

Does Our **Uniqueness** Prevent Us From **Communicating?**

by Philip Mulford

This is the fifth in a series of articles about relationship communication – how it works, why it doesn't, and how to make it work in our relationships. Thank you for your feedback on my last article. Keep those e-mails and comments coming! I hope this article addresses some of the communication issues we all face.

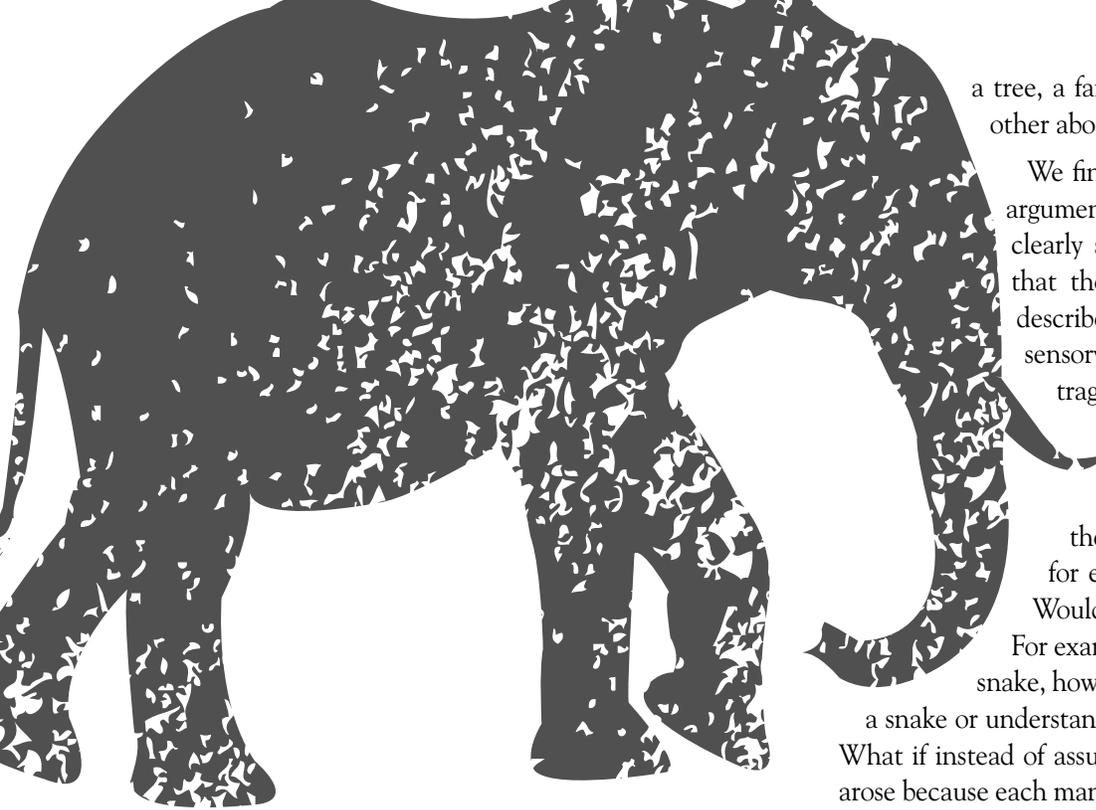
You are special. You are unique. You're One of a Kind. No one in this world is You, except You. If that's true, and I hope you'll agree it is, then what does that say about me? Wouldn't that mean that I, too, am unique, special, one of a kind? What about your spouse? Each of your children? Everyone else? Isn't each one of us unique, special, one of a kind? I think so. In this high-tech world of ours, we're often reminded of our physical uniqueness when we hear about biometric security measures at airports and other access controlled areas where unique physical characteristics such as our fingerprints, our eyes, our hand size and shape, and our voices are used to identify those specific individuals who have authorized access while keeping the rest of the world out. So what does this have to do with the way we communicate?

