

On Being a Communication Ally

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Confronting Fluency Privilege

In the 1990s, the issue of privilege is slowly, and with much resistance, percolating into the consciousness of the population at large. In my home town, there has been a major effort directed toward community-wide race dialogues; one of the most prominent features of those dialogues has been the acknowledgment by white participants (often for the first time in their lives) that they are the beneficiaries of white privilege. They come to recognize and talk openly of some things that they expect and feel entitled to in their neighborhoods, workplaces and daily interactions which cannot be taken for granted in those same situations by people of color.

Privilege is a loaded term in many ways. For most sorts of privilege (white privilege, male privilege, and heterosexual privilege, for example), the people who are least aware of its existence are usually those who are its biggest beneficiaries. The term smacks of unfair advantage (which it is) and of a vague moral "not-niceness" which tends to make most privileged people feel unfairly put-upon. Many well-meaning people feel accused of possessing a privileged status in one or more domains which they have never actively sought for themselves. While such feelings are understandable, they must not be a barrier to action. One cannot truly be a social and political ally to marginalized members of the community without recognizing and owning one's privileged status in various domains.

To understand the role of a communication ally, which will be presented in this article, it is useful to focus attention on a form of privilege that, as yet, has no commonly recognized name. I will refer to it here as fluency privilege, which I define as "the advantages automatically accruing to people who are competent, fluent speakers of the standard dialect or dominant language of a given society."

For most Americans raised speaking English, the concept of fluency privilege may be a difficult one to grasp. Most of us acquired our privileged status at a relatively young age, and most of us have had few personal adult experiences in which our fluency privilege was not fully operating. Consequently, when we see others experiencing the social effects of a lack of fluency, we may be more likely to focus on other aspects of their circumstances which might lead to negative social consequences -- their immigrant status, perhaps, or their disability -- and we may not attend to fluency as a social issue.

It is often through dramatic personal experiences that we become conscious of some previously invisible privilege. Here are some ways in which the issue of fluency privilege was brought home to me:

Several years ago, my wife Mara and I, vacationing in the French town of Besançon, decided to take a canoe trip advertised in a local tourist brochure. She and I are both moderately experienced whitewater canoeists; we both speak, reasonably well, the French we learned in high school. We set off in the company of our guide, the driver, and several German tourists.

As we all rode in the shuttle van up the river to the place where our trip would start, Mara and I were increasingly apprehensive about what we saw. The river flowed quietly for the most part, but every mile or so it tumbled over two-foot or three-foot dams through narrow spillways. We asked our guide, an athletic-looking young man, whether we would be portaging around the dams. No, he assured us, we would be running them, and everything would be fine. The driver and the guide spoke for a time, quietly and rapidly; Mara and I tried to follow their conversation without total success; the gist of it was that the driver proposed the possibility of canoeing a different stretch of the river, which the guide rejected.

Mara and I tried to ask the guide again if he was sure that the stretch of the river we would be running was safe, and he brushed off our question with a breezy assurance. We all set out, with the guide and his partner leading the way to show us how to run the dams. The guide ran the first dam successfully; three of the other canoes, including ours, capsized. We were swept down the river, and I came closer to drowning than I ever want to be again; Mara and I have not been whitewater canoeing since.

In our angry conversation afterwards with the owner of the tour company, we learned that the young man guiding us had, in fact, never run that stretch of the river before. Although he was an experienced canoeist, our trip took place on his first day of working for the company. The owner agreed that running that stretch of the river with the water as high as it was had been a case of poor judgment.

The next day, as Mara and I revisited our experience, we recognized how we had felt powerless to negotiate the day before; we also saw the ways in which our lack of fluency had contributed to that powerlessness. Although we both spoke enough French to understand the guide, and to make ourselves fairly well understood, our lack of fluency limited the number of questions we could ask that the guide was willing to answer; he would have had patience for many more detailed questions if we were all fluent in the same language. We were limited in the specificity with which we could obtain information, and in the opportunity to engage in casual conversation (which might have told us, for example, that he had just arrived in Besançon the day before.) We were both clear that, had the interaction taken place in West Virginia or Colorado rather than in France, we would have been active participants in the decision not to run the river, rather than bedraggled victims of the guide's mistaken self-assurance.

