

It Takes One to Know One: Counseling Needs of, and Suggestions for, Visual-Spatial Learners

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It's March 3rd. This article was originally due March 1st. The deadline was extended until today, thank God, but still I wonder if I'll finish it on time. I find myself out of communication with my advisor so that I can't get any of my last minute questions answered. I reference a familiar childhood feeling rising in my gut. That feeling was a regular visitor on Sunday afternoons at Yankee Stadium, during the fourth quarter of New York Giant football games. I felt it while playing with friends on other Sunday afternoons. "I haven't done my homework and there's not much time left," I thought. I tried to push the thought out of my mind and concentrate on the game. Unfortunately the burden of unfinished homework had taken the joy out of my play. "What a drag!"

I'm a visual-spatial learner. In my capacity as staff counselor at the Gifted Development Center in Denver, Colorado, I have been counseling other visual-spatial learners (VSLs) for more than twenty years. Now, one might reasonably judge this as a case of "the blind leading the blind." I prefer, however, to describe it as a case of "the visionary leading the visionary," an interpretation that is more empowering to me and to my clients. The latter framework has allowed me to take a regular and painful experience from my childhood and use it to help my deadline-challenged, visual-spatial clients feel understood. Letting these clients know that they are understood, and that their patterns of thinking and acting are understood and make sense, form the foundation of effectively being able to serve their needs.

The counseling issues that arise out of visual-spatial learning patterns primarily center around negative self image, the wounding of feeling judged "less than" or different and the frustrations of being unable to perform at the level of their intelligence or the level of other people's expectations. There are also educational issues that, ideally, are responded to by teachers and learning specialists, in the schools, who understand the challenges and strengths of visual-spatial learners. Over the last two decades, however, I have been called on to address the educational side, because the level of awareness that is required to respond to this population in schools has not quite matched the need. I am optimistic that this is improving as we speak. Since there are other writers who are covering the educational focus in this magazine, I will confine my comments to the counseling needs of this population.

Negative self image, feelings of being judged, alienation, frustration, resignation and hopelessness are among the painful feeling states that result from visual-spatial learners struggling in auditory-sequential systems. This is often compounded at home, by well-meaning parents endeavoring to enhance their children's success, and by competing with siblings who may not be similarly challenged. The wounding experiences that produce these feelings tend to occur almost daily, over many years.

Some VSLs have auditory-sequential strengths. Others find themselves with a mix of strengths and weaknesses. For me, deadlines turned into dreadlines. Last minute panics and all-nighters were part of education for me. A second feature of my learning style that worked against me in school is what I would now describe as making intuitive leaps. From 1st to 6th grade I received negative marks on every report card for—Gasp!—“Jumping to conclusions without the adequate evidence.” I laugh today, but as a highly motivated elementary school boy I was extremely frustrated. Try as I might, I could never figure out how NOT to jump to conclusions. Nor did I have the moxie to ask, “Adequate for whom?” And no one told me to trust my intuition. A further irritation was that strange request, “Show your work.” If I got the answer (which I usually did), why did they care (which they usually did)? Often I wasn’t sure how I got my answers.

These attacks on my peace of mind were compounded by a father who tried to spur me to greatness with comments like, “A 90? Why can’t you get 10 lousy points on an exam?” While I was blessed with knowing that my parents loved me, I left their home with the core belief that I just wasn’t good enough, along with the need to do something about it.

Prevention, healing and growth

There are three general areas to be addressed in responding to the counseling needs of visual-spatial learners: *preventive*, *healing* and *growth*.

By *preventive*, I am probably addressing the parents and teachers of preschool and Kindergarten through first or possibly second grade students. If parents or teachers can identify their students’ visual-spatial learning styles and avert the kinds of problems they might otherwise face, a great service will have been performed. As parents’ concerns are being addressed in another article, I will limit my comments to three broad suggestions: First, education, such as is offered in this magazine and *Upside-Down Brilliance* (Silverman, 2002); Second, inviting children’s teachers to do the same, possibly by putting these resources in the teachers’ hands to make it easy for them to access; Third, learning and using the available powerful and effective listening skills of mirroring, validating and empathizing to support their children and help them to process their feelings and experiences. *Raising Cooperative and Self-Confident Children* (Beauvoir, 1997) is an easily readable and excellent resource for acquiring these skills. Preventive measures might similarly be taken by school personnel, who could pass this information on to parents.

By *healing*, I am referring to meeting internal psychological or developmental needs that were not met earlier. The wounds experienced by visual-spatial learners revolve primarily around not feeling competent and effective and with not feeling that “I am ok the way I am.” While the needs for the feelings of competence, effectiveness and “ok-ness” is life long, developmentally those needs become particularly important between the ages of four and seven. Those are the ages when children naturally develop their sense of competence. And these are the first years of school, when visual-spatial

learners tend to get the messages that they aren't doing it correctly or fast enough and that something clearly or vaguely is wrong with them.

