



Thoughts on communication: serve and return

By Jenner Roth

A couple of years ago in our annual continued professional development February winter workshop, Anni McTavish, one of our professional community, introduced us to the work of Edward Tronick with mothers and infants and his concept of serve and return as a model of communication which builds a healthy sense of self and other. It's a simple and effective model in many ways. At its most basic, one person says something and the other person responds. As this continues a conversation ensues and a relationship is created.

I started to think about it in relation to my therapy work with couples where one of the most frequent complaints is that partners do not feel listened to or heard. Listening is a relatively easy skill to learn; hearing a bit more difficult. I then thought that the most difficult skill of all, and the one that most of us have the least experience and practice of, is returning.

Returning requires that we first listen, then hear and then make a response that is not clichéd or flip but is genuine, contextual and informative and tells something about us. This is the difficult part and it reminded me of a wonderful poem by the American poet Mary Oliver: "The Mockingbird"

All summer
the mockingbird
in his pearl-grey coat
and his white-windowed wings

flies
from the hedge to the top of the pine
and begins to sing, but it's neither
lilting nor lovely,
for he is the thief of other sounds –
whistles and truck brakes and dry hinges
plus all the songs
of other birds in his neighbourhood;

mimicking and elaborating,
he sings with humour and bravado,
so I have to wait a long time
for the softer voice of his own life

to come through. He begins
by giving up all his usual flutter
and settling down on the pine's forelock
then looking around

as though to make sure he's alone;
then he slaps each wing against his breast,
where his heart is,
and, copying nothing, begins

easing into it
as though it was not half so easy
as rollicking,
as though his subject now

was his true self,
which of course was as dark and secret
as anyone else's
and it was too hard –

perhaps you understand –
to speak or to sing it
to anything or anyone
but the sky.

For me the metaphor of this poem is about the difficulty of learning to speak to another in our own voice and words about our own experience.

I think that one of the reasons people feel dissatisfied in conversational exchanges is that they are not getting or giving a good return.

We may open up, share a feeling or an idea, get listened to and then nothing is returned. There is no response or a response which is clichéd or seems out of context. Or we may be the person listening and realise we don't know what to say in return.

This is where we can develop the skill of returning. If we can bring ourselves to be present, we can start by stating the obvious: "I'm listening to you and I don't know what to say in response", "I'm listening to you. I'm gripped by what you're saying. I want to think about it", "I'm listening to you. I never thought about this before".

As long as you're breathing there is something happening that you can share. It takes effort to ask yourself what it is and to commit to saying it.

This unlocks the channel of communication and opens it to an on-going conversation and relationship.

http://www.spectrumtherapy.co.uk/index.php/information/resources/personal_development