

The Palette of the Therapist: A Manifesto  
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Artists have their tools: Painters have a palette of colors. Composers have tone, timbre, rhythm, and harmony. Choreographers fashion their art using the movement of dancers. Within the confines of their respective arts--within generally acceptable constraints--artists use their "palette" in myriad, creative ways.

Each artist is limited by his/her medium. Painters commonly have a defined canvas. Composers select musical instruments, each with a set range. Choreographers have a stage. Sculptors have marble, bronze, clay, wood, etc. There is no art without imitations.

But, paradoxically, it is the essential for artists to push against the constraints of their medium. Artists explore their tools to maximum effect, broadening potentials, exploring new horizons. Artists of all persuasions wield their tools to unearth previously unrealized possibilities in their medium and subsequently its potential effects. And, in doing so, they have a universal goal.

There is subtext across the arts, an underlying imperative: Artists of all persuasions have expressive intent to affect the recipient of the art; they strive to alter perception, to modify perspectives, to reach the human heart.

The domain of the therapist is similar. Clinicians work to reach the human heart, to modify perspectives, to alter perceptions.

Therapists have tools to effect change; they have their palette. Therapists have words. Sometimes it seems words are clinician's only tool. My academic training as a clinical psychologist focused on learning the "correct" words to use. But words are not the royal road to the human heart.

Artists know how to effect emotion and perspective; they use extra-verbal effects. Music, for example, is the most abstract of arts. Music takes human communication into realms to which language cannot aspire.

The human heart is impacted by the extra-verbal components that are seamlessly inherent in communication. These output components include gesture, expression, movement, posture, tone, tempo, repetitions, prosody, volume, locus of voice, proximity, hesitations, ambiguities, silence, and even misspeaking and incongruities. Extra-verbal elements affect emotion; they affect emotion more than verbal elements.

Human communication consists of both verbal and extra-verbal elements; it is both informative and expressive. The surface-level, verbal content can be considered the informative channel. The extra-verbal components comprise the expressive channels of communication.

Take the simple sentence, "Here is a table." The surface level seems clear, but the sentence takes on emotive meaning when announced imperatively by a furniture maker, a chef, or a family having a picnic. Similarly the sentence, "I never said he stole money," can mean at least six different things depending on the expressive emphasis of the speaker.

Expressive communication is the channel from which animals communicate. Reptiles, birds, and mammals communicate complex social/emotional understandings. Human communication takes advantage of more well-developed cortical centers, adding verbal elements. But, human emotions are not so far divorced from our evolutionary sociobiology. Human emotions are communicated socially primarily on the expressive level.

How the extra-verbal components of communication can be used to effect generative psychotherapeutic change has been the subject of my recent explorations. I strive to explore the therapist's palette and extend our horizons. These initiatives are an extension of my work in hypnosis.

I started studying hypnosis more than 40 years ago. Much of my work was influenced by my mentor, Milton H. Erickson, MD. Studying hypnosis has taught me to harness the expressive aspect of human communication. Words are not the primary tool to alter "states." Dr. Erickson was history's most avid explorer of strategically using extra-verbal components to effect therapeutic change in both hypnosis and psychotherapy.

Take for example one of Dr. Erickson's studies in which he explored the effect of using the locus of voice. In a demonstration in front of the then

president of the American Psychiatric Association who was visiting him, Dr. Erickson offered a simple induction of hypnosis to a demonstration subject who was known to have motion sickness. The patient had his eyes closed as Dr. Erickson wove an induction in which the overt content was neutral. But, as he spoke, Dr. Erickson swayed strategically from side-side, intentionally altering the direction of his voice. As Dr. Erickson expected, the subject developed motion sickness. And this case is just one of the many examples of how assiduously Dr. Erickson explored extra-verbal aspects of communication. Dr. Erickson could rightly be tabbed the Christopher Columbus of expressive therapeutic communication.

Here is another example in his own words of Dr. Erickson's efforts to explore expressive methods. It is taken from one of his hypnosis lectures, circa early 1960s, from the Milton H. Erickson Foundation Archives.

*"In hypnosis you ought to recognize that the way you say something conveys a tremendous amount, and that the words have literally no meaning. It's the manner, the bearing, the attitude, the intonation, the inflection, that carries the meaning.*

*I can think of a situation in which we were all thanking our hostess for a very delightful dinner. And it was very charming to be in that long queue of guests that were thanking that hostess. She was always saying the appropriate and the gracious thing to each guest who shook her by the hand. And being a little bit mischievous, I thought I'd have a perfectly delightful time. And as I shook hands with her to say thank you for the very nice dinner, I told her, 'Thank you very much. I thought those fried horse's tails were absolutely delicious, and could I have the recipe please?' And she said, 'I'll be very pleased to send it to you.'*

*I had used the right inflection. The words meant nothing; I did the right thing. I had the right attitude, the right bearing, the right manner, and the mere fact that I said 'fried horse's tails' meant nothing, so far as thanking her for the dinner was concerned. Margaret Mead happened to be with me at the time and she listened with a great deal of amusement to what I was saying to the hostess. She studied the hostess' face to see if the hostess actually heard what I said because I had spoken very distinctly and Margaret Mead knew it. But the hostess heard the right tone, the right inflection, and saw the right facial expression--everything that was correct. I could've used any words I wanted to so long as I used the right expression.*

*And so it is in the use of hypnosis. You use not just words...*

Traditionally therapists do not learn to use expressive elements of communication for strategic effect. They do not learn to use their palette to maximum effect. There may be historical reasons for our collective failure.

