chapter six

HELP UNIQUENESSES MEET

To review the first four steps, in order to "properly communicate," the basic **actions** you use are "taking in" and "giving out" (Chapter 2). The **possibilities** our brain empowers us with are *impersonal* and *personal* relating (Chapter 3). The crucial **choice** is to work to make your communicating *as personal as possible* (Chapter 4). The **features to get on the table** are choices, ESP, reflections, and mindfulness (Chapter 5). This chapter explains how the **outcome** that can occur is that uniquenesses may meet, as appears to be happening for Prince Harry and the young African in the picture.

UNIQUENESS

The probability of somebody other than your identical twin having your exact DNA is almost zero; and even identical twins are individuals. This is one way of saying that uniqueness is another defining characteristic of a person. Each of us is a unique combination of culturally influenced choices, measurable and unmeasurable parts, reflections, and the ability to be mindful.

Uniqueness surfaces in communication as people mindfully take in and give out their choices, ESP, and reflections. When relevant parts of these features are present in a conversation, the people will get a sense of some of what's unique about each other. This makes uniqueness the simplest yardstick for whether and when a communication event is *as personal as possible.* A *personal* contact happens when the people involved have a sense of some of what's unique about each other.

This has happened to you many times in the past with family members and others you care about or love. If you think back, I'm sure you can recall some of these times, because they were moments that *mattered.* They may have been positive or negative, but they had impact.

One of these moments that I remember wasn't all that pleasant, but it was really important. It happened in a session my wife and I had with a counselor named

Ellen, when we were trying to sort out what made our marriage stressful. Ellen asked me why I'd arrived late for the session, and I described what had happened on the way. I'd rushed to my car, realized I'd forgotten my keys, slid my briefcase under the locked car while I ran back to my office, returned with the keys, and driven off. Part way there, I discovered what I'd done, returned to the lot, and found that my briefcase was gone. I was definitely frazzled when I got to the counseling session. Ellen sympathized with me some and then gently asked me how much "dignity" I thought was in my life.

Her question struck me like a slap on the face. I was embarrassed and angry at the thought that my life might be "undignified." "What are you saying?" I snapped defensively. Ellen didn't push the idea. She just planted it and helped me think aloud about it.

Pretty soon, I began to see that she'd really hit a nail on the head. She had listened to me deeply enough in earlier sessions that she'd come to know me uniquely, in this case better than I knew myself. Her point was not that I needed to be stuffy or formal, but that I should respect myself enough to slow down, be mindful, and move through life with more grace. Ellen talked about learning a similar lesson about her own life, and she shared some of the ways dignity smoothed things for her. It felt like a talk with an older sister. Although it was painful, I experienced real contact between Ellen and an important part of who I was.

As I think back on this experience, I realize that in this conversation, part of my uniqueness met part of Ellen's. She wasn't just "a counselor" to me, and I wasn't just "a client" to her. This particular conversation could not have happened between any two people in the world other than Ellen and me. Her question about "dignity" was customized to fit me—who I was right then and where I was in my life. Her report about how dignity worked in her life gave me a window into something unique about her. Relevant choices, emotions, and reflections were on the table between us. As a result, even though there were gender, age, and ethnicity differences between us, we connected as *unique persons*.

The fact that this wasn't a pleasant encounter is important. Contact that's *as personal as possible* isn't always agreeable, fun, or supportive. Its value comes from being genuine, candid, real. This is why personal contact so often *matters*.

This kind of communicating can happen in many life arenas—online, at work, in learning situations, and in spiritual and religious contexts.[16] Most importantly for this book, it can happen when you're communicating with someone who's culturally different from you.

As the next chapter explains, multicultural situations are where uniqueness is most obvious, and sometimes most challenging. If you move through the steps that are outlined in these chapters, though, you can help create contact that is *as personal as possible*, which is what Dr. King is pointing toward.

