

# What do you mean?

Guidance for communicating with humans

By

Brian de Francesca

## **What do you mean?**

This book is dedicated to my children - thanks for giving me purpose for being; and to my wife – who is slowly teaching me how to be a better communicator – thanks for your patience. I love you.

## What do you mean?

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## **What do you mean?**

### **I Promise**

This book is written to help you avoid unnecessary pain in your life and waste less time as well. I believe these are important and valuable goals, which is why I am writing this for us. Yes, “us.” I am writing it for me to help clarify my thoughts, and for you – because I care.

With each moment that passes, we get closer to death, thus our time becomes rarer and more valuable. This is the sad economics of time. We should strive to not waste our finite and precious time on this planet and avoid either causing or receiving pain when possible. I promise you – what I have written here provides very specific guidance on how to achieve those two important life goals. This may be one of the most important things you will ever read.

## What do you mean?

### The Point

I have worked for several years in and with Hospitals. If the hospital does not function properly, people who should have lived, will die. Every day I need to identify problems, find their causes and make changes. I cannot fix a problem if I do not know what is causing the problem. The problems fall into two categories: waste and pain. We waste lot - time, money, space – lots of waste; and there is also much emotional and psychological pain – frustration. Waste and Pain are my enemies.

For years, I have had to search and discover the root causes of wasted time and resources, and the emotional pain, frustration and general unhappiness of our patients and staff.

I have had many years to work on this, in many countries, with thousands of different people and situations. In all of these situations, I have found one consistently common cause of a tremendous amount of waste and emotional and psychological troubles: **when others are speaking, presenting and writing to us – quite often we do not fully understand what they mean; and we don't ask them for clarification.** Over the years, I have found this not only applies to my work life – but to my personal life as well. We rarely ask people to clearly explain what they mean. This is not a minor problem – It is one of the greatest challenges to humanity. How can we improve our world, societies, relationships and more – if we are not able to communicate effectively? We can't.

We often make important decisions and take action based on what other people “say” – believing the “meaning” or “intention” of what they say is the same as ours; very often – we are wrong – we mean different things, have different expectations and/or motivations. We use the same words but have different meanings for those words – sometimes resulting in pain to one or both parties and/or wasting our precious time.

This book contains many more questions than answers. In fact, my intention is to inspire you to ask more questions and to be more specific

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and thoughtful in the clarity of your communication with others. (No matter what you think, you do not do this enough. You are not a good communicator and neither am I. Let us improve).

I have field tested and verified the concepts in this book around the world – in airports from Abu Dhabi to New York; bars and board rooms from Bangkok to Baltimore – I have found the concepts included in this book consistently applicable across regions, cultures, ages and economic status. Simply put – this is the Real Deal. It is a tool you can use to make your life better today. These are not Secrets, great discoveries, revealed trends or the result of 10,000 hours of analysis of pie charts and bar graphs. What follows is a thoughtful synthesis of a lot of experience and observation that I know will help you.

- // -

A few days ago - I was flopped poolside at the Al Ain Rugby Club here in Abu Dhabi, listening to music and reading. There were several children racing around the outside of the pool. As three small speeders passed by - I suggested they may want to slow down – warning that they may slip and smash their heads on the ground. They kept running. They passed again. I again popped out my headphones and gave my same warning. Again they ignored me and sped along.

I have kids and hate when they get hurt; I hate when any child gets hurt. I was attempting to warn them – because I care about kids. Finally, one of the little racers slipped and flat backed onto the concrete – stunned, bruised but luckily neither the concrete nor his head split open. The racing stopped; the fall could have been avoided. I had warned him.

I learned of this poolside risk a few months ago. We live in the desert, where a thin layer of sand-dust accumulates on the surface area around the pool (and everything). If you combine this layer of sand-dust with swiftly traveling wet footed persons of lower body weight (kids) – you soon have a hydroplaning human. This happened to me – but my greater weight (I am working on that) and slower walking speed kept me to no more than a comical awkward slip and embarrassing wobble – but I did not fall as did the small speedster. So when seeing him, I tried to warn him by sharing my experience.

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It has been said, and I believe, an idiot does not learn from his mistakes, an intelligent person learns from his mistakes and a genius learns from the mistakes of others. This young man had the chance to learn from my mistakes – but he did not.

What I am sharing with you in this book, I have learned from decades of different experiences from all over the world. Let's call these experiences "experiments" from which I am now sharing some of my findings with you. For example, walk slowly around the poolside in the desert.

