

You Make Sense - Always

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Probably no question has been put to me so often these days as to what I mean by the phrase “Make Sense.” The Diversity Principle: “All people make sense all the time,” is for me one of the most useful tools I’ve come up with. It allows me to connect with people who are doing things that I don’t at first understand or like. It allows me to continue to more and more fully understand myself. It is a keystone tool in helping people build self-esteem. And it is a tool that stands up clearly, setting me against what I call “the pathology of our culture.” But what do I mean by “sense?” I will try, in this article, to be more clear.

“Why?” A super question

It all started for me back in the early 1980s when I was single, between marriages, and I was studying Boundaries. I knew I had done a lot wrong in my first marriage and was taking courses. At one point I was given some information about questions. My memory was that some questions were easier to answer than others. I recall that What, When, Where and Who questions took a small amount of brain power to answer –let’s say 5 units. A How question took something like 25 units of brain power. And a Why or How Come question took over 500 units of brain power. To me this meant that anyone who asked a question was wanting me to put effort into the answer and Why questions involved a lot of effort. I remembered from childhood a neighbor girl who would say, “Why?” and I’d answer and she’d say “Why?” and I’d answer and she’d say “Why?” etc. It was exhausting. This started several fun experiments that focused on Why questions. For about a month, I didn’t answer Why questions that anyone asked. I would tell people, “I don’t answer Why questions.” When they would ask “Why?” I would respond with a shrug of the shoulders. This became boring for me after a while, so I began to respond with more clever answers. Looking at the clock I would say, “Sorry, I am not answering Why questions after 2:00 PM today.” Later I started giving out numbers to people who asked “Why?” I would say “Reason 16.” They would say, “What do you mean?” I would tell them that to make my life easier, I had numbered all my answers to Why questions and I am giving them my answer. They would ask “Why did you number your answers?” I would respond, “Reason 48.”

This was all fun and taught me a lot about not feeling pressured to automatically answer Why questions unless I chose to. But it also got me to focus on Why questions themselves and to learn what was going on that caused them to take so much energy.

Nasty Why Questions

I found that many Why questions were not very nice. People would be critical, angry or upset by something someone did. Instead of saying so, they would ask (with a tone of arrogance), “Why would you do that?” I found this was a sneaky question or actually not a question at all. It seemed more of an attack. It seemed to me of the form “How do you dare do that?”

I started calling this the Nasty Why, and I found many examples of this. People would say, “I don’t get it why you do that,” when they weren’t even trying to get it. Here are some more examples: “I don’t see how anyone could do that?” “Why did you do that? No one in their right mind would do that.” The clue was that the words were a question, but the tone was shaming and not followed up by attempts to learn Why. The most simple form was, “I don’t get it” followed by silence.

I get a kick out of the Nasty Why nowadays. Here someone is, faced with someone doing something that they don’t like, faced with that person’s differing view of reality being displayed, and not only do they not like it, they try to suggest that the person is defective because they are different. This is all about Emotional Symbiosis.

I think it important to filter out, and set aside, Nasty Why’s. They seem all about controlling.

Nice Why Questions

But there are lots of Why questions that are quite nice. What is going on with them? Well, I think it comes back to the issue of safety. People want to feel safe with each other. They can try to achieve this by controlling each other. I’ve learned that this doesn’t work in the long run.

The reliable way to relax or feel safe with another is to share Predictive Information. People relax in predictable situations. I can relax with you, if you seem predictable to me – no surprises. This seems all about intimacy (into-me-see) and becoming close. Thus people seek sharing of information that lets them predict what each is going to do next so that they can relax with each other. We ask about each other’s motives, the factors that lead us to do things, we ask “Why?,” so that we can relax. And the answer we seek, and relax when we hear it, is one that shows

enough factors so that we can predict behavior. By answering these questions you are creating safety for your partner. By withholding an answer to these questions you are increasing their unsafety – being a source of threat/danger to them. Nice Why Questions bring about closeness and safety for all.

Answers to Why Questions

So why are these questions so hard (remember 500 units of brain power) to answer? Well, the answer is in the numbers.

I once took a psychology course in Learning Theory. This course focused a lot on rats and mazes and why people or rats turned left or right in a maze. The professor wrote on the board a mathematical formula for a rat's decision. Now, I don't recall that formula exactly, but here is my memory of it.

$$\text{Action} = \text{sum of } (\text{factor}_1 \cdot \text{intensity}_1) + (\text{factor}_2 \cdot \text{intensity}_2) + (\text{factor}_3 \cdot \text{intensity}_3) + (\text{factor}_4 \cdot \text{intensity}_4) + (\text{factor}_5 \cdot \text{intensity}_5) \dots + (\text{factor}_n \cdot \text{intensity}_n)$$

The rat did something (turned right or left or stood still, etc) based on a series of factors, and the Action was the result of all factors added together. Each factor had an intensity all it's own. Theoretically there were a lot of factors. As she wrote the formula, she noted that no one knew the total number of factors and she indicated that by a series of dots and a last factor she called the n^{th} factor.