When King said "properly communicated," I believe he meant communicated as personally as possible. When conversation partners are present to each other, when they listen for choices, feelings, and reflections, when they talk about their own relevant choices, feelings, and reflections, and when parts of their uniquenesses meet, their contact will often overcome the difficult differences they're experiencing.

HOW TO HELP UNIQUENESSES MEET

Taking In "Take in" uniqueness by actively listening for and asking about the other person's distinctive take on the topic. This is what Ellen did for me. Ask the other person where his or her view is the same as yours and where it's different. Probe his or her feelings and metaphors, because this is where a person's individuality often surfaces. Especially when the person is culturally different from you, ask yourself, "Who is THIS person?" In my case, how is what Ellen is saying different from anything else I've heard on this topic? How is she unlike everybody else?

Remember what it's like to really get into a piece of music? Taking in uniqueness is something like this. You *let the other person happen to you* just as you let music happen to you. In a way, you move to another's melody. You grasp, sense, feel, what sets this person apart from everybody else. The experience may be something you like or dislike, but the point is, you contact him or her as a *person.*

When it's difficult for you to get a sense of uniqueness, go back to the four qualities. Ask more about choices. Watch for and check your perceptions of emotions. Get a sense of his or her personality. Check to see that you understand what questions this person is asking about this topic. In all these efforts, work at being present to the person and making it easier for him or her to be present to you.

Giving Out This will make it easier for the person to sense your individuality. Be as candid and open as the situation permits. "Give out" some of your own uniqueness directly by summarizing relevant parts of your history or how your views are similar to and different from your conversation partner's. Do the same about the unmeasurable parts of your take on the topic. Ask questions to check whether he or she is hearing your individual viewpoint. You can also paraphrase what you hear is unique about the other and ask for verification or correction.

As I mentioned, sometimes it isn't appropriate or safe to connect personally with another person. But don't be led astray by out-of-date beliefs about management, productivity, learning, satisfaction, happiness, and even health that have encouraged people to "keep your distance," "don't get personal," and "remember your objective role in the work group/family/team." Many actual studies of real people don't support these generalizations.

chapter seven

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT DIFFERENCE

"If you are different than me, why don't we talk?"

Pope Francis and Dr. King both understand that the best way to deal with difference is to get to know each other better. My goal in this book is to empower you to do this, to help make your communicating *as personal as possible* especially when you experience difficult difference.

Difficult difference happens when you notice a difference between one or more of your cultural identifiers and another person's race, gender, age, sexuality, ability, or religion, and the difference creates a difficulty. Some examples include:

- You're around someone of a different race and you're irritated at how loudly they are talking, or how close they're standing to you.
- A person doesn't seem to believe that you're competent, and you suspect it's because you're female, Latino, physically disabled, or Black.
- You are one of the only people in the room like you, and you notice that most people are ignoring you.
- You're passed over for a reward at work in favor of a person who's culturally different from you.
- You encounter an obvious act of discrimination that you want to respond to—a joke that someone makes at the expense of a member of the LGBTQ community, ridicule of a woman in power, or violent criticism of "those Muslims."

In situations like these, most people respond with "flight," "fight," or "freeze." For example, after a young man of color assaulted and murdered a White woman in our primarily White city, people posted anonymously online that the problem was "all those outsiders we've allowed to move in," and one challenged others to join with him in "getting rid of them." This is obviously a "fight" response. On the "flight" or "freeze" side, a Black friend of mine told me that, when he's waiting for an elevator and the door opens to reveal that there is only a single White woman in the car, he waits for the next car, because he's learned that she's likely to be afraid of him. He avoids this possibility.

The pope's invitation and Dr. King's advice offer an alternative to "fight," "flight," or "freeze." As I've said, it's hard to hate or fear others who are different from you when you know them personally. This is the connection between what's in Chapters 2 to 6 and the rest of this book. **The more you can succeed at helping make your communicating *as personal as possible,* the better you'll know the other person, the less you're likely to fear him or her, and the more effectively and productively you can deal with difficult difference.**

PRIVILEGE AND POWER

Especially in the United States, the context for everybody's efforts to deal with difficult difference is shaped by the realities of privilege and power. Since this country's inception, certain people have been able to experience more societal value than others. Most frequently, these have included men, Whites, and heterosexuals. These privileged groups have attained social entitlements, often at the expense of others. This is what is known as "systemic privilege." If you're a White, heterosexual male, you may not have expected or asked for this privilege, but *systems* give it to you anyway. Many of these systems were established far in the past, and demographic probabilities continue to populate them. These systems give power and privilege to the people in them.

