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# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of my first book, *Healing Wounded Emotions*, was to help correct any misunderstanding and to counter misinformation that exists about our humanness, especially our emotions. Erroneous thinking in this area affects many people, including religious people. The book was an attempt to change the negative attitudes we have about our feelings and to give us permission to feel whatever we may feel.

The other goal of *Healing Wounded Emotions* was to help readers integrate the emotional with the spiritual, or if you will, the psychological with the religious, and eliminate the seeming contradiction between the two. I pointed out that genuine spirituality is rooted in our ability to be fully human. The book was successful beyond my expectations, so that I was continually exhorted by people to write a sequel.

*Healing Wounded Relationships* is that sequel. It looks at the many aspects of our human relationships, especially our close and personal ones, and tries to provide the information and enlightenment they need if they are to survive and grow in today's world. It is only with such information that misunderstanding and misinformation can be avoided.

Daily in my role as a marriage counselor, I see the same misunderstandings about relationships being passed on from one generation to another. I watch couples going into married life with the same disastrous baggage that their parents carried into marriage. The unnecessary suffering that stems from all this does not have to be. To avoid it we need a massive education program about what makes good relationships, what makes them work, how to communicate within them, the necessity of conflict, and coming to know what intimacy

is about. The information I'm talking about is abundantly available today, but it is not being disseminated in our schools, churches, and universities. It will only be through education in these matters that we will, for example, lessen the divorce rate, which is wreaking havoc in our society.

Jesus became a human person. He integrated the human and the spiritual. He taught us how to be human and how to relate. The gospels are all about relationships. He, as Paul says, became one like us so that we might become more like him. He told us to love God and our neighbor as ourselves. He showed us that, unless we love ourselves, we can't possibly genuinely love another, including God.

But do you know what? After 2000 years, we still don't get it when it comes to forging healthy relationships. I hope this book will help readers "get it" and to realize, among other things, that if we are not fully human, we cannot truly love or develop a genuine spirituality.

# *Communication*

Healing wounded relationships must start with communication. In all troubled relationships, especially in marriage and family, the issues involved can be numerous: children, finances, sex, in-laws, pets. Misunderstandings can be overwhelming, misinterpretations frustrating. But no matter what may be the difficulties and the differences, the bottom-line problem is usually the breakdown in or lack of effective communication. We are not connecting with one another; we are out of sync with one another. So we can't know each other.

The tragedy is that we don't realize that one of the most powerful and most beautiful human gifts we possess is the ability to communicate. We live in high-tech times with sophisticated methods of communicating with anyone anywhere in the world; we can know almost instantly of the tragedies and triumphs that are

taking place anywhere, but we still have problems getting in touch with and connecting with one another in our own lives.

We were created to communicate. We are equipped with a voice, tongue, lips, ears, facial expressions, and bodily movements to express what we think and feel. We were made for revelation. That's what life and relationships are about. We are created in the image and likeness of God. We refer to the Bible as the book of revelation, in which God is revealed in the power and beauty of creation and in the hearts of all who listen to him. Indeed, God calls us into relationship with him by asking us to reveal ourselves to him.

The clearest way to think of the Trinity is to think in terms of relationships: three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—interacting and communicating closely with one another. Moreover, much of the teaching and life of Jesus is about relating and communicating.

God calls us to reveal ourselves to him. We do this in prayer. Indeed, one of the challenges of being Christian is to develop and nurture relationships. Isn't this what Christian spirituality is about, love God, and your neighbor? This can only be accomplished if people are willing to talk to one another. Without communication, you can't have a relationship; without a relationship, you can't have love. "Speak the truth to one another in love, so that you may grow up in Christ" (Ephesians 4:15).

The basic goal of communication is revelation, not resolution. Many people abandon the attempt to communicate, saying, "What's the use of talking? We aren't resolving anything." If resolution is the primary goal of communication, we get nowhere. If revelation is the goal, then we have the hope and possibility of resolution. Most often, within the revelation one makes to another is found the resolution of our problems, because through revelation we reach an understanding of one another.

A working definition of personal communication is revealing of who I am to another person. I reveal what I perceive, think, feel, and need. Such communication can be very difficult as well as threatening, because it means opening up myself to another person. We are not talking here about the ordinary communication between casual friends and neighbors or co-workers, but about closer and more intimate relationships, especially those in marriage and family. Such

communication requires a much deeper openness and honesty, a communication that must be direct and clear.

