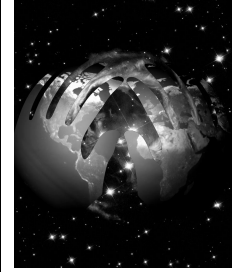


4

Understanding & Improving Relationships



- Communion: A Theory of Relatedness
- Understanding the Components of Relatedness
- Building Relationship
- Types of Connection
- Repairing Breakdowns

Communion: A Theory of Relatedness

I saw the Dalai Lama when he came to visit Ann Arbor in April 1994. There was great anticipation of his visit and of the words of wisdom he would share in his public appearances. I was fortunate enough to be able to attend one of his lectures and I remember the hush over the large crowd as he walked on stage. What did he tell us? What did the newspapers report about each of his talks here in Ann Arbor? He told us, “Be kind to each other.” Of course he said much more in his gentle and eloquent way, but that was the essence of his message, “Be kind to each other.”

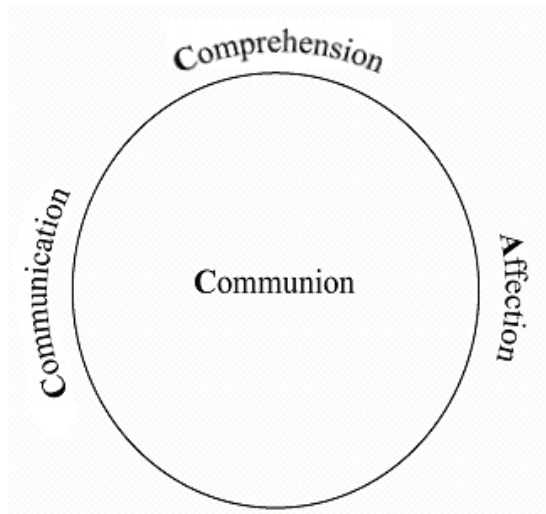
I could feel the response from some of the audience that day, “Is that all?” But when you think about it, being kind to each other is not only a virtue and an ideal, but a life’s work. *Many* things are easier than the practice of daily kindness to those around us. Anything that helps us in this practice is a useful tool for life. Such practice helps us to strengthen our characters and help us to improve the quality, not only of our own lives, but of all those whose lives touch ours.

Of course, human beings are capable of great kindness, even heroic kindness to others, especially when disaster strikes. While that is admirable for sure, what may be harder in some ways is sustained kindness to those around us day after day.

What we will be looking at in this chapter is raising the level of positive connection between people in daily life.

Understanding the Components of Relationship

Now I want to share with you one of my favorite parts of Applied Metapsychology. Dr. Gerbode's model for understanding relationships can be applied both in sessions with clients and in daily life. If you draw a circle and write around the outside edge: *Communication*, *Comprehension*, *Affection*, and then write inside the circle: *Communion*, you will have the basic model. He uses the word *communion*, not in its religious sense obviously, but more in the sense of, "a possessing or sharing in common, participation; a sharing of thoughts or feelings."



A Model for Communion (Fig. 4-1)

A lot passes for *Communication* that really isn't, if we define communication as the interchange of ideas, concepts and feelings, with the message sent across by the sender being accurately received by the receiver. (As one of my students on an Effective Communication Workshop once said, "Oh, you mean *real* communication!") *Comprehension* refers not just to the understanding of a particular message or communication, but also to the wider context of a common ground or shared frame of reference. *Affection* is the degree of liking between people; it is an attractive force. If affection is high, you want that person near you and may even

feel close when physically far apart. Low affection can have a repelling force to it. If you don't like someone or are upset with someone you ordinarily do like, you wish them far away. Communion then is the sum of these parts, a word that represents the quality of connection between people.

Building Relationship

Communication is where we commonly start when meeting someone new. We exchange ideas by communicating to find out if we have some sort of common ground, a basis for a relationship. We achieve comprehension of each other by this exchange. We may both be interested in gardening for instance, and even though we might have quite differing views on proper gardening methods, we could settle down to arguing about this happily. As we establish some comprehension between us, we usually start to feel some affection and wish to communicate more. In this way communion rises.

