

# Movement Speaks: Non-Verbal Communication in Bereavement Care

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Verbal and written communications about non-verbal communication often seem to miss the point. It is, after all, much easier to teach this topic non-verbally, by experiential methods such as role-play (with or without a video-tape analysis), sculpting, psychodrama, or co-counselling.

Even so there is a place for articles which draw our attention to the various ways in which we communicate non-verbally with each other, for this language is as subtle, complex, and, at times, puzzling as verbal language. Verbal language is linear, one word followed by another, non-verbal language is non-linear, with different parts of the body simultaneously sending out messages which may or may not confirm each other.

The conscious mind can only pay attention to one thing at a time

It is generally accepted by the caring professions that for good communication to take place between the carer and the client, we have to create the right environment. The whole basis of a good counselling situation depends on the quality of the relationship established. I believe that serious consideration given to the non-verbal communication aspect of the interchange will help counsellors enormously both in their skill in 'reading' the client and in moderating their own habits of movement appropriately. This in turn will enable counsellors to communicate their attitude and intention quickly and clearly.

In enlightened establishments and when funds permit, considerable thought is given to practical amenities in order to create an atmosphere of safety and comfort, e.g. a warm room, comfortable chairs, quiet furnishings and gentle, appropriate lighting. However, the final responsibility for putting the client at ease is dependent on the manner in which the counsellor presents herself\*. Her aim will be to emanate a feeling of stability and quiet confidence, with an outgoing warmth and empathy. Throughout the ensuing sessions the counsellor may need to:

- give attention without invading or compelling
- respond without urgency or pre-empting

\* Where the feminine pronoun is used the masculine can equally be transposed.

and is forced, by its very structure, to convert non-linear messages into linear. We do this by a process of scanning which is poorly understood but which accounts for the fact that, although we all live in the same world, we perceive it quite differently. Written and spoken language locks onto the linear process of the reader's thought and enables the author to organise the message we receive and to impose the author's own coherence. Hence it enables complex, multiple messages to be reduced to simpler, sequential forms.

In the article which follows, Walli Meier, who describes herself as 'a specialist movement observer (based on the principles of Rudolf Laban)', scans the field and provides us with her own linear exposition of this fascinating and important topic.

Editor

- support without imposing or dictating
- wait without causing floundering
- hold without necessarily holding.

At all times the counsellor is expected to behave appropriately according to the needs of the individual, the stage he or she has reached, the quality of the relationship established, and the depth of the distress. It is therefore a continual balancing act, a state of constant mobility. Subtle adjustments of attitude which might be observable in movement are:

- advancing and retreating
- initiating and waiting
- opening and closing
- giving and receiving.

There is a constant flux of the flow of movement 'from me to you, from you to me' which is the essence of relationships. In this context, the purpose is to facilitate change and growth.

It is more often the way we move which 'speaks', rather than the words we utter. The way in which we behave bodily while walking, standing or sitting, or the way we enter a room to greet a visitor, all indicate something of our personality, our inner state of the moment and our intention or lack of attention. There is nothing new in this. We have been assessing other people by the way they move all our lives, most of the time unconsciously. We have responded to the synthesis of words, gesture and posture of other people without thought of our own



and what they are conveying. Most of us are concerned to some degree about what other people think of us, and consider quite seriously what to wear for certain occasions. But few of us consider how to move in that situation in order to create the impression we want to make.

Many counsellors, on meeting their client for the session, know how she is before she has opened her mouth, especially if they have known her for some time, they instinctively respond appropriately in: a) how they present themselves to their client and b) how they prepare themselves inwardly in order to deal with the ensuing period. However, other counsellors in the same situation may have recognised the inner state of the client and allowed their reaction of shock, apprehension or indecision to slip into movement. In these instances the counsellor will use up valuable time in retrieving the confidence and trust so hardly won in previous sessions.

## Attention

In order to be more precise about the role of movement in counselling, let us consider in detail one of the major aspects of a counsellor's work, that of giving attention. On the surface we may take it for granted that 'of course we have to give our clients attention, that is what it is all about'. But we may never have seriously analysed what attention is, and recognised that it is the quality of the attention we give which may be the foundation of the successful interaction we are endeavouring to establish.

The fact that one human being extends herself to give time and

space to concentrate on the needs of another human being is a therapeutic act in its own right. The client feels herself to be the centre of attention, it builds up her self-esteem and she feels comforted in that some one is caring for her. (Up to now it may have been the dying person who has had all the caring and attention.) Attention may be considered under two headings: a) general attentiveness and b) concentrated attention.

