

Watch Your Language

When my daughter, Simone, was about two-and-a-half, she and I were walking in our neighbourhood. As we waited for a light to change, a woman, who looked to be in her mid 60's, leaned down to address Simone. She was being "friendly". I don't remember her exact words, but I do remember how exaggerated and gushing her tone was. A kind of over-the-top adult to child delivery you might use if you were warming a two year old up to sell them insurance or real estate. She said something like, "Well! Look at you! So pretty in your darling little dress, walking like such a big girl with your Daddy! And waiting for the light to turn green. Why, you're not only pretty, you're very smart and grown up too!"

As the woman prattled on, Simone turned to me with a slightly distressed look on her face and said, "Daddy, why is she talking like that to me?"

The woman ended the chat quite abruptly, and I told Simone that sometimes adults just talk that way to kids. She didn't seem to need any further explanation.

This moment came to mind when I was thinking about our various uses of language because kids are so good at showing us what we're really up to.

One way we might describe what took place in that brief encounter is that my two year old met with what could be called a "language system" that was not familiar to her, and she didn't quite know how to read it. The adults in her life didn't tend to talk to her as if she weren't all there. Simone was familiar with all the words the woman was using, but the way they were being spoken was confusing. She didn't know the "code", as it were, the system of meaning imbedded in the delivery. I gathered from the woman's somewhat surprised and insulted look that she had been speaking to my daughter in a way she normally spoke to small children. I'm quite certain she was not conscious of what she was doing. The problem was that it was not "normal" to Simone. It was a from a foreign "language system".

To those of you who are joining us at C.T.P. for the first time this evening, I'd like you to think of this as a kind of cautionary tale. (Let's call it, "*Watch Your Language*") One of the things that's happening for you is that you're joining a learning community that, like any other, has its own verbal culture. Despite our best efforts, the implicit meanings of that language system are not always conscious to us. Of course, part of your training does involve an intentional expansion of your vocabulary. The lectures and readings, then later on, the concentrations and seminars, will immerse you in the technical language of various psychodynamic theories. This specialized language is essential to our ongoing discourse about human experience and its troubles. We need it to frame our theories and to talk about our work. It's an abstract language whose main value is its contribution to our general understanding of human psychology. A good psychotherapist knows the grammar and vocabulary of this language and continues

to learn it throughout his or her career. Students at C.T.P. are required to complete an oral exam on Freud's terminology as a way of establishing a foundation in psychoanalytic parlance. Those of you who have completed the exam, know that getting even the basics of this language is a demanding task because it attempts to speak as precisely as possible about complex and confusing human experiences. But despite its efforts at precision, what it ultimately provides is some understanding of recurring patterns in our emotional and psychological lives. In this way our theories function somewhat like navigational charts. They're essential for keeping our bearings in the shapeless open waters and negotiating hazardous coastlines. Without them we would be lost. However, unless we're working with psychotic or extreme borderline clients, doing psychotherapy usually feels more like walking a trout stream than it does sailing an ocean. And for that, charts are of little or no use. No one can tell us in advance where the wily little fish are hiding. We have to observe the stream's topographical nuances for ourselves, while walking very quietly. A process that usually requires more patience than bravery.

And even the most finely articulated theories can't reveal a particular dream's deeper meaning. What helps us most with that enterprise, is knowing as much as possible about the inner world of the individual dreamer. Our best access to that world is through relationship. To establish that relationship, all we really have is our everyday interpersonal language. The language that puts **us** into the picture.

There is a kind of paradox at work here. As important as our theories are for learning and doing our work, they constantly foster in us, and in our clients, the delusion that we know something that enables us to fix people. I believe, what we actually accomplish in a successful therapy is that we've helped someone **imagine** a life that is larger and less restrictive than the one they brought to us. The terms that define their experience of themselves and the world around them have been loosened and expanded. This doesn't result from their learning a new therapeutic vocabulary (that just replaces one small compulsive world with another), but rather from a greater awareness of the previously unconscious beliefs that defined and limited their being. Our consciousness is bounded by words, and alterations in consciousness are achieved primarily through language.

