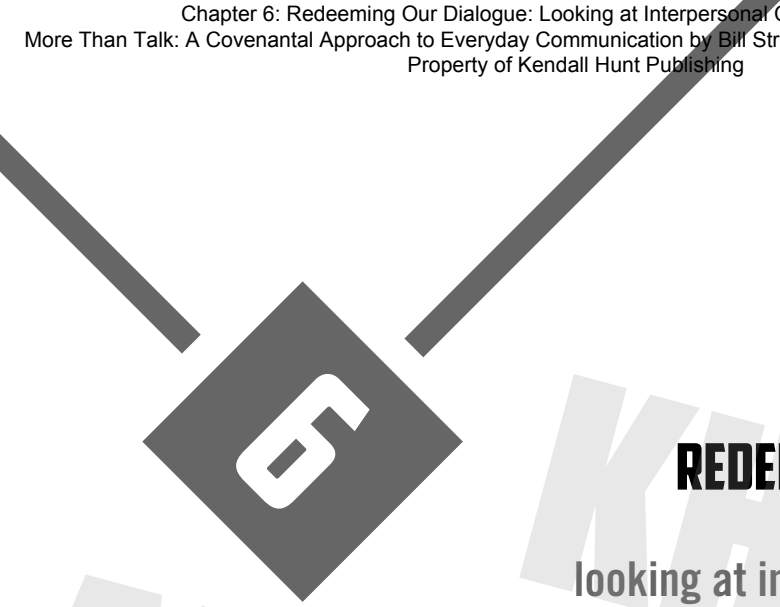

# 6 REDEEMING OUR DIALOGUE

## looking at interpersonal communication

**IN DESCRIBING HIS BELIEF** that hurting people heal best within communities of care, psychologist Larry Crabb wrote:

> We were designed to connect with others. Connecting is life. Loneliness is the ultimate horror. In connecting with God, we gain life. In connecting with others, we nourish and experience life as we freely share it. Rugged individualism, proud independence, and chosen isolation violate the nature of our existence as much as trying to breathe underwater.[1]

His observation underscores covenantal principle number one—that persons-in-community is God's design for relational thriving.

Unfortunately the bonds that bring life can also beleaguer us, as in the case of Robert and Vicky. I was surprised to hear from my wife that Robert had admitted to an affair. This was the first case of infidelity within our circle of friends. We had known Robert and Vicky for nearly ten years. They were raised in Christian homes, made personal commitments to God in their youth, graduated from Bible school and taught Bible studies.

But after thirty-three years Robert felt controlled by Vicky and reported no feelings for her. After Vicky discovered the affair the two saw a counselor, but it became clear that Robert did not intend to break off his adulterous relationship. His tears were not over his infidelity, but having to choose between wife and mistress. What went wrong?

Without doubt Robert and Vicky suffered from numerous strains in their relationship—debate about money, fatigue from dual incomes, the challenge of three children, and negotiation for affection. However one strain that seemed most telling was their interaction. When problems arose, Vicky discussed them avidly, suggested solutions, and acted to solve them. Robert usually went along with her solutions but rarely voiced his own. Unknown to Vicky, Robert held deep resentment concerning her assertiveness. During one counseling session, Robert explained how Vicky had barged in on a business deal he was cutting with a salesperson and messed it up. Over thirty years later he shared his anger about it for the first time.

> A covenantal perspective affirms that we don't communicate *in* a relationship, but that our communication *is* the relationship

Marriage relationships exist because two people come together, vow allegiance, and develop bonds through communicative acts. No wonder we refer to it as the marriage covenant. But marital communication is just one example of relational communication, or, more broadly, interpersonal communication. All three represent potential places for serious covenantal interaction as we commit to friends, family, and workplace colleagues to change together.

A covenantal perspective affirms that we use responsible symbolic expressions to create, enact, and mold relational bonds for connection. Therefore communication plays a central role in creating relationships. The tough part is visualizing how communication and relationships merge. For starters, let us begin with three pictures of interpersonal communication that extend the two models presented in chapter one. They should help us grasp the mystery of

between-person communion whether among couples, friends, or workplace comrades.

## What is Interpersonal Communication?

In *Making Friends (& Making Them Count)*, Em Griffin depicts three metaphors of two-person communication.[2] Some people picture it like bowling, others like Ping-Pong, and still others like charades.

Bowling imitates the *linear model* of communication.[3] In chapter one I referred to it as the *transfer* model. In this metaphor the bowler-ball-alley-pins represent sender-message-channel-receivers. To "throw a strike" communicationally depends on the bowler/sender's efforts to select the right ball/message and cruise it down an alley/channel so that it strikes/effects passive pins/receivers with predictability. The wrong ball/message results in a gutter ball or split/misunderstanding, but the right ball/message scores a strike/understanding. "Understanding" is cast as knocking preferred meaning into pins/receivers who do not, or cannot, respond uniquely with feedback. Maybe you know someone who speaks *at* you in this flooding manner offering little opportunity for you to respond.


*A linear model of communication pictures the process as the mechanical transfer of information.*

Unlike bowling, Ping-Pong requires two people to play—a better metaphor already. Ping-Pong typifies the *interactive model* of communication.[4] In Ping-Pong someone serves/sends and someone returns/responds,

and then they reverse roles. A skilled server can put the ball/message where she wants and a seasoned opponent/responder knows how to handle what is coming. The more each player knows the other's history, the more readily he or she can predict and respond to the immediate shot. The upside of this metaphor is that it begins with two people, acknowledges feedback, and recognizes history with our partner. The downside includes the assumption that people are predictable and that only one message (ball) is in play at a time. It also assumes communication is chiefly a power game rather than a cooperative dialogue. Even still, this model resembles everyday interaction with store clerks and casual acquaintances with whom we match conversational topics and share impersonal information.

