

BODY LANGUAGE

Shirley Kinney

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Last year I did a talk here on masks. I talked about the masks we all wear—to protect ourselves, to hide our conflicting emotions, to keep the world from knowing who we really are.

After the service, Pirkko came up to me and said she had been waiting for the part in my talk where I brought in body language. What a dumbie! Of course! I should have talked about body language. So, here it is, a year later.

Generally, a person who walks, scuffling along, hands in pockets, head down, is dejected. There is a story of a priest who, spotting a man walking like this one morning, and, taking pity on him, handed him two dollars and said, “Never despair.” The following morning, the priest again saw the same man. This time the man came up to the priest, handed him \$40 and said, “Never Despair came in first and paid twenty to one.”

Actually, I began my interest in body language twenty years or so ago. I was regretting the fact that I didn’t know any magic. Wouldn’t it be great to know spells—that worked—and to be the wise woman people would come to for help. After considerable thought, I came to the conclusion that a good bit of magic comes from just being very observant about life and about paying close attention to people. And, except for the occasional abracadabra, all magic is knowing stuff other people don’t. I can make fire appear like magic—and it is magic to you, if you don’t know about matches. I can magically read your mind, if you aren’t aware of how you’re sitting and what you’re doing with your hands that clearly shows me your thoughts.

So, I took a class on handwriting analysis, I learned about astrological signs, and I read a book on body language. Look out world—I was magic just waiting to happen!

As it turns out, I’m not so sure I’m at all magical, but the body language stuff stayed with me.

Tom and I have been minor reluctant birdwatchers since we spend three months a year among avid birdwatchers in Texas. We have learned that sometimes all you need to identify a bird is to watch how it flies or how it hops around on the ground or in a tree. How handy! You can say, “that’s a chickadee” just by seeing a bird fly far far away. Wouldn’t that be a handy skill to have—identify what sort of person you’re seeing, just by watching him move?

Well, as a matter of fact, we can do that. All we need to do is to pay attention. To listen to his body language.

Say you’re at a party and you don’t know anyone there. Middle aged people. You see a group of 3-4 women together talking and laughing. Are they married or single? Answer: married. Single women tend to pair off with men.

A man enters the party, approaches the host and shakes his hand. Where is he from? Answer: America.

Another man comes in. Shakes hands with the host. Pumps one time only. Where is he from? Answer: Germany.

A third man enters. Shakes the hand of the host while cupping it with his left hand. What is his occupation? Answer: Politician.

The handshake is a modification of the primitive gesture of both hands raised, indicating that no weapons are held. Later came the Roman salute which was a hand-to-chest gesture. At that time also, men grasped each other at the forearms instead of the hand. The modern handshake is a gesture of welcome—your palms interlocking signify openness and the touching signifies oneness.

Women historically did not shake hands, because women were not allowed to wield weapons. Today, of course, women are just as dangerous as men, so they now shake hands.

Politicians are taught to gesture exposing their open palms, to say subconsciously to their constituents that they are honest. Politicians also take off their jackets and roll up their sleeves. They could come into the auditorium without their jackets on, but to take off their jackets and roll up

their shirt sleeves in front of the audience signifies that now they're among friends. They roll up their sleeves—let's get down to the honest facts here. Let's get to work.

We have all been told the importance of a firm handshake. Americans tend to sometimes overdo the firm grasp, compared with the rest of the world. Those in the East usually accompany the handshake with a slight bow.

Another thing to watch for in the initial handshake, if he grabs your hand firmly and turns it over so that his palm is directly on top of yours. He is attempting a type of physical domination. On the other hand, when a person offers you his hand with the palm up, he is showing a willingness to accept a subordinate role.

Back at the party, a group of several people is sitting and talking. One of the women has her ankles crossed, one arm in front, crossing her waist, and the other hand is patting or playing with her hair. What can you say about her? Answer: She's anxious, lacks self-confidence, insecure, defensive.) Someone else in that group is sitting with her legs crossed, her foot kicking slightly. What is she feeling? Answer: boredom.

We come by this body language naturally. It isn't formally taught and isn't even conscious, for the most part. We are animals with certain ingrained responses. We humans put our hands on our hips to show anger or dominance. We humans tap our foot or drum our fingers when we're impatient. We humans cross our arms in front of our body to show a withdrawal or a defensiveness. We all know what these gestures mean immediately, without being told. And, we know that if we assume these postures, the other person will understand that we are impatient or angry or whatever.

My colleague, Dr. Larry Graves, has some latest on-the-cutting-edge information he would like me to add to this. He read a study—a preliminary study—that suggests that about 37,000 years ago, the human brain began to grow larger. And it is postulated that that increase in size was brought about by the human need to communicate. And, back then, it is thought, understanding the nuances of human body language was the principal means of communication. We had to know when we met a fellow humanoid that standing with hands on hips meant you are upset; shaking a finger meant that you were bad; holding up your hands at arms length meant to stay back.

Concern for safety for our bodies meant we had to not allow strangers too close too fast.