It is with such communication that we develop trust and build trusting relationships. A loving relationship is built on trust. In our society, this is not well understood. People often talk about love, but what they mean by love is naïve and superficial, because it is not based on trust. This is why there are so many in our society who cynically ask: “What is love?” They have been burnt and hurt by someone who has too glibly said: “I love you.” They have lost in love because they have never developed trusting relationships, which must be built on open and honest communication.

This type of trusting relationship means being able to share deeply not only what I think and perceive but what I feel and need. Sure, I can tell you that your decision to leave a dinner party early was impulsive, but can I also state to you that I felt hurt and angry about what you did there? The latter approach is much more of a risk, so we tend to eliminate such openness and honesty, and so never convey the true message about ourselves to the other person. The message is incomplete, and leaves the other person without some important information—that you are hurt and angry.

Such incomplete communication over a period of time tends to distance people from one another. They don't know one another and they live in an atmosphere of unresolved hurt, anger, and frustration, which gradually erodes the relationship.

The possibility of becoming close eludes them. People often refer to this as falling out of love, but it really is much more a matter of losing connection with one another.

How many marriages, families, and close friendships in our society die or never reach their potential because people don't know how to communicate, or avoid true communication out of fear?

We can be fearful of honest communication. We fear rejection or that we won't be loved. If that happens in a relationship when the truth is spoken, then there never really was much of a relationship, was there?

*Speak the  
truth to  
one another  
in love.*



Or we fear hurting others. We have a distorted sense of what a healthy relationship is about. Honesty in a relationship will result in necessary hurt at times, but that is the normal consequence of our being honest with each other. What we want to avoid is speaking in a mean and malicious manner. Remember also that there can be malice in our silence. My oft-repeated statement is: “More marriages are dying from silence than violence.” And often it’s silence that causes the violence!

Jesus said, “The truth will set us free” (John 8:32). He didn’t say it wasn’t going to hurt. We fear honest communication because we fear conflict. Any relationship that is healthy and honest will involve conflict from time to time and will allow for appropriate anger and disagreement. We fear honest communication because opening up and becoming emotionally close to another can be threatening.

*How* we state things is another essential aspect of communication. Being open and honest doesn’t mean being caustic, cynical, mean, or vicious. Being honest means stating, clearly, directly, and civilly, what we perceive, think, feel, and need. If I am boiling inside, I need to wait it out, cool off, and diffuse my anger before I can state my case appropriately. I may realize I’m too angry to speak with you now, so I’ll talk to you later. But I must be sure to return to speak with you. We recall the wisdom of St. Paul, “Speak the truth to one another in love.” Too often, after we cool off, we avoid talking with another about a disturbing issue. We let it go. We take the easy way out. This can result in our being less credible to others. We confuse them because of our inconsistency. Children especially suffer when parents are not consistent. When parents promise to discuss difficult issues with children but never return to the matter, this can erode the children’s trust of their parents, and leaves children in a state of confusion and anger.

When we fail to communicate openly and honestly we not only run the risk of deepening misunderstanding, we multiply misinterpretations. Remember again the devastation silence causes. Nine times out of ten, if silence reigns, we will make a negative or wrong interpretation or a false presumption.

Speaking openly and honestly with each other is the only way I can know you and you can know me. We can’t read each other’s minds. We can only know what we each think and feel when we state what we think and feel.

## COMMUNICATION IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIPS

As we learn to communicate effectively, especially in our closer relationships, we will not only get to know each other better, but we can live together better and deal with our frustrations. What kills relationships is our tendency to avoid communication about the important issues and feelings of our daily lives. The system breaks down, and we become distant from one another.

A marriage, or any deep friendship, has three stages: being together, differentiation, and being together but different. Being together occurs when we see all that we have in common; *differentiation*, when we begin to perceive our differences, when we begin to see each other as we are. We are both good persons, but are different, unique, having different backgrounds, opinions, perceptions, and ways of doing things. This is normal in any relationship. This is when we are faced with the possibility of growing together or growing apart, of divorcing or finding intimacy. It is only through painful communication that we can come to understand each other, learn to compromise, cooperate, collaborate, tolerate, and learn to live together. Otherwise this is often the period when divorce occurs, or families become loosely connected, with the members manifesting a “proper” but superficial niceness to one another. This is when relationships die.

But when we can admit our differences and work through them and accept them, we develop a deeper relationship, a way of being together but different. We preserve unity and individuality; we are equal but different. Any genuine relationship involves struggle, some tension, and adjustment. When we maintain our individuality we will preserve the relationship. “The two shall become one” (Genesis 2:24).