Enter the idea that communication is like (or can be like) charades—a cooperative yet messy give-and-take.[5] As Griffin puts it, "A charade is neither an action, like a strike in bowling, nor an interaction, like a point in Ping-Pong. It's a transaction."[6] Thus the charades metaphor resembles a *transactional* model of communication because it assumes that active, mindful communicators jointly construct meaning, enact a relationship, and are hampered by noise.

Consider how charade partners work together to share the same meaning or image. They read each other for clues to solve the puzzle. The person acting gets into the head and heart space of a partner's experience. She might use gestures unique to their relationship in order to generate a responsive chord. All the while she uses every channel imaginable, from facial expressions to gestures. Together the partners figure out enough words of the clue until the penny drops: "Oh I know what you mean, 'Two heads are better than one.'" If they happen to share the same connotative meaning of the "Two heads. . ." adage, their common experience overlaps even more. Through nonverbal cues they not only conjure up the same quotation, but link in spirit and connect emotionally. They change together.

The charades metaphor is reflected in definitions of interpersonal communication. In *Interpersonal Communication: Pragmatics of Human Relationships*, Aubrey Fisher and Katherine Adams write, "Interpersonal communication is the process of creating social relationships between at least two people by acting in concert with one another."[7] Along the same lines, in *Bridges, Not Walls*, John Stewart writes "For me interpersonal communication is the type or quality or kind of contact that occurs

when each person involved talks and listens in ways that highlights the individual's and the other person's humanness."[8] Note his emphasis on quality, not structure. A structural definition would depict interpersonal communication as the face-to-face exchange of messages between two or three people. But it is more than a Ping-Pong exchange—or it should be. Let's look more deeply at these definitions to understand why. We will start with John Stewart's.

## Interpersonal Communication Highlights Each Other's Humanness

If you feel quirky when leaving phone messages, then you can relate to Stewart's first distinctive of interpersonal communication. An answering service is an object, not a person. It might "talk," but it is not human. Stewart defines "human" by contrasting it with "object," based on the work of Jewish philosopher Martin Buber.[9] What distinguishes humans from objects? Stewart interprets Buber as standing for four qualities.

| HUMANS ARE | OBJECTS ARE |
|---|---|
| 1. Unique | 1. Standardized |
| 2. Unmeasureable | 2. Measureable |
| 3. Choice-makers | 3. Not choice makers |
| 4. Addressable | 4. Non-addressable |

***People are unique, not standardized.*** We talked about uniqueness in the self-identity chapter. That I am a father/professor/believer/old athlete/joke teller means I am probably one-of-a-kind whereas the plastic action figure on our shelf from childhood is like 100,000 others. Objects are not unique; they are comprised of identical component parts. When we talk to people without consideration for their uniqueness, we treat them as objects.

If you develop routine impersonal talk with your housemates, you might fail to listen deeply to each other's dreams and fears. Routine scripts such as:

"Hey, what's up?"

"Oh, nothing much—how you doin'?"

"Fine I guess"

"Well, see you later."

make for *phatic* communication—talk that functions as social lubricant to make interaction easy—but like component parts, these scripts remain superficial and standardized.

***People are unmeasurable, not measurable.*** Social scientists have made valiant attempts to measure people, but in the final tally our questionnaires and experiments fall short, at least in the eyes of Stewart and Buber. Stewart writes "'Pulse 110, respiration 72, Likert rating 5.39, palmar conductivity .036 ohms' might be accurate, but it doesn't quite capture all what's going on in me when I greet somebody I love."[10] Some people call the unmeasurable part of being human the psyche or personality. Christians call it the soul or spirit. Whatever the label, this feature of being human makes us unpredictable in a good way. No one can define and measure all the variables in my spirit accurately enough to predict how I will choose to act.

***People are choice-makers.*** We have already noted that to be made in God's image is to have a will to choose (see Chapter 5). When Vicky messed up Robert's business deal, Robert had options for response. He could have noted his concern assertively and lovingly, or hinted indirectly, or sulked, or blown up, or remained silent. He chose the latter. Objects, in contrast, have no choice.

Our interaction with others becomes more object-like when our talk squelches their freedom to choose. The Verizon salesperson on the phone might ask, "So which bundle is best for you?" This question appears to give two options, but it omits a third—that we don't want a package at all. It is a loaded question because it assumes you want their products. The question constrains your choice.

***People are addressable.*** By saying humans are addressable and objects are not, we mean that one can speak with a person, but only at an object. This is what Stewart and Buber say distinguishes humans from animals. By speaking with someone, we engage in communication of similar kind and mutuality; we engage their personhood, and they ours. Animals, and especially pets, seem to take on this "almost human" addressable quality. But no matter how tender a response from my dog, his actions are not human, nor mutual. Animals remain objects.

However just because people are addressable does not mean we address them routinely. Sometimes we chatter as if on automatic pilot

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

### Are your relationships more like a contract or a covenant?

In addition to the bowling / Ping-Pong / charades metaphors, we can also envision interpersonal relating in terms of contracts and covenants. But what do these orientations look like head-to-head? Consider these statements.

