



Unconditional communication  
with most severely handicapped persons  
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## **Partnership With Severely Retarded Persons**

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To this meeting I have been invited to introduce my way of Basic Communication to you, which enables getting into contact even with most severely retarded persons. Now I do not want to repeat what you can read up elsewhere, but intend to share with you some ideas about the attitude of partnership which is conditional to Basic Communication.

When I introduced this way of communication in the journal „Geistige Behinderung“ in 1984 I emphasised that it „does not intend to be a way of educational training and thus does not want to substitute any other approach of training. It tries to create a situation of encounter, and so in my experience actually may bring about the very preconditions where meaningful training can start.“ (Mall 1984, p. 3) - „Its aim is the ‘healing’ of my relationship to this partner as he is, (...) It enables me to tell the most severely retarded person and the autistic seeming to have completely withdrawn: ‘I want to be friends with you.’ in a way which he is able to understand, which he is open for.“ (ibid. p. 15 f)

Thus Basic Communication is a way to start mutual exchange without preconditions on the partner's side. It respects every impulse, each expression of him and answers on the same level. Basis is the experience to be joined with each other in the same rhythm of breath. From here on fantasy is unlimited to individually and creatively arrange the situation of being together, just as it suits both partners in this given situation. Participants of my courses where I show them this way of exchange tell about experiencing a kind of comprehensive closeness, perhaps like in their mothers' womb before birth.

But now as announced some ideas about the attitude I see as conditional for such experiences. I do not claim them to be absolutely new. Remedial education („Heilpädagogik“) understood as a holistic approach has always been obliged to put the encounter with this real person entrusted to us at the top. It is my concern to remember you as well as myself how easily we come to post between us and the other person our image of him, thus leaving the level of partnership.

Certainly each of you will affirm the basic rule of remedial education: „We have to meet the other person

(the child, the handicapped person) at the place he is!“ But do we not frequently come along like one on his high horse, bending down to him whom we see sitting in the dust? Then we drag him up onto our horse and on we go, towards the goal we have already chosen for him. If he resists he only proves how much better we know what is good for him.

How do I come to know so exactly what this person wants? Perhaps he does not see himself sitting and suffering in the dust at all, but rather at the place in which he has put great effort to fit himself as well as possible. Perhaps he does not want to be met at all, perhaps not by me to begin with. And if he does want to get where I try to bring him is undecided after all.

Could not our „meeting the other person“ look like this: You meet a person you want to get involved with in an as helpful way as possible. Descended from your high horse of ‘I already know what is good for you.’ you start with sitting down next to this person, perhaps even into the dust, and experience the situation from his point of view. You bring along much gentleness, humility, respect for his personality. You try to let him feel that you are interested in him, want to let friendship grow, in the limitations of your mutual situation. You give him time to take notice of you and to respond to you, you try to get to know him as well as possible, to understand what he wants to express: His feelings, needs, intentions and wishes. You try to sense the story behind this person that let him become as he is today.

Then in course of time perhaps you get a notion where the other person is heading to, what ‘comes next’ right now at this point of his life. Then you offer your helpful company, pace and speed adapted to his walking. - Or you get an idea what could be important for him. Then you offer him to come along with you, yet at the same time being ready to take his resistance for serious, even if you do not understand. With special care you look for signs of ambivalence, the problem of tension building up due to an urgent need, but being blocked by overwhelming fear. This often is the case with regard to the person's readiness to contact his environment, especially with severely retarded people.

So it is an adventure every time you get to know another person and try to build a relationship. This

means: Both path and goals are uncertain, and so is the outcome of it all. Being ready to face risks, even of failure, is required. Only then you are open for a really personal relationship.

Two small examples I remember:

A woman, in her mid-twenties, with me for an hour daily of single therapy, showed great problems to open herself for tactile stimulation. So she feared very much to walk barefooted across a lawn or other structured surfaces. Trying to train this with her in our first summer I led her across the lawn barefoot. Reluctantly and full of fear she went with me. One could see she rather would have avoided it, but she did not resist.

When next summer came - in the meantime I frequently had offered her situations of bodily encounter - I repeated our walking with bare feet. But not her readiness had changed to perceive tactile stimulation and tolerate it, but so had her will of self-assertion. She vehemently refused to walk with me, screamed, and sat on the ground. Only the next summer she was ready to walk barefoot across the lawn with me.

Thomas, the boy who helped me to develop Basic Communication (Mall 1980), had enormous balance problems due to generalised hypertension of his whole body. All the time he was looking for someone he could clench to, and his yelling drowned every sound. In vain I tried to train his control of balance. Only when I sensed his vital fear underneath, I could meet his actual need by offering him to calm down in my lap, to feel a little more secure, to let his tension relax a bit. These - very limited - experiences, combined with a more attentive and understanding way of dealing with him by his attendants, were enough to awake his energy to develop his sensory-motor abilities. He started to enjoy when someone carried him, romped around with him, threw him on the sofa. He climbed on the furniture, and he started showing interest in sounds and colours, without any special training of these items.

As professionals of remedial education - or how our profession may be called - we have learned: Before you start with training a diagnosis must be made. You determine the person's state of development or its gaps. We set goals, rough and fine ones, and plan our methodical steps accordingly. There are developmental screenings, checklists, tests, backed by distinct theories and concepts of developmental psychology and therapy. These have resulted from the respective experiences of their founders, and they can help us a lot to understand severely retarded people and facilitate to get along with them.