### General attentiveness

If one were to compare a counselling session with a movement or dance class, general attentiveness would go under the heading of warming up, general activity or the introductory section. In this part of the class it would be the task of the leader to create the right atmosphere, to relax, set at ease and mobilise the class members and introduce the theme of the session. In this way they are given time to make the transition from the outside world to the special one inside. It also gives them time to get in touch with themselves and the leader. Beginnings are crucial. The right inviting music has been chosen, the task is not too demanding, confidence has been reinforced, the direction indicated and the work may then proceed into greater depth.

If we transpose this to the counselling situation, the same applies. We must help the client to make the transition from outside to inside the counselling environment, where some of the facade may drop and feelings be allowed to show. Much of this has to do with the initial meeting of client and counsellor.

### Greeting

This next section will be taken from two points of view: a) the client visiting the counsellor, and b) the counsellor visiting the client.

We have all experienced, perhaps at an interview for a job, being ushered in to the person in authority by the secretary and left standing in the entrance to the room while the figure of authority completes his notes or finishes his 'phone call behind a large, imposing desk. Our body image shrivels, our knees shake and our anxiety level rises with every second. Self-esteem diminishes, and perhaps rejection becomes reinforced.

The greeting is crucial, and the counsellor must be the one who guides the transition. Obviously circumstances differ, but ideally it is the counsellor who should walk to greet the client, accompany her into the meeting place and help her to settle where she is most at ease. It is during this period that the counsellor practises her all-round

attention. She 'reads' the client. Is she as last time? If different, in what way?

The counsellor also notes how the client arrived. Was she alone or did someone bring her, and how is she dressed, with care or carelessly? At the same time the counsellor will be making light conversation to put her at her ease, perhaps filling a painful silence. In fact the counsellor needs to engage the client actively, giving and gaining information. Meanwhile the client is probably doing the same, i.e. sizing up the counsellor. Even if only unconsciously, she too will be evaluating the counsellor and how she feels about her.

Counsellors are specialists. They know their craft. They know about grief, they know about this situation and are leaders and guides. They are not authoritarians but collaborators, people who *understand* (stand beside), and who can wait, support and counsel. How do counsellors convey this in their greeting and make that client feel that they want her beside them?

While retaining her own unique personal range of movement, the counsellor will aim for an open, fairly relaxed body stance—shoulders down, chest relaxed, eyes open, alert but friendly. The flow of movement is an opening while she advances with sufficient firmness in tread to show confident intention. Any gesturing needs to be unfussy and clear in shaping. The gaze must be steady, and the smile genuine, i.e. body and gesture synchronise so that there is full body involvement in one direction. If a handshake is appropriate let it be generous and flow 'home' into the other hand. This gives a quality of sensitive gentleness with firm, uncrushing warmth. Touch is immediate communication. It says 'Welcome—I am dependable—you are safe—I won't let you down'. By the way she comports herself in this greeting, the counsellor gives the message that she is a confident, stable person with experience, and with a capacity for warmth and empathy.

She will guide her client into her room, perhaps holding while not actually holding. That is, she has the body shape of one who could contain and who can protect, while allowing the client her space and time to enter.

### Placement

Next, consider the spatial placement of the sitting arrangement. The chairs must be at the same level, so the notion of authority and superiority is diminished and a sense of sharing is invited. However, the orientation and proximity of the two placements might be

one of personal choice. Some people might prefer a direct front-to-front and near situation, where the client feels the full concentrated attention of her counsellor. Others might want a more distant and oblique situation, where the pressure is not so strong and eye contact and feelings can deflect and diverge. Self-reflection is then given more freedom from scrutiny.

The ideal situation is one where the client is given the opportunity to place her chair where she will. Initially this may be a direct invitation given by the counsellor while she takes the opportunity to get the much welcomed cup of tea or coffee, fulfilling a useful physical form of attentiveness as well as being out of the way while the client makes her choice. For some, this decision-making is far too difficult in the early stages and the counsellor must decide. She knows from experience what is adequate for most clients and, also important, what is best for herself. If placement is very important to her, she must not give a choice. It is essential that the counsellor is clearly visible to the client, so she must not sit with her back to the light, and some counsellors might have to reconsider their hairstyle if it prevents their client seeing their face.