Perhaps there is a reason that dates to Sigmund Freud for our failure to explore seemingly hidden recesses of impactful communication. In order to study transference, Freud rightly limited the presence of the therapist. The therapist was prohibited from having strategic design which would distort the transference.

Perhaps there is a research reason for our failure to explore seemingly hidden recesses of impactful communication. The extra-verbal aspects of communication as elements of effective therapy are not easy to research. They are lumped together with what researchers call “non-specific factors” that are implicit to the process of therapeutic change. But contemporary research in social psychology indicates how we are designed by evolution to respond to expressive elements. (See for example the studies by John Bargh and his collaborators on priming.) Non-specific factors can be specified as extra-verbal components that can be categorized.

My work in hypnosis during the last 40 years has lead me to explore expressive communication. Hypnotists learn to effect trance by using gesture, modulations of tone, tempo, and volume among other extra-verbal methods.

To learn about expressive communication, I have been studying artists of all persuasions, attempting to learn more about the expressive elements of their work, especially those elements that are universal across arts. (See: [www.emotional-impact.com](http://www.emotional-impact.com). )

Art is an extension of expressive communication. Art is an essential method of exercising human emotion. Art is part of our evolutionary sociobiology. It is based on our animal heritage of using extra-verbal communication for social effect.

Once I categorize the codes of influence that artists use to impact emotion and perspective, I explore how I can use those elements strategically in

offering effective psychotherapy and hypnotherapy. When I want to have emotional impact, I apply methods I learn from artists.

For example, many artists use ambiguity to engage the recipient in the process of co-creating meaning. Rembrandt was a marvelous technician, supplying a photographic representation of in his portraits. When photography was invented, Monet was free to use abstraction to create impressions that would be enlivened by the projections of the viewer. Similarly, Milton Erickson used indirection and ambiguous story telling to stimulate resources into play.

Movie directors of feature films know that their medium is, “Show, don’t tell.” They use the power of montage (juxtaposition) to orient the viewer. Flash an image of a man followed by a jump cut to a bowl of soup and the viewer will ascribe hunger to the man. If the same image of a man is followed by a jump cut to a woman standing over a coffin, the viewer will attribute compassion to him. If the jump cut is to a child playing with a balloon, the viewer will see the man as paternal.

Milton Erickson used the power of montage in his story-telling approach, suddenly jumping from one story to the next, thereby linking the stories to create a new association. (See, for example, A Teaching Seminar with Milton Erickson, Zeig, 1980)

Feature film directors know to keep the viewer’s eyes moving. Film is primarily a visual art, although it is one of the more complex art forms consisting of many arts joined together including, acting, script writing, musical composition, costume design, and sound effects. Therapist should take note of the importance of appealing to the patient’s eyes to empower a message. Consider the fact that a large part of brain processing is dedicated to vision.

In a couples session, with two highly intelligent professionals, I used a visual, show-don’t-tell method. The husband was a perfectionist, a trait that made him highly successful in his chosen vocation. But being a perfectionist at home did not help him to be successful as a husband.

During the session, the wife offered, “When we went out on Tuesday...” Before she could finish the thought, he interrupted and corrected her,

saying, “Wednesday!” The wife blanched at yet another example of the husband’s repeated attempts to perfect her.

I turned to the husband. I imaginarily pushed something aggressively into my open left hand. I made my left hand into a fist and thrust my arm forward. Then I hesitated dramatically. Next I opened my right hand face up and gestured as if taking something special with my left hand from my heart and gently placing it into my right hand. I extended my open right hand toward him in a loving gesture. Then I again extended my left hand in a fist and thrust it forward. Looking at my left hand, I said, “Here is being right.” Looking at my right hand, I said, “Here is being effective. Then I waited for his acknowledgement.

In future sessions, if I want to get across the concept of right versus effective, I merely thrust forward my left hand in a fist, followed by gently extending my right hand, palm opened, gesturing from my heart. The visual message was much more powerful than the words it represented.

Because affective neurobiology is much in vogue, perhaps a brain-based rationale is relevant. Human problems can be posited as located in limbic regions. If problems were located in the medial frontal precortex, patients could think their way through them. Hence, returning to our evolutionary biology, we can use expressive methods that have more limbic resonance.

Advancing the work of Milton Erickson, clinicians can explore their palette and learn to use evocative communication to have therapeutic impact. Therapists can explore how to use previously untapped aspects of their medium, the output channels of communication.

It is important for therapists to push against the constraints of their medium. Therapists can explore their tools to maximum effect, broadening potentials, exploring new horizons