My experience in close relationships tells me it's not selfish to look out for myself first, because if I'm not happy, then my life isn't very meaningful. The challenge is that people are so unique, and it's difficult to find the right person to make me feel secure and special. Once I'm in a close relationship, it comes with a lot of personal costs (such as time, money and emotional investment), and I can consider myself lucky if my friends are at least giving back in return to make things fair. Sometimes I get more than I deserve, but that's fine by me. Sometimes I pray about my relationships, but clear answers are slow to come by, and so I feel like I'm due happier times. It's also hard when people close to me let me down, and I feel forced to fight back or leave a relationship in order to survive. People who have found the ideal friend or mate are fortunate. If and when I meet my soul mate, I may have to end a current relationship in order to enjoy the best one yet.

*-The voice of a contractual relater*

In a significant way I see relationships as imbedded in, and shaped by, my faith community—a place where people closest to me find purpose, support, and love. It's like God has brought us together in a kind of sacred bond, and along the way we have vowed to stick together no matter what. Of course we all make mistakes—myself included—from time to time and even hurt each other out of bad motives, but we know that everyone has the potential to change for the better with God's help and each other's accountability. The key to getting along with others is to take care of my own stuff and to be responsible to others when I have hurt them,

*cont.*

even if unintentionally. Ultimately there is forgiveness from God and friends, and in humility and compassion we can heal and move on. Those close to me find wisdom about relationships in our scriptures, and rely on principles therein to get along well with others. For instance, relationships work best when you promise to remain true to each other, and do so.

*-The voice of a covenantal relater*

Can you identify with these statements? Do they echo themes in your close relationships? Some research shows that the first orientation is common when we are single and searching for a life partner, and that the second one settles in once we have become committed to that person. Why do you think that is the case? What do you think happens when we take the contractual orientation into marriage and long-term friendships? What do you think happens if we adopt a covenantal approach while single?[11]

**BOX 6.1**

and speak *at* others, not *with* them. We have all done so in spilling details that bore people we love; we ignore their addressability.

## Redemptive Interpersonal Communication

Stewart, Fisher and Adams would all agree that when we stop communicating we stop relating. Again, Stewart writes, "For me interpersonal communication is the type or quality or kind of contact. . ." and Fisher and Adams write, "A relationship is not a 'thing.' When you are not interacting, the. . . relationship. . . [is] not occurring."12

This is the fluid truth that the transactional model (charades metaphor) offers us, and a covenantal perspective affirms. Interpersonal communication is more than FedEx-ing words; it is creating, enacting, and becoming in relationship as we heighten each other's humanness. A covenantal approach, however, extends that view with spiritual purpose. Yes, our interaction should address the whole person, but with the redemptive goal to become more like Christ. Paul's letter to the

believers at Ephesus articulates a redemptive process and redemptive end. He wrote, ". . . speaking the truth in love [the process], we will in all things grow up into him [the goal] who is the Head, that is, Christ" (Ephesians 4:15). To me this speaks of redeeming the process and person, the relationship and relaters. I want to recognize your sinfulness as I speak with you, but I do not want to enhance your vice. I want our communication to redeem both of us to every corner of our being.

> Interpersonal communication requires inter-person connection which weds soul with soul.

So what does redemptive relating look like? How do we avoid the pitfalls encountered by people like Robert and Vicky? I think the answer extends to four areas, namely, how we 1) perceive others, 2) speak with others, 3) manage conflict, and 4) listen.

## Gracious Perceiving

In chapter five I suggested that you do the twenty statements exercise for self-identity. What if your best friend wrote down twenty statements that describe you? Would his or her list match yours? Probably not. What you wrote is your *private self* (how you see yourself in all its intimate intricacy), but what your friend might write is your *public self* (how you come across to others).[13] As Michael Hecht would say, we express our personal or private identity differently in nested communities, and people read us accordingly. Moreover, people tend to process our self-presentations in less-than-rational ways. Robert and Vicky may have thought they knew each other as they dated, but if either were putting on a front, or misinterpreting the other, those impressions were but sand castles.

How good are you at figuring out your best friend's private world? Research indicates that we can improve our accuracy by being more realistic about ourselves, by not seeing things in black and white, and by becoming better at inferring traits from behaviors.[14] This means if we are unsure about our own self-identity, we best not make outlandish claims about our friends. Chances are we will be off target. Also, if we

have grown up in a strict, authoritarian home, we may think we can peg our friends into squarely-cut holes. But as we noted in the last chapter, people are more complex than that.

Jesus' call to take the log out of our own eye before we complain about the sawdust speck in someone else's (see Matthew 7:3) is more a caution not to judge than a rule for how to perceive others, but there is a principle we can learn here: acknowledging that we are complex, and not perfect, will help us exercise empathy and extend grace when trying to understand others. If we are receiver-centered and enter their frame of reference, we may understand them. Unfortunately, we often fail at empathizing with others, and therefore misunderstand. Research testifies to perceptual biases that create interpersonal noise. Be aware of the following.