Yet here opens up a danger we must not lose out of sight: The conclusive theory convincing us, as well as the according practical approach may seduce us into

believing we already were comprehensively informed about this specific person in front of us. Thus we reduce his personality to our own, for ever limited point of view, which results in neglecting his human dignity, our respect for his personality, his biography, his free will. This without difference is true for most severely retarded people as well.

Diagnostic observations may give hints on the present situation of a specific person, where we may meet him best. So we might be told someone deals with himself and his environment according to the stage of primary circular reactions, the first phase of sensory-motor development according to Piaget. This leads us to assume that it would be too much for him to be confronted with too different kinds of sensory stimulation at one time. Or we hear that somebody lives according to the symbiotic stage of the development of personality according to Margret Mahler, and conclude that our behaviour towards him should be marked by constancy, clearness, and contrast. We aim our attempts accordingly, being inspired by methodical approaches we have learned. But none of these concepts saves us from getting involved very directly, without prejudice, and unprotected, with this individual partner. Only then there is a chance that something really helpful may happen.

For who has ever managed to describe the full complexity of a person in a comprehensive way? The better I know somebody the harder comes the attempt when for example I am told to write a developmental report about him. More and more facets of his individuality come into view which resist being paraphrased by words, or to be assorted into a prescribed screen. It would take a novel, or an artist's portrait, to at least give a notion of a person's nature.

How limited our training programs are becomes finally obvious facing the varying „fashions“ in remedial education during the last decades. From behaviour therapy to Gestalt, all these concepts tend to be set absolute and to claim universal truth. But succumbing to this danger we strip ourselves of our own sovereignty encountering a handicapped person, and we do not come to get to know his personal reality.

Because if you approach the other person according to your theory and methodical concepts this is only the beginning of your common history. You offer to him your point of view regarding how it could go on with you two. But if you seriously mean it as an offer in the sense of the term it cannot be your last word. It can be rejected, you can „discuss“ it, it may be modified, until it fits your partner as well as yourself. This is just as well true for most severely retarded people, only that there is a difference in the means of communication.

You watch your partner even more carefully, even more depending on the self-critical use of your intuition. The opinion of others - for example the parents - is important as a corrective. Your „discussion“ takes place in - sensory-motor - action. Each touch is a question, an offer, an expression from your side. Each eye contact, each change of facial expression, of body tension is an answer. Each single breath is an expression, even body temperature, blood circulation, pulse, transpiration, the process of excretion, all this tells you something about the other person. And by each sound you make, by your posture, your way to carry him, to move yourself together with him you tell him something about yourself.

Looking at the biography of a severely retarded child (e.g. Mall 1990, p. 11 ff) you realise how their start into life in addition to their physical handicap very often is hampered enormously: Frequent troubles during pregnancy, long stays in hospitals, painful treatments, the irritation of left-alone parents in many cases influence the first months and years. Even to a child without physical defects such experiences would cause great trouble. Hardly will develop under such conditions what we call basic trust: The fundamental conviction that it is right to be in this world, and things never will be so bad that there is no help at all. This belief, though, we basically need to face the world, bear failures, start anew each time.

For this reason it will be our main concern to make it clear to our partner that above all he is right just as life has formed him until today. His behaviour is meaningful against the background of his biography and his subjective view of his chances, and it is our problem if we do not understand it right away. If we do not manage to this to him he will experience once again how his attempts to express himself and his needs are ignored, and we will increase his resignation or rebellion.

But if you take him serious, his stereotyped movements will not be undesired behaviour anymore which should be extinguished by therapy, but a meaningful expression of your partner. You may pick it up, try to answer in a fitting way, perhaps imitate it or play with it in another way, always watching his reactions and corresponding to them. His behaviour principally is meaningful even when it hurts himself or third persons. Yet now you may try to show him alternative ways to express his aggression, feel more intensively, use his

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energy, or influence his environment, according to your understanding of this behaviour. Communicating as a partner of course means as well to bring in your own preferences or aversions, as well as limits that are given or important to yourself: So not to be hurt, no precious things to be damaged, or to have time for yourself as well.

You probably will agree more easily with my statements when you think of adults. With them it is not so hard to leave an achievement-oriented attitude, even if this is more a sign of resignation. Yet I see good reasons when you look at children as well, to give more way to their autonomy, and to put aside unconditional concepts of developmental training. For above all we should care that our partner can see it is worth living, becoming involved with his world, backed by the - even though limited - relation to another person. Then you often will be surprised about his will to live, to learn, to develop, even with an older person, and you will know he takes these steps because he wants it himself.

To take the other person serious as a partner means as well, though, to acknowledge limits of development, and to help to live within these limits as happily as possible. Comparing the stages of unhindered development with a multi-storeyed house: Why should someone not be contented with a one-storeyed cottage? We could help him put a solid roof on top of it and furnish it as comfortable as can be, when we offer him the environment and the assistance corresponding to his limited opportunities. Do we not with the same for ourselves? Perhaps one day he is ready to go on building at his house, adding another storey. If we watch him carefully he presumably will give us notice. Then it is ours to assist him.

Partnership as I tried to describe requires attitudes which I think conditional for those who want to accompany handicapped people: To renounce the supposed security of preconceived theories and methods; to be able to question oneself facing reality; to be open for being questioned by colleagues, parents, the severely handicapped partner himself; to face the shattering of one's concepts by failure up to admitting: „I don't know anymore how to understand you, how to deal with you.“ Referring to authorities must not finally justify my actions, but only the concrete experience with this individual person.

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