Sometimes we can go from comprehension as a starting point. If you attend a lecture on a subject that particularly interests you, even if you are shy, you may find it easier to strike up a conversation with a stranger sitting nearby. This is because you can assume that that person's presence at the lecture shows a similar interest to your own. The comprehension in that situation is already there, making it easier to start communicating.

Once in a while we meet someone we like immediately, even before we have a chance to communicate and establish some comprehension. We meet a person and just instantly like him or her without even knowing who s/he is yet. No matter which of the parts of communion seem to come first, each leads to more of each of the other parts, allowing communion to blossom and grow.

Exercise 4-1:

- Remember some times when you entered into communion with someone through communication.
- Remember some times when you entered into communion with someone through a background of comprehension.
- Remember some times when you entered into communion with someone through instant affection.
- Repeat each item as long as you are interested or until you have a positive shift.

Types of Connection

At the European Metapsychology Conference of November 2001 held in Milan, an interesting distinction came up in discussion: that we cannot fully understand communion until we distinguish three specific types:

- Social Communion
- One-Way Communion
- Two-Way Communion

Social Communion

A type of communion we might call *social communion* occurs when two people talk as acquaintances without exchanging any deeply felt beliefs or emotions. This sort of interchange can be very pleasant without being especially deep. Social communion is the appropriate level in many social and work situations. Communication at this level may be testing the waters for the possibility of deeper communion, or our interchange with that person may continue in the social communion vein.

We have countless opportunities for striking up social communion with people we encounter. Some we will never see again; others we may meet up with repeatedly for brief non-intense social interaction. Of course, some people we meet up with may not want to communicate, or to enter into communion, even the social kind. It's important to respect this. You can always "float" a communication over

to someone and wait to see what the response will be. An initial communication is an invitation to the other to enter into communion.

If the invitation is accepted because the “invitee” is ready and willing to communicate, you can go on from there to build some communion. (The exercises given near the end of the last chapter have as much to do with establishing and building communion as they do with the Emotional Scale. You might wish to revisit them with this in mind.)

Exercise 4-2:

- **Practice establishing and building communion with people as you go through the day. Practice your ability to communicate something that will be real (comprehensible) to the other person and engage his/her willingness to communicate further.**
- **This is a social skill that we all have to a greater or lesser degree. Consciously practicing the ability just puts in more in your command.**
- **Try this either verbally or non-verbally with babies.**

One-Way Communion

Another type of communion we may call *one-way communion*. This occurs in the relationships between professional people and their patients or clients. We expect from doctors, dentists, lawyers, counselors and therapists that they will listen compassionately to our problems and offer the appropriate treatment or service, without their taking a turn to unload any similar problems they might have upon us. That is one-way communion. The relationship may be quite cordial and friendly and marked by significant communion (by definition, a phenomenon between people that both are experiencing), but the communication is one-way in the sense that though two people are involved in the communication, only one of them gets to share personal thoughts, feelings, etc.

This is really why “dual relationships” (friendship or romance or business relationships between a professional person and his or her patient or client) are frowned upon. It can be difficult to maintain the boundaries of the one-way pro-

fessional relationship while also having another (two-way) relationship with the same person. Also the professional in the relationship elicits a feeling of trust and safety in the client as a result of the practice of this one-way communion that can give him or her an unfair advantage if the relationship moves into a deeper degree of communion. A person on the receiving end of a one-way relationship, a counseling client let us say, usually shares thoughts, feelings and concerns with the other person at a deeper level and faster than in a two-way relationship where trust is built up more slowly. The position of trust the professional person has upon entering into this one-way communication allows a deeper, faster intimacy, even though it only goes one way. As the client relaxes into the safety of this trust, it can be such a relief and (if the professional is doing a good job) the client can feel so well understood that the common “falling in love with” one’s therapist, medical doctor, (fill in the profession), phenomenon can occur. The communion experienced in these situations is real and is appropriate as long as the professional person maintains professional boundaries. In terms of normal human relationships, it is artificial in that it is one-way communication. Looking at it from the other side, professional people receive this relatively swift, deep trust and admiration from their clients due to the special nature of the relationship. This aspect of one-way communication can lead to a professional feeling that s/he is falling in love with a client.

