

If I understood what you were saying would I look this way?

Hol White 5/2019

President Guffey, Secretary Cavanaugh, my fellow presenter and members of the Athenaeum Society and their esteemed guests.

I'd like to share a story with you. Marla and I had met up with some friends from High School in Santa Fe New Mexico. After a full day of art and museums we gathered around the fireplace and began asking about fellow classmates. This conversation turned into "remember when" My friend Bob chimes in and says. "Hol do remember in high school when you used to drive us around town in that baby blue Mercury Comet on Friday nights, you would look over to me and without context or prior conversation you would say "Yeah, let's do that". You had thought through in your head what things we could do, made a selection, shared it with nobody and agreed with yourself. Marla quickly chimed in saying," yes and he still does that".

Can I be helped?

My paper tonight is based on Alan Alda's book "If I understood what you were saying would I look this way?"

Alan Alda played Hawkeye in the movie and TV show Mash and more recently a Villain on Blacklist. He has played a variety of roles on television, Broadway and in film. Besides acting, Alan had always been interested in science and had read every issue of the magazine Scientific American since he was a young man. He was fascinated how scientist, could with such a minor amount of detail, make accurate approximation of what nature is like. He was ecstatic when invited to Host the show "Science" on PBS and wanted a role not just narrating but interviewing the scientist. Based on his theatre background and interest in science, he expected that hosting would be easy. It wasn't.

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The first story that they shot for PBS's Science featured racing cars powered by solar panels.

The show's crew traveled to Cal State; filming was set up in a workshop where the featured scientist was working on a large solar panel. As Alan entered the workshop, He did not realize that this interview would be the beginning of more than twenty years of trying to figure out what makes communications work.

Alda began his interview by making three big mistakes. His first mistake was assuming that he knew more than he did. After a brief hello and a quick glance at the solar panel Alda told the scientist how amazing it was that they had put all this together using parts off the shelf. Alan saw the scientist's face tighten a little. They're not off the shelf," said the scientist, slightly offended. "We had to make most of it by hand". Alan could see the anxiety in the scientist's face but didn't respond to it. Alan ignored his own anxiety and that of the scientists. He made the next mistake with his body.

Alan reached out to the solar panel and laid his hand on it, assuming a bit of unearned familiarity. Again, he saw something happen to the scientist's face, but he continued, not content with touching the panel, he gave it an affectionate pat. "Please don't touch the panel, the scientist said. "you could ruin It". The distress in the scientist face was now clear to Alan. He had seen the scientist stressing earlier and had ignored it. Alan was not observing the response in the scientist's face; he was not listening with his eyes.

Alan continued the interview, but it was lame and halting. He proceeded to make his third mistake: Because he was not relating, by not responding to the look on the scientist's face, none of Alan's responses grew out of what the scientist was telling him. Alan wasn't really listening to the scientist he was interviewing.

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The award-winning actor found himself flopping as a host. Alan thought there must be a better way to communicate. Could he use his acting skills to change his interaction with scientists for the better?

Alan explains in his book how the concepts of Relating, Empathy, and using Emotion are used to connect and can be trained through theatre exercises.

### **Relating**

The concept of relating requires observation skills. To hone those skills, Alan suggests the use of an improv theatre exercise called "Verbal Sync". Alan has a pair of actors sit in chairs facing one another. He asks the first actor to tell the second something ordinary, such as -what she did to start the day. With no preparation, their task is to stay in verbal sync, so both say the same thing at the same time. It starts out hard, who knows what the other will say and there are lags between leader and follower. Alan urges them to slow down and to give the other person time to catch up. At the start of the exercise they are frustrated, but they stay focused on each other's eyes, lips and bodies. Listening intently, they try to pick up signals on what the other might say next. Eventually the couple starts finishing their sentences together, and finally they say in unison "No..., kidding that was hard".

The Verbal Sync exercise helps the actors, relate to each other and learn to read the other person. The actors are in synchrony: The relation that exists when things occur at the same time.

