

Human Communication and Peace

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After years of studying human communication, completing a PhD on the subject and teaching various forms of communication skills and theory, it has become clear to me that human communication is largely non-verbal. And non-verbal communication might include gestures and eye contact and touch, but far and away the primary form of non-verbal communication is the intention or tone of the speaker. We all know this because we can identify many shades of meaning in every statement. We all recognize the differences between two different utterances of “have a nice day” when one speaker says it with a big smile and a warm handshake and one speaker snarls it and stomps away. And how many times have you walked into a room and sensed that something tense or embarrassing was being communicated and asked, “What’s going on?” before you even heard any words spoken.

We might conclude that intention is such a primary part of human communication that we could, under some circumstances, find words to be unnecessary. Perhaps you’ve even had such an experience of communication or shared understanding that required no language. Maybe this non-verbal moment has occurred with a sibling with whom you’ve shared many, many experiences. Or maybe with a stranger during a time of shared distress. Or perhaps with a beloved companion animal (animals have no speech, but if you’ve lived with a pet for any time you know they are generally much more precise communicators than most humans!).

What is happening during non-verbal communication? How are information, thoughts, feelings being shared? Although we all know communication is happening, we don’t have technology or perhaps depth of understanding as a species yet to name the means of this communication. But I think we can say that non-verbal communication is more closely linked to the truth than verbal communication. In other words, it’s harder to lie nonverbally than it is verbally. An intention is a difficult thing to fake.

I think this is why peace rallies often feel as hostile as any other battle. The intention and the non-verbal part of the communication about peace are not so peaceful. (Thus, the phenomenon of the violent peace rally.) I think this is also why, staying at home and clarifying one’s own intentions for peace within yourself, your family, friends, and co-workers is perhaps more powerful peace communication than any rally or other peace gathering.

Once found on the inside, a deeply felt, true intention for peace resonates more loudly on the outside in all non-verbal and verbal communication that follows. And without that internal knowing and intention for peace, spoken words of peace will generally ring false.

I think that if enough people found their own non-verbal peace communication, we would have very little occasion to ever speak of war again.