### The visiting counsellor

In the case of a visiting counsellor, other factors have to be considered. She is the guest, away from her familiar territory. She is visiting a home that is bereaved, saturated by the personality of the one who has gone or is dying. She is facing unknown rituals of manners, timing and placements (who sits where?). She is also ignorant of the bonds between the family members. She must be extremely sensitive, from the practical details of where she parks the car to being acutely aware of how the people are behaving in context.

Her entrance must be unhurried, but sure. Her open attitude must flow before her steps. Her gaze must be steady to the host or hostess—seeing all without seeming to be looking. She must give the family time to choose their grouping, their spacing, their looking as they assess her. Give them time for their actions and organisation, such as where she and they should sit, and accept for the time being whatever they decide to arrange or offer in the way of hospitality.

The visiting counsellor may enter a house of people stunned by their experience. The initiative is left to her to take. This she must do gently, through questioning where they might go (supposing they

meet in the hall) and where they might like her to sit. She must help them to settle. Very often, while verbally questioning, she can organise everything as she wishes through movement, e.g. leaning and looking in the direction she wishes to move (observing whether this is acceptable or not), indicating in a light, clear gesture that they sit, and what the possibilities are. She may have to query an invasive television set, recognise and disarm the overprotective neighbour, and defuse the questionable ferocity and direct gaze of the resident dog! Her quiet composure will do more than any words to ease everyone into a co-operative counselling atmosphere.

Everybody experiences making social visits to other people's homes. Next time watch the dance, observe your solo, and become conscious of what role movement has taken place in order to facilitate the required interaction.

A clever hostess organises her party without the guests knowing they have been organised. An experienced counsellor can do the same, even when visiting. She can do it by seeing, anticipating and initiating through her own movements. Her confident adaptability will be communicated to those about her, and they will adapt themselves suitably for the interchange to develop.

Once the counsellor has considered the greeting and the physical and psychological well-being of the client, the period of general attentiveness should transfer smoothly into the more concentrated attention-giving part of the counselling session.

### Attention

Giving attention forms the main part of the counselling session, involving the skills of listening, observing, responding and waiting.

To give true attention to another requires an extension of the self. It is hard work, as it is a contained, outgoing exertion. In order to achieve this, the counsellor must be free of herself. Some people might call this being 'centred': having a sense of being sufficiently 'at home' in the self to be able to put oneself and one's problems aside and so be released to attend to others. At the same time, while being pliant, the counsellor must not tax her own body boundaries. In strong emotional situations it is easy to be sucked into the feelings of others and lose sight of one's role. Actors or dancers, while deeply involved in expressing passionate feelings, never lose sight of where they are on the stage in relation to lights, props,

other actors and what is happening in the sequence of events in words and gesture. There is always a part of them standing outside, watching and monitoring, otherwise they would get lost in sequencing and be utterly exhausted by feeling the real emotion. So also must counsellors, while playing their part, be vigilant for the sake of the whole interactional experience of the next months or years.

So, how can the counsellor help herself by movement? She should aim at being well grounded, placing herself quite firmly in the chair, her feet in contact with the floor. She should give comfortably into her body weight, particularly in the pelvic region, while having a light, sensitive alertness in the upper part of the body. The shoulders and neck should be free and open, the body indicating a balanced ease, with free mobility for inclination forwards and backwards or side to side. (Needless to say, the face should reflect the same quality.) An easy self-confidence attracts confidence. She must find her own way of having relaxed hands and place them where they might be still and comfortable.

When moving and gesturing, the movements should be restrained from being too large or too fussy. Clarity of shaping indicates clear thinking. The counsellor should try to keep the movements smooth, avoiding jerkiness or communicating a sense of urgency which might induce a state of anxiety. On the other hand, there might be a purpose in those very qualities—to break a state of inertia, perhaps—in which case the gestures then should be quite firm and direct. This is dependent on observation, listening and so responding.

### Listening and observing

What is the non-verbal way of saying 'I am listening'? Classically, by a slight narrowing and inclination forwards in the torso. By direct eye contact, a concentrated stillness with a little more tension in the body, all the energy concentrated outwards into one direction, the body a unit in stillness. Some people ask for this, they need this strong statement; perhaps they have never been listened to properly before.

Others might find it too powerful or too invasive; they might feel 'needed' or pinned down. They may react by withdrawing bodily and choosing their words more carefully, or dry up altogether. We deflect this without giving the impression that we have stopped listening. We could avert our gaze into space and 'lend an ear'. We can soften our body shape into a more plastic form or let the head

fall slightly sideways. We can lean back and open our posture, thus giving more space and showing a willingness to receive. We can replace the concentrated frown with a milder expression, opening the palms of the hands and having them facing upwards.