The Army develops synchrony with a simple exercise. Our soldiers at Fort Campbell, Kentucky learn to fly complex helicopters. They train with night vision goggles. They learn to rappel from great heights. However before developing these advanced skills the Army utilizes a verbal sync

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exercise. But what is the training in the modern Army, which places an emphasis on effectiveness, that they first have recruits do? The recruits have to learn to march, in unison, chanting:

Sound Off 1,2

Sound Off 3,4

1-2-3-4, 1-2-3-4

There certainly is not much call for marching and singing in modern warfare, however a Stanford study confirmed that marching in step and singing cadences together strengthen the cohesion and promote cooperation within a group.

In the practice of relating to one another, no one is more observed than the first Grandbaby. Marla and I couldn't be prouder grandparents, and I couldn't be a happier granddad. A fun way for me to relate to our granddaughter Charlotte is from playing school songs I had forgotten about long ago. Using an ALEXA linked to Spotify I can request children's songs, a favorite song is Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes. As the song begins my granddaughter Charlotte and I square off toward each other. We watch each other closely and we begin singing together; I touch my head and she hers. I am too stiff to reach my toes, but Charlotte follows me down anyway. The song makes us both smile. We are observing each other's actions closely and we relate to each other.

From learning to finish each other's sentences, chanting marching troops, and observing each other touch head, shoulders and knees, the power of synchrony is relating. To develop

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Synchrony requires observation and extended observation promotes empathy. Empathy is the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

Alan describes three improv Theatre training exercises that enable people to see and respond to small shifts in other's behavior which in turn increases their empathy. These exercises are "Object Observation", "Talking Gibberish" and "Guess the Relationship"

For the exercise of object observation.

**ACTION: PRETEND FILL A GLASS WITH AN IMAGINARY PITCHER**

Let me create an object, I can fill my glass with it and the glasses of others around me. All of your observing how I carry it, what I am doing with it. I can pass it to someone, and they note the weight and where the handle is located. Because it is invisible it only exists by common agreement. Suddenly everyone in this room is seeing something that was not there before. The water pitcher has become real. I have communicated to you the existence of a pitcher of water that isn't there by your observation of what I am doing.

The second exercise is called "Talking Gibberish" The object is to use the body, gestures and intonation to convey meaning, with anything but understandable words. One form of gibberish you may remember.

**ACTION: PUT ON CHEFS HAT AND WOODEN SPOONS**

Eeena aran guten sweena. Inga poten spooten stirrin ze hoten ponannalish

Does anyone remember the Swedish chef from Jim Henson's Muppets?

Talking in gibberish requires animation and expressive intonation. It also requires using communication other than words. A theater exercise of "talking gibberish" has actors trying to sell each other products without using the English language. The act of speaking in gibberish

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requires the actors to make contact with the audience without splaying words and with using the whole expressive self.

In the exercise “Guess the Relationship” one actor has to identify the reason for another actresses’ behavior. Alan has one actor sit in a chair waiting and sends the actress outside the room. There Alan gives the actress outside her relationship to the seated actor in the room. After a moment the actress reenter the room and begins to explain something to the person seated in the chair. She might tell him about the plot of the movie she seen. It doesn’t matter what she talks about. Her job is to convey the relationship, not through what she says but through how she relates to him. Without any clues, and just by observing the manner that she relates to him- the person sitting in the chair has to figure out the emotional relationship that he shares with her. Is he her beloved little brother, Her strict father? Her overbearing boss? The actress will realize a lot of communication takes place in ways that don’t use words, the seated is learning to read her behavior.

Through these three exercises, “Object Observation” with the imaginary pitcher, “Talking Gibberish” think the Swedish Chef and “Guess the Relationship” actors can develop a sense of what others are feeling and have an awareness of what they are feeling. This awareness is empathy, the connection with others that is the bedrock of communication.

### **Emotion**

The final key to communication that Alan relates is about tying emotion to the message to make it memorable. Emotion makes memory.