We can see this most clearly when we examine the effects that result from changes in terms we use to describe everyday events or processes. Take, for example, what happened when the Harris government began using business language to talk about education and the public school system. It didn't take long for students and parents to begin to see themselves as "consumers" of a service, and teachers as employees whose job it was to deliver that service in the most efficient, cost effective manner. Principals came to be regarded as managers who were answerable to their customers as well as their board of directors, and schools that failed to meet the fiscally determined criteria of efficiency, were closed down. (I recently filled out

a survey my daughter brought home from her high school, and it was as if I were being asked to give my opinions about the service at my local Starbucks. The very notion that a questionnaire to parents could have some relevance to an individual student's learning experience, says so much about how current expectations of education have been influenced by commercial and corporate sensibilities. If education is a commodity and students and their parents are customers, what does this mean for the relationships between students and their teachers? How does this affect a student's expectations of herself?) The implications of this kind of shift in perception are profound, and the whole phenomenon is predicated on an alteration of language. As P.R. experts are so well aware, the reality of an event or situation does not need to be addressed, only how the the public *thinks* about the reality does. So Iraq has been liberated, not invaded, and the destruction of schools and hospitals and the people in them is actually just collateral damage that's an inevitable part of the liberation process.

As William S. Burroughs so wryly put it, "Language is a virus from outer space". We like to think of it as our tool and our creation, but it actually inhabits us. Franz Kafka called words, "evil's greatest buttress, because they shield us from the whirligigs of time". In other words, we use them to lie to ourselves, not just to others. But the lies Kafka is talking about are more difficult to detect than even the clever manipulations of politicians, because they are truly outside the range of our conscious awareness. Since I'm referring more to unintentional than intentional untruths, it might be better if we think of it as "kidding" ourselves, rather than telling ourselves lies. But the results are, unfortunately, often the same. We tend to use language, including psychoanalytic language, to shield ourselves from discomfort. An understandable human foible most of us can use some help with. But we don't need to turn to experts for this help, because we have each other. We come here together to study and discuss a body of knowledge that has a deep and rich history, but some of the most important truths you will gain for your eventual work as psychotherapists are not pre-existent; they are truths about yourselves that will come into being through dialogue with each other. As the the American analyst, Donnel Stern, puts it, "...the great proportion of analytic observations, and all the most significant ones, are of the common human variety." (p.236) C.T.P. provides a structure and context for your learning, and we **will** put you through your paces, but the majority of the most transformative truths will arise through interactions with your fellow students. Your challenge will be to remain open to both hearing and speaking them. To facilitate this, I suggest that you *watch your language*. By this I don't, of course, mean that you should be self consciously careful about everything you say. In fact, I mean something quite the opposite. When you're engaged in the experiential aspects of the program, and especially during sessions of training group, be aware of your background thoughts, images,

and feelings, and allow them to come forth. This doesn't mean you should blurt the first thing that comes into your head, but be aware that the thought or feeling is there for a reason, which is probably not yet fully conscious. And when it **is** spoken, it might indicate more about your own inner world than it does to the situation at hand, but that doesn't mean it's wrong or irrelevant. Speaking spontaneously can toss you into a living moment of self-discovery. As Stern puts it, "An unbidden thought can be no more wrong than a dream".(236) One of those simple truths that are so difficult to live by. Such as in the story *The Emperor's New Clothes*, so many elements conspire against us making discoveries and speaking the plain truth about them, not the least of which is our habits of language. Donnel Stern puts it quite succinctly, so I'll quote him one more time. "The conventional use of language, however essential it is to the smooth operation of our day-to-day lives, does not give birth to meaning; it counts it, notes it, passes over it. This use of language reveals nothing new, but it does grease the tracks. Life is easiest when we use language in a way that reveals only what we already know. All of us are prone to this temptation."(90)

Most of us feel discomfort when we're confronted with situations we don't understand, and we are prone to imposing familiar meanings upon them. So we are tempted to use our theories as formulae; our language becomes riddled with psychological clichés and jargon. I think this is what the British analyst Adam Phillips is getting at when he cautions his readers from the analytic community about spending too much time with each other. He says we start taking our theories and ourselves way too seriously. It's this I'm referring to when I ask you to *watch your language*. Our words are our primary vehicle for self-discovery and giving birth to new meaning, but they serve to block this process when we allow them to become stale and clichéd. Listen for this in your language. Be aware when it starts to conform to the *dialect* being spoken around you. Challenge it by avoiding the comfort that verbal conformity offers. Keep your language as fresh and as your own as you possibly can, while adding to your technical vocabulary. This will help you to stay open to the surprise that is an essential aspect of real self discovery and personal transformation.