Giving the Love that Heals (Hendrix, 1997) offers a clear and insightful description of developmental needs and the wounds that often result when these needs are not fully met. Hendrix also informs us of how the tendency for wounds that parents had received gets expressed with children, and how the process can be dealt with so that healing takes place for children and parents.

Healing, then, is a two-fold process. One aspect is to help individuals understand and to validate the pain that they experienced when they got messages that denied their competence and sense of being ok. Having a safe space and caring support to move through these feelings is healing. The second aspect will be corrective. It will provide the needed reflection and validation of competence that the individuals would have benefited from receiving in the first place. And since the negative messages were most probably delivered multiple times, over years, these will be conversations worth having a number of times, remembering numerous incidents. A safe space, time for completion and a willingness to be really present and open during these conversations are important.

The question arises as to who might be best suited to have these healing conversations. My understanding is that healing occurs most easily in an environment where there is commitment, time, understanding, skill and intimacy. Therefore, my first choice would be for these conversations to occur in the family. Theoretically, a parent will have the most commitment, time and intimacy. The understanding can arise from the parent being a visual-spatial learner and reading these articles. *Upside-Down Brilliance* (Silverman, 2002) provides an extraordinary natural resource for these families. The superb listening skills taught by Francine Beauvoir (1997) and Harville Hendrix (1997) will help parents understand their child's particular experience, let the child know that he or she is being understood and validate the child's experience.

If, for whatever reason, it is not possible for a parent to have these conversations, then a counselor might be the best choice. It is helpful for this person to understand the issues and to be empathetic. For the child to be open and vulnerable to sharing, he or she must feel safe and feel understood. Without that basis, healing is more difficult.

School personnel are already interacting with this population. Everyone who relates to a child is a potential healer. I recognize that many teachers, counselors, psychologists and principals are already stretched. I do believe, however, that by availing themselves of the understanding and skills from the resources I have suggested, the effectiveness of, and satisfaction derived from, their work will clearly increase.

And it is worth noting that, for some people, this healing comes later in life, through the understanding, empathy and love of a partner. I have seen instances where a child's difficulties have reactivated the memories of one or both parents and a healing emerges for several family members. Healing for one is a metaphor for the other.

By *growth*, in contrast to healing, I am referring to the modification of character adaptations that were developed in response to wounds that went unattended. To protect oneself from pain, each individual formulates generally unconscious strategies of self-defense, a kind of private Homeland Security. Depending on an innate preference for either contracting or expanding in the face of stress or perceived danger, an individual will develop a particular style of dealing with repeated pain. One child will withdraw, or hide, or try to minimize her difficulties. Another may act out overtly, rebelling in chosen ways at school and at home. Feeling angry and helpless, and not having a healthy way to digest these feelings, one might become depressed. Another will adopt an attitude of simply not caring. Ditching school may become an option for a student. A child might try desperately, at all costs, to figure out and do what seems right. As in my own story, a counter-productive core belief may develop in response to wounds. The list goes on.

Obviously, each of these adaptations has its negative side effects, which will, eventually, cause considerable difficulties. Left unaddressed, these behaviors can continue to be expressed, in some individuals, well into adulthood. Some people spend their lives reacting to school-age wounds, without dealing with the underlying issues. Our hope, of course, is to take a more proactive and creative approach, and to act as early as possible. In fact, one goal of our work is to use the knowledge base about visual-spatial learners to impact the understanding and methods of the educational system in a way that effectively eliminates the wounding of this population.

Growth work does not require the same level of commitment, time and intimacy as healing work. Counseling is often very effective in assisting growth—provided the clients are motivated. I add that caveat knowing that youngsters, particularly teenagers, who come into counseling because their parents are motivated, rather than themselves, get much less from the process. Consequently, I let clients know, during our initial meeting, that I will only work with them if they want to work with me. I give them up to three sessions to check me out and, if they don't know by then that they will benefit from our work, I suggest they find someone else with whom they want to work. I have found that giving teenagers the power to choose a counselor eases their willingness to access their own motivation.

The specific growth work that is embarked on relates directly to the goals of the clients and the character adaptations they have developed. I have found, however, that certain attitudes and practices by this clinician, in addition to certain ideas and personal practices for my clients, have been most useful for a wide range of my clients. For the purposes of this article, I will sketch a few broad strokes about process, leaving content and in-depth detail aside.