Jesus said it clearly: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst” (Matthew 18:20). Jesus wasn’t talking only about people praying together, but about people having the courage to face each other, to talk openly and honestly, and to recognize the many aspects of their personalities and the differences that make each one unique. It is not a time when people are caught up in power struggles, or the desire to control, or manipulate, or have another submit. It’s a time when people truly reveal themselves to one another. As God reveals himself to us, so God calls us to reveal ourselves to one another. When we do that, we find God in our midst!



## **WHERE CAN WE LEARN TO COMMUNICATE?**

When and where do we learn how to communicate? Look at our years of education. Where does anyone receive a formal education in the skills of personal communication? Nowhere! We go to school, we obtain degrees, and we might become professionals. But in the area of communicating we have no education whatsoever. So whether it's the doctor, the lawyer, the religious person or member of the clergy, the person who pumps gas or works in the supermarket, when it comes to communication, all of us can be on the same level of verbal impoverishment and lack of skills.

Practically the only place we learn how to communicate is in our family of origin. We bring into our relationships the patterns of communicating we observed our parents practicing and that we practiced with them and our siblings.

We need to sift out what was good with the way we communicated in our families and improve on it. The ineffective ways we cast off. All families have some areas of damage, and some are severely dysfunctional. Poor communication, dishonest communication, communication without feelings, or no communication at all are at the root of every dysfunctional system, whether it be marriage, families, friendships, parish communities, the work place, or religious communities. Some patterns of communicating need to be reexamined, adjusted, and changed.

We go back to our family of origin so that we can better understand how we communicated then. We don't go back to blame anyone. In many cases, our parents taught us to communicate as well as they knew how.

When I observe a couple struggling to communicate with one another in my office, I can surmise how each communicated in their own families. That's why I tell young people before they marry: "Stop looking into each other's eyes for a while and look into each other's family." Especially observe how the members communicate. How do the parents communicate with each other? How does your future spouse communicate with his or her parents and siblings? In the end, the communication or non-communication you see is what you will experience in your relationship with your spouse—unless you do something about it.

We determine whether a family is dysfunctional or functional by the quality of its communication skills. The two basic communication principles are: first, we need to talk about our life, our issues, our problems; we need to break through any denial of the past, any avoidance of problems, any fears that control us, any blaming, and deal with the real issues in question. Second, we need to discuss how we feel about these critical issues—like painful feelings from the past, and how we feel about one another. If we share the pain, the hurts, the anger, the disappointments, the failures, and the frustrations of our lives, we can together deal with the painful realities that are before us. We can find healing. Then we will also be able to share our joys and successes.

Mental health professionals stress the need for parents to keep in continual, open, and honest communication with their children in all areas of their lives. Such communication can help prevent children from abusing drugs, alcohol, tobacco, and sex. Parents should keep the lines of communication open to their children in good times and, especially, in bad times. Communication maintains the connection.

We read about what a great communicator Jesus was. Jesus communicates a message of good news, but notice how he also addresses problems and expresses not only what he thinks, but how he feels. As in the episode with the rich young man, Jesus is sad about the fact that the young man could not let go of his lifestyle to follow him. Later, he talks about the death of Lazarus, his friend, and he cries. It is fascinating to read the gospel accounts of Jesus as a model of an emotionally healthy and mature person. He speaks clearly and directly, openly and honestly.

Being a functional Christian has much to do with being a person who communicates openly and honestly. Isn't this part of what we are about—being a light in the darkness, opening the eyes of the blind, giving hearing to the deaf? All this happens through good communication. When we communicate with one another, love becomes alive and breathes life into a relationship. Jesus once said, "Let your speech

*Love becomes  
alive and  
breathes  
life into a  
relationship.*



be yes, yes, and no, no” (Matthew 5:37). In other words, let’s be open and frank with one another. Let’s be direct. Let’s be clear. Let’s talk openly to one another. Let’s not beat around the bush. Jesus, in that small phrase, says much about what we are about as Christians.