When we consider the fact that each of us is unique, we generally think of our physical characteristics. But if we are physically unique, then wouldn't it be reasonable to consider that we are also mentally, emotionally, and psychologically unique. If so, wouldn't it make sense that we each perceive and process the world we live in uniquely, in our own special way, dare I say, differently? Not only do we process our world uniquely, we each have lived a unique life experience that evolves continuously as

we go about the daily living of our lives. Even if we live in the same household, even when we experience the so-called "same" event, even if at the same time, we each feel, think, and interpret that particular event, and the totality of events that make up our life's experience, differently. A specific event can't be the same event for me as it is for you because you and I perceive it in our own unique way. Not only do we perceive it differently, but when we attempt to share our feelings, thoughts, and emotions about it, we use words and expressions that mean different things to the speaker than they mean to the listener – even though we speak the same language. And here's the rub. We assume that's not the case. We assume our own experience is basically identical to the experience of those who experienced it with us. We assume the words we say mean the same thing to those listening. When we make those assumptions, we create communication misunderstandings that impact our relationships in ways we don't even stop to consider.

When we're together, it's easy to assume that my experience is very similar, if not the same, as your experience. If, as I share my thoughts with you, I discover that your experience was different

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a tree, a fan, and a rope and then argue with each other about who is correct.

We find humor in their confusion and in their arguments because from our vantage point we clearly see the entire elephant and understand that the different perspective each blind man describes is based on the limited and different sensory information available to each. The tragedy is that we assume their differences arise from the different parts of the elephant with which each comes in contact. But what if each man grabbed the same part of the elephant, the trunk for example? Would that make a difference? Wouldn't their experiences still be different?

For example, if one man had never experienced a snake, how could he describe the elephant's trunk as

a snake or understand another's description that it is a snake? What if instead of assuming that the differences in perceptions arose because each man touched a different part of the elephant, we consider that the differences in perceptions arose because of the differences within each man? Because they are each unique, each will experience the elephant differently, even if they each grab hold of the trunk.

We readily laugh at the men from Indostan, never realizing that it is we, ourselves, pictured there. It is our uniqueness that makes the world different for each of us, not simply that we have grabbed hold at a different place.

In his autobiographical book, Confessions of an Economic Hit Man, John Perkins describes the reactions of his boss and co-workers to his decision to leave his company:

"After nine years with my company, during which I achieved a position of title, responsibility, and power unmatched for a person of my age, I decided to resign. My immediate supervisor refused to believe me when I advised him of my resignation. He finally accepted my decision.

"After that, everyone else tried to talk me out of resigning. I was reminded frequently about how good I had it, and I was even accused of insanity. I came to understand that no one wanted to accept the fact that I was leaving voluntarily, at least in part, because it forced them to look at themselves. If I were not crazy for leaving, then they might have to consider their own sanity in staying. It was easier to see me as a person who had departed from his senses."

It often seems easier for me to see you through my eyes than to try to understand you through yours. And yet it's not. The arguments that arise from this mindset drive us apart.

One evening I was driving along Rixeyville Rd (Rt 229) from Warrenton to Culpeper as the sun was setting. The sunset over

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than mine, one or more of the following, among many other possible alternatives, may happen:

- I may argue and try to persuade you that my point of view is the "right" point of view – and that yours is "wrong."
- I may withhold my view because I don't want to embarrass myself by sounding "uninformed" or because I've learned that if I express my different point of view it will result in an argument and I don't want to argue.
- I may change the subject to one we agree on (based, of course, on my perception of agreement).
- I may judge you personally and decide you're not worth my time because you are so out of touch.
- I may evaluate your point of view and decide to dismiss it as that of the uninformed.
- I may use those "tools/weapons" that I have learned will result in me winning the argument – yelling, name calling, making accusations about your mother, reminding you how often you're wrong, that you don't know what you're talking about, and worse – my various "relationship skills" to verbally beat you into submission.
- I may go to war with you.
- I may accept your description of the event without argument.

