

## Listening...

...to understand, to love, to influence, to be influenced and to be heard

*Exercise 1 – How well do you listen?*

### Introduction

God asks questions and listens. God says, “Speak to me,” or “Ask me for things.”

If He knows everything why question? Why listen? Why urge us to communicate with Him?

- It must be that **we** need to talk – process what was; what is; what might be; what ought to be.
- It must be, also, that we need to do this with others; that we’re built to be relational. Otherwise, solitary confinement wouldn’t cause psychiatric disturbances - we could just talk to ourselves.<sup>1</sup>

Of course – unlike God - we are not omniscient, loving or righteous. So, in addition, we listen to learn, to empathize, to let ourselves be influenced by the one we are listening to and to diminish the confusion that develops when two people try to be heard at the same time.

As leaders, we prize unity of purpose, the unity that comes through grace (e.g. acceptance, forgiveness, forbearance, etc.) but an important part of fostering unity is fostering an ethos of attentiveness to what others are experiencing, feeling, thinking, wanting and doing.

Finally, listening is the easiest way to enter into a conflict (if you tend to avoid conflicts) and the fastest way to resolve a conflict (if you tend to get bogged down in fights).

### The Importance of Personal Humility

In general people have a lot of confidence in their ability to observe, discern and remember things. Research suggests that our confidence is misplaced. We are very subjective and prone to errors in observation, memory formation/recall and logic.

- Flesh problems – we are all self-justifying and self-deceiving.<sup>2</sup>
- Brain problems
  - Selective attention
    - the naive scientist – naiveté keeps you from attending to what matters but it also allows you to see things experienced people don’t.
    - the invisible gorilla – focus on one task keeps you from seeing other things; the door study
    - movie perception – if things are similar & moving quickly enough we don’t tend to see edits.
    - stress blindness – in a stressful situation (e.g. a fight) we zoom in on some things and completely miss others. This is worse with those having a history of abuse (e.g. dissociation).

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<sup>1</sup> “Stuart Grassian, MD psychiatry, has...concluded that solitary confinement can cause a specific psychiatric syndrome, characterized by hallucinations; panic attacks; overt paranoia; diminished impulse control; hypersensitivity to external stimuli; and difficulties with thinking, concentration and memory. Some inmates lose the ability to maintain a state of alertness, while others develop crippling obsessions.” <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/criminal-justice/locked-up-in-america/what-does-solitary-confinement-do-to-your-mind/>

<sup>2</sup> See, *Mistakes were made but not by me*, Tavis & Aaronson

- Memory formation and recall (false memories)
  
- Projection  
We tend to see situations through the filter of our own struggles; tendencies; values history & experiences.
  
- Logic/Empathy switching - the brain cannot simultaneously process logical and empathetic input. It switches from one to the other.<sup>3</sup>  
In an argument, the tendency is to attend to rational data or emotional data, depending on how we are built or bent.
  
- Decisions are emotional – people with damage to emotional processing areas are unable to make decisions, even about whether to eat or not.<sup>4</sup> These brain areas are needed to make decisions and they are heavily connected to emotional processing areas.

If we grant researchers are right about their observations concerning human subjectivity, then we have to grant that, even if I'm very confident, I may be wrong – I need take a tentative posture about the 'facts' as I see them and be humble about the influence of my own emotions on my 'rational' conclusions.