***Our first impressions of others go deep and die slowly.***[15] This is called the *primacy effect*, because we tend to weigh early information about others more heavily than later information. A short-term memory exercise I do with my students hints at why this might be true. I ask my students to listen to a list of ten words. After the tenth one I say "go." Their task is to write down as many words as they can recall in the right order. Without fail, the most remembered word is the first one (usually 95% get it right), then the second word (about 90%) and then the tenth word (about 85% score a ringer). Between words two through ten there's a big dip, like a grin from left to right. The smile is actually a smirk, because the least recalled word is the seventh one at about 50%. What happens is people rehearse or dwell on the first words more than the middle ones, so these ideas stick. The upswing in recall at the end resembles the *recency effect*, or the tendency for us to form impressions based on fresh behavior while ignoring stale behavior. Both findings remind us that we are not likely to consider everything we know about someone when perceiving them in the moment. No wonder we are not always accurate with our impressions.

***Our first impressions guide future perceptions***. For example, once we think a person is "funny" or "sloppy" or "liberal," we look for things to confirm that impression, even if it means ignoring contradictory information. For example, if I have already made up my mind that Mindy is stuck-up, I may ignore or diminish her selfless service at the Salvation Army.


**"You're more beautiful today than you were the day I met you. You had a really big pimple that day."**

Another classroom exercise comes to mind that illustrates this. On the screen I show students two words in two orders:

Half the class sees the word "kind" first, and "dishonest" second.
The other half sees the word "dishonest" first, and "kind" second.

After seeing both words, I ask them to imagine someone with both traits. Then I ask whether their image is more like Robin Hood (a good guy who does dishonest things to help the poor) or a con artist (a bad person who does kind things for dishonest gain). The results indicate that the first word's meaning colors interpretation of the second word. Students who saw "kind" first and "dishonest" second more often say their impressions resemble Robin Hood, but students who saw the terms in reverse order connect with con artist. This perceptual bias gives us reason to be careful about how we present ourselves at job interviews and on first dates as impressions formed here will guide people's thinking about us later. It is also a reminder that, as perceivers, we ought to hold off on cementing first impressions until we see the entire load.

***We are prone to pay attention to the intense, novel, and beautiful.***[16] This bias occurs in relational encounters as well as our engagement with the media. For example, every semester professors look out onto a sea of faces in large lecture classes knowing that they will befriend only a handful of students. Which ones is somewhat predictable—the ones who stand out.

The guy sporting the two-tone buzz cut, and the gal who answers two questions the first week of class will gain the professor's attention more readily than their less active classmates who by comparison are gray backdrop.

Moreover the media expertly gain our attention with intense, novel, and beautiful people who may shape our impressions for those close to us. YouTube hits such as PSY's "Gangnam Style" or impersonators rapping Obama and Romney set up expectations for our own sexy lady or friend's humor. The intensity of "Facebook Parenting" (where the dad shoots his daughter's laptop for her dissing him online) not only draws attention, but may influence our perceptions of parents and their rules for media use. The point is that a lot of our friends appear drab, dry and dark relative to the bright glitz and celebrity-rich environments of the web and cable television, and those relational messages register somewhere, somehow, in our consciousness, and may shape our interaction with people next door.

> In human relating, it is not easy to determine what we choose to do versus what others cause us to do.

***We allow negative information about others to outweigh the good.***[17] In fact, one negative item can undo the effects of ten positive ones. I experienced this while sifting through resumes for pastor candidates. For good or for bad, the committee I served on let negative information take its course. When applicants had similar strengths, but some had stark weaknesses, we axed them. Or, when a candidate had five positive traits and one negative trait, compared to someone who had three positives, we favored the all-positive applicant. Were we accurate in our perceptions? Only God knows. This reminds us that we should consider negative information about others in the most gracious light rather than jump to conclusions. Perhaps people who report weaknesses on resumes are more honest than those who do not.

When people interpret our profiles online, a related pattern applies, especially for statements we make about our physical attractiveness. Despite our best attempts to post accurate material, viewers of

our profile will put more weight on statements others post about us, whether positive or negative, because they deem those statements less controllable by us, and maybe more objective. So if we post that we are "pretty good-looking," but a friend posts, "yeh, like a good-looking dog," we are hooped, but if that same friend wrote, "you are being waaaay too humble," others will think she, not we, is right. Thankfully this pattern is not true about things posted about our personality; our own self-statements tend to be more believed. (Maybe people assume that we know our private-self best, but beauty is more publicly objective.)[18]

***We see ourselves as responding to our environment, but see others as choosing to act as they do.***[19]. This is called the *actor–observer* difference in attribution-making, because as social actors we tend to see the outside world imposing upon us, but as observers see others in control of their world.

For example, why do we (as actors) walk across campus? We might think "to get to class," or "to study at the library," or "to keep an appointment." In each case something in our environment calls us, even requires us to react—the demands of the professor, the upcoming exam, the person waiting for us. But why do others walk across campus? As observers our perception may be "because she's a responsible student," "she wants to earn an 'A'," or "she made an appointment." In each case we attributed the cause of behavior to the walker—her responsibility, motivation, and appointment-making. Which explanations are right? Both could be right because in human affairs it is not easy to determine what we *chose to do* or what we *were caused to do*. As gracious perceivers, we need to balance the two and acknowledge that other people feel constrained by their environment just like us.

***We take credit for our good behavior and blame our environment for our bad behavior, but do just the opposite for people we dislike.***[20] If there were any proof that we are essentially selfish, back-side saving creatures, this is it! Consider these typical examples:

> *I* consoled my arch rival after we won the game *because I'm a loving person*.
>
> *She* consoled me after my dad died *because everyone expected her to.*

*I* failed to comfort her after her car accident *because I had such a hectic week*.

*She* failed to comfort me after my backpack was stolen *because she doesn't care*.