Now, what I got from this was that whatever we do it is the result of a long series of factors, some having more power and some less. And that our brains have no trouble putting all these factors together quickly in taking the indicated action.

I asked the teacher how many factors did she guess were involved with a rat's decision in a maze. She guessed perhaps 500. I asked how many she thought were involved in a person turning left as a traffic intersection. She guessed 20,000. Wow!

Now, I don't really care, nor I think did she, how many factors there are. What struck me was that when a person asked me "Why", I was faced with examining thousands and thousands of factors in me. And many of these factors I was not aware of, but which still fit to the formula of my action. And, I found, usually people seemed to want or have time for only a single answer. "But what they want is not possible," I thought. A short simple answer to a vastly complex situation! No wonder a Why question was difficult!

This was about the point in my life when I began to answer Nice Why questions using the phrase, "Some of the factors (reasons) are probably....." This was my way of letting my questioner face the awareness that I was complicated, I didn't know all about myself, and yet I could offer some reasons. (Note: for most people the word "reason" is used instead of the word "factor".) I also found that it was easier for me to get answers from people if I asked, "Could you share some of the reasons that lead you to do that?"

That mathematical formula for action was daunting for me, and has continued to amaze me. However, it is the underpinning for my definition of "sense."

All Behavior arises from within a person

One thing I've become comfortable with is that everything a person does, originates inside of them.

Obedience: No one ever does what they are told. Things are much more complicated than that. People choose to do what they do. And sometimes they choose to do what someone tells them to do. What I am told, what I hear you say, just becomes one of the factors in my actions. From this, I developed the comforting rule: [All people are chronically disobedient. Learn to Live with It.](#)

Ambivalence: Hesitancy or indecision just means that there are several strong factors that are in conflict with each other. This is common. "I don't know what to do." This phrase just says that there are several different voices inside. Some are saying, "Do it." Others are saying, "Don't do it." From this I developed the comforting rule: [If you don't know what to do, give voice to, and become friends with, the competing ideas inside your head. This is a start.](#)

Unknown/Unconscious: I believe that often times powerful factors are not in our awareness. We wonder, “Why did I do that?” Yet I am comfortable that those factors still exist and contribute to actions.

Example: for forty years I would become almost physically paralyzed when I came close to a dance floor. I didn’t understand my reaction. Yet it was extremely powerful. I could feel it. It was there. When I was 47, I recalled a terrifying event that occurred when I was seven years old. It was a moment when things were so bad I tried to commit suicide. The event occurred in a situation that looks exactly like a dance floor. As I realized, became aware of, this factor, I could see more of what contributed to my paralysis at a dance floor. I could now see how my reaction made sense. It had always made sense. I could now just see more of that/my sense.

All People Make Sense All Time

This is what I call the Diversity Principle: All People Make Sense All Time. I’ve found it a most useful tool. Let me state it several different ways.

- All people’s behavior arises directly, and logically, from the various active factors within them.
- If I do something, it is the result of all of who I am at that moment.
- Everything I do at all times is congruent with who I am at those times.
- No one is capable of being incongruent with the factors inside themselves.
- Whatever you do, it makes sense to you – your self.
- You may not be aware of some of your own important motives, but they are still there, operating inside of you.
- I’m sorry, but I don’t believe it possible for someone to not make sense.
- All people are valid all the time.

Turning Toward. Turning Away

One of the most critical factors in any relationship is the tendency toward getting to know you vs. the tendency to pull away from you. John Gottman, the great marriage researcher, suggests that you can predict divorce by measuring how often a couple turns away from each other and how often they turn toward each other.

Turn Away

A very common way to turn away is to judge another as making no sense. We tend to do that when someone shows that they do not conform to our ways. I think the power and danger of this is that it is trying to invalidate, or try to make “invalid,” or try to make a person feel defective, when they are currently just making sense that is different from ours.

I believe that all people, and especially children, are seeking comfort from others by asking “Do I make sense.” I think it is easy to doubt yourself and wonder if you are crazy. Parents often sow these seeds of doubt with vulnerable children by telling their sense-making child, “You don’t make sense.” Any way I can get rid of this habit of invalidation, I do it – in me or in others.