All three kinds of privilege (skin color, sexuality, gender) have been abused, and skin color has especially given people advantages and disadvantages for hundreds of years. For example, at various times in the past, the racial category "White" in the United States did not include Italians, Poles, or Irish. Because of the power and privilege it would give them, "High caste Hindus" argued to be classified as White before the U.S. Supreme Court in 1919, and Japanese made the same effort in 1922. Today, many mixed-race people and light-skinned immigrants from war-torn Mideast countries struggle with the advantages and disadvantages of choosing to be classified as "White," because it can make a huge difference in their lives

Whiteness makes this kind of difference, because, in the United States, most of the power in educational, law-enforcement, finance, government, health care, manufacturing, artistic, and religious organizations is still held by White people. This power reality creates a situation in which Whites usually don't have to think of their race and their unearned privileges, whereas people of color have to cope with racial issues and challenges every day. One author calls this "the normative violence of Whiteness."[17] "Normative" means Whiteness sets most of the ground rules, and "violence" means that many of these spoken and unspoken rules hurt people who aren't White.

For example, Whites can insist that it's good to be "color-blind." "I don't even notice color," some insist, "and that's the way everybody should operate." There are at least three serious problems with this claim. First, Whites are the only people who have the luxury of believing this, because we hold most of the power. People of color are forced to be aware of the consequences of being Black, Latino/a, Native American, or Asian every day. They cannot be "color blind."

Second, people of color know that everyday realities deny the possibility of genuine color-blindness actually happening. Black men regularly hear the familiar sound of car doors locking as White drivers stopped at an intersection act to ensure their safety. The Black or Latino father and son get out of their car at a garage sale and see the White woman hosting the sale immediately move to guard the cash box. On committees or in classes the lone person of color is expected to be able to report on "how you people think" about the topic. These subtle, often unintentional actions that highlight cultural difference are called microaggressions,[18] and they happen to people of color every day.

People of color also know that most "color-blind" efforts cancel out contributions that might be made by those with distinctive cultural experiences. Research shows that diverse groups make the best decisions, and the "color blind" impetus is designed to mask or deny differences that can be very productive.

In a similar way, White politicians can argue that all U.S. citizens should "assimilate" into a "melting pot" society. Again, people of color experience acts of

hatred that show them that this goal is also wildly unrealistic, and they wonder what valuable features of their cultures they would be required to give up in order to join this "assimilated" culture.

Dozens of research studies illustrate how widespread and powerful "the normative violence of Whiteness" can be. For example, several research reports show that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates, and yet people of color are jailed on drug charges at rates ten to fifty times greater than those of Whites.[19] A similar situation exists in the arena of employment. In 2003, when 500 identical resumes were sent out with fictitious names to help-wanted ads in Boston and Chicago, the ones with White-sounding names received 50 percent more callbacks than the ones with Black-sounding names.[20] Evidence from all life-arenas shows that, as diversity expert Verna Myers puts it in a popular TED-X talk, "We gotta get out of denial" that Whiteness is a major issue.

REPLACE GUILT WITH RESPONSE-ABILITY

When hearing this claim about privilege and power, some Whites ask, "Why do you people always play the race card? I don't condone slavery. I support civil rights. I can't change what happened before I was born." The dynamic that combines resentment from people of color and regret from well-meaning Whites commonly produces this kind of guilt—and it only makes problems worse.