Four years ago, I was operated on for oral cancer. For a week after the surgery, I breathed through a tracheotomy, was unable to speak, and communicated by slowly and shakily writing notes on a stenographer's pad. My mouth and throat were filled with a seeming ocean of mucus following the surgery; I relied for my survival on the wall-mounted suction machine, with its long hose and hard plastic mouthpiece. The hose and mouthpiece often clogged; I would clear them by dipping the mouthpiece in a glass of water. When that didn't work, and the hose or mouthpiece needed to be replaced, I had only a few minutes "breathing space" before I would begin choking.

One afternoon, the hose and mouthpiece both clogged, and I waited an endless-seeming 15 minutes until the nurse responded to my buzzer. When she asked me why I had buzzed, I started to write, "My suction is clogged -- the tube and mouthpiece need to be replaced." I wrote MY SUCTION IS... and the nurse started out the door, saying, "Oh, I see -- you need a new mouthpiece -- I'll get it for you." I knew that merely replacing the mouthpiece wouldn't work, and I was already gasping for air. I flung my notebook at her, and hit her in the back of the head. Startled and angry, she came back to yell at me; I kept pounding my pencil on the table-top and gestured, until grudgingly she returned my notebook to me. I scrawled my panic-stricken message in its entirety, making sure she did not leave until I was done. "Oh," she snorted, and with ill-grace returned a few minutes later with my precious suction hose. I'm sure she went home that night to tell someone about the rude patient who had attacked her.

I am embarrassed to admit that, despite a focus on supporting the communication of people with disabilities throughout my adult life, and despite years of having considered these issues from a political as well as from a clinical point of view, it took dramatic events such as the ones I just described to alert me to the real power of fluency privilege. I am humbled by the knowledge that the occurrences I described above, which feel like major events in my life, are often the ordinary stuff of life-long daily struggle for many of my friends and for the people with whom I work.

Since my cancer surgery, which left me with limited movement of my tongue and a hole in my soft palate, my speech has often been difficult for many people to understand. I pause in my speech in ways that are often misinterpreted as my being finished with what I had to say, and I may need to repeat a word or phrase several times, or spell a word out letter by letter, to make sure I am being understood. I speak slowly compared to most other people, and have a great deal of difficulty jumping into a conversation when many people are speaking at once.

However, these limitations to my fluency have not prevented me from continuing to be an assertive communicator in my family and in my professional and social communities. Despite my limitations, I possess a sense of entitlement, captured by the phrase, "I have a right to be heard." Is this because I began to experience limitations in fluency only after a lifetime of fluency privilege, acquired on my journey to my status as a native English-speaking middle-aged professional European-American male? I often wonder what my situation would be today if I sounded the way I do, but did not have this deeply ingrained feeling that the world owes me an audience.

The Social Uses of Communication

Over the years, I have worked with many people with varying levels of communicative impairments. Like most other professionals I know, I began my work in this area assuming that the difficulties which people were experiencing primarily affected their ability to obtain information from, and convey information to, other people. Many professionals, teachers and speech pathologists in particular, focus their remedial efforts in these areas. But such an approach often ignores the reasons for communicating that have little to do with the conveyance of information, the reasons that most fluently speaking people, most of the time, are such eager communicators. People who have never communicated from a position of privilege often experience their greatest barriers with regard to these social, rather than informational, dimensions of communication. They include, among others:

* Social connection: When I get on an elevator with a co-worker, and I say, "Beautiful day, isn't it?" and he says "Oh, it's great! This is my favorite time of year!" he is unlikely to have learned any new information about the weather, and I am unlikely to have learned anything significant about his personal preferences. What we may mean, at some level, could more directly be expressed by my saying to him, "You're a pleasant-looking person, and I'd like to experiment in a non-committal way with having a conversation with you," to which he could respond, "I'm agreeable -- let's see how it goes for the length of this elevator ride, and that will give us a basis for connecting the next time we see each other."