We might just call that one-way type of communion “professional communion” except for the fact that it is necessary in some other contexts as well. In communicating with a child, an adult needs to understand that he or she has the overall responsibility for the quality of the communion. According to Woititz (*Healthy Parenting*, 1992), the needs of the child come first. Parents who lean on a child for emotional support, or for someone to listen to their troubles are behaving inappropriately. Children need the support of this one-way communion in order to develop with relative smoothness into fully responsible adults themselves. Of course the love between parent and child flows both ways, and each can communicate with the other and achieve comprehension. What is one-way is the responsibility for the relationship overall, and the care the parent takes in all aspects of communion to fulfill that responsibility. (My sister Jennifer points out that a great source of frustration in parent-child relationships comes from parents resisting a

shift from the one-way to the two-way form of communion as their children enter adulthood.)

Another example of the need for the uneven type responsibility in a relationship occurs when one of the people is unable due to his or her mental, physical or emotional condition to assume an equal responsibility. Someone who is in horrendous physical pain, or who is undergoing great mental or emotional stress, whether from some situation in life or from a chronic mental condition, will be less likely to be able to shoulder equal responsibility for the quality of communication. Friends often give each other turns to be the one who needs some extra care or consideration. Such things as serious business difficulties, or severe illness, put a strain on relationships and families. Couples and families who understand this and manage it well can survive crises, or even come through them stronger than before. Couples and families who do not understand and work with this can crack under the strain. (Wallerstein and Blakesley, *The Good Marriage*, 1996).

It's a special ability to be completely able receive and appreciate the communication, comprehension (at whatever level it may be) and affection from another person you are in an unequal relationship with, without any resentment of the inequality. Most people manage it at least part of the time with their own children.

Exercise 4-3:

- 1. Remember a time when you experienced good one-way communion with a professional person such as a doctor, therapist, etc.**
What was that experience like?

 - 2. Remember a time when you were in a one-way communion situation with a professional person that did not go well.**
What happened?
Was something missing?
- **Repeat steps 1-2 as long as you are interested**

Exercise 4-4:

1. **Remember a time when you, as a professional person, parent, friend of a person in need, etc., achieved good one-way communion with another. What was that experience like?**
2. **Remember when you, as a professional person, parent, etc., were in one-way communion with someone when it did not go well.**

What happened?

Was something missing?

- **Repeat steps 1-2 as long as you are interested.**

Two-Way Communion

Now let's move on from social and one-way communion to something that is two-way and a bit deeper. With people we spend more time with, friends, co-workers, business associates or colleagues, we have the opportunity to build communion that is more meaningful because we share more. Communion grows and becomes more rewarding as we establish habits of communication, common purposes and easy affection with these people. In our more intimate relationships, we can have communion deep and true. Good family relationships and good close friendships provide deep affection that has grown over the years of knowing and being known at the deepest level, the familiarity that only comes with shared experience, good memories and lots and lots of communication. While people who experience love at first sight, or who meet and become instant close friends, have that sense of knowing each other deeply, there is still the work to do (and delightful work it is), of filling in the comprehension by means of lots of communication. Getting to know another in all of his/her facets and qualities just does take some time.

Some people who fear or avoid intimate relationships and who would be uncomfortable with deep communion, are adept at social communion. Such people feel safe in the very limitations of social communion and its relative anonymity. On the other hand, some people who are comfortable in deep communion in familiar close relationships are fearful of communion with strangers and are awkward

and shy with new people. It isn't an either/or proposition. It is just an interesting set of phenomena in that we might tend to think that someone who is "good at" communion in one context would also be comfortable in another.

Communion with others is perhaps the best reward of living.

Ideally a person can be at home in the world and can go anywhere and strike up some level of communion with the people s/he finds there. If no kindred spirits appear, the communion stays on the social level. Once s/he finds a congenial person, communion can deepen quite rapidly into true friendship.

For optimum quality of life, we want to be adept at *all* forms of communion:

- Social communion.
- One-way Communion.
- Two-way Communion between people on an equal basis.

