



Nonverbal Messages Introduction by Michael J. Lincoln, Ph.D.

Humans are pro-active -- they anticipate events and act accordingly. We do not just react in the moment to whatever impinges upon us. In other words, people are purposive and future-directed -- they operate in a “getting things done” manner. Their cognitive learning capacity means that they can conceptualize things in advance.

This frees them from the strict constraints of behavioral heredity as the basis of human systems -- from “instinct-domination.” Humans are consciously aware of their existence and of their mortality, and they therefore seek to assume control of their lives as a result.

The mechanism through which this works is attention-deployment, which is the focused psychological and spiritual energy of intentionality. What we attend to is cultivated in order to realize our intentions. Our experience is what we agree to attend to.

We make things happen via our attention-allocation. Attention is a finite resource, and it has to be shepherded -- there is only so much we can be and do and pay attention to. People therefore pay attention to what they want, as a function of the structured hierarchy of their goal intentions.

These intentions of ours are the bases of our interpretations. Attention is fully effective only when we are in optimal perceptual involvement with our experience or with the flow of things. Boredom and anxiety are alienated attention, and they are the result of non-cultivation of our attention -- of non-purposive allocation of our attention.

In order for this to work, though, we simply must have an over-arching system of comprehension and commitment to our goals with which to cultivate our attention, in order to be able to function and survive. This comprehension system is based on a set of cosmic symbols regarding the nature of human, social and individual existence. This system is called culture and/or religion.

These Cosmic symbols provide meaning to the relationship of humankind to humankind, to nature, and to each other. Ecological consciousness of the Universe of multiple intentions and processes (including empathy and compassion) is essential for survival -- and the preservation of the Universe is the ultimate criterion of evaluation of all things.

Religion is humanity's attempt to integrate self, society and spirit -- to integrate the ultimate goals of the person, the community and the Cosmos via rituals, symbols and framings. This provides the commonality of commitment necessary for human community.

It leads to consistent investment of attention in ways that lead to congruence with each other -- and to harmony with the Universe. It allows us to reconcile our own desires with each other, with the community, with the community-of-communities, and with the laws of nature and of the Cosmos.

Out of this comes the meaning of existence, along with standards, moral imperatives, and social systems by which to judge actions. Out of this, in turn, come our commitments and undertakings, with the result allocations of our attention and our intentions.

Meaning- and significance-contexting are all-important in human interaction. We create a socially embedded symbolic universe that is experienced as objective reality. We react to things as signs standing for something, by means of creating a thought or an interpretational idea and/or emotion.

Meaning grows with the experiences we have with each other. We develop a differentiated self in the context of society. We treat each other as representations of the "generalized other," and we develop a social "self" or "personality." We also develop agreed-upon ways of reacting to and initiating social interaction sequences. Social systems are shared structures of attention, interpretation and intervention.

It is primarily people's emotional meaning-loaded perceptions, cognitions and interpretations that determine the nature of the import of interactions with each other. People make sense of their emotional surrounds and their social environment, and they seek out information to do so via communication, observation and interaction.

People discover the limits of their being by expressing their individuality, and by finding their role in society and in the Universe from the resulting feedback. They find what they are capable of, as well as how vulnerable and limited they are. Out of this dynamic dialectic between the individual and the social, the natural and the Universal, human existence is made possible, meaningful and significant.

The big issues here are; 1) Who am I? – the personal self, 2) Who are you and we? The social self, and 3) What and Why is it? – the Cosmic self. Meaning is the ultimate goal in people's lives, particularly the meaning of who we are in all these senses.

Self-awareness and self-control are major factors in our functioning. We use representations to stand for vast ranges of experience that tell us who and what we are. Self-knowledge is always indirect and inferential, by means of social interaction, language and thought concerning the meaning of who we are, what we do, and the impacts we have.

All of this is translated into the symbolic meanings of all events and phenomena. Verbal communication evolved to denote things, to designate things. Connotation, meaning or implication was a by-product of this "thing-designation" process, and verbal tools are therefore not very adequate for denoting feelings, evaluations, preferences and significances.

