

Does Not Compute

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There's an elephant in the room. It's invisible, and people can't touch it or see it, but it's still there in the room and I can kind of *feel* it there, using some kind of other sense, so I know about it. I know it's standing up and it's fairly big, with big tusks and an old, wrinkly face. I'm pretty sure I know everything about it. But here's the problem: you're in the room with me, and you are convinced the elephant is not an elephant, but a woolly mammoth. You can feel this invisible creature too, and you've come to the conclusion that this *thing* is a different creature all together, even if it's almost the same, with similar features as the elephant like its trunk, its tusk, and its shape. You know that the mammoth is crouching down and it's huge, and very furry. You're pretty sure you know everything about it. But the creature is not supposed to be discussed, and it would take too much time trying to find out exactly what it's doing there, what its purpose is. So I go on thinking the thing is an elephant, and you go on thinking it's a mammoth. They're close enough creatures that we both treat it the same way, walk around it with the same care. So I'll never know that you see the thing in a very different way than I do, and you won't know either. Is that okay? Does it matter?

It may not seem to matter, because it doesn't seem to be a realistic situation. But that is exactly what goes on when two people communicate. Communication is about information going from one brain to another, and about understanding. But that process is extremely complicated and full of problems. The main one is that we all perceive in different ways, whether slightly different or enormously different. This isn't something that can be ignored, because our lives consist of the relationships we make with the people around us. From the very beginning humans are with at least one other person, and spend the rest of their lives *with* other people. We learn from others, live with them, work with them, love them, hate them, and most of the time we communicate with them. Humans were evolved to be social creatures. Some societies are individualistic ones, where people make mostly personal decisions and actions chosen for personal benefit. And some societies are collectivist ones, where decisions and actions are based around the people or families around them, and others come before the individual. But in either case, there's no denying that every human's life is built upon his or her interactions with one another. But how exactly do we interact with each other, and why?

Every day we talk to people, wave, laugh, and make eye contact with them as we pass by them on the street. But while we're connecting with these people and deriving meaning from messages made up of actions and words, how can the meaning we finally come to be trusted? I believe that they can't, because we can never fully understand what's going on in another person's head. An article on communication by Louisville University states, "Through speaking we try to eliminate this misunderstanding, but sometimes this is a very hard thing to do. Just as we assume that our messages are clearly received, so we assume that because something is important to us, it is important to others. As time has proven this is not at all true. Many problems can arise in speaking and the only way to solve these problems is through experience." Most of the time we aren't really communicating in the way we think we are; we're just giving and receiving information, and guessing what is in another person's head. But our guesses will always be limited, because we'll make assumptions. I will assume that another person sees an elephant if I do, but for all I know they might see a mammoth. I might assume someone is on the same page with me and understands what I'm saying, but the other person might

be getting a completely different meaning. We are doing what we do to survive, but not *understanding* one another.

This lack of understanding might have more affect on us than we realize. Many arguments are created by not understanding one another, and even wars are for the most part created by large groups of people who are not the same page as another large group of people. In the end the message isn't simply traveling from one mind to the other. Every person's mind has many filters made up of past experience, or knowledge, or personality, or genetics that information has to travel past. These filters, or barriers of communication, are unique for every individual, and must be looked at in detail before we can ever think about eliminating some of the gaps we have in our relationships created by faulty communication.

Before looking at the barriers in communication, we have to look at what communication actually means, or what it consists of. When you hear the word "communication", you might immediately imagine two people simply talking to each other. But when you delve deeper into the word, many other meanings reveal themselves. There are many formal definitions of the word "communication", but most of the time they are never specific enough to really mention the mechanics of it. To me, the interesting part of defining communication is looking at the different ways of transmitting or conveying the messages, or the different symbols, signs, and behaviors used. There are four main types of communication that most people acknowledge: 1. Verbal Communication, 2. Non-Verbal Communication, 3. Visual Communication, and 4. Written Communication.