It does not matter how old you are, there are young persons with a tremendous variety of experience and older persons who have experienced very little in their lives; I have had the good fortune to make many different types of mistakes in various places here and there. Fortunately, I have learned a lot from these "experiments" and wish to share this learning with you, as I wished to help the young poolside speeders. It is unfortunate that I was speaking English to children who only spoke Arabic.

Thank you for joining me on the revolution toward clarity and specificity. I sat up late into the evenings writing this, investing pieces of my life, because I know it will change your life for the better.

Brian de Francesca  
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates 2008

**What do you mean?**

## **Wars and Divorces**

**I love you ...**

**I love you too ...**

These few words:

Said too soon

Said too often

Said with differing meanings...

can hurt you and others and certainly waste time. Assuming you don't get a kick out of pain or wasting away your life, please read on.

Lack of clarity and speaking specifically, often results in avoidable pain (emotional, psychological, and physical) and/or wasted time, which as said a few pages ago, becomes increasingly more valuable with each passing moment.

This is not a book about love. I am only using the Love word as an example. The need to be clear and specific applies any word or phrase that we use to communicate between humans (hate, success, pain, late, trust, close, far etc.)

It is very likely that two persons using the same words do not have the same meaning, motivations, or expectations. This is the big point. Wars and divorces often occur because of this reality. It is likely that this is happening to you every day, even as you are reading this book. When people speak about something that is important to you or upon which you will make decisions or take actions, to ensure understanding, you need to ask them what they mean. It is very ok to ask people what they mean – you will not look stupid.

Asking people what they mean is a great tool. It unlocks doors, expands dialogue, and deepens understanding. It is powerful, but you



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may not believe it or know until you try. **When is the last time that anyone has cared enough about you to ask you to explain more about what you were saying to them?**

## **Don't be an ass**

When someone is speaking to you, if you assume that you fully know what they mean, you are possibly wrong.

If you assume that they know what THEY mean, you are probably wrong.

If you assume that you both mean the same thing, you are more than likely very wrong.

It is rare when both persons have a clear understanding of what they actually are saying and hearing – and rarer when their meanings are even closely the same.

When I speak, I assume you know what I mean; and you assume that you know what I mean. There a lot of assumptions.

I was told many years ago that when you assume, you make an ASS out of U and ME (ASS-U-ME). Don't assume. Seek clarity – don't be an ass.

My kids say, "I love you dad," and then I ask them, "What do you mean?" They think, we talk, share and learn together – we are closer. We care.

## **Sex (the prequel)**

When a 17 year old boy is panting, sweating and begging out 'I Looooove you' to his 15 year old girlfriend in the grassy field behind the school – he means it. Really.

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But what is the “it” that he means? What is his definition of love, at that specific moment in time? And what is Little Miss Grassy Bottom hearing? [I know we need condoms now, not dictionaries. That is why this book is written. By condom time, it is too late for reason.]

The ‘I love you’ that she hears, interprets and responds to – probably has a different definition than the, ‘I love you’ that his testosterone has composed.

Same words – different meanings.

## Sex (the sequel)

HIS definition of LOVE (if he is aware of it) may be: *I love you (now) but I can also love more than one person at the same time (I have a whole lotta love to share) and this love may last until such time as I meet someone that I love more than you. I consider myself as the most important being in my life and would not put your interest before mine. (This is not selfish – it is simply my definition of love and I assume that yours is pretty much the same as mine).*

HER definition of LOVE (if she is aware of it) may be: *I love you now and believe I will love you forever – if not longer; I want no one else and expect that you will also be loyal and faithful to me. Our love will stand the test of time and I will put your interests before mine. I would give my life for yours if necessary.*

Now let’s get a few things out of the way here. You can swap the HIS and HER around if you want and in fact make it HIS and HIS, or HER and HER if you want. That is NOT the point here. I am not at all trying to portray guys as callous, loveless, testosterone driven beasts (any more than they actually are) or women as overly romantic, wimpy, naïve simpletons. So if you find yourself getting too stuck here on this point, please get over it. We have more important ground to cover.

The point in this example is Mr. Testosterous has a significantly different definition of love than does little Ms. Harlequin Novels. And it is likely that both of them are about to make decisions and actions that they may later really, really regret.

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Far be it from me to want to interrupt a good adolescent romp with a semantics lesson, but a simple, “What do you mean?” has a hell of a lot of long term value.

“I love you....”

Pause...”Hmmm...What do you mean?”

Welcome to the revolution.

## **Please**

You need to clarify what other people mean when they say important things to you. By ‘them’, I mean anyone who is attempting to communicate with you via any medium. If it is important, you need to ask them what they mean.

When asking, please don’