Of course, nobody ever talks like that -- we've been socialized not to -- and that's why the weather is such a popular topic of conversation. We use the rituals of communication as ways of establishing social connections with each other. These rituals often rely on split-second timing, intonational nuance, and other features that are particularly challenging for non-fluent people.

* Claiming a persona: Many people my age have experienced the eye-rolling exasperation of our teen-aged children when we use words that were in vogue with young people the last time we checked. What we are trying to do at such a moment (unsuccessfully) is to tell our listeners about the kinds of people we are. It's as if we are saying, "Please notice that I am intelligent/ sophisticated/ witty/ sensitive/ folksy/self-confident/modest/ trustworthy/ loveable....etc." Increasingly, focus groups are used to help political candidates perfect the nuances of the ways in which they deliver their messages to the public. As one of their main tasks, these groups reflect back to the candidate the persona that he or she is projecting. Often, this persona is considered far more important than the actual content of the candidates' positions.

* Making something happen: When I answer a state trooper's questions after he has pulled me over for speeding, I am only minimally concerned with the informational content of what I say; my efforts are much more intensely directed at trying to work a kind of magic with my words that will somehow remind the trooper of the wonderful feeling he will experience when he sends me off with a warning instead of a ticket.

Influencing outcomes is a challenge for non-fluent people even in two-person interactions; in meetings or other larger group processes, the barriers to a non-fluent person's full participation may sometimes feel insurmountable.

If we were to assume communication is only about the exchange of information, then we could conclude that what people with limited fluency need most are the services of expert clinicians. However, a shift of focus toward social uses of communication will lead the professional and lay-advocate alike away from the role of therapist, and toward the equally important but rarely recognized role of communication ally.

What is a Communication Ally?

Communication allies are people who use their fluency privilege on behalf of people who experience limited or impaired ability to communicate fluently. Their tools include their long-term experience and emotional comfort in settings where communication takes place. They also take advantage of the respect and deference which they are shown by others as a benefit of their fluency privilege. What they do with those tools is create a safe and empowered place for the communication of the non-fluent people with whom they ally themselves.

In a presentation called "On Being a Communication Ally," Nancy Kalina and I made a rough attempt to define the role of communication ally, specifically in the context of planning meetings

or other activities in the organizational domain:

In a social situation or meeting, the communication ally is someone who has agreed to have, as his/her most important role, making sure that the situation is structured so that the person is fully informed, heard and respected throughout the proceedings. (Shevin & Kalina, 1997).

The communication ally, through his or her actions, serves to counteract both the systemic oppression

(i.e., the disempowering and dismissive ways that institutions and their representatives treat non-fluent people) and the internalized oppression (i.e., the negative self-images and feelings of powerlessness) experienced by people who are not fluent speakers in a particular community.

The Art of Being a Communication Ally: General Principles

Communication allies vary their specific actions depending upon the social circumstances in which they and the people they are allied with find themselves. However, there are some fundamental principles which undergird those actions:

Respectful assumptions concerning the speaker. In this role, it's useful to ground ourselves by being aware of the assumptions we tend to make which we bring to our interactions with new students, clients or coalition partners. The key to this activity is remembering that these are assumptions; in other words, they are the starting points, the "default values" on which we act until we receive specific information to the contrary.

My personal assumptions are fluid. The last time I stepped back and considered what they were, this is the list I developed:

My Assumptions About My Communication Partners

- * They are highly intelligent.
- * They have a deep interest in fostering relations with others (and possibly with me.)
- * They have stories they would like to tell, if the circumstances are right.
- * They have positive images of themselves which they wish to present as part of their communication.
- * Regardless of appearances, they are paying attention to me when I interact with them.