Hence interpersonal signals, non-verbal communications, and behavioral symbols became the bases of meaningful existence, alongside the verbal denotative representations of what is.

It is this "hidden wiring" and "embedded sustenance system" of symbolic interaction that makes human living possible. And it is contained in our non-verbal communication systems.

Symbols are signs based on convention, rather than being based on qualitative, physical or functional resemblances, between the thing specified and the designation given to it or on direct personal idiosyncratic experiential histories. Symbols convey shared inter-subjective meanings given to things.

They can be dealt with outside of the immediate context, because they are abstractions that give us greater control over events by their ability to evoke predictable reactions in other people. They are also transformative templates of spiritual and psychological development that program us to react to things in terms of what they mean, portend and intend.

Contemplation and remembrances stimulated by symbols activated by tangible interpersonal events brings the intangible into tangible form. They also related the person to the meanings and relationships that the interpretations and symbols activate.

They preserve and provide the significance of what otherwise would be lost in transience. This is done through shared values, ideals and interests, and most meaning is in the form of these “cultural gloss” reactions to what happens and to what is communicated.

Social systems owe their organization of goals to directed attention of individuals in a mutually reciprocal fashion, where what is taken as the meaning of things stems from an agreed upon system of interpretation of events. We influence and guide each other in the interpretation of what happens.

Socialization keeps idiosyncraticness to a safe level. Effective interaction between people requires an ordering of consciousness that shapes the individual while preserving his or her own goals at the same time. We can then communicate and coordinate as a result.

Social interactions also have to be able to change the system from what its components have become due to historic events or changed ecological circumstances. These processes make it possible for human community to operate and to evolve with the world, and it all rests on the formative socialization of the community’s members into verbal and non-verbal language systems when they are young.

Children are concerned with the use and control of cosmic energy itself, rather than with outcomes, and, as a result, they emphasize the experience of the enjoyment of the moment as they develop their personal self.

Playful enjoyment is activated when engaging in scaled down models of how it feels to live in terms of one’s relationship with the Cosmos. Children and youth live in the enjoyment of the occasion, and in the releases of the present moment.

They internalize actions and define their limits through direct control and through immediate physical and social feedback. They build on positive and enjoyable experiences that shape capabilities and that generate evidence that they are being successful as an autonomous self.

The learning of the control of impulses and emotions is all-important. Mastery over inner spaces and information-processing systems is the foundation of human existence. One becomes certain of one’s soul, instead of being dominated by loneliness, anxiety, lust, wrath, etc. by means of mastering internal representations of things for developing effective means of mastering internal representation communications about them.

One solidifies one’s self by control of one’s psychological processes. A child learns that transactions with their surrounds always produce outcomes. If they don’t learn this, they come into conflict with others, the community and the Cosmos, and they may ultimately be ostracized from society.

Adult males follow specialized blueprints of occupational skills and life-ways. They also emphasize their independence, freedom and fun. They pin a lot of their meaning as a person on the opinions of others, and on conventional values regarding what they do and who they are -- their status, standing and standards. They want to stand apart through competitive comparison of power, prowess, prerogatives, position, prestige, prominence and dominance.

Fathers thus set the tones and status for the family. Their orderly discipline provides the security to be an autonomous and cosmically congruent individual for the developing child. Fathers pass on their values, and the children follow the example set by fathers in their values and priorities. The sons in particular are profoundly imprinted by the father's modeling.

Meanwhile, the mothers pass their meanings on to their daughters, and they emphasize to both genders the importance of positive emotional atmosphere and relationships, and of being cosmically correct in their ecological impact.

Mothers are the representatives of the Cosmos, the emotional meanings of things, the practical workability of things, and the network of relatedness out of which everything comes. They convey what it is to be a soul-in-context and a member of the Cosmic community.

And all of this becomes our system of communication, interpretation, meaning attention-deployment and significance-expression as we share with each other our takes on things and our goal intentions. In other words, it is the basis of our verbal and non-verbal communication system.