The alternative is to replace guilt with response-ability. For example, if you live where snowfall is a winter reality, you don't consider yourself guilty for the most recent four to six inches of white stuff. If you're a renter or property owner, it is also up to you to clear the snow from your sidewalk. Although you had nothing to do with creating the problem, you are expected to help deal with it. This is an example of response-ability; not "fault" but the willingness and ability to *respond* to the conditions you encounter that need to be changed.

Each of us needs to understand the realities and the crushing weight of privilege and to respond effectively in our own spheres of influence. "Understanding" is how we think globally and "responding effectively" is how we act locally.

When I say "each of us," I mean both Whites and people of other ethnicities. Although White male heterosexuals clearly created and primarily sustained today's systems of power and privilege, people of varied cultures continue them. Consider, for example, the multiracial adoration of Michael Jackson and Beyonce. Both Jackson and Beyonce invested millions in becoming what mainly White standards say is attractive and sexy and people of all colors bought into this value system. The power difference is often so great that White values can shape both White and Black consciousness, often insidiously. We <u>all</u> have a lot to learn about Whiteness, and it works best when we learn it together, because we can be teachers and learners with each other.

WHY "RACIAL"? WHY "EQUITY"?

Race The examples that start this chapter are not only about race; they also include sexuality, gender, age, religion, and class. So why is this book called *Personal Communicating and <u>Racial</u> Equity*? Social justice advocates may wonder why I'm leaving out the other kinds of discrimination, and critics could complain again about "always playing the race card."

It's true that equity won't be accomplished until all kinds of discrimination are eliminated, but I focus on race here for four reasons.

First, although the concept of "race" is, as a widely viewed PBS series demonstrated, "an illusion,"[21] it is a very powerful one. DNA evidence shows that there are more physical differences between people of "the same race" than between individuals of "different races"; but, even though racial markers can't scientifically be used to distinguish between people, we do it anyway.

Second, as I've already mentioned, race inequities create the most pressing problems in the United States at this time in our history, and the most serious of these inequities are Black/White. Between 2012 and 2015, events like the Trayvon Martin shooting (Sanford, Florida); the police killings of unarmed Blacks, including Tamir Rice (Cleveland), Akai Gurley (Brooklyn), Kajleme Powell (St. Louis), Michael Brown (Ferguson), Eric Garner (New York), McKenzie Cochran (Detroit), Wendell Allen (New Orleans), Laquan McDonald (Chicago); and perhaps most tragically, Dylann Roof's murder of nine Blacks holding a prayer meeting at Charlotte's African Methodist Episcopal Church all demonstrate that this country's main problem is still "the color line" that W.E.B. DuBois identified in 1903. A group of social justice activists insist that "Black Lives Matter," and although it's easy to respond, "All lives matter," this group's message needs to be heard, because regular news reports demonstrate that, in many cases, Black lives don't seem to matter as much as they should.

This point is vividly and disturbingly illustrated in David Pilgrim's 2015 book, *Understanding Jim Crow: Using Racist Memorabilia to Teach Tolerance and Promote Social Justice.* In 171 pages, Pilgrim shows 141 pictures of postcards, cookie jars, figurines, board games, books, sheet music, toys, fishing lures, and other everyday items that subtly insinuated cruel and violent racist stereotypes into almost every U.S. home between 1870 and 1970. Many are still for sale today. One postcard shows five black male babies with the caption, "Alligator Bait." Pilgrim's Jim Crow Museum at Ferris State University in Michigan also displays a poster of a Black baby drinking ink with the caption, "Nigger Milk," a "Bulls-Eye Bill" target with a black face in the center, a photo of a proud White man leaning against a tree where two lynched Black men hang lifelessly, and thousands of other racist artifacts. The shockingly dehumanizing messages about Blacks cunningly communicated in these artifacts have deeply distorted American hearts and minds. Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. calls Pilgrim's book, "One of the most important contributions to the study of American History that I have ever experienced."[22]