For protection, we have developed a sense of personal space—although that can vary slightly from area to area around the world. Your personal space is defined generally as that distance around your body that friends or strangers must not enter. And it varies if you are a friend or a stranger. You probably can't say how much space defines your personal space, but you'll know immediately what it is as soon as someone crosses it.

We've all had a conversation with someone and that person insists on entering your personal space. You get uncomfortable and take a step or two backward in order to maintain what is your correct distance from each other. Of course, often then, the person takes a step again towards you, and you are forced to take another step backward.

This dance can continue until you are backed up against an immovable object, at which point you leave the conversation because you are so uncomfortable or you just stand there nose to nose with this person and you end up with your body drawn in, your arms crossed in front of you—anything to set up the perception that you have this personal space.

Personal space varies and it's wise to be sensitive to someone's reaction in a foreign setting. If you are in Scandinavia, for instance, people talk usually from three to six feet away from each other. Americans, and most western cultures, people talk to each other from a distance of one to three and a half feet. So, a Scandinavian may feel uncomfortable talking to an American if that American violates the Scandinavian's personal space. Personal space to a Chinese is even closer than to an American.

What happens in an elevator, though, when you're forced into very close proximity with strangers? The general rule of behavior is that when two people enter an elevator, where do they stand? Answer: they each lean against the opposite walls. What happens when four people enter an elevator? Answer: they each occupy a corner. What happens when five or six people enter an elevator? Answer: They all turn to face the door; they get taller and thinner; hands and purses and briefcases hang down in front in the "fig leaf" position. They must not touch each other in any way unless the elevator is very crowded and then only touch at the shoulder or lightly

against the upper arm. And they have the tendency to become fascinated with the lighted floor indicator.

Walk into an elevator and stand facing the back of the elevator and suddenly the other people feel very uncomfortable.

Police have learned that violating someone's personal space during an interrogation is a useful tool. The policeman may walk right up almost touching the prisoner, the prisoner sitting, the policeman standing. This leaves the prisoner with no chance of defense—he can't back away, he's sitting down. And it will give the officer a psychological advantage.

This is all very interesting, but why come to church to hear about body language? What does this have to do with religion? There is an answer to that. We are Unitarians. We, more than most religions, are made up of people of a wide variety of spiritual beliefs. We are committed to providing a home for people as they journey on their own spiritual path.

We Unitarians are generally passionate and we generally love to talk about that passion. The least we can do is to learn how to interpret the inner feelings of our fellow Unitarians to ease conflicts and to help understanding. More importantly, we need to know what our own expressions and body language is saying to the person we're talking to.

Reading body language always has to be done carefully. There are so many factors going into why people do what they do. Standing with your arms crossed in front of you tells people you are being protective of your position or that you are putting a barrier between you and the speaker. But, it can also mean that your back hurts. This gesture, combined with tightly pinched lips, combined with what the person is saying, combined with the person's posture—are they standing rigid or slumped a bit like they are favoring a sore back—all these factors go into interpreting body language.

Dropping the eyeglasses lower on the bridge of the nose and peering over them usually causes a negative reaction in others. They feel they are being looked down on or are being closely scrutinized. People who wear granny glasses or whose eyeglasses need adjusting because they keep sliding down should be aware that they are causing a negative reaction to themselves just by this simple action.

Many of us have stood at this pulpit on Sunday mornings. Perhaps services would become more interesting if we as speakers paid better attention to the body language of you the audience. It can be a tricky business, however. If your audience is sitting on the edge of their seats, it could be signaling that they are totally buying what I'm saying. Or, it could mean they are in total disagreement and can't wait until they can stand up and leave.

Both animals and people cock their heads slightly whenever they hear something that interests them. If your audience has their heads cocked, they're interested. But, if the group is getting more information than they want or can handle, heads will straighten up, backs will straighten, people will glance around, and then finally position their bodies so that they are pointing toward the exit.

You, the audience, also must be aware of gestures that the speaker is making. This applies to this sort of situation and also to a one-on-one situation. If a person covers his mouth with his hand while speaking, he may be unsure of what he is saying. "And God will always take care of you." (Gesture covers mouth). The listener's reaction is often to think that the speaker is lying.

On the other hand, if I'm talking and someone who is listening to me passes his hand towards his mouth, maybe eventually hiding the mouth, he is implying that he distrusts what I am saying.

If you scratch your neck while you're listening, perhaps you are feeling uneasy. There may be a conflict of opinions, with an objection, which must remain hidden. This is especially true if someone says, "Yes, yes. I agree with your ideas." And at the same time he is scratching his neck.

If your listener scratches his earlobe, that may imply dissociation. In other words, "I've heard enough."

If you ask someone a question they don't particularly want to answer, like, "Honey, do you like my new haircut?" If the husband absently touches or rubs his nose with the index finger very lightly or rubs beside the ear or rubs the eye, it means no. They may be saying, "Sure. It looks terrific!" But, if that index finger is rubbing the eye, he's thinking, "My God, how could you let them do that to your hair?"