### **A FUNCTIONAL FAMILY COMMUNICATES**

A functional family is one in which the members speak directly to one another about their perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and needs. If it’s a question of praise, gratitude, or affirmation, if a member is feeling anger or disappointment, he or she needs to express these feelings directly to the proper individual. When Mom tells Dad that their son John is angry with him for not allowing him to drive the family car that evening; when son John tells Dad that Mom was hurt by his unkind remarks at dinner—these are not considered direct communications. We refer to such communications as “triangulation.” Such indirect messages from others can cause misunderstanding, hurt, and anger precisely because they come secondhand. These are the communication patterns of dysfunctional families. Such communication keeps family members distant and out of touch with each other, and can create unnecessary conflict and resentment. “Why am I being treated this way?” “Why can’t my husband tell me directly?”

When the aforesaid John tells his mother he is angry with his father, that’s OK. But the mother needs to tell John, “I understand why you are angry with your father, but you need to speak to him. Tell him how you feel about using the car.” That is the mature and trusting way to face an issue.

But if mother steps in and talks to her husband, she enables John to avoid his father and this weakens the son-father relationship. If John is anxious and uncomfortable about approaching his father, the mother may coach John on how to speak with his father. John may even agree to have his mother accompany him to his father as support, but John will do the talking. “John has something to discuss with you, dear,” says the mother. Then she backs off.

How many adults can’t speak openly and honestly and directly with their parents? They are still relating to their parents as they did when they were children. This problem of communication originated in childhood and has carried on into adulthood. It is a form of commu-

nication that will probably be carried into their marriages.

Issues are never resolved when triangulation takes over. It not only leaves the family with feelings of ambiguity about one another, but they also feel disconnected from each other—and this damages the family system. Sometimes people tell me glowing and affirming things about another person. Sometimes they tell me how angry they are with that person. “Did you tell the other person?” I will ask. “They need to know.” We should never take the responsibility for delivering messages for others or we become part of the triangulation. We are then part of the problem and not part of the solution.

The basic principle is this: the closer and deeper our relationship, the more honest and open, the more direct and clear our communication must be. Casual relationships may survive distorted ways of communicating, but not close, intimate relationships. Never, never presume or assume that the other person in a relationship knows what you think, feel, or need.

*Never  
presume the  
other person  
knows what  
you need.*

For example, people don't know we care about them unless we say we do. Children don't feel they are loved or appreciated unless they are told. Wives can be silently seething because their husbands don't know their needs. “He should know!” Sorry! He won't—or can't—unless he is told. He is not a mind reader. The husband himself may not even be aware of his own needs, so how will he possibly recognize his wife's needs? Each spouse must take the responsibility to identify, accept, and express their own needs—physical, emotional, sexual—to each other. In the words of Dorothy Day, “Love is a harsh and dreadful thing.”

### **COMMUNICATION AND SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS**

In my dealings with persons having problems in their sexual relationships, I am usually dealing with persons who do not communicate verbally in an effective way. People not in touch with one another in speech are not in touch with one another emotionally, and eventually they become sexually out of touch.

So many times I have sat with a couple, helping them break down the walls erected between them by years of poor communication. Even though they may not immediately address sexual issues, I realize that the void I see in their personal relationship indicates that their sexual relationship is in serious trouble. If someone can't communicate with another verbally, how can he or she communicate effectively sexually? It's not possible. Sexual communication is doomed to fail if it is not rooted in verbal communication.

There are many people who engage in sexual relations but who never discuss their sexual feelings with one another. They usually presume, wrongly, they know each other's sexual needs and preferences. Is it any wonder that for one partner or both the sexual relationship goes flat? Many are anxious about their sexual life, but find it difficult to discuss it honestly and openly with the other person involved. How destructive this is to their relationship! Where is their trust?

We Christians believe that most premarital sex is sinful, meaning destructive. It can hurt the people involved. We are irresponsible toward our sexuality when we treat it casually before a genuine emotional relationship has developed. When sexual relationships are entered into prematurely, they often give one the illusion of being a deep and serious relationship. However, within a period of time, as that relationship deteriorates, as it often does, we hear people saying, "I thought I was in love. I thought he or she loved me." We can come to the realization of love in our lives only when we are able to sit down with one another and speak openly and honestly to each other. Then we share deeply one another's world and worldview. Then, in the pain and joy of such communication, many illusions can be dissipated. Then we are truly able to relate sexually.

In marriage, if there is no personal relationship and meaningful and penetrating communication, the sexual relationship will soon find itself weakened, less satisfying, or dying completely. Often married couples go through the motions of having sex, but do not have an emotionally satisfying sexual relationship. Wives are the first to acknowledge this, but husbands eventually come to the same realization. It has often been said, "Men express affection in order to obtain sex and women give sex in order to receive affection." Why can't it be both? It can, but that requires communication.