These are assumptions, not guarantees; but since we tend to find what we go looking for, my interactions with people tend to take on the respectful flavor of this list of assumptions.

Exercise: Reflections on Assumptions

Label a piece of paper "My Assumptions About New [Clients, Students, Patients, etc.]" and write a spontaneous list of assumptions for yourself. Then set it aside and go do something else.

When you return to the list after a break, ask yourself:

* Do I really assume these things, or does the list consist more of things I feel I'm supposed to believe, but don't?

* Do I tend to find what I go looking for in these people?

* Is that what I want, or would other assumptions serve us all better?

* What stands in the way of those other assumptions?

Respectful listening practices. A communication ally is, most fundamentally, a respectful listener. I wish to place emphasis here on the concept of respectful listening, rather than the more general ideas of "good listening skills" or "reflective listening." By respectful listening, I mean the honor we give people by conveying to them, "your words are important to me, just because you are saying them."

Many of us have had the experience of meeting a famous celebrity, or a personal hero of ours; in those highly charged moments, we tend to pay attention to exactly what that person has to say -- even if it is only to rent a car from us, or order lunch. That's one snapshot of respectful listening. My friend Eugene Marcus summarized his advice on respectful listening in a single sentence: "Treat everybody like a visiting dignitary who may not speak your language very well."

The practices of respectful listening are well-known; for some people, however, they are second nature, while for others they are only mastered through thoughtful practice. They include:

* Dedicating enough time for the communication to unfold. Patience is increasingly important for all of us in our speeded-up world; for the person with communication impairments, time may be the single most important factor in gaining real access to the conversational community.

I learned an important lesson on this topic from my friend "Jonathan." I used to see Jonathan about once a week; I'd bring him over to my house where we could relax, and carry on a conversation using facilitated communication. At the time, I was the only person in Jonathan's life who facilitated with him regularly, so those two hours a week were his only real opportunity for extensive conversation.

Jonathan insisted on following an exact routine each time he came over. He would use the manual sign for "soda," and I would get him a can of Coke from the refrigerator. He would drink it while lying on the couch with his feet up and his head resting on my lap. Only after finishing his Coke would he be interested in conversing with me, and the can of Coke could last him as

long as 45 minutes.

After several weeks of this routine, I spoke to Jonathan of my frustration. "I hate wasting our limited time like this," I told him. "Isn't there any way we could hurry through the Coke time?"

"No," Jonathan typed. "This time is important. When we are talking, I am in your world. When we are quiet, you are in mine."

"Oh," I said, and stayed quiet.

Dedicating enough time to respect the speaker's communication often requires postponing a conversation until a time when you can give it the attention it deserves, and making sure that such time is made available without significant delay.

* Making sure you have really understood what the person is telling you.

Clarence was a 70-year-old man with whom I had a passing acquaintance at the state institution where I worked in North Dakota. He spent most of his leisure time hanging out at the facility's cafeteria, engaging staff in conversation when they were there on their breaks.

Clarence's speech was almost impossible to understand, but that didn't stop him from trying. When I first got to know him, I would engage with him in the same way I saw most other people doing: I would say hello, smile and nod and say "Uh-huh" several times while he talked, and find the most convenient and inoffensive way to leave as soon as seemed polite. After several such conversations, though, I began to question what I was doing, and engaged in the more frustrating activity of telling him I hadn't understood him, and asking him to repeat what he had said. Often, he and I would struggle for five minutes so I could make sense of a single sentence. Sometimes I would have to leave before I understood, and I would apologize; I'd remind him the next time we met that we might have unfinished business.

Was this frustrating? I know it was to me, and perhaps it was to him as well. But the effort seemed worth it -- because I had realized that my previous polite nods and smiles had symbolically meant, "I'm sure that what you're saying isn't worth hearing."

* Making sure you have the full message. Not only must you understand what you've heard; you must also make sure you've heard all there is to hear. "Getting the gist" of what someone is saying may be enough in some situations, but it conveys little respect; also, you may have missed the most important part, as I described earlier when I spoke of hitting the nurse with the notebook to get her to listen to my full request.