The urge to blame others in conflict situations is particularly strong. What did Adam say when God asked, "Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?" He said, "The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree, and I ate it." And what did Eve say when God asked, "What is this you have done?" She answered, "The serpent deceived me, and I ate" (see Genesis 3:1–14). They both responded with blame, blame, blame. Better that we own up to our responsibility.

## Gracious Language

If I had to grade Robert and Vicky's language the past ten years, I would give them a "C." Their public language was not bitter or calloused or attacking or explosive, but neither was it affirming, empathetic, trusting and loving. It was blah talk—facts and opinions about other people and current events, but little inter-human sharing, as described earlier in this chapter.

The Bible gives evidence that from our mouths come life and death for those around us. Even a short study demonstrates how "mere words" are more than talk as they nurture or destroy relationships.

**The Power of Gracious Language**
Words can bring healing (Prov 12:18)
Kind words bring life (Prov 15: 4)
The right words bring joy (Prov 15:23)
Careful words keep us out of trouble (Prov 21:23)
Apt words are beautiful (Prov 25:11)
Words bring help, encourage and comfort (1 Cor 14: 3)
Helpful words build up and provide what is needed (Eph 4:29)
Speaking the truth in a loving manner encourages Christ-likeness (Eph 4: 15)

**The Power of Ungracious Language**

Thoughtless words wound (Prov 12:18)
Cruel words crush the spirit (Prov 15:4)
Gossip separates close friends (Prov 16:28)
Answering before one listens is unwise (Prov 18: 13)
Insulting and obscene talk are to be ridden of (Col 3: 8)
Lying is bad (1 Peter 3:10)
Slander is to be avoided (James 4:11)

Maybe these verses underscore the obvious, but so often we treat words like computer bytes—weightless and dimensionless, therefore harmless. Perhaps we have accepted the lie that sticks and stones break bones, but words cannot hurt us. Recall from chapter two that John Gottman's research indicated that couples who divorce were almost certain to pepper their interaction with criticism, defensiveness, contempt and stonewalling (giving the silent treatment). This negative talk occurred once for every five positive statements, or a 1-to-5 ratio. Couples who did not divorce tended toward a 1-to-6, negative-to-positive ratio, or even better.[21]

Insults and criticism at least recognize that the other person exists. But ignoring a friend entirely or denying her perceptions might be even more damaging. Consider the times when we have

. . .chosen not to return a text message
. . .avoided saying "hi" to someone
. . .said "don't be silly—you don't really feel that way."
. . .changed a topic abruptly with no regard for what a friend just said

Not texting and not greeting others implies that they do not exist, or, at least, that they are not important. Labeling their feelings as silly or wrong suggests that they are oblivious to their own emotions! Abrupt topic switching implies that our agenda is more important than theirs.

All are cases of *disconfirming messages*—messages that do not recognize or affirm others, nor invite involvement. *Confirming messages*, in contrast, are words and behaviors that 1) acknowledge our friend and our relationship, 2) show a relevant response to what she said, 3) affirm our friend's experience, and 4) indicate a willingness to become involved with her.[22] A confirming message might entail putting away our phone so we can give full attention and feedback that validates our friend's emotions and signals our willingness to help. Confirming messages convey, "I value you."

## Gracious Fighting

Gracious language yields gracious conflict management. I am convinced that if Robert and Vicky had listened better, their relationship might have survived. Or, if Robert had spoken his mind instead of shoving resentments down deep, they would have had more to go on. Or if Vicky had not bulldozed Robert under a mountain of monologue, he would not have felt resentment in the first place.

While each of these statements is true, they imply that improved communication will save relationships, and for years I believed this. More recently I have been reminded that handling conflict doesn't begin with improved skills, but a renewed soul. Consider what Paul wrote to the believers at Colossus:

"Clothe yourselves [rather] with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity" (Colossians 3:12–14).

Paul mentions only one skill—forgiving grievances—as he makes the larger point that we clothe ourselves in Christian virtue.

I think psychologist Blaine Fowers would agree. He argues that good communication stems from a good heart, and that focusing on skill development, while helpful, misses the mark. From his own experience in handling conflict with his wife Susan, he writes, "We would work and work and work until we had either ironed it out completely or completely exhausted ourselves. We would often be up half the night—communicating."[25] He goes on to note their covenantal resolve: "We do use communication skills to help, on occasion; but what keeps us going is our joint commitment to ideals and goals that guide us in knowing how we want to live together."[26]

This vision of relating inspired me to carry out my own study. In it I asked seventy couples to indicate their impressions of their spouse as virtuous or not. In particular I asked them to assess the degree they thought their spouse was self-controlled, wise, faithful, industrious, and humble. They also rated the quality of their marriage on a global measure of relational and communicative health. Perhaps not surprising, the more husbands and wives saw each other as virtuous, the more they thought their marriage was of high quality.[27]

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

### Has digital communication benefited close human relationships?

Who can imagine relating to a close friend without digital communication? Today we use email, texting, Facebook, Twitter, personal blogs, Skype and more to be in relationship across oceans, between countries, and down the hall. Are we in a better place today than years ago when relating was largely face-to-face? Consider these observations and questions.

1. Thanks to digital communication, the people you are close to today (e.g., college friends) can remain that way even if you move to Texas, and people you were never close to FTF (e.g. certain high school acquaintances) can now be your friend online. What does "friend" mean today? Why do you befriend some-people online but not others?