If we are asked to remember our first kiss we could. If you asked me to remember what I had for lunch last week. I could not. How many of you can you remember your commute in the

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morning? Ever get to work and wonder, how did I get here? However, all of us remember the morning on September 11<sup>th</sup>, seventeen plus years ago. Does anybody remember September 10, 2001? No, unless of course something happened important on that date as well.

Emotion makes us remember. It could be a traumatic event or even plunging our arm into ice water. Researchers at UC Irvine tested subjects by having them sit in front of a monitor and look at pictures that were emotionally charged, like a gun, an injured boy, decomposing dog or a snake. The test was to see how many of these pictures the coed could remember a week later. To help her remember, after she looked at the pictures, she was asked to stick her arm in a tub of ice water, how could that help her remember the pictures Alan wondered.

The reason for the ice water dunk said the scientist, is that it is a well-known technique to activate the body's stress-hormone response. And the researchers believed that the body's stress response acts to enhance memory. The subject looked at the pictures and dipped her arm in the tub, exclaiming, "oh!" "and then was able to hold her arm there for three minutes. The scientist explained, that during the ice water dunk her brain is busy storing all the information. They call it consolidating. Kind of like Jell-O setting. During the setting process, the stress hormones are working on storing the new memory.

A week after the test, the subjects that got the ice water treatment remembered the emotionally charged pictures better than the ones that had not plunged their arms in cold water. Emotion does help us remember, and a bit of stress can help make that memory stick and feel more important than other memories.

Alan adds that it is not just the emotion of fear, but humor and insults that make communication stick. Members of the Athenaeum can appreciate this as much as anyone. We

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labor on our paper, going down rabbit holes of research, doing multiple rewrites, then presenting the paper at our Monthly meetings. Our process in the club is to allow members of the audience to provide feedback on delivery, content, similarities between the papers and a Hoptown connection if any. What the speaker remembers in the rebuttal It is not the kind comments regarding how excellent the papers were, or the quality of research or what an interesting topic. What we remember, is the negative, told in sarcasm, for the longer papers “We heard three really good papers tonight” when only two were given, or “that was an excellent paper, but I think I liked the book better”. It is the good-natured insult that sticks in your memory and if it is funny all the more so.

Emotion may be the only way we retain what is communicated to us, but it would be careless to ignore such a powerful tool when we want people to understand and remember what we tell them. So how can we excite emotions in people who don't have training in what we are talking about? The answer lies in stories. The following story was one Alan uses to convince Doctor's to avoid using Jargon in their practice. This is his story:

I nearly died in a small town of Chile. In an emergency operation in the middle of the night a doctor had to cut out about a yard of my intestine to save my life. The surgeon was brilliant and an extraordinary communicator. He realized that he had to perform an end to end anastomosis,” but he did not use that term when he told me what he had to do. Instead the surgeon leaned in, made eye contact with me, and said, “something has gone wrong with your intestine, and we have to cut out the bad part and sew the two good ends together.

Alan said he had never heard a clearer, more accurate description for something with such a frightening name. This is an easy story to remember. Alan's life was in the balance and it sticks

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in the minds of doctors that when you talk to a patient, try not to use jargon. If you are looking for a way to bring emotion to someone, a relatable story is the perfect vehicle.

We often do not listen intently enough that we can finish each other's sentences or observe well enough to do a basic dance of head and shoulders or tell stories with emotion. By not being truly engaged with the people we are trying to communicate with, we suffer the snags of misunderstanding. It is the grit in the gears of daily life. It jams our relations with other when people don't "get it", when they don't understand what we think is the simplest of statements

Alan summarizes with the following: Not being able to communicate is the Siberia of everyday life- a place crazily that we often send ourselves to. But the solution isn't a formula, a list of tips or a chart that shows where to put your feet, Instead, it is transforming yourself-like going to the gym-only a whole lot more fun,

Practicing contact with other people feels good. It's not like lifting weights, it feels good while you're doing it not just after you stop. When it clicks and you are in sync with someone even for the briefest moment, it feels like the pleasure of reconciliation. We go from "No, you're wrong to "Oh, maybe you're right" and then "boom" Dopamine, Communicating, it's a good feeling, I think we all crave it.

Thank You.