* Avoiding the sidetracking or appropriation of the conversation. Many of the habits of our everyday informal conversations can stand as barriers to respectful listening. These include interrupting, correcting real or perceived mistakes, "topping" someone's story with one of our

own, and offering advice which has not been sought.

Most fluent speakers in a community have learned to continue their speaking assertively in the face of such obstacles; for the person with communication impairment or limited fluency, these interruptions and distractions, and the message of disrespect conveyed, may be enough to make further communication feel unsafe, or block it altogether.

Speaking respectfully. Although the roots of respectful speaking are contained in the practices of respectful listening, there are some additional issues which communication allies attend to, so that what they say and how they say it advances the safety and empowerment of the individuals they are supporting.

- * Attending to the physical aspects of the communication. Much of respect in speaking is conveyed by the means of communication rather than its content. Such issues as physical proximity, positioning of the participants, eye contact, tone of voice, facial expression, loudness and pitch of speech, and time allowed between utterances all convey messages of differential power and respect.

Exercise: Physical Aspects of Communication

This exercise can be done by yourself; it is more effective done while taking turns and debriefing with a partner.

Think of how you might ask the question "What are you doing?" to a skilled glass-blower giving a demonstration at a craft fair. Now think of how you might ask the same question to a five-year-old you found drawing on the bedroom wall with crayons. How would your actions differ? (Consider such aspects as tone of voice, loudness, facial expression, physical proximity, how long you wait before beginning to speak, how long you wait before repeating or reframing your question, etc.)

Now think of how you would ask the same question to a student sitting in a special education classroom fiddling with a piece of string. Listen to what you sound like.

- * Talking to people rather than about them. Nearly all non-fluent communicators (and many fluent ones with obvious physical disabilities) have experienced being talked about in their presence as if they were not there. This conveys a clear message of disrespect.

- * Using questions in a respectful way. Generally, the person who asks the most questions is the one with the most power. Some of that power differential can be relinquished, and questions can be asked respectfully, by several means. The ally can invite questions as well as asking them (e.g., "Is there anything you'd like to know about me?"); he or she can ask questions for clarification, rather than in an inquisitorial, "let's-see-if-you-understand-what-I'm-talking-about" way; and the ally can ask permission before raising significant topics. (The social conventions of "If you don't mind my asking..." or "Could you tell me..." are markers that signify I

am asking someone for something which is his or her right to bestow, rather than my right to demand.)

* Accommodative turn-taking. Respectful communication is reciprocal, but true reciprocity is a complex issue when dealing with individuals who are non-fluent. On one hand, such people may require much longer than usual to get their messages across, and thus may need more than an equal share of the conversational time. On the other hand, non-fluent communication can be exhausting, and the person communicating may feel put on the spot if required to "hold the floor" for long periods of time. Accommodative turn-taking should be attended to, but the details must be worked out anew with each individual.

Translating General Principles into Specific Actions: The Communication Ally at the Team Meeting

The communication ally who has established a respectful, reciprocal relationship with another person is well-positioned to support that person as a powerful communicator on his or her own behalf. Such support is particularly valuable in settings such as team meetings and staffing conferences. These settings historically have served to affirm the social distance between people with disabilities or other communication challenges on one hand, and the professionals who serve them on the other. In those settings, people with communication impairments have typically been ignored; have not been supported in preparing for the meetings to the extent that professionals and team leaders have; they lack official status; and they may be oblivious to the relative status in the hierarchy possessed by other meeting participants.

When I speak to groups about the role of communication ally, I am often asked, "Shouldn't everybody in the meeting be the person's communication ally?" In one sense, of course, the answer is yes -- everyone in the group should be conscious of his or her ability to affirm the person's communication and support that person's empowerment. However, when I speak of the role of the communication ally in a formal setting such as a meeting, I am referring to the specific definition found on page 4 above. In the formal setting of a team meeting, the communication ally is deliberately stepping out of any other roles he or she plays in the person's life as a way of focusing completely on supporting that person's communication.

