 certainly 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. Planck, Einstein and their followers saw to it that there was, and every line, letter, dot and molecule of what we know about the world has been affected ever since.

A paradigm is a set of metaphors that suggest a certain world view. Freudian-style analysis 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' etc - was all but forgotten. We failed to seek out alternative metaphors, or to check what the familiar metaphors were revealing or concealing. Yet Freud's heart was not in treating individuals, as psychologist Steve Ayan points out in his paper 'Psychotherapy on Trial' (2006)<sup>8</sup>, but

in refining his theories. He took the knowledge he had gleaned from certain patients and applied it to people in general. The ideas in Freud's book, 'The Interpretation of Dreams' (1899), were as influential and became as familiar as Darwin's and Einstein's, but later Freud revised and discarded many of them, and came to recognize that the new sciences of biology and neurology might one day blow away his hypotheses.

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 and the individual. In quantum theory in particular Korzybski found a structural 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, we have immensely - immensely - more potential than we know.<sup>9</sup> It is not so long ago that the laws of physics were thought to be fixed and immutable. Today we are writing new narratives of fluidity, ambiguity and possibility. The assembly of conflicting factions of which the body-brain is composed is capable, we see now, of subtle and flexible internal negotiations, and this gives us more scope for change than ever before.

Korzybski would have embraced the philosophy and principles 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 leap in procedure 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 was a part of this unproductive pattern. In his pioneering book 'Against Therapy' (1988), former psychotherapist Jeffrey Masson advocated the abolition of the 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."<sup>10</sup> I have to agree, and have more to say about this in the next chapter. Yet many of the therapists, coaches and agents of change I know would argue that their training equips them to 'know better' than their clients and students, that confronting a client's or a student's 'erroneous' belief system is the best way to change it, and that the loss of a little client/student dignity and autonomy on the way is a small price to pay. To these ends their language patterns are designed to interfere fundamentally with the other's experience. My hope is that as our knowledge of neurology advances and we become increasingly fascinated about how the mind works, there will be a greater acceptance of, even delight in, difference and pluralism. The urge to know more about ourselves and others will become a prime strategy for survival. We have little choice. Astronomer Royal Sir Martin Rees reckons this could be humanity's last century unless we sort ourselves out.<sup>11</sup>

Jung readily appreciated the uniqueness of his patients' inner worlds and used to say that it required him to invent a new language for each patient. What he meant was a language of his own, of course. It did not occur to him that the new language he should 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 think they have to choose between therapist-directed techniques that are out of touch with today's philosophy of self-help, and medically-directed 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 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. It was a significant step, but it did not go all the way. That benign developer of new patterns of NLP, John McWhirter, has said that the techniques of NLP are not in themselves a complete therapy. I agree. They may 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, that boundary between stimulus and response, input and output, they oblige the 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 interference and into an altered state of their own creation: *to know themselves in their own way*. When Grove began to develop his philosophy in the late 1980s this was a radical enough concept, but his means of achieving it were novel and original, and some thought bizarre. The structure of Clean Language follows the empirical structure of the client's own language, exactly as expressed. The client's words are repeated back to them without re-interpretation, without challenge, without comment, without paraphrase, without subtle re-wording; attention is drawn to what the client has said; and a clean question is asked about what they have said. (You can find the detailed syntax elsewhere on this site.) To put it as simply as it deserves: clients hear themselves back to themselves, and are 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 gets to know it for themselves. And what happens next is inevitable, and not complicated: *the self-system learns from itself*. Power returns where it rightly belongs and change emerges organically in the context of the outcome desired.

Even today as clean algorithms begin to 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? Only with an about-turn in our philosophical and linguistic orientation can we get our heads around such ideas.

Clean questions are asked, as 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."<sup>12</sup> Information gathered *for* rather than *from* the other person.

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

### Light beyond Alison's cloud

A middle-aged woman is weeping as she describes the "black cloud of despair" that has enveloped her for months. She 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, colleague or friend might come up with any number of ideas to move Alison out of her despair and to make things happen. Instead I 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 I am tempted to intervene, to move things on, to do or say something to 'help'. After all, my client has been in this situation countless times before, stuck in the cloud, aware of nothing but darkness and despair around her. But 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 Alison brings metaphor and reality together and chooses an entirely new way of perceiving herself and the world. And she does it in a way that only she knows how. Without revisiting childhood trauma, without years of analysis, and without any suggestion from me, she has learnt to trust her unconscious.

The 17th century Spanish 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 to others, we almost certainly have more will to be ourselves than any generation before us. All we have to do is keep it clean.

© 2006 [philipharland@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:philipharland@blueyonder.co.uk) Philip is a neuro-linguistic psychotherapist specializing in Clean Language, Clean Space and Therapeutic Metaphor. He has a practice in north London working with individuals and couples, and also works on the phone nationally and internationally. More articles of his can be found on the website.

### Keeping It Clean / notes

1 *Mind is what the brain does*, etc: Steven Pinker, *How The Mind Works*, Penguin 1999. Neuroscientist Susan Greenfield 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 (*Sensational Minds*, New Scientist 2 February 2002).

2 *Brain capacity*: Edelman (1992), Greenfield (1996, 2000), Pinker (1997), Carter (1998). Those who like numbers have calculated that there are about 1070 particles in the visible universe, a modest sum compared to the 10100s (googols) of different words, sentences, meanings, feelings, melodies, objects, ideas, places, chess games etc 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 learnt in a day or two; the more advanced training takes two weeks; the experience to practise intuitively takes as long as you like.

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 *Humanity's last chance*: Martin Rees, *Will the Human Race Survive the Twentyfirst Century?*, Heinemann 2003.

12 "*Clean questions are asked to...*": from David Grove and Basil Panzer, *Resolving Traumatic Memories*, Irvington 1989.

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