Verbal communication is an obvious type, and it deals with sounds or speech and language. A lot of our verbal communication depends on other types of communication to support and get across any kind of meaning. If I spoke about how angry I felt without changing the pitch of my voice or without scrunching up my face, both non-verbal communications, then the level of my anger, if I felt any at all, couldn't be measured. Verbal communication relies on language development. A child learns verbal communication by producing sounds with their vocal chords, some natural like laughter, and some learned like words. Words are learned as they gradually have meaning assigned to them. Without people, words are dead and meaningless. Studies show that children with mothers who speak directly to them knew almost three hundred more words than other two year olds whose mothers rarely spoke to. It's probably safe to say that learning the meanings for words mostly comes from one's parents. So even though learning a language is not genetically influenced, does this mean we are somehow coded in what meanings we will have for certain words, and we'll pass down this code? Words are supposed to have universal meaning, but there will always be incongruencies on full meanings. These differences will probably be brought upon by how you were taught, and what experience you have with the word. Language can also be limited to different tones, which are used for different situations. For example, only proper and sophisticated languages are used when talking to one's boss.

Non-verbal communication is generally about physical communication, and varies a great deal. This includes body language, tone of voice, touch, posture, physical contact, facial expressions, and clothing or hairstyles. There is an entire field of study on body language called Kinesics, which shows how important it is alone in communication. An internationally acclaimed Communications specialist, Patricia Ball, states, "To

effectively communicate it's not always what you say, but what your body says, that makes the difference." There are many seemingly miniscule subtleties in not only body language but most types of non-verbal communication that make all the difference, like keeping direct eye contact and a firm grip during a handshake, but not shaking too hard. So much of our daily lives are consumed with non-verbal communication: shaking hands, eye contact, hugging, clapping, folding arms, dancing, and even music, which is considered a "universal language" by many people.

Then there is visual communication, which is the use of visual representations of ideas or information, perhaps a less obvious form of communication. Most types of art are part of visual communication, like photography or drawing. This is a very interesting dimension of communication that is between the artist and the viewer, which can be close or far, direct or indirect, quick or ongoing. It also includes television or video, and symbols or designs. This form of communication is in general a lot less direct, and is often conducted through strangers. It also usually has a designated "giver" and "receiver", which will make a difference in the balance that other communication usually has.

Finally there is written communication, which uses solely written words from different languages to communicate. Over three thousand languages and major dialects are spoken in the world today. A huge difference between written communication and other means is that it can be edited and refined before delivering it to the other person or people, while other types of communication are more in the moment and immediate. So when writing an email, you can rearrange and check for proper grammar, etc. Written communication is taking on new forms and expanding through the advance of technology and Internet and websites like Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube.

All of these different modes of communication offer us a wide variety to choose from. When we want to translate the inner world of our minds into some form of information in the outer world, we attempt to have others create a similar meaning as it does for us. But what actually goes on in and outside of the mind when this happens? What is the process?

From what I understand, communication is when a person feels an emotion or thinks a thought, and wants to share that with another human being, for whatever motive. This person translates his or her feeling or thought into one of the modes of communication for the other person. The translating of what is in the first person's mind to the outside world will depend on many different aspects, as will the interpretation of the information put out. For example, let's say Richard wants to tell Lauren about his vacation in the Bahamas. He first has to sort through what actually happened on his vacation, and narrow it down into important chunks, which gets converted into words. He might leave out the fact that he tripped and fell, breaking his arm on the beach, because he wants to leave out some of what he believes to be unnecessary detail and is somewhat embarrassed by it. Then Lauren takes the sentences he says apart, but might be predisposed to have certain reactions. Lauren might see his casual explanation of the vacation as hostile, because she was already upset because she had nowhere to go during her vacation, and stayed in bed with a fever for the entire two weeks. She might then see his description of the lovely Bahamas as bragging or mocking.

So when the receiver of the message finally takes in the information that was put out, the whole idea might be changed. Like the well-known game "Telephone", where

information is whispered from person to person, the original message will inevitably be distorted when traveling from one person to the other, because people can only ever get “whispers”, or fuzzy versions of a message from one another with these barriers. Obviously this process is a very complex one, even though it might not seem so on the surface. We quickly talk back and forth, exchanging so much in a little amount of time, and we make simple gestures that seem to come naturally to us. But behind all of it there’s a great deal of filtering and morphing of ideas. So how do we know that there’s real comprehension involved? We know we are constantly communicating in different ways, but how do we know that we ever understand one another fully, if at all?