To be effective as someone's communication ally in formal situations such as meetings, the communication ally must be active in that role not only during the meeting, but before and after it as well.

Before. In preparation for the meeting, some of the communication ally's tasks might include:

* Learning the person's formal and informal agendas for the meeting. It may be important to Lily that we talk about the logistics of getting adequate job training; it may also be important to her that nobody gets mad at her during the meeting. The communication ally should be aware of

both of these.

- * Telling the person what other issues are going to be brought to the meeting. If the person is to be an effective strategizer within the group, he or she needs as much information as possible in advance of the meeting.

- * Brainstorming logistics. (Depending on the situation, the meeting's facilitator may or may not be involved in this discussion.) The discussion could include such questions as "Who else would you like to make sure will be at the meeting? Who would you like to be sitting next to you? How will you let me know you are getting scared or upset, or need a break?"

- * Helping the person prepare written materials in advance. Often the lowest-status person at a meeting is the only one who arrives without a written report, plan, list of issues, etc. By coming with a written agenda, list of questions, or an open letter to the planning team, the person is able to assert his or her official status as a primary player.

- * Clearing your own agenda prior to the meeting. You cannot attend the meeting both as the person's communication ally and as a passionate advocate for a specific issue in that person's life. If such advocacy is needed, find someone else to attend the meeting as the champion of that particular issue. If you are the only such champion available, then you should help the person find a different communication ally for that meeting.

During. The communication ally empowers the non-fluent person by creating the space for that person to process what's happening effectively, and to be heard throughout the proceedings. As the meeting progresses, most communication allies must work very hard to remain "in character." There is often a strong temptation to become an active participant in the meeting, forcefully representing one's own point of view. This is a dangerous game; short-term gains are obtained by sacrificing the opportunity for the person to actually become someone with a speaking role in his or her own life.

Some specific actions of the communication ally during a meeting might include:

- * Monitoring logistics. The ally checks in with the person being supported to make sure that seating, acoustics, and other aspects of the meeting support that person's comfortable and empowered participation.

- * Making sure that agendas are reviewed at the beginning of the meeting. Often there are last-minute changes or previously unspoken agenda items brought to a meeting. The person who is not a fluent communicator should be apprized of this at the outset.

- * **SLOWING IT DOWN!** The greatest barrier to a communicatively impaired person's full participation in his or her own meeting is often someone else's impatience to get it over with so they can get on to something "more important." The communication ally is often well positioned to make sure that the brakes are applied in situations where false closure is being

imposed on a situation in which one or more people have unanswered questions, vague semi-commitments, or serious misgivings.

* Checking in with the person. It's important to know that the person has been following the conversation despite obstacles such as rapidity, multiple simultaneous speakers, or use of professional jargon. The communication ally also keeps track of the person's comfort level with the discussion, and his or her agreement with what's being decided. In the heat of discussion during a lively meeting, it's the communication ally whose role it is to remind the group of the difference between someone's actual agreement and his or her silence being read as acquiescence.

* Taking the person's "irrelevancies" seriously. I have been at many meetings when the conversation has gone more or less as follows:

Team leader: "What progress has Joe made on his second and third vocational goals since last September?"

Joe: "Pet store. Little dog."

Team leader: "No, Joe, we're not talking about that now... we're discussing your vocational goals."

Joe: "Pet store. Doggie."

Team leader: "Joe, we can talk about that after the meeting. That's not what we're talking about now."

Joe becomes silent, and walks out of the room while the rest of the team talks. Several days later, in a chance conversation with Joe's day habilitation worker, the team leader finds out that the day habilitation worker and Joe had visited a pet store during the previous week, Joe had played with the puppies, and the day habilitation worker had talked with the pet-store owner about the possibility of Joe getting a part-time job there.