I think the problem is that our culture is a “control-freak” culture, bent on making people obedient. Conformity seems the general rule. Trying to make people doubt themselves is a way to control them. I believe this is simply a part of our inheritance of thousands of years of warfare among the many parts of our community. And it seems common for people in our culture to settle into one of two semi-peaceful, yet symbiotic, postures: those who tell other people how to think and be, and those who ask others how they should think or be. There are people who criticize and people who seek to be corrected. Years ago I wrote my paper on [Master/Slave](#) to set out my beliefs on this subject.

Turn Toward

On the other hand, the Diversity Principle makes for repeated opportunities to turn toward each other. Remember that when a person does something that does not conform with our way of thinking, they are doing something that

conforms with their way of thinking. They make sense in their way. This is an opportunity to turn toward them and discover other ways of seeing the world. This is always a chance to broaden your mind, broaden your experience. This is a chance for adventure. I see this as a chance to see the magnificence of the world reflected in another person's eyes.

I've found that there are two relationships in which this skill of turning toward is critical vital: parent-child relationships and intimate partner relationships. In the parent-child relationship I think the Diversity Principle is part of helping the child grow up, guiding it to self-esteem and self-responsibility. Turning away from a child, invalidating a vulnerable young person, to me is simply child abuse – it damages the child.

In an intimate partnership the skill seems to me absolutely essential in developing a long term close, passionate, and loving team. Turning away, trying to invalidate your partner, simply leads to either postponing happiness (maybe forever) or leads directly/eventually to divorce.

For me, the difference between a parent-child relationship and the adult relationship is that the child is vulnerable, has no strength to resist attempts at invalidating, and simply sustains damage. In the adult relationship, people can try to invalidate, but cannot accomplish it. Since all people make sense all the time.

PreValidating

I started using this word several years ago to describe the mind-set, the attitude, that people make sense before they open their mouths to tell you about it. At the time this seemed obvious to me, but seems to have been kind of radical thinking for many people I share it with. To me it is so simply an awareness of the life condition – the way it is. To me it is just a comfortable awareness of that formula at the beginning of this article. It leads me to an almost constant (unless I am tired) curiosity about the sense of “the other”.

- I watch people on TV and wonder “What is their sense that leads them to do that?”
- I listen to my lover, wondering and asking, “What leads you to do that? I know it makes sense to you.”
- I hear my friends speak, and wonder what is pushing them to do what they do?
- When a client says, “I don't know why I do that.” I respond with, “Well, it makes sense to you some how. Let's see if, together, we can figure it out.”
- When I work with one partner in a couple, they often tell me about the “bad behavior” of their partner. I respond, “Sure, that hurts you. And I wonder what they are up to? I wonder how their behavior, that hurts you, makes sense to them?”
- People complain that their partner won't talk. I respond, “Well, I've learned that people won't talk cuz they fear to talk. I wonder what you may do when they have talked that kicks them into fear?”
- People complain that their partner lies to them. I respond, “Wow. It sure feels safer to know what is going on. I've learned that people lie cuz it isn't safe for them to tell the truth. I wonder what you could do to make them feel safer?”

Validating

Validating is just the act of making a person feel understood. I've found it that one can make a big production about validating or it can be done by the smallest gesture. The bottom line is you've Validated them when they feel understood. To validate a person usually you have to understand them first.

To understand is to see or appreciate the factors, at least the major factors, that lead them to do what they do. I experience understanding as a kind of startle reaction – a little “ah hah.” They tell you about several of the factors leading to their behavior.

$(\text{factor}_1 \cdot \text{intensity}_1), (\text{factor}_2 \cdot \text{intensity}_2), (\text{factor}_3 \cdot \text{intensity}_3)$

In your mind, the pieces begin to “fall into place.” The startle reaction is the sound of the pieces, the factors, the reasons, falling into place in your head. Those pieces are or were in place inside the person you are trying to understand. Because of the Diversity Principle, I believe you can always understand anyone, if two other conditions are present: 1) they tell you, and 2) you listen. Pretty simple.

An easy way to understand Validating is the phrase “Bear witness to their sense.” All I have to do is show the speaker that I have grasped the factors in their sense and how they link. “Oh, I see. You were late because a) you started late, b) there was a lot of traffic, c) you’re tired so you don’t want to speed recklessly, d) you trusted that I would rather you be safe than be on time.” Now, that’s a pretty formal validation. Sometimes just saying, “I got it.” or “I see.” will do the job. The long formal form may be necessary, so be ready.

Remember the bottom line: you haven’t done it until they feel understood. And you always can, since they make sense all the time and if 1) they tell you, and 2) you listen.

Why is this important?

I call this situation of the habit of turning away, of invalidating, of telling other people that they don’t make sense, as a good idea run amok. The good idea is to relax. That is a good, a really good idea. I like it more and more as I get older. And the best way to relax with other people is to get Predictive Information – why did they do what they did and what are they going to do next. This really works.