There are many more 'listening posture' modes. Each counsellor must choose her own, be herself, but know how that is and what messages it communicates. Catch yourself unawares and make a note of how you listen. Your intelligent adjustment might make all the difference\*. Not all clients are fascinating people. They might be particularly repetitive, and even boring. However, you must be interested and alert and not show that you are fighting to stay awake!

### Responding

You are responding to two things: a) what the person is saying in words, and b) what the person is saying through movement. Most of the time the basic message is the same. Words and gesture synchronise in rhythm and emphasis. Some words are accentuated by the accompanying movement. Many gestures fill in details of the experience which words do not describe, such as size, shape and, above all, quality. This is very useful when clients are describing other people, but there are times when words say one thing and the body says another, so that we are given double messages. Here there is a conflict in understanding, and more than likely the client is not understanding her feelings. She may be expressing confusion and an overall feeling of dis-ease. Recognise the state—don't catch it from the client—and wait.

Our tendency in this situation will be to concentrate on the words and try to make sense of them. However, it is best to concentrate on looking. Movement is very difficult to dissemble, it speaks the truth. On looking, you may see more conflict, e.g. the upper part of the body says one thing, the lower another. The gestures give one meaning and the posture another. The whole body may make a giving gesture and the hands stay clenched and shut. You may be observing an enormous struggle for coherence and inner understanding. You may be seeing someone on the brink of some unacceptable reality. Sit quietly, stay alert, and wait.

Responding is the giving part of the flux of movement—of towards and away—from your client. The classical nodding of the head is

\* This is extremely difficult to do alone. It is best practised in workshop situations, ideally with the use of video equipment or with someone else observing.

# Observing the Client



Square — intense



Brave — confronting



'S' shaped — weak and willowy



Shapeless — heavy, giving into weight



Out of her body — non-focusing



Narrow, high — above it all



Pulled inward — back, retreating



Thrust forward — urgent



Floundering — dispersed

towards the client—a slight inclusion of the torso gives it more validity. A quiet, sustained, flexible movement will convey understanding and encouragement to continue speaking.

A subtle aid to harmonious communication is synchrony of movement between the client and yourself. 'The listener dances with the speaker'. This occurs quite naturally and spontaneously. Watch any involved couple in animated discussion. They will be sitting in similar attitudes—the same body shape, the same quality of gentleness, or determined clarity of gesture or darting excitability. They may well be mirroring each other quite accurately and absolutely unconsciously. This activity is reflective: 'I see myself in you—I see acceptance of me in you'. Minutes of silence are unnoticed

or made bearable by your synchronised acceptance—a sense of sharing, of not being alone, yet having time and space for inward reflection.

But you may not feel in tune with your client, and find yourself in a contrasting body position by the nature of your individual unconscious reaction. This may be significant to the counsellor's functioning at the time! Here it might be worth consciously moderating your postural response to synchronise more with the client's for the time being, and this might well ease the process of interaction.

Research has shown that the most powerful agent for conveying empathy through movement is the process of 'echoing'<sup>2</sup>, which is also a natural phenomenon in harmonious relationships. The principle is to respond in a similar way to the

motion of the client a fraction of a second later, showing the given posture or gesture and thereby emphasising the statement made. You have made it yours, thus demonstrating your empathy.

Besides the giving aspects of responding there will be times when the counsellor needs to take the initiative. Perhaps, in the first instance, this will be in response to a direct question. There may be a straightforward, practical answer. The bodily response would most likely be direct, decisive but measured, and the end of the verbal and movement phase would be emphasised or accentuated, thus achieving clarity and giving security. However, when wishing to open new avenues of thought, the accompanying posture or gesture would more likely be of an opening movement, more flexible and in-

direct, accenting the beginning of the phrase and allowing the latter part to die away. This leaves the questioning open, and the suggestion may or may not be taken up. In practice, you may be wishing to convey this attitude by what you are saying. However, it is possible that inside yourself you know the path your client should be taking and, by the unconscious choice of your movement vocabulary, show what that is, very clearly. So, by your gestures, you negate the words you utter. Each situation is different and will require a unique and appropriate response, both in movement and speech.