There are so many complexities when it comes to understanding the messages put out in front of us. But words or language is perhaps one of the most significant problems in communication. *Waking Life* is an animated film that is a collection of different ideas and feelings that people may have, exploring very broad issues and emotions in life. There is a clip about the power and use of words, stating,

“Creation comes out of imperfection. It seems to come out of a striving and a frustration. This is where, I think, language came from. I mean, it came from our desire to transcend our isolation and have some connection with one another. It had to be easy when it was just simple survival. “Water.” We came up with a sound for that. “Saber-toothed tiger behind you!” We made a sound for that. But when it gets really interesting, I think is when we use that same system of symbols to communicate all the abstract and intangible things we’re experiencing. What is “frustration”? Or what is “anger” or “love”? When I say “love” the sound comes out of my mouth and hits the other person’s ear travels through the byzantine conduit in their brain through their memories of love or lack of love. They say they understand, but how do I know? Because words are inert. They’re just symbols. They’re dead. You know? And so much of our experience is intangible. So much of what we perceive cannot be expressed. It’s unspeakable...”

This beautifully communicates much of what words mean to us, and how both useful and useless they can be to us at the same time. Like it says, words are there as a sort of even ground for all of us, like a compromise of meaning, but we all have different experiences with the words and different thoughts about the concepts that the same word might take two people to completely different places. Different memories with certain words and different personalities will play huge roles in how we listen and how we read. It’s interesting because words seem to us as the key to communication, because it allows us to be so specific and acknowledge that we share common feelings. But here they say that words are dead, which I completely agree with. Words carry the message, but what we put into it and what we take from it is always enormous compared to the narrow little meaning that the word holds in a dictionary. But as mentioned earlier, the true “dictionary definition” that someone has for a word comes from the family and people that they grew up with, that spoke to them and taught them the word. So people might have interesting similarities in what they think of one word to their families or childhood friends. I do not know of any study conducted to find out, but I believe that in this way, language can exist within a family or small community itself, creating more differences in comprehension.

What I did explore within specifically the Oxbow School community is the diversity in mind and the differences in thought process. I interviewed eleven students on

how their minds worked. First I created a list of words that contained both “easy and simple” words like water, or shirt, and “abstract and intangible” words like love, or pain. I instructed the person being interviewed to say the first word, memory, or feeling that comes to mind when I read aloud the word. For most of the simple words like water or shirt I got similar responses like “river”, or “drink”, but for the abstract words I received all kinds of responses that had nothing to do with each other, like “needles” or “thinking”. I instructed all of the people I interviewed to say the first memory that came to mind when I said the word “family” and of course all memories were unique of place, feeling, and detail. I also asked people how their thoughts work. Many people think in pictures, while others think in full sentences, and some think with a combination of both. Some people even thought in completely different ways than everyone else, described as moving in a “movie reel” fashion. It’s a miracle that with all of these differences in mindset, we are able to take that narrow bit of a word and pair it with other cues to give us a meaning that hopefully has some kind of proximity to the original idea.

Another huge problem with communication is when we think we’re communicating, but what is actually occurring is this minimal kind of interaction that can barely be called communication. In another quotation from *Waking Life* a girl says,

“...I don’t want to be an ant. You know? I mean, it’s like we go through life with our antennas bouncing off one another, continuously on ant autopilot, with nothing really human required of us. Stop. Go. Walk here. Drive there. All action basically for survival. All communication simply to keep this ant colony buzzing along in an efficient, polite manner. “Here’s your change.” “Paper or plastic?” “Credit or debit?” “You want ketchup with that?” I don’t want a straw. I want real human moments. I want to see you. I want you to see me. I don’t want to give that up. I don’t want to be ant, you know?”

This quotation made me personally think about every little interaction we have throughout our days, all the external acknowledgements of each other’s presences we have without thinking about it. We go through life talking and looking at each other, without really *talking* or *looking* at each other. We don’t really process what’s going on around us, but we just listen and answer without having to think. I recorded half of my day’s conversations at the Oxbow School, and most of what I said and what other people were saying consisted of these kinds of conversations, like “I’m hungry, let’s go get food,” or “Are you busy,” or “Excuse me.”