2. Sites such as match.com and eHarmony.com introduce you to compatible partners if you seek romance, while ones such as illicitencounters.com (a British dating site for married people) can assist you if the match.com marriage isn't working out. What messages do dating sites and affair services communicate about finding love and getting along?

3. Words-based media such as email and texting were once thought to be "thin" with potential to convey emotion or develop meaningful relationships, but more recently we have discovered that they can work just as well as the love letters great grandpa Reimer wrote his girl Louise.[23] What features do email and paper love letters share for developing covenantal relationships?

4. Social media sites like Facebook give opportunity to post our relational status and prove it with BF or GF pictures and videos. If we break up, Facebook can also be used to bug our ex, monitor their new relationships, make them jealous with untrue status

*cont.*

posts, and attack them with nasty wall posts.[24] Do you think the nature of Facebook as digital and public make these ugly practices more or less likely than doing so FTF? Why?

These four observations may cast digital relating in too shadowy terms, so it's important to acknowledge that the web also empowers us to share deep joys of life—news of babies, friends, jobs, travel and faith, not to mention finding practical information for career, school, and home. Given these brief observations, do you think digital communication enhances or limits our potential for meaningful relationships? If the answer is "it depends," then depends on what?

**BOX 6.2**

These simple observations are worth making. Compassionate people rarely treat others as objects. Kind friends rarely use words that wound. Humble individuals seldom judge others. Gentle folks avoid cussing blue streaks. Faithful people usually keep promises. So while virtue is a noble aim, we can still consider particular conflict strategies that spill from a good heart. Consider these biblically informed pointers.[28]

***Keep your cool and consider taking a time out.*** Quick tempers can get us in trouble. The proverbs remind us that hotheads act foolishly (14:7) and stir up strife (14:18). Righteous people, instead, think before they answer (15:28), and step away from quarreling in the heat of the moment (17:14). As long as that stepping away does not lead to avoidance of the issue, the idea of a cool-off period for reflection makes sense.

If you practice time outs, consider doing more than stewing; consider writing. Two family therapists recommend that you take this time to write a letter to your friend or spouse noting your feelings, how you may have responded differently, and what you want from him or her. Married couples who use this technique seem to improve their problem-solving skills, and increase marital satisfaction.[29] Even if you don't write a letter, time apart will cool emotions and help you think through the issues so you can discuss them calmly together.

***Keep short accounts.*** Robert's 31-year grudge is a sober reminder to not let the sun go down on our anger (Ephesians 4:26). If we nip it in the bud, an issue will never have time to blossom. Some couples and friends make the redemptive pact to not let a day end without addressing an issue. We can all benefit from that strategy. It may mean making a phone call late at night, or getting together for coffee at a 24-hour joint, but when each party's account has been credited with timely discussion, there is little fear of a major blow-up later.

***Act wisely, not foolishly.*** Acting wisely means discerning the best thing to say in the heat of conflict which will benefit everyone involved. In covenantal perspective this requires steadfast love while acknowledging that you still live by important guidelines. Research indicates that wise people focus on the problem, not their partner, and appear to use more strategies for solving problems than the less wise.[30] They don't get stuck in the rut of blaming each other, or believing there's only one solution to a problem. Wise people distinguish between insignificant issues that don't matter, and the big-rock ones that do.[31] Discerning the difference saves mental and emotional energy for problems that really count. Wisdom requires smarts, heart, and discernment. Brains alone will not cut it, for heady analysis may just puff up (1 Corinthians 8:1). Wise communication meets everyone's needs.

***Make understanding and reconciliation your aim.*** If you are competitive you will have the urge to win an argument rather than understand your partner and reconcile. Men in particular have this urge to conquer rather than connect.[32] As long as men are in control, they feel they are managing conflict just dandy. This posture may succeed in fixing the problem, but sacrifice mutuality. Mutuality means both parties voicing their concerns and being understood. Solomon put it bluntly, "A fool does not delight in understanding, but only in revealing his own mind" (Proverbs 18:2). Understanding begins with listening so we can know our partner's mind.

Once we understand each other—empathize with what hurts, who hurts, or why it hurts—we can better work toward reconciliation. Reconciliation means settling our dispute, reestablishing communion, and coming to an agreement. Reconciliation between you and me

mirrors God's new covenant with the world. Consider Paul's letter to the Corinthian church:

> Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5: 17–19).

David Augsburger might say becoming reconciled requires *carefronting*—the dual acts of caring for others out of love, yet confronting them with issues that irritate us.[33] To confront without care may lead to domination or the abuse of power. But to care without confrontation may turn us into embittered servants who keep the peace. Neither reconciles the relationship. Reconciliation requires equal parties negotiating their needs in a spirit of love so legitimate human needs can be met. Reconciliation requires courage.

Reconciliation may also require extending and receiving forgiveness. Recall from chapter five that egotists find forgiveness difficult. To forgive someone means to grant a pardon for the hurt they caused, and to release resentment or anger against them. Forgiveness, like Jesus' death, pays the debt of the other person's sin. A woman who forgave her alcoholic and mentally ill father for sexually abusing her wrote:

> Forgiveness is agreeing to live with the consequences of another person's sin. . . . You're going to live with those consequences whether you want to or not; your only choice is whether you will do so in the bitterness of unforgiveness or the freedom of forgiveness. . . . All true forgiveness is substitutionary, because no one really forgives without bearing the penalty of the other person's sin.[34]

## Gracious Listening

Working toward reconciliation requires an open-ears attitude. Like the charades metaphor implies, listening entails alertness to friends' words

and tone. Did you know that remembering something a friend mentioned in a conversation—even a pleasant one—is more difficult than a point made by a public lecturer?[36] The reason is that during a lecture our roles are well defined, as speaker and listeners, but in transactional encounters we are speaker *and* listener. We often think about what we want to say next, and this garbles incoming messages.

