

## BEING IN RELATIONSHIP

1. . . . Perhaps I can share something of myself, something of my experience in interpersonal relationships, something of what it has been like to be me, in communication with others. This is not an easy thing to do. But if I can do it, if I can share something of myself, then I think you can take what I say, or leave it alone. You can decide whether it is relevant to your own job, your career, your profession, your life. You can respond to it with the reaction, "That's just what I've felt and what I've discovered," or equally valuable, "I feel very differently. My experience has taught me something entirely different." In either case, it may help you to define *yourself* more clearly, more openly, more surely. That I *do* regard as worthwhile, and as something I hope I can facilitate.
  
2. So I'm going to share with you a somewhat miscellaneous bag of learnings, things I have learned or am learning about this mysterious business of relating with other human beings, about communication between persons. I'm going to share some of my satisfactions and my dissatisfactions in this area. The reason I call it a mysterious business is that interpersonal communication is almost never achieved except in part. You probably never feel fully understood by another, and neither do I. Yet I find it extremely rewarding when I have been able, in a particular instance, truly to communicate myself to another. I find it very precious when, for some moment in time, I have felt really close to, fully in touch with, another person.  
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3. .So the first simple feeling I want to share with you is my enjoyment when I can really *hear* someone. I think perhaps this has been a long standing characteristic of mine. I can remember this in my early grammar school days. A child would ask the teacher a question and the teacher would give a perfectly good answer to a completely different question. A feeling of pain and distress would always strike me. My reaction was, "But you didn't *hear* him." I felt a sort of childish despair at the lack of communication which was (and is) so common.
  
4. I believe I know why it is satisfying to me to hear someone. When I really hear someone it puts me in touch with him. It enriches my life. It is through hearing people that I have learned all that I know about individuals, about personality, about psychotherapy, and about interpersonal relationships. There is another peculiar satisfaction in it. When I really hear someone it is like listening to the music of the spheres, because beyond the immediate message of the person, no matter what that might be, there is the universal, the general. Hidden in all of the personal communications which I really hear there seem to be orderly psychological laws, aspects of

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the awesome order which we find in the universe as a whole. So there is both the satisfaction of hearing this particular person and also the satisfaction of feeling oneself in some sort of touch with what is universally true.

5. When I say that I enjoy hearing someone I mean, of course, hearing deeply. I mean that I hear the words, the thoughts, the feeling tones, the personal meaning, even the meaning that is below the conscious intent of the speaker. Sometimes, too, in a message which superficially is not very important, I hear a deep human cry, a "silent scream," that lies buried and unknown far below the surface of the person.
6. So I have learned to ask myself, can I hear the sounds and sense the shape of this person's inner world? Can I resonate to what he is saying, can I let it echo back and forth in me, so deeply that I sense the meaning he is afraid of yet would like to communicate, as well as those meanings he knows?
7. I think, for example, of an interview I had with an adolescent boy, the recording of which I listened to only a short time ago. Like many an adolescent today he was saying at the outset of the interview that he had no goals. When I questioned him on this he made it even stronger that he had no goals whatsoever, not even one. I said, "There isn't anything you want to do?" "Nothing . . . Well, yeah, I want to keep on living." I remember very distinctly my feeling at that moment. I resonated very deeply to this phrase. He might simply be telling me that, like everyone else, he wanted to live. On the other hand he might be telling me, and this seemed to be a distinct possibility, that at some point the question of whether or not to live had been a real issue with him. So I tried to resonate to him at all levels. I didn't know for certain what the message was. I simply wanted to be open to any of the meanings that this statement might have, including the possible meaning that he might have at one time considered suicide. I didn't respond verbally at this level. That would have frightened him. But I think that my being willing and able to listen to him at all levels is perhaps one of the things that made it possible for him to tell me, before the end of the interview, that not long before he had been on the point of blowing his brains out. This little episode constitutes an example of what I mean by wanting to really hear someone at all the levels at which he is endeavoring to communicate.
8. I find, in therapeutic interviews, and in the intensive group experiences which have come to mean a great deal to me in recent years, that hearing has consequences. When I do truly hear a person and the meanings that are important to him at that moment, hearing not simply his words, but *him*, and when I let him know that I have heard his own private personal meanings, many things happen. There is first of all a grateful look. He feels released. He wants to tell me more about his world. He surges forth in a new sense of freedom. I think he becomes more open to the process of change.