If you spend too much time using this minimal version of communication, I believe its possible to learn to live without expressing your inner self, because your thoughts and feelings get clouded over by this “ant autopilot” survivor mode, which requires no deep thought or personal inflection. The problem is that we think we are communicating when we use these kinds of minimal sentences, and then we wonder why we have such problems communicating, and why people don’t understand each other. Perhaps if we took the time to express ourselves more, the gap between our thoughts would be smaller.

But even when people communicate expressively, there are numerous barriers that stop us from getting the full message. There are two types of barriers: the first kind is the barrier in the mind that keep the full message from reaching the words, symbols, or gestures communicated, and the second kind is the barrier that prevents the whole message from being picked up and understood by the other person. When converting

thoughts into messages, one problem is when people edit what they think consciously or subconsciously, when they communicate it. This might be because of insecurity, or wanting to please others, or trying to give themselves a certain desirable image. People will also choose different tones or words depending on who they're talking to, or attempt to release the message in a way that the listener or viewer will best understand it, fitting to what kind of person they think he or she is. Of course these perceptions can be wrong, which is where problems come in. Everyone has different motives in getting their point across, but these motives can distract the communicator into saying something or making some gesture that will not be consistent with their thoughts. That might be desirable, like someone who laughs when they are nervous to ease the tension. But the point is that this disconnect from the mind to the outer reflection is always there, whether it's desirable or not, and whether it's noticed or not.

And just as there are problems with the information output, there are problems with the information input. For example, we as humans can have big philosophical discussions dealing with theories of life, and to me they seem to always go nowhere. The small questions of life can usually be answered, like how our bodies work, or other things that can be proven or disproven. But questions that don't have yes or no answers, like Is there a God, or How do memories work, or What is love, or Is our perception of the world faulty, are all questions that get bounced back and forth and never really answered. We may have some "Aha" moments where we realize something we had never thought of, but humanity has been arguing and fighting wars over questions that cannot be answered for longer than anyone knows, while we never find some sort of consensus or right answer to anything. People like to find out what *they* think about these topics, so they can label themselves as Catholic or Liberal or whatever else. But while these might be the right answers for someone, the right answers for someone else will be completely different, Atheist and Conservative. And then these two people might argue, because they want to know not their own right answer, but *the* right answer. But maybe there is no right answer, because there are always going to be pros and cons about every stance, and the pros for one person will be the cons for another. In other words, people will always be very different, and will always be stuck in the boundaries of their personal opinion. So when two people communicate about anything at all, they will always be limited. People make great arguments for their view on *life*, and many times others are swayed by seemingly revolutionary ideas, but a constant is that in these arguments we can only agree with something we understand, and we can only understand something we know, or have experienced or witnessed, which is different for every individual.

Richard may believe in God because he grew up with it, because that knowledge of God's presence was inserted in his mind early on, through practice or experience. But Lauren won't believe in God because she never learned about God as a child, or simply never thought to acknowledge such a being. Then Richard and Lauren might argue about whether or not God exists but they will probably never reach a conclusion because they don't have each other's past experiences to understand, they don't think or work or live in the same way, so they can't change their mind because their minds are preset. We all have preset minds to some extent. We have ideas that cannot be changed by communication. But the crucial point is that we may have ideas that are *opened* by communication, when we realize we agree or believe in something because someone opens up knowledge or feelings that is already there, hidden. So Lauren might gradually

be swayed by Richard's arguments, because he might be describing a spiritual experience with God that she can relate to, and therefore is opened up to the idea of God. The same idea goes for any other type of argument. But other than that opening of knowledge between people, what we think can only truly be changed by personal experience or gain of knowledge.

The first *Waking Life* quotation I used in this essay continues on to say, "And yet, you know, when we communicate with one another and we feel we have connected and *think* we're understood, I think we have a feeling of almost spiritual communion. And that feeling may be transient, but I think it's what we live for." We may go through the rest of our lives never understanding anyone but ourselves, but there might be moments where, friends or families or even strangers, might be on the "same page" as you. Sometimes I think you can feel it, and know when it's there. And it's true; I have met some people, whose minds I imagine to work in the same way as mine, who seem to read my thoughts aloud as I read theirs, when we can only guess. We spend our time trying to find people who understand us, that is how we choose our friends, that's how we find people we like, maybe that's even how we choose our job and how we spend our days. But in the end we live with this big invisible creature in the room, and we can only hope that the other person imagines it as we do.

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