The ideal is the *active* listener. The active listener engages head and heart in order to hear, attune, understand, and respond to others' ideas and feelings. It is mindful, effortful, and receiver-focused. Active listening takes humility, because it requires us to turn our full attention to someone else to track their thoughts and emotions. Because active listening takes effort, I suggest that our entire relational attitude can be summed up by our willingness and skill to listen deeply.

What does this look like in practical terms? From the definition you see it begins with *hearing* the other person. Hearing is the physical registering of someone's voice. Listening also entails *seeing* the other person so you might interpret their nonverbal cues. Offering "two-eye" attention improves reception. Finding a quiet place is wise if you want a heart-to-heart talk.

Active listening also requires us to *attune* to what is most relevant, and this is becoming increasingly difficult due to digital distractions. If you are like most students, you can hardly study more than six minutes before shifting your attention to something else, and it is usually a digital distraction. Even as you read these words my bet is you are fending off interruptions and temptations of texts and Facebook, but I empathize if you cave.[37] Given these distractions, what hope is there to attune actively to a partner if we don't make hard choices? Those options include dropping what we are doing, getting away from silicone gadgets, giving eye contact, turning our bodies toward them, and leaning forward. These behaviors tell them we are ready to listen.

Hearing and attuning are important, but, as already noted, we need to understand people's intended meaning. Is it possible to hear and attune but still not understand? I think so, especially when people speak vaguely or with poor syntax. Consider Megan, who says, "I'm feeling like ya' know, like I could do it if I had to, but so many things can, well . . . it's hard to say, ya' know . . . it's not easy." What does she mean? Abstract words such as "it" and "things" and her halting delivery make

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

### What messages about relationship violence are Rihanna and Chris Brown communicating?

In January 2013 pop singer Rihanna got back together with her ex-boyfriend R&B artist Chris Brown with whom she had broken up four years earlier after Brown physically abused her. You may remember images of Rihanna's bruised face on tabloid covers after the 2009 Grammys. The public admired the stance she took in leaving the relationship. With all that's taken place since the assault, the reunited couple represents an array of mixed messages: a year and a half after Brown slammed Rihanna's face against the window of a Lamborghini, she sang lyrics describing a young man who physically abuses his girlfriend (in "Love the Way you Lie" with Eminem). Four months before reuniting, Chris Brown got a tattoo on his neck depicting a woman's beaten face, whom he denies is Rihanna; two months after the tattoo Brown sang a new tune with Rihanna: *You'll always be the one that I wanna come home to. Girl let me love you and show you how special you are. I wanna be your baby, you'll always be my baby. Tell me what you want now* (in "Nobody's Business"); finally, a few weeks after making public their reunion—with Brown still on probation for the abuse—Rihanna was seen blowing to kisses him at one of his court hearings.

In your opinion, has Rihanna sold-out to Chris Brown too soon?

Has Brown proven himself worthy of her trust? According to a contractual approach is Rihanna getting a "good deal" out of the relationship, and will Brown commit to a non-violent future together?

Is gracious fighting valid when physical abuse is involved or does the situation require a whole new set of guidelines?

Are the messages sent by Brown and Rihanna conflicting or is there something behind the messages that we don't know about?

What does Brown's tattoo mean?

What does Rihanna intend when she sings about domestic violence?[35]

by Logan Paulgaard, communications student at Trinity Western University

**BOX 6.3**

us strain to eke out understanding. Sometimes the context and topic do not even help. Here is where responding with questions and nonverbal affirmations plays in. Asking "What do you mean by 'it' Megan?" or "What kinds of 'things' make it difficult?" may keep you and Megan on the course to understanding. Furthermore, your quizzical look and thoughtful pause after you pose your questions will tell her that you await clarification. When we ask timely, thoughtful questions, or paraphrase our friend's ideas, we indicate that we are processing her message mindfully.

Hearing, attuning, understanding and responding are key, but the litmus test of active listening is *remembering* what was said. One study indicated that men have a harder time remembering conversations they have had in the last six months compared to women. When asked if they had discussed household chores with their wives, only 19% of men responded affirmatively, while 71% of the wives did so. When asked if they had talked about having more children, men answered yes 15% of the time compared to 91% for women.[38] I fit this pattern. Twice a month or so I will ask Shelaine about an issue or event, and she will graciously comment that we have already discussed it.

Our entire relational attitude can be summed up by our willingness to truly listen to others.

We are our own worst enemies when it comes to listening. The following examples crystallize how we should *not* listen if we want to

engage in redemptive dialogue. Suppose a friend sat down with you and remarked, "I can't believe it! My sister is getting married and she isn't including me in the wedding party! Maybe I should just volunteer to park cars!" Consider how six poor listeners might respond.

*The Pseudo (Fake) Listener*: "Uh huh. Yeh, marriage . . . it can be quite a party or a lot like parking cars." (The pseudo-listener is clueless to the intended meaning but has obviously heard something.)

*The Selective Listener*: "I didn't know your sister was getting married! Who's the lucky guy?" (The selective listener picks out only a portion of the meaning rather than the larger picture.)