Interestingly enough, if you ask someone, “why are you standing with your arms crossed like that?” or “why are you sitting with your legs pointed away from me?”, he’ll answer that his back hurts or that his other leg was falling asleep, or some physical excuse. And, he’ll truly think that’s why he is doing it. He will never say, or probably never think, that he is sitting or standing in that fashion because he thinks you’re lying or he wants to dissociate himself from what you’re saying.

Sit on stool

Two people sitting next to each other and talking. He crosses his farther leg over his nearest leg and points in your direction with his hanging foot. Odds are pretty good that he is favorably inclined to you or what you are saying. If he switches that position, he may possibly be trying to separate himself from you or what you are saying.

However, and this is just a tip for you men out there,—if a woman is seated next to a man in a somewhat formal situation, she may turn to him with a smile. But, in order to make him understand this is not intended as a sexual invitation, she will cross her legs in the opposite direction. But, if she crosses her leg toward you—run for cover—she has you in her sights.

Stand and get chair

On occasion, a man (and this is almost always a male trait) will come up to a group of seated people. He’ll grab a chair, turn it backwards and sit down on it facing the group. He may appear to be friendly, but subconsciously he is using the chair as a shield and he is attempting to show aggression or dominance.

Keep in mind that these gestures or stances are not being done consciously—usually. It’s just the biological formation of the human body that dictates how our subconscious will express itself. And, as our planet gets smaller and smaller with technological advances and we all see the same television programs and movies, even these slight differences in the gestures will disappear.

Some of these gestures are learned—the silly ones especially. In most nations of the world, if you are wishing for something to happen, you cross your fingers. In Botswana or that area of the world, you stand on the tips of your toes.

Also in that area, you indicate how tall someone is by pointing your palm up—he's this tall. If you turn your palm down, you are pushing down his luck.

In the south—and it took us awhile to learn this one—if you pass someone on the road, you raise your fingers from the steering wheel to signify greeting. Of course, that only applies to the smaller roads around your house. Once you turn the corner off your road, the fingers may remain on the steering wheel. Not saying hello by raising that finger means either that you are a newcomer, and thus not really worthy of a hello by a been-here, or that you are mad at the other guy and you're not talking.

Unitarians are notorious for creating committees to study this or that. If you are in a committee meeting, or talking to your boss, or talking to your spouse, if your fellow committee members or your boss or your spouse has his legs crossed, odds are good that agreement over the issue will not be happening. Almost always when agreement is close, the legs get uncrossed.

In this committee meeting, if people are listening to you with their head in the palm of their hand, they are probably meditating on the problem, or else thoroughly caught up in what you are saying.

But watch out if that listener now moves his hand, putting his chin in the palm and extends his index finger up and the remaining fingers are below the mouth and he also moves his body away from the speaker. By this time, his thoughts are critical or cynical or negative to the speaker.

By staying alert to how people move and how they gesture, one can learn a lot about how they really feel. You can diffuse a difficult situation by using this information. If his arms are crossed, if his lips are compressed, no matter how you continue to press him, he won't agree with what you're saying. But, if you see those arms going up or see him turn away from you in his chair, switch tacks, draw out his feelings, find a common ground.

If you are uncertain whether this crossed arms position is one of defensiveness or because his back is sore, look at his hands. If his hands are in fists, or wrapped around the biceps in a stranglehold, chances are good that he's posturing defensively.

If you see your spouse frowning at you as you talk, reach up and push your glasses back up on your head. You've been giving her the signal that you're looking down your nose at her, even though it was just your glasses that needed adjusting. Be aware of your own body language.

Strangely enough, we can also impact ourselves this way. Paul Ekman, the world's foremost expert in reading expressions, once spent seven years working with his colleague learning how to isolate and then combine the various muscles of the face that make up our facial expressions. Seven years of sitting in a room and making faces at each other, learning which muscles did what and then how to consciously use those muscles. This culminated in an extensive body of language on reading expressions.

Ekman and his colleague had spent weeks working on the expressions that make up anger and distress. He says, "It was weeks before one of us finally admitted feeling terrible after a session where we'd been making one of those faces all day. Then the other realized that he'd been feeling poorly, too, so we began to keep track....What we discovered is that that expression alone is sufficient to create marked changes in the autonomic nervous system." When they were making these facial expressions of anger, their heartbeats would go up. Their hands would get hot. The expressions they wore were the way they felt.

Several studies have been done by others since then to test this thought. Can what you do with your face actually govern how you feel?

One of those studies had a group of subjects look at cartoons, either while holding a pen between their lips—an action which made it impossible to contract the muscles you use to smile—or while holding a pen clenched between their teeth, which had the opposite effect and forced them to smile. The people with the pen between their teeth found the cartoons much funnier. If they were already using the smile muscles, then they tended to find more to smile about. What this research showed is that emotion can also start on the face.

Walking around with your hands in your pockets, all slumped down, head down, feeling blue? Stand up straight, head up, swing those arms and maybe you'll even start to feel good.

If we want to truly hear what others are feeling, if we want to bring about agreement rather than confrontation, if we want to promote UU principles of living in a diverse world of beliefs, then we need to tune in to what people are saying to us by their body language and, most importantly, what we are saying to them.