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9. I have often noticed, both in therapy and in groups, that the more deeply I can hear the meanings of this person the more there is that happens. One thing I have come to look upon as almost universal is that when a person realizes he has been deeply heard, there is a moistness in his eyes. I think in some real sense he is weeping for joy. It is as though he were saying, "Thank God, *somebody* heard me. Someone knows what it's like to be me." In such moments I have had the fantasy of a prisoner in a dungeon, tapping out day after day a Morse code message, "Does anybody hear me? Is there anybody there? Can anyone hear me?" And finally one day he hears some faint tappings which spell out "Yes." By that one simple response he is released from his loneliness, he has become a human being again. There are many, many people living in private dungeons today, people who give no evidence of it whatever on the outside, where you have to listen very sharply to hear the faint messages from the dungeon. . . .

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10. Let me move on to a second learning which I would like to share with you. I like to *be heard*. A number of times in my life I have felt myself bursting with insoluble problems, or going round and round in tormented circles or, during one period, overcome by feelings of worthlessness and despair, sure I was sinking into psychosis. I think I have been more lucky than most in finding at these times individuals who have been able to hear me and thus to rescue me from the chaos of my feelings. I have been fortunate in finding individuals who have been able to hear my meanings a little more deeply than I have known them. These individuals heard me without judging me, diagnosing me, appraising me, evaluating me. They have just listened and clarified and responded to me at all the levels at which I was communicating. I can testify that when you are in psychological distress and someone really hears you without passing judgment on you, without trying to take responsibility for you, without trying to mold you, it feels *damn good*. At these times, it has relaxed the tension in me. It has permitted me to bring out the frightened feelings, the guilts, the despair, the confusions that have been a part of my experience. When I have been listened to and when I have been heard, I am able to re-perceive my world in a new way and to go on. It is amazing that feelings which were completely awful, become bearable when someone listens. It is astonishing how elements which seem insoluble become soluble when someone hears; how confusions which seem irremediable turn into relatively clear flowing streams when one is understood. I have deeply appreciated the times that I have experienced this sensitive, empathic, concentrated listening.

11. I have been very grateful that by the time I quite desperately needed this kind of help, I had trained and developed therapists, persons in their own right, independent and unafraid of me, who were able to go with me through a dark and troubled period in which I underwent a great deal of inner growth. It has also made

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me sharply aware that in developing my style of therapy for others, I was without doubt, at some unconscious level, developing the kind of help I wanted and could use myself.

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12. Let me turn to some of my dissatisfactions in this realm. I dislike it in myself when I can't hear another, when I do not understand him. If it is only a simple failure of comprehension or a failure to focus my attention on what he is saying, or a difficulty in understanding his words, then I feel only a very mild dissatisfaction with myself.

13. But what I really dislike in myself is when I cannot hear the other person because I am so sure in advance of what he is about to say that I don't listen. It is only afterward that I realize that I have only heard what I have already decided he is saying. I have failed really to listen. Or even worse are those times when I can't hear because what he is saying is too threatening, might even make me change my views or my behavior. Still worse are those times when I catch myself trying to twist his message to make it say what I want him to say, and then only hearing that. This can be a very subtle thing and it is surprising how skilled I can be in doing it. Just by twisting his words a small amount, by distorting his meaning just a little, I can make it appear that he is not only saying the thing I want to hear, but that he is the person I want him to be. It is only when I realize through his protest or through my own gradual recognition that I am subtly manipulating him that I become disgusted with myself. I know too from being on the receiving end of this how frustrating it is to be received for what you are not, to be heard as saying something which you have not said and do not mean. This creates anger and bafflement and disillusion.

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14. The next learning I want to share with you is that I am terribly frustrated and shut into myself when I try to express something which is deeply me, which is a part of my own private, inner world, and the other person does not understand. When I take the gamble, the risk, of trying to share something that is very personal with another individual and it is not received and not understood, this is a very deflating and a very lonely experience. I have come to believe that it is that experience which makes some individuals psychotic. They have given up hoping that anyone can understand them and once they have lost that hope then their own inner world, which becomes more and more bizarre, is the only place where they can live. They can no longer live in any shared human experience. I can sympathize with them because I know that when I try to share some feeling aspect of myself which is private, precious, and tentative, and when this communication is met by evaluation, by reassurance, by denial, by distortion of my meaning, I have very strongly the reaction, "Oh, what's the use!" At such a time one knows what it is to be *alone*.

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15. So, as you can see, a creative, active, sensitive, accurate, empathic, non-judgmental listening, is for me terribly important in a relationship. It is important for me to provide it. It has been extremely important especially at certain times in my life to receive it. I feel that I have grown within myself when I have provided it. I am very sure that I have grown and been released and enhanced when I have received this kind of listening.
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16. Moving on to another area of my learnings, I find it very satisfying when I can be real, when I can be close to whatever it is that is going on within me. I like it when I can listen to myself. To really know what I am experiencing in the moment is by no means an easy thing but I feel somewhat encouraged because I think that over the years I have been improving at it. I am convinced, however, that it is a life-long task and that none of us is really able to be comfortably close to *all* that is going on within his own experience.
17. In place of the term *realness* I have sometimes used the word *congruence*. By this I mean that when my experiencing of this moment is present in my awareness, and when what is present in my awareness is present in my communication, then each of these three levels matches or is congruent. At such moments I am integrated or whole, I am completely in one piece. Most of the time of course I, like everyone else, exhibit some degree of incongruence. I have learned, however, that realness, or genuineness, or congruence—whatever term you wish to give it—is a fundamental basis for the best of communication, the best of relationships.
18. What do I mean by being real? I could give many examples from many different fields. But one meaning, one learning is that there is basically nothing to be afraid of when I present myself as I *am*, when I can come forth nondefensively, without armor, just me. When I can accept the fact that I have many deficiencies, many faults, make lots of mistakes, am often ignorant where I should be knowledgeable, often prejudiced when I should be openminded, often have feelings which are not justified by the circumstances, then I can be much more real. And when I can come out wearing no armor, making no effort to be different from what I am, I learn so much more—even from criticism and hostility—and I am so much more relaxed, and I get so much more relaxed, and I get so much closer to people. Besides, my willingness to be vulnerable brings forth so much more real feeling from other people who are in relationship to me, that it is very rewarding. So I enjoy life *much* more when I am not defensive, not hiding behind a facade, just trying to be and express the real me.
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19. I feel a sense of satisfaction when I can dare to communicate the realness in me to another. This is far from easy partly because what I am experiencing keeps

changing in every moment, partly because feelings are very complex. Usually there is a lag, sometimes of moments, sometimes of days, weeks, or months, between the experiencing and the communication. In these cases, I experience something, I feel something, but only later do I become aware of it, only later do I dare to communicate it, when it has become cool enough to risk sharing it with another. Yet it is a most satisfying experience when I can communicate what is real in me at the moment that it occurs. Then I feel genuine, and spontaneous, and alive.

20. Such real feelings are not always positive. One man, in a basic encounter group of which I was a member, was talking about himself in ways which seemed to me completely false, speaking of the pride he took in maintaining his front, his pretense, his facade, how skillful he was in deceiving others. My feeling of annoyance rose higher and higher until finally I expressed it by simply saying, "Oh, nuts!" This somehow pricked the bubble. From that time on he was a more real and genuine person, less a braggadocio, and our communication improved. I felt good for having let him know my own real angry feeling as it was occurring.
21. I'm sorry to say that very often, especially with feelings of anger, I'm only partly aware of the feeling at the moment, and full awareness comes later. I only learn afterward what my feeling was. It is only when I wake up in the middle of the night, finding myself angrily fighting someone, that I realize how angry I was at him the day before. Then I know, seemingly too late, how I might have been my real feeling self; but, at least, I have learned to go to him the next day, if need be, to express my anger, and gradually I'm learning to be more quickly acquainted with it inside myself. In the last basic encounter group in which I participated, I was at different times very angry with two individuals. With one, I wasn't aware of it until the middle of the night and had to wait until morning to express it. With the other, I was able to realize it and express it in the session in which it occurred. In both instances, it led to real communication, to a strengthening of the relationship, and gradually to a feeling of genuine liking for each other. But I am a slow learner in this area.  
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22. It is a sparkling thing when I encounter realness in another person. Sometimes in the basic encounter groups which have been a very important part of my experience these last few years, someone says something which comes from him transparently and whole. It is so obvious when a person is not hiding behind a facade but is speaking from deep within himself. When this happens I leap to meet it. I want to encounter this real person. Sometimes the feelings thus expressed are very positive feelings. Sometimes they are decidedly negative ones. I think of a man in a very responsible position, a scientist at the head of a large research department in a huge electronics firm, very "successful." One day in such a basic encounter group he found the courage to speak of his isolation, to tell us that he had never

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had a single friend in his life. There were plenty of people whom he knew but not one he could count as a friend. "As a matter of fact," he added, "there are only two individuals in the world with whom I have even a reasonably communicative relationship. These are my two children." By the time he finished he was letting loose some of the tears of sorrow for himself which I am sure he had held in for many years. But it was the honesty and realness of his loneliness which caused every member of the group to reach out to him in some psychological sense. It was also most significant that his courage in being real enable all of us to be more genuine in our communications, to come out from behind the facades we ordinarily use.

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23. I am disappointed when I realize—and of course this realization always comes afterward, after a lag of time—that I have been too frightened or too threatened to let myself get close to what I am experiencing and that consequently I have not been genuine or congruent. There immediately comes to mind an instance which is somewhat painful to reveal. Some years ago I was invited to spend a year as a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, California. The Fellows are a group chosen because they are supposedly brilliant and well-informed scholars. It is doubtless inevitable that there is a considerable amount of one-upsmanship, of showing off one's knowledge and achievements. It seems important for each Fellow to impress the others, to be a little more assured, to be a little more knowledgeable than he really is. I found myself several times doing this same thing—playing a role of greater certainty and of greater competence than I really felt. I can't tell you how disgusted with myself I was as I realized what I was doing. I was not being me; I was playing a part.
24. I regret it when I suppress my feelings too long and they burst forth in ways that are distorted or attacking or hurtful. I have a friend whom I like very much but who has one particular pattern of behavior that thoroughly annoys me. Because of the usual tendency to be nice, polite, and pleasant I kept this annoyance to myself for too long a time. When it finally burst its bounds it came out not only as annoyance but as an attack on him. This was hurtful and it took us some time to repair the relationship.
25. I am inwardly pleased when I have the strength to permit another person to be his own realness and to be *separate* from me. I think that is often a very threatening possibility. In some ways I have found it sort of an ultimate test of staff leadership and of parenthood. Can I freely permit this staff member or my client or my son or my daughter to become a separate person with ideas, purposes, and values which may not be identical with my own? I think of Kahlil Gibran's poem on marriage,<sup>1</sup> which includes the lines:

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Let there be spaces in your togetherness,  
 And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.  
 Love one another, but make not a bond of love:  
 Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls. . . .  
 Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping.  
 For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.  
 And stand together yet not too near together:  
 For the pillars of the temple stand apart,  
 And the oak tree and the cypress grow not in each other's shadow.

26. From a number of these things I have been saying I trust it is clear that when I can permit realness in myself or sense it or permit it in the other, I find it very satisfying. When I cannot permit it in myself or fail to permit a separate realness in another it is to me very distressing and regrettable. I find that when I am able to let myself be congruent and genuine it often helps the other person. When the other person is transparently real and congruent it often helps me. In those rare moments when a deep realness in one meets a deep realness in the other it is a memorable "I-thou relationship," as Martin Buber, the existential Jewish philosopher, would call it. Such a deep and mutual personal encounter does not happen often but I am convinced that unless it happens occasionally we are not human.

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27. There's another learning. I like it when I can permit freedom to others, and in this I think I have learned, and developed considerable ability. I am frequently, though not always, able to take a group, a course, or a class of students, and to set them psychologically free. I can create a climate in which they can be and direct themselves. At first, they are suspicious; they're sure that the freedom I'm offering them is some kind of trick, and then they bring up the question of grades. They can't be free because in the end I will evaluate them and judge them. When we have worked out some solution, in which we have all participated, to the absurd demand of the University that learning is measured by grades, then they begin to feel that they are really free. Then curiosity is unleashed. Individuals and groups start to pursue their own goals, their own purposes. They become explorers. They can try to find the meaning of their lives in the work they're doing. They work twice as hard in such a course where nothing is required as in courses with requirements. I can't always achieve this atmosphere and when I cannot, I think it is because of some subtle holding back within myself, some unwillingness for the freedom to be complete. But when I can achieve it, then education becomes what it should be, an exciting quest, a searching, not an accumulation of facts soon to be out-dated and forgotten. These students become persons living in process, able to live a changing life. Of all the learnings I have developed, I think this climate of freedom which I can frequently create, which I can often somehow carry with me and around me, is to me one of the most precious parts of myself.

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31. So, in this third area, prizing or loving and being prized or loved is experienced by me as very growth enhancing. A person who is loved appreciatively, not possessively, blooms, and develops his own unique self. The person who loves non-possessively is himself enriched. This at least has been my experience.  
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32. Let me close this chapter by saying that in my experience real interpersonal communication and real interpersonal relationships are deeply growth-promoting. I enjoy facilitating growth and development in others. I am enriched when others provide a climate which makes it possible for me to grow and change.
33. So I value it very much when I am able sensitively to hear the pain and the joy, the fear, the anger, the confusion and despair, the determination and the courage to be, in another person. And I value more than I can say the times when another person has truly been able to hear those elements in me.
34. I prize it greatly when I am able to move forward in the never-ending attempts to be the real me in this moment, whether it is my anger or enthusiasm or puzzlement which is real. I am so delighted when a realness in me brings forth more realness in the other, and we come closer to a mutual I-thou relationship.
35. And I am very grateful that I have moved in the direction of being able to take in, without rejecting it, the warmth and the caring of others, because this has so increased my own capacity for giving love, without fear of being entrapped and without holding back.
36. These, in my experience, are some of the elements which make communication between persons, and *being in* relationship to persons, more enriching and more enhancing. I fall *far* short of achieving these elements, but to find myself moving in these directions makes life a warm, exciting, upsetting, troubling, satisfying, enriching, and above all a worthwhile venture.

28. Another area of my learning in interpersonal relationships has been slow and painful for me. It is most warming and fulfilling when I can let in the fact, or permit myself to feel, that someone cares for, accepts, admires, or prizes me. Because, I suppose, of elements in my past history it has been very difficult for me to do this. For a long time I tended almost automatically to brush aside any positive feelings which were turned in my direction. I think my reaction was, "Who, me? You couldn't possibly care for me. You might like what I have done or my achievements but not *me*." This is one respect in which my own therapy helped me very much. I am not always able even now to let in such warm and loving feelings from others, but I find it very releasing when I can do so. I know that some people flatter me in order to gain something for themselves. Some people praise me because they are afraid to be hostile. Some people, in recent years, admire me because I'm a "great name," or an "authority." But I have come to recognize the fact that some people genuinely appreciate *me*, like me, love me, and I want to sense that fact and let it in. I think I have become less aloof as I have been able really to take in and soak up those loving feelings.
29. I have found it to be a very enriching thing when I can truly prize or care for or love another person and when I can let that feeling flow out to him. Like many others, I used to fear that I would be trapped by this. "If I let myself care for him he can control me, or use me, or make demands on me." I think that I have moved a long way in the direction of being less fearful in this respect. Like my clients I, too, have slowly learned that tender, positive feelings are *not* dangerous either to give or receive. . . .  
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30. Because of having less fear of giving or receiving positive feelings, I have become more able to *appreciate* individuals. I have come to believe that this is rather rare. So often, even with our children, we love them to control them rather than loving them because we appreciate them. I have come to think that one of the most satisfying experiences I know—and also one of the most growth-promoting experiences for the other person—is just fully to *appreciate* this individual in the same way that I appreciate a sunset. People are just as wonderful as sunsets if I can let them *be*. In fact, perhaps the reason we can truly appreciate a sunset is that we cannot control it. When I look at a sunset as I did the other evening I don't find myself saying, "Soften the orange a little on the right hand corner, and put a bit more purple along the base, and use a little more pink in the cloud color." I don't do that. I don't *try* to control a sunset. I watch it with awe as it unfolds. I like myself best when I can experience my staff member, my son, my daughter, my grandchildren, in this same way, appreciating the unfolding of a life. I believe this is a somewhat oriental attitude, but for me it is the most satisfying one.