*The Monopolizer*: "Ah, sister behavior!! Sisters can be so wrapped up in their own worlds sometimes. My own sister, Jennifer, once said that . . ." (The monopolizer takes over the conversation rather than allow the speaker to finish or expand on ideas or feelings.)

*The Fixer*: "You know what you should do? You *should* volunteer to park cars and she will feel so ashamed I'm sure she'll ask you to be in her wedding party. She'll figure out what's right, and you'll get what you want!" (The fixer seems to understand the speaker, but intends to fix the problem, not simply hear out the issue and emotions.)

*The Ambusher*: "Well aren't you something to criticize your sister's wedding plans! I'll have you know that your life has not always pleased your friends and relatives!" (The ambusher looks for opportunity to criticize the speaker, rather than support the speaker.)

*The Defensive Listener*: "So are you implying that I had something to do with it? I may know your sister, but it's not

my fault she left you in the cold!" (The defensive listener interprets descriptions as personal evaluations, rather than taking them at face value.)

These examples might make us chuckle, but sadly they represent how we often respond to others. James, the brother of Jesus, encouraged believers to be "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry" (James 1:19). If we live out that second challenge—to be slow to speak—we will probably have time, and heart, to listen actively.

## Summary

In this chapter we likened interpersonal communication to bowling, Ping-Pong, and charades. "Bowlers" picture communication as a one-way process largely dependent on hurling messages at passive recipients. "Ping-Pong players" acknowledge that receivers provide feedback, but still assume a predictable process of give and take until meanings are scored. "Charade players" view communication as a transaction whereby responsible symbolic exchange enacts relationships and changes participants through inter-human dialogue.

Redeeming our dialogue means guarding against nasty perceptual biases. We should guard against letting early, recent, novel and negative information overshadow other things we know about people. We also need to guard against rationalizing that our behavior is driven by our environment, but others are driven by their choice; both are likely at work.

Redemptive dialogue also means that we engage words that edify or confirm, not tear down or disconfirm. It means seeking understanding, not winning, as we experience conflict, and dealing with issues sooner, not later. Finally, I suggested that our entire relational stance with friends is measured by our willingness to listen to them with empathy. Listening takes mental effort and requires an appropriate response. Active listening requires that we reflect back to the speaker what we hear him or her saying rather than charge off on our own agenda.

Many of our closest and most trying relationships occur with relatives. We turn to the family context in the next chapter to see how redemptive communication often does *not* happen.

## WORTH THE TALK

1. With whom do you enjoy a deep, soul-to-soul relationship where your interaction is typified by the transactional (charades) model? With whom do you interact more mechanically (Ping-Pong) or one-way (bowling)?
2. Which of the perceptual biases noted in this chapter plague college students most? What strategies would you suggest to guard against them?
3. This chapter suggests that virtues such as humility and compassion help us manage conflict. Other people say we need to learn conflict-resolution skills and theories. What do you think?
4. What do you think are the top three barriers to active listening? How can we minimize them?
5. What impact have digital media had on your closest friendships? Can you think of times when they have cause significant misunderstanding and hurt? What have you learned to guard against their negative influences?

## CONSIDER THE WALK

1. Keep a journal of your interpersonal communication with another person (e.g., roommate, friend, or parent). Choose someone you see regularly or someone with whom you think you have poor communication. Use ideas in this chapter for your reflections. Ask:
    a. to what degree do you affirm each other's humanness? To what degree do you treat others like objects?

b. how do you perceive this person? Are any biases at work?

c. what kind of language typifies your talk?

d. how do you manage conflict? Do you fight fairly?

e. what is the quality of listening in your relationship?

2. Write a paper that reports and analyzes your findings from the journal noted in number one. Or, if you have not written a journal, use the same questions listed there to analyze your communication with one person or with people generally. The paper could accomplish two goals. One is to describe your communication habits with others (both the good and the bad). The second is to prescribe goals for yourself for more redemptive relating.

3. Interview a person whose work is largely interpersonal communication (e. g., a student affairs staff, a counselor, a salesperson, a pastor), and ask what role interpersonal communication plays in his or her work. Write up your findings and share them in class with your classmates.

4. Keep a journal of your digital media habits hour by hour for one waking day. (For example, "10–11 a.m. texted mom twice, Brit once, Phil once, and sent two Facebook messages to Ben.") Soon after try to assess your messages using ideas from this chapter. (For example, "Tried to use *confirming messages* with mom because she feels down this week," or "Tried to fix Brit's relationship with Juan, but should have just supported her.") Analyze if you think your digital messages are of higher or lower quality than your face-to-face ones.

## ON-LINE CHALK

This chapter covers a wide spectrum of the interpersonal communication field. The following Internet search phrases attract academic and practical web sites concerning the themes addressed.

- Transactional model of communication
- Interpersonal perception and communication
- Language and social interaction
- Online relating /relationships/dating
- How to deal with interpersonal conflict
- Good listening skills
- How to be a good listener
- Barriers to interpersonal communication

## ENDNOTES

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6 Em Griffin, *Making Friends*, 16.

7 B. Aubrey Fisher and Katherine L. Adams, *Interpersonal Communication: Pragmatics of Human Relationships*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 18.

8 John Stewart, "Interpersonal Communication: Contact Between Persons" in *Bridges, Not Walls,* 5th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1990), 13.

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16 See Adler and Towne, ibid., 98.

17 See ibid., 99.

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