## Getting to Intimacy

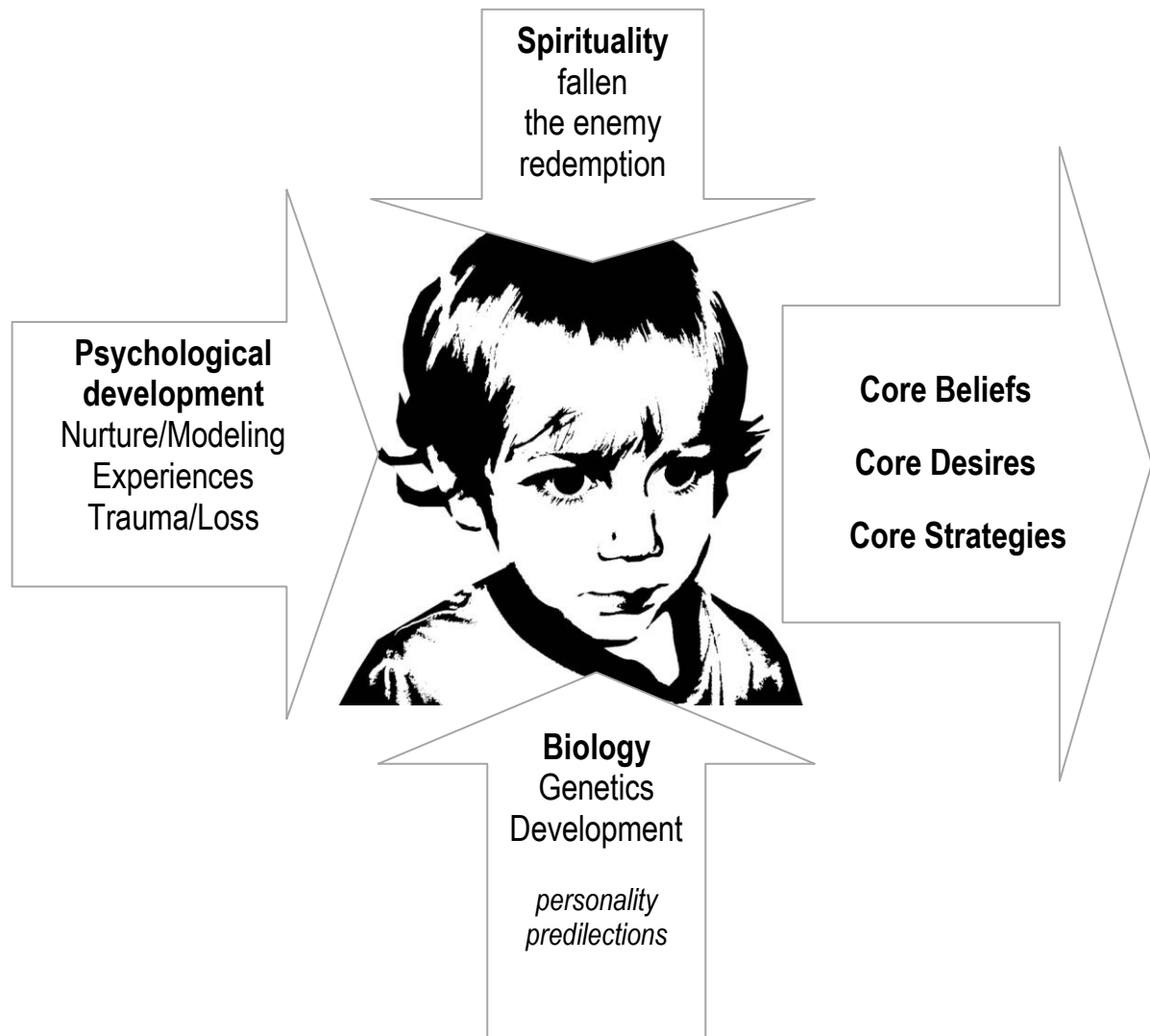
If I am to be intimate with another person, I need to let them know what I have experienced; how I felt about it; thoughts I had that were related to it; what I wanted and what I did. If I am deeply open with another person I may also let them know about the role that core beliefs, desires and strategies play in my life (see the handout, *Beliefs & Desires*)

Unfortunately, this is rarely what we present to others or what others provide for us. Why? Well, for one thing, we may not know about some aspects of the inner life; for another, we may not want others to know our seamier side. Additionally, we may handle our inner life in a way that puts others on the defensive.

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<sup>3</sup> Jack, et. al., *fMRI reveals reciprocal inhibition between social and physical cognitive domains*, *NeuroImage*, 2013 Feb 1;66:385-401.

<sup>4</sup> Bechara, Damasio and Damasio *Emotion, Decision Making and the Orbitofrontal Cortex*, *Cerebral Cortex* Volume 10, Issue 3, pp. 295-307.



The person in front of you has been formed from a variety of influences, just like you. Their personality, perspectives, desires, habitual ways of acting and reacting developed from conception until now. Many of these features are not conscious, in the sense that they are automatic rather than considered; emotionally or spiritually driven rather than rationally.

We emerge from our childhood with deeply held beliefs about who we are, what the world is like and even what God is like (core beliefs). Tied to the beliefs are certain longings that are often the opposite of the desires (e.g. those feeling unacceptable long for acceptance; those feeling the world is chaotic long for control; etc. – core desires). Finally, we have all developed ways to prevent negative feelings and get what we want (i.e. core strategies).

*Exercise 2 – mapping the inner life (Johari Window, Understanding Beliefs & Desires)*

**Turning toward them** - Making it easy for them to tell their story (vs. turning against or away).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Gottman, *The Relationship Cure*

note: the backfire effect

- If you are initiating the conversation about something you've seen, notice out loud & ask them to help you understand.
- If they are initiating the conversation, let them have their turn & make it easy for them to speak.
- Non-verbal invitations to talk

*Exercise 3 – taking turns listening with your body*

- Reflecting & summarizing what you *think* you heard
- Validating what they feel, think & want (i.e. not necessarily agreeing with them)

*Exercise 4 – taking turns reflecting & validating*

## **Getting Around Their Bad Habits**

When people are offensive or defensive, rather than being intimate, it can be a real temptation to argue with them but it is much better to re-direct the conversation toward understanding their inner life and revealing yours.

- Mindreading instead of saying what was experienced

*Discernment is prized amongst workers & leaders. When is discernment 'mindreading'?*

- Blaming instead of taking ownership of feelings
- Insisting instead of being tentative with thoughts
- Entitlement instead of making wants known
- Justifying instead of simply stating what was done

- Other defensive postures (see the *Defensiveness* handout)

Be defensive or offensive with me (take turns).

We'll take it slow. I'll let you know what I believe I'm hearing, explain how I intend to work my way back toward intimate sharing & then try to do it with you.

Try not to cave in too soon or be deliberately obstinate...keep it as real as possible.

*Exercise 5 – taking turns working around defensiveness*

## **Questions & Thoughts**