
talking about...

... *designing better relationships for better outcomes*

February 2006
Talking About Pty Ltd

A Question of Authority

"Does it follow that I reject all authority? Perish the thought. In the matter of boots, I defer to the authority of the bootmaker."

... **Mikhail Bakunin (1814 - 1876) Russian anarchist**

In this article, we continue our series on "relating" with an exploration of the role of authority.

Generally when we think of "authority", we think of people in power – politicians, the clergy, our teachers, our parents. Although this view of authority is valid, it is also quite narrow and focuses on people in roles of authority. I would like to offer you an interpretation that you may not be as consciously familiar with, but which plays a pivotal role in everyone's life.

For us "authority" is a linguistic phenomenon and to understand it we must first look to a basic way in which human beings use language. Those of you who have been with us for some time might recall that we occasionally refer to the actions we take through language. There are FIVE basic linguistic actions – assertions, declarations, requests, offers and promises. The major focus for us here is the linguistic action of making a declaration. A declaration is the use of language to bring something into existence that did not exist for the listener before. In making a declaration, we say that "the world follows the words". Some of the most common examples of declarations include proclamations, decisions, opinions and promises. In all cases, something happens in speaking the declaration that brings something into being such as a marriage, a commitment to future action or a new direction to be taken. The validity of these declarations (its impact on creating a new future) lies in the authority given to the speaker by the listener.

This can be easily seen in any school playground. Children are constantly making declarations about what game should be played. "Let's play ball!" "No, let's play tag." When a game begins, it points to the authority given to the person or persons who suggested it. Their declaration has been taken up by others. This schoolyard example can be expanded into all aspects of life. We are always listening to others' declarations and either accepting them or not accepting them. This acceptance or otherwise points to the authority that we give the speaker in that situation and in doing so shapes the way we relate to them. From this we can see that authority is in itself a declaration; one that gives the speaker (including ourselves) the right to make declarations that concern us and that we will accept. Indeed, "authority" can be seen as the primary declaration for without it no other declarations can be valid.

The upshot of this understanding in terms of relating is profound. Valid declarations are the way human beings use language to shape their future. By giving people authority, we give them the right to play a large part in shaping our future. This will affect the way in which we relate to them in the future. Given how important authority is in our life, it is a paradox that most people give authority to others transparently. In other words, they do not see they do it.

Although we have only touched on this idea of authority, we invite you to look at who you give authority to in your life and the appropriateness of this. This exercise can often be illuminating in

terms of the way in which you relate to others. In the next article in our series on "relating", we will explore what it is that has people give authority to others and how we can do this more effectively.

"The universe is hydrogen gas. Leave it alone for 13 billion years and it turns into rosebushes, giraffes and humans."

... **Brian Swimme at the Earth Spirit Rising Conference 2001 on the story of the universe**

Context is everything ...

We do not know who authored this, but it speaks to the value of creating a suitable context ...

A mother enters her daughter's bedroom & sees a letter on her bed.

With the worst premonition and trembling hands, she reads it:

It is with great regret & sorrow that I'm telling you that I eloped with my new boyfriend. I found real passion and he is so nice, with all his piercings, tattoos and his Harley.

But it's not only that Mum, I'm pregnant and Mad Dog said that we will be very happy in his caravan in the woods. He wants to have many more children with me and that's one of my dreams.

I've also learned that marijuana doesn't hurt anyone and we'll be growing it for us and his friends, who are providing us with all the cocaine and ecstasy we want.

In the meantime, we'll pray for the science to find the AIDS cure so that Mad Dog can get better, he deserves it. Don't worry Mum, I'm 15 years old now and I know how to take care of myself.

Some day I'll visit for you to get to know your grandchildren.

Your daughter, Judith

PS: Mum. Just kidding! I'm at the neighbour's house. I just wanted to show you that there are worse things in life than the school report card that's in my desk drawer... I love you.

"I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars..."

... **Walt Whitman**

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