However, the more commonly used method is to try to control others, to try to force conformity, to try to achieve agreement. I’ve found this doesn’t work in the long run and often is a pretty poor method in the short run. Yet it seems to be extremely common. And so we have the phrase, “You don’t make sense.” And we often hear this phrase and we even use this phrase.

If I am talking about people making sense, perhaps I’d better talk about what is the sense of people who say, “You don’t make sense.” From the point of view of the sender, I’ve found that people tend to mean one of three things when they say it.

1. I say “you don’t make sense” or “you don’t make sense to me” because I do not see the sense you **are making** - yet. You are making sense, but I don’t see it yet. This seems a very common usage. I think it might be nicer to say, “I don’t yet see your sense.”
2. I say “you don’t make sense” because I don’t like your sense. I think it kind of silly to suggest that another person is defective, that they don’t make sense, because I don’t like what they are doing. My liking or not liking their action doesn’t effect their sense. But if I don’t like their sense, I might want to punish them, by invalidating them. Here we go with the control issue.
3. I say “you don’t make sense” because you do not make my sense, because you do not conform to my way. This one seems to me to be blatantly an attempt to control.

And this doesn’t work to help people relax. People who are treated this way tend to pull away or “go underground” and not share their sense. Thus they become less understood, more unpredictable and less a source of safety.

From the view point of the listener, the one who hears that phrase “You don’t make sense” something pretty awful is happening. A listener is being told they are defective, broken, wrong. This can affirm or build any doubts the listener has about themselves. This tends to undermine self-esteem and even integrity at the very point where they, the listener, is demonstrating their selfhood or integrity. When this is done to a child, I think it is a form of child abuse. A child’s brain needs to be supported as it develops. Telling that child that their sense doesn’t exist or is defective damages this development.

Conversely, I’ve found that turning toward a person or child, seeking so understand the understandable sense of another, affirms and builds integrity and self-esteem. It is at the same time a great way to get to relax by getting predictable information.

Finding Your Sense

So how do you discover your own sense, so that later you can share it? This is a common question. “Why do I do what I do?” I’ll share some thoughts on this subject.

First, we need others in order to find our sense. We need people who are interested and who are curious. We need people to share our sense with. And we need people who are different from us, from whom we are different, so that our sense is unique in a relationship. I often say, “We need a good audience.” People who will sit on the edge of their chairs waiting for us to reveal ourselves: the factors that lead us to do what we do. I’ve found that a person can do some self-discovery when they are alone, but I think it will be in a kind of rehearsal mode – getting prepared to share. The other side of needing a good audience is that feeling of wanting someone to understand us.

Second, let me talk about the four sources of the factors in our sense.

1. Our left brain (true for most people) is a wonderful logical machine. It follows steps. Very much like a large computer, it seems to be saying $A + B = C$. People who appeal to logic often tend to be very comfortable with the way this side of their brain works. Several of the factors in our sense clearly arise from our left brains. These factors often have a tone of logical deduction.
2. We are an emotional creature. In our bodies there are lots of chemically driven feelings. These feelings are triggered by thoughts and symbols and the chemicals alter the actions of our brains. About 10 years ago I learned that different emotions result in different memories being available. If I am angry, the factors in my left brain change radically, because different memories are available than when I am happy. This is one of the reasons that I try to not solve problems when I am angry or fearful. My computer, that left brain, is kind of scrambled when I am full of those emotions. Some of the factors in my sense relate to the feelings I am having and their intensity and they way they shift my thinking.
3. Our right brain tends to seem like a vast number of little computers that all vote. The right brain seems to be the seat of hunches, guesses, intuitions, and tendencies. “I’m leaning toward that idea,” is a right brain effect. “I feel certain about this,” is another right brain idea. I like to think that the right brain contributes several thousand factors, usually of fairly low intensity. But sometimes they add up to a big factor. “It just feels wrong! I don’t know why. I ain’t going to do it.”
4. The memories we have and that we do not remember are an enormous factor. This is made much worse by the emotion of fear. Fear triggers many many memories that we cannot recall. In childhood, up until age 12 or so, memories of very scary events are stored in a way that keeps us from thinking about them. And yet these memories are always available to us when we become fearful. Thus in any tense situation, many factors of our sense are “scary memories” almost always very intense, of which we are unaware. These factors may dominate current behavior – and puzzle us and our partner. Oftentimes as an adult these scary memories will surface. I gave an example of my 7 year-old attempt at suicide. I have seen many many of these. Check out my paper on Safety and the Lizard for more material on this.

Looking for your sense begins with “knowing that it is there.” A couple of useful questions to start with. How long have you been doing this thing? When did you first do it? What was it like then? Where in your body do you feel tension when this happens? When was the first time you recall feeling that tension?

Good luck.