The third reason I focus on race is that this kind of discrimination is especially difficult to repair because of its long history. This country that we love in many ways has been built, in part, on the backs of groups that have been identified as "not White" and then exploited. The scientifically invalid idea of "race" was invented several hundred years ago as a construct to put people in power hierarchies and to justify inhumane treatment of many different groups. In the United States, colonists took land from Native Americans who had no concept of land ownership, brought diseases, and, when tribes resisted, killed them. The early years of this country were marked by widespread discrimination against Irish, Italian, and Polish immigrants; Chinese railroad workers; Japanese placed in internment camps; and, from the earliest U.S. government documents, Blacks. The U.S. Constitution originally said that slaves, who were virtually all Black, would only count as a partial person (hence the 3/5th clause) for purposes of taxation and representation. For the first 200 years of U.S. history, national, state, and local laws openly discriminated against Blacks, and both legal opinions and racist social conventions reinforced these practices.

To take just one example, the 2015 "Lynching in America" report from the Equal Justice Initiative details a version of terrorism in the United States that historically reinforced racial inequality.[23] EJI researchers "documented 3959 lynchings of black people in twelve Southern states between the end of Reconstruction in 1877 and 1950. . . ." (p. 5). "Racial terror lynching was a tool used to enforce Jim Crow laws and racial segregation. . . not merely punishment of an alleged perpetrator for a crime" (p. 5). Often, lynchings were treated as community education events, and parents were encouraged to bring their children. EJI concludes, "Lynchings in the American South were not isolated hate crimes committed by rogue vigilantes. Lynching was targeted racial violence at the core of a systematic campaign of terror perpetrated in furtherance of an unjust social order" (p. 23). Unfortunately, the report shows, "The narrative of racial difference that lynching dramatized continues to haunt us" (p. 3).

The Voting Rights Act of 1965 and the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, 1968, and 1991 significantly changed what's legal, but the hearts of many U.S. citizens

today are still hardened by this 400 years of legal racism. Beliefs with this much history are tough to change. Our only hope is to confront them as honestly and directly as we can.

The fourth reason to focus on race is that several groups have found that, when they make progress toward narrowing the gaps between people of different races, they also succeed in closing gaps that are economic, and those based on gender and sexuality.[24] In other words, this emphasis can have important side benefits.

Equity This is another important term in this book's title. The first dictionary definition of the word *equity* is, "The state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair." Emphasizing equity can create problems, though, because *equality* and *freedom* are two of the most basic U.S. values, and when we start with a playing field that is anything but level, equity sometimes demands *unequal* remedies that threaten some people's *freedoms.* You can't level a tilted playing field by giving everybody the same help. This would just keep the field uneven. In order to move toward equity, there are times when some has to be transferred from those of us who have more to those who have less. If this sounds un-American, remember that it's the rationale behind the graduated income tax. People with more pay more, and appropriately so.

Successful programs in schools, businesses, nonprofits, and political organizations also have demonstrated that equity work can benefit all participants. Achieving equity is not a zero-sum game. When I am respectfully curious (see Chapter 8) about a culture different from my own, I don't lose or give up anything. Rather, I learn something about that culture that enriches my understanding. When I take time to listen to someone different from me, I can experience the same kind of enlightenment that often happens when I visit a foreign country: "Naps in the early afternoon! What a great idea!" "Their constant smiling masks disagreements, but it sure helps to keep the conversation going." "I can see now that an hour of tea and small talk before getting down to business can actually help the negotiation."

As I mentioned, research also shows that diverse groups make better decisions than homogeneous ones. This means that when White privilege is diminished, contributions from "Others" often enhance group outcomes.[25] So when politicians argue against multiculturalism in favor of "assimilation," they are actually putting at risk both good decision making and public learning.

In short, if you want to deal more effectively with difficult difference, it helps to acknowledge that, much of the time, these differences have to do with race and equity. Your efforts to help make your communicating as personal as possible will take place in this context. The practical work of developing an alternative option to "fight," "flight," or "freeze" emphasizes three actions that all help lead in this direction: **curiosity, humility,** and **platinum empathy.** These are the topics of the next three chapters, because each of these can help you make your communicating in situations of difficult difference *as personal as possible*.