Our ability to commune relates to the Emotional Scale since, higher on the scale, people tend to be more able to experience and generate the components of communion. Each of these separate skills has impact on the quality of life:

- Ability to enter into social communion in all sorts of situations.
- Ability to maintain social communion over time.
- Ability to establish communion on either side of an unequally based communion.
- Ability to maintain communion on either side of an unequal relationship.
- Ability to enter into strong, deep communion.
- Ability to maintain close communion over time.

Exercise 4-5:

Do these exercises over a period of some days or weeks. If doing them alone, you can keep track of your practice and the results in a journal. If working with a partner or in a group, you will probably want to discuss these exercises over some weeks.

1. **Think of some ways to establish social communion with new acquaintances, or to build social communion with people you already know. Choose one or two of these and practice them. Notice the results.**
2. **Think of some ways to establish or build one-way communion, either on the receiving side or the cause side, or both. Choose one or two of these. Notice the results.**
3. **Think of some ways to build communion with your nearest and dearest. If you are willing, choose one or two of these and put them into practice. Notice the results.**

Why would anyone not want to improve communion with his/her intimates? Vulnerability is a key component in intimacy. Intimacy is all about opening up to another person, and this can be scary for many people. Notice whether any reluctance, resistance or any other feelings or attitudes come up for you when you contemplate building communion with the people closest to you. The next section may shed some light on anything that comes up. Our fears about being vulnerable come from misunderstandings, hurts and upsets in the past. Doing good work in session can clear up loads of charge on past upsets. Meanwhile, we can become skilled at cleaning up upsets as they occur.

Repairing Breakdowns

Now that we have looked at the component parts of communion and how they build together, let's look at what happens in an upset, a breakdown of communion. Just as all the parts build together, when one part breaks down, all the rest are dragged down as well. For example if you are meeting me for lunch at a restaurant and I am late, you may be tolerant at first. As time goes on your tolerance may wear thin and eventually you get upset. There is no communication so you don't

know what is going on (= no comprehension) and whenever an upset occurs, affection drops. If I finally do show up, your first feeling will probably be that you do not want to talk to me! That is the normal response to broken communion. Of course, the correct thing to do is to communicate in spite of that. With communication re-established, comprehension can come back (maybe I had a flat tire on the way to the restaurant) and affection rekindles.

It is essential to realize that communion has to exist before it can be broken. When it breaks (and the stronger the communion was between two people, the bigger the upset will be when it breaks), there is a tendency to think that it really wasn't there at all. Let's look at a balloon as an analogy. If you stick a pin into a balloon that has very little air in it, not much happens. If you stick the pin into a balloon that is fairly well filled with air, you will get a pop. With a very tightly filled balloon, a pin prick will make a much louder bang. The more communion present, the bigger the "bang" when it breaks. The effect of a communion break is to invalidate the communion that has gone before. If you keep that in mind, you can overcome the normal tendency to want to withhold communication from a person with whom you are upset.

Here is a story that illustrates the point that communion has to exist before it can be broken. I had a boyfriend once who took me home to meet his parents. Over dinner, my boyfriend and his father started complaining about the other son in the family who had moved away and stopped communicating with them. They were saying lots of disparaging things about him, and one might have thought that they never wanted to see him again. After dinner I took the mother aside and asked her for her other son's address while my boyfriend and his father were off doing something else. She was perfectly willing to give it to me even though she had just met me. Mothers are almost always the last to give up on their children. Then I wrote to the brother and said, "You don't know me; I'm your brother's girlfriend. I'm writing to tell you that I can see that your father and your brother love you very much. The reason I know this is because they are very upset that you are not communicating with them. I just wanted to let you know this in case you want to get back in touch with them." It worked! He did get back in touch with his family, ap-

parently in response to my letter, and that was the end of all the complaints about what a terrible person he was.

When two people have an upset and do the work of fully repairing it, the relationship is stronger than before, similar to a broken bone that has healed. Good relationships do not depend on never having any upsets; that would be unreal. Good relationships do depend on a high level of trust. Trust gets strengthened every time a break in communion is repaired. Although there are three components, there are just two main strategies for repairing breakdowns:

1. Naming the type of breakdown reduces the charge it generates. For example, two friends can sit down together and sort out how a misunderstanding happened from each person's point of view until full understanding is reached and communion is restored. One might say, "For me it was a break in comprehension because I didn't understand what was going on with you when you walked away without talking to me." The other might say, "Well that's interesting. I can see how you felt that way. For me it was a break in affection because I didn't think you cared about talking to me because you were talking to George for so long while I was waiting to talk to you!" In this way, being respectful of each other's feelings, the two can repair their communion. (Sometimes one person or both will need a cooling-off period before effective communication can take place.) This strategy employs the use of communication to re-establish comprehension and hence restore the communion.