Most of the options include the evaluation and judgment of you by me and of me by you. Evaluation and judgment are major driving forces in relationship conflict. One major obstacle to successful communication is that we are each well-trained to believe that we all experience life the same. But it's just not so. We're all familiar with the poem about the six blind men from Indostan who describe an elephant as a wall, a spear, a snake,

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the Blue Ridge Mountains was spectacular. I commented on the beautiful “orange” sunset. My son, Philip, about ten at the time, shared his different perception, “Dad, that’s not orange. It’s tangerine.” “So you’d call it tangerine?,” I replied. “And how would you describe the mountains?” “Blueberry,” he replied, describing what I would have called purple. A tangerine and blueberry sunset was exactly how he saw it. Now we could have taken each other on and argued about it. I could have made it a “teaching moment” and “helped him with his colors,” but instead we enjoyed each other’s different descriptions and allowed them

the question. What good comes from both of us deciding, “I’m right and you’re wrong, but let’s not argue?” I’m not promoting argument, but instead of agreeing to disagree, I think that phrase should be a reminder for each of us to ask, “Do I truly understand your point of view on this issue?” We could be, and most likely are, both “right,” but different, simultaneously. In fact, take the concept of being “right” and put it aside. We are each entitled to our own perspective and because we are unique, those perspectives will, more often than not, be different.

When we apply this concept to communication it opens up many possibilities. No matter what the subject, whether it’s the

to co-exist. The sunset and we perceived its magnificent display differently, but we used the opportunity to listen, understand, and connect with each other and build yet another piece of our relationship

Now you may be thinking, “Orange vs. Tangerine. Blueberry vs. Purple. Who cares?” “Those differences are insignificant,” you might say. They certainly aren’t enough to cause an argument for anyone, right? But I’d suggest that lesser distinctions have been the cause of tremendous relationship stress and conflict. Whether it’s about leaving the toilet seat up, putting the toothpaste cap back on the toothpaste, bringing the cat in at night, setting the air conditioner thermostat at the “right” temperature, leaving “on time” to get where we’re going, what we choose to wear, what we say and how we say it - our differences drive our conflicts. If we always agreed with each other, we would have no arguments.

I’ve often heard it suggested that instead of continuing an argument, we should just agree to disagree. For me, that begs

color of the sunset or a deeply held moral, religious, or political belief, we each have a unique perspective. Even when we say, “I agree with you,” that expression is often a euphemism for, “That’s close enough not to argue.” We spend so much time evaluating each other’s perspectives while deciding whether “it’s close enough” for agreement or whether we have to “correct” each other because we disagree. Watch yourself the next time you interrupt someone. Did your need to interrupt come from a desire to understand or a desire to express your disagreement? What if instead of listening for agreement, we listen to understand each other – especially when we disagree? What if the only things we assume are: 1. our perspectives will be different; and 2. I can’t know your perspective until you share it with me? What if we allow different perceptions to co-exist rather than continue our struggle with each other to establish “The Truth?” If we do, then we’ll put ourselves in the position of learning from each other, valuing each other, accepting each other, and living a more peaceful and loving co-existence.

Once a practicing attorney, Philip founded Mulford Mediation in 1990 and has mediated professionally for over 21 years. With offices in Fairfax and Warrenton, VA, Philip specializes in marriage, family, divorce, and family business mediation and communication. For more information about Mulford Mediation, please visit www.mulfordmediation.com. In addition, Philip and his wife, Lisa, are the creators and co-hosts of a weekly radio talk show called Communication360 where the topic is relationship communication. The show, with over 170,000 listeners per month, is available on the internet at www.webtalkradio.net. All shows are archived and can be listened to on demand or downloaded. For more information about Communication360, please visit www.C360today.com. In October 2011, Philip will be speaking about effective communication at a forum organized by Fauquier Women. In November 2011, Philip will be offering an afternoon workshop called, “When You Speak, Listen: Reconnecting Your Passions to Your Life.” Philip may be reached at pmulford@mulfordmediation.com or at 540-341-4615.