Had there been a communication ally present, he or she could have attended to Joe's persistent talking about the pet store, and explored more deeply with Joe why the topic was coming up in this particular discussion. Had that been the case, the entire team might have had the opportunity to help Joe think about an exciting work possibility.

* Negotiating modifications to support the person's full participation. Many of us live our lives following our Day Runners as we rush from meeting to meeting. Although we may complain of this, it's a pretty fair guess that for most of us in this situation, meetings feel like home. For other people, meetings may feel like ventures into alien territory. On their behalf, a communication ally may propose modifications to the meeting which allow the person's continued active participation. These might include taking frequent breaks, breaking out from large group

discussions into one-to-one conversations where the person might feel more free to speak, or reprioritizing the agenda to focus on issues of greatest importance to the person.

* Pressing for details when needed. As meetings plod forward and participants get tired, there may be a tendency to become vague about time-lines, individual responsibilities, or follow-up meetings. The communication ally can be helpful in obtaining as much specific information as possible while the group is all assembled, and can help establish reporting dates and check-in points when specific information is not available. (This is another example of a place where the meeting-experienced person can be a strong ally to someone who is not.)

The role of communication ally calls for significant assertiveness; it calls for speaking out of turn, and for interrupting the smooth flow of routine. In my experience, most teams have eagerly welcomed allies taking on that role, when the allies made the role they were taking explicit from the outset

After. Any of the professionals attending a meeting on someone's behalf could easily call other participants if they have misgivings, are unsure of exactly what got decided, or wish to check on the progress of various team members toward getting plans rolling. But what if the person on whose behalf the meeting was held were to have similar misgivings or confusion? Many of the people we support do not have the luxury of being able to initiate conversations or phone calls independently, and may need an ally's help in doing so. Also, "buyer's remorse," the opportunity to change your mind because you're having second thoughts, should not only be the prerogative of the privileged few. Some of the ways in which a communication ally can be helpful after a meeting include:

* Reviewing the meeting minutes with the person after the meeting. A few days after the meeting, it's useful to check with the person to make sure he or she understands what's included in the minutes, and still agrees with what has been decided.

* Helping the person monitor whether decisions reached are being followed up appropriately. Unfortunately, commitments made at meetings are sometimes not acted upon. I have sometimes attended meetings where wonderful-sounding goals are developed; someone then speaks up and reminds the group that nearly identical-sounding goals had been adopted, and then forgotten about, in the previous year. The communication ally can assist the person for whom planning was done in making sure things happen. A professional receiving a letter with a formal request for update information from a client he or she serves is unlikely to disregard it.

Conclusion

The preceding section has emphasized the specific actions which a communication ally can take to support the empowerment of a person with limited fluency in structured settings. In focusing on the details of these actions, however, it's important not to lose the big picture. The spirit in which those actions are taken is more important than the specific acts themselves. If the

communication ally "does all the right things," but does them in a way that keeps him or herself at the center of attention of the group, then the purpose of playing that role will have been defeated. Fundamentally, communication allies are people who refuse to continuously occupy the center, thus clearing the way for other people who have systematically been pushed to the margins. In doing so, the communication allies honor not only those previously marginalized people; but also the group process. Creating a space for all to participate in the process makes the importance of that process unmistakable; it can turn an ordinary meeting into a sacred place. Deliberately choosing to act as communication allies can be a challenging experience, leading us to act in novel ways that may seem awkward at first. But in doing our work on behalf of the people with whom we ally ourselves, we create spaces in which being awkward is not a barrier to being powerful. As we do that work, we find that new freedom and power has been opened up for ourselves as well; we become both more skilled and graceful, and more fearless even in moments when skill or grace seems lacking.

Little of the work of the communication ally is overtly revolutionary or dramatically transformative. More often, in tiny, uneventful-seeming increments, non-fluent people become, over time, the engines driving their lives forward, and the deepest sources of information about their own destinations.

Reference

Shevin, M., & N. Kalina. (1997). "On Being a Communication Ally." Presentation at the annual conference of TASH, Boston, December 1997.