2. The other strategy uses straight affection. With this approach the individuals simply let go of or "get off" their disagreements and misunderstandings and reassert their affection for each other. John Gottman (*The Seven Principles that Make Marriage Work*, 2000), advocates this method over the "communicate it out" approach.

Though it is not true in all cases, women tend to favor the first method over the second and men tend to prefer the second over the first. At least, with this data in mind, two people with different styles can take a look at their preferences and gain understanding of what is happening.

Sometimes there is too much upset occurring for either of these strategies to work. One or both of the people need to work on it with a facilitator or counselor, either individually, or in joint sessions. Often earlier breakdowns, including ones that happened in earlier relationships, are tied in to current one and those need to be resolved to fully handle the current situation. Keeping this in mind can help us to be more tolerant of self and others. Whenever a person's current upset fails to resolve, it is tied to an earlier one.

My father pointed out to me that if you are in a general state of broken down communion in most areas of life, then life can occur for you as so flat, dull and gray that another upset hardly makes much impact, but just adds to the general gloom. Once you have increased your communion however, from clearing up or letting go of past upsets, when you are clean and sparkly and wide open to communication, comprehension and affection, then a disruption is intolerable. It is something that must be resolved immediately if possible because it is too painful to tolerate.

Exercises 4-6:

- 1. A. Think of a time when an upset that you had or that you observed was not fully healed. Was there a lasting effect from that upset?**
B. Think of a time when an upset you had or that you observed was fully healed with the communion restored to its former level or even higher.
C. Repeat as long as you are interested.
- 2. Enlisting the willingness of a friend or mate, try both strategies for repairing communion breaks as the opportunity arises. Compare notes on what works or doesn't work for you as a pair.**

There are a number of misconceptions about love, communion and relationships floating around in the world. One is the idea that falling in love is the peak of a love relationship and that it's all downhill from there. Not true. Over time as people work through their upsets and continue to build communion, their closeness grows and gets richer. Another is the idea that love just dies for no reason, the "falling out of love" phenomenon. In this case, there are many, many large or

small breaks in communion which have not been resolved and eventually build up to the point where one or both of the people in the relationship can't stand it any more.

Another false idea is that a break has to weaken a relationship of any kind. If you and your friend have a big upset and manage to work all the way through it to complete understanding, harmony and restored communion, the relationship and the trust will be stronger than ever, just as a broken bone when it heals grows stronger in the broken place.

Another application of the concept of communion in everyday experience is to use it as an indicator of how well we are doing in life. The level of communion we feel for ourselves, our bodies, our environment, and the people around us, has everything to do with our quality of life. A life filled with upsets, withheld communication and resentments is not very much fun. A life warm with communion, both the social kind and true deep communion, is rewarding indeed. We can use the concept as an indicator or guide when making life decisions: will the outcome be less communion, or more and better communion? We can use the concept to examine and improve our own behavior by looking at how our words and actions affect the level of communion between ourselves and others.

Applying this model in life is kindness in action.

Chapter Summary

Gerbode's model: Communication + Comprehension + Affection = Communion, makes sense of the components of relationship. Once we understand each one and see how these necessary ingredients affect each other, we have useful knowledge for building our connections with other people.

This connection may be:

Social, which is to say the kind of connection we have in the course of daily life with people we do not know or know only slightly, or in the context of business.

- One-way, when one person bears all or most of the responsibility for the relationship, for example:
 - Parent and child.
 - Professional person and client.
 - Anyone and a person who is very needy (either chronically or acutely).
- Two-way, Communion between equals who know each other. In this category we find Communion in its deepest and most profound form.

Knowing how to build relationship and connectedness also gives us insight into how breaks in Communion may be repaired. This helps our chances having relationships that grow better and stronger through the years.