The process of counseling

Helping the client, or student, or one's child, to feel *safe* is the prerequisite for assisting any growth and change. The feeling of safety is greatly enhanced when one knows that she is truly being heard, that she is being understood and that her thoughts and

feelings make sense. If one's thoughts or feelings are being in any way questioned or invalidated, one will naturally feel attacked and will defend one's established position. One's words are precious. One's feelings are precious. They are the place we need to begin—to begin hearing, to begin validating and to empathize with. Only after sufficient time bathing in this experience will one feel safe enough to begin to consider other possibilities. The safety must come first.

At a point that feels safe, it can be helpful to introduce the concept of being a witness or observer of thoughts and feelings. Unguided, and without questioning it, most people naturally identify with their thoughts and feelings. While we clearly always experience our thoughts and feelings, they are not actually who we are. Learning to be the witness of thoughts and feelings, while not denying the experience, can have a most liberating effect (Tolle, 1999). This understanding, and the practice that might develop from it, can free individuals to make new choices, without judging or blaming.

A brief note here: Judging, blaming, and criticizing are rarely, if ever, helpful. They decrease safety and increase defensiveness, hardly the outcomes we had hoped for.

I want to say a little about “meaning.” By our very human nature, we are always making meaning of our experience. Something happens and we assign a meaning to it. Most of us have learned to make our meaning *reactively*—that is, in reaction to our past experiences and learning. One of the most important things I have learned is that “We give everything the meaning it has for us.” Meaning is not absolute, assigned from on-high or from the world outside. We decide, consciously or unconsciously, what each and every experience will mean to us. We are free to choose what an experience means, to us and for us. We are free to choose our interpretations. And we are free to choose again what something has meant, free to choose again our interpretation.

I invite clients, actually all the people I care about, to explore this possibility. If we are free to choose what something means for us, then we can choose *proactively*, that is, aligned with the experience that we wish to have. If our wish is to have peace, then we can choose peaceful meanings and interpretations. Likewise, if our aim is to feel guilty, then we can choose guilt-ridden interpretations. The interpretations or meanings need to be within the range of credibility for us. Within that range, however, there is generally a wide range of reasonable choice. This ability to choose how we interpret and make meaning of our experience is freeing and empowering. It provides a way for gaining control over our experience, even when we cannot control the outer world. And young people are eager for ideas and skills that offer a measure of control.

In assisting growth, this concept has great potential. In terms of visual-spatial learners, once they have been able to safely move through their feelings and have had their whole experience validated, they may be open to discovering new and helpful meanings for what they went through. What once was a wound may actually become a resource, for themselves and perhaps for others. When the safe and validating foundation has been laid, young people often are able to recognize the power and freedom of this possibility. The way home is frequently found through choosing again.

The last stroke I will offer is a simple, non-Freudian map of the mind that I offer my clients. This map claims that there are three aspects of our minds that are worth learning about. The first is a part of us that believes that we are separate—separate from each other, separate from the planet, separate from God, if there is one. This part of our mind uses the feelings of fear, guilt, and judgment to substantiate the experience of being separate. If we reference it with our attention, this part of our mind is available, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to prove that we are, indeed, separate. The voice of this part of the mind is ever ready and seeking our attention.

A second part of our mind knows that we are joined—joined with each other, joined with the planet, joined with God. This part of our mind uses the feelings of love, forgiveness, peace and acceptance to validate the experience of being joined. Likewise, if we reference it with our attention, this part is available, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to prove that we are indeed joined. The voice of this part of our mind is ever ready and available for our invitation for its counsel.

And then there is a third part of our mind that is a decision-maker. It decides which part of our mind, which voice, we will listen to. Many of us have been trained to identify with the separate part of our mind, with the voice of separation, and we think that voice is our voice. And so it seems. I believe, however, that it is helpful to realize that, here too, we have choice. We can learn to identify with the decision-making part of our mind. And from it, we can choose which part of our mind to listen to, we can choose *which voice to reference*. For myself, I notice that it is often the voice of separation that speaks first in my mind. But if I ask to be shown another way to see it, if I ask for a more peaceful interpretation, I get a helpful way of seeing, a gentler, kinder voice. It may take some practice to see and listen in this way. But when I explain all this to children, they seem to get it.

As I approach the end of this article, I realize that I never commented on “It Takes One to Know One.” A reasonable interpretation might have been that it takes a visual-spatial learner to know a visual-spatial learner and that was the meaning I started this article with. However in writing this article, I’ve seen a different meaning. In truth, *it takes one* person who is willing to take the time to educate him- or herself, to listen exquisitely, to validate and have empathy *to know one* visual-spatial learner.

And now it’s March 4th. Another deadline extension and I’m not late at all. I’m not even going to lose any credit. And it wasn’t a drag. I loved writing this article. I had great fun. Evidently, I’ve learned to choose again. And if it serves your purposes, may you and yours do the same.

References

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