Giving much more conscious thought to how we accompany our verbal approach to our clients with movement may well influence the choice of words, the structure of our sentences and the cadence and emphasis within them. The deliberate synchronising of the two will contribute greatly to the quality and effectiveness of the counsellor in relation to her clients.

### Silence, waiting and stillness

Waiting may be a very active response, just as stillness may be a very powerful action. This is dependent on when we wait and how we are still. So much of waiting has to do with timing. Timing in this context is associated with decision-making: 'when?', 'how long?' Can the client sustain the silence? (Never mind your own ability.) Is she 'working' in that seemingly 'time-lessness'? How do you know? By observing. Your 'working' client will probably be absorbed in an inward-flowing stillness, with some slight shifting as thoughts flow from one idea to another. The tension in the body will vary with the passing of emotions or the reliving of experience. She may demonstrate comprehension and resolution by inward firmness and symmetry in the body, or understanding and acceptance by relaxing, giving into weight a little and breathing more deeply.

Waiting in movement is stillness. One is balanced, grounded, relaxed but alert in all the senses. The body is highly sensitised with a light, fine-touch quality, particularly in the upper torso. The body flow is outward, but restrained. There is a watching, as it were, from behind, therefore creating no spatial tension. The client is given personal space in which to expand. Having enabled this time to occur, it must be given the time that it takes.

More likely than not it is the client who breaks the silence and the counsellor continues to respond. However, there are times when the client shows the beginnings of distress and yet can-

not take the initiative. The counsellor must then either intervene and prevent the client from floundering in her own helplessness, or cope with an ever increasing state of anxiety and tension. This is where the counsellor may shift her position and appropriately break the silence, perhaps with an increased expression of warmth through an opening and outflowing movement.

### Stillness

There are many kinds of stillnesses. There is the stillness of finality when the flow of movement has arrived and is stopped. There is the stillness when our personal sense of urgency is restrained, often leading to a sense of frustration—for example when we are caught in a traffic jam when driving to meet a train. There is the stillness where the outward flow of movement is held in the body in a pause, but the flow continues. This often happens when we are caught in mid-sentence by the client's response. We want to hold back the words in order that she can have the space, but the meaning in the gesture stays and encourages her response. There is the stillness of collapse—no tension, no intention. There is the stillness which is timeless—time is neutralised into an ever ongoing 'now'. It is the kind of spell which occurs when listening to a story or when one is in an act of creativity. Perhaps this is the type of stillness we must strive for when waiting, though recognising the others when they occur either in ourselves or our client. Each quality of stillness has its uses and, when we recognise them, they may become a tool.

### Concluding the session

Eventually the spell has to be broken and the flow contained. Somehow, a termination of the session has to be brought about. Initially this may have to be the counsellor's decision. Later the client should be able to initiate her own conclusion, i.e. dealing with her grief. Whichever way, a period of transition must be provided, enabling the client to regain a state of 'normality'. Time must be apportioned, and perhaps a warning given to enable the necessary disengagement or change to take place. The intensity of the session must be defused and eased, and the mantle of ordinariness and coping must be donned to protect the inner life and face the reality of the outside world. Instead of the quiet, direct attention, a little restlessness may be allowed to occur. Some attention may be deflected to an all-round awareness. Posture shifts a little and stretching and re-

leasing of stiff muscles and joints may occur, while the questioning or response will be about more mundane matters. When bridging the gap from the present to the next time, talk of arrangements helps to fill the gap—the journey home, tea, television and work. These are practical pegs to hold on to whilst standing and moving to put on coats and collect belongings. As you greeted them at the start, so now you help them to take their leave, with your support flowing from behind. Then, just when you thought you had accomplished the leave taking, the most difficult question is asked or the most meaningful feeling expressed! It can't be helped—you did your best and inwardly they were prepared to go. Now it is time for you to look after yourself. Go home and give up—have no intention and no tension!

### Conclusion

The art of counselling another human being is perhaps one of the most creative, sensitive and responsible activities we can be involved in. It demands that we strive to meet others where they are in need, and we are rewarded in our own growth as they unfold in theirs. It behoves us to care for our own well-being, to be in touch with our own body—the house in which we live. In a practical sense, we need to look after it. In a psychological sense, we need to know how it functions and how it feels. We are told that the better we know ourselves and come to understand ourselves, the more we will be able to understand others. I believe we should also know more about our unconscious movement patterns and how we express our personality in movement. In this way we may learn to extend our own movement range and learn to moderate our movement habits in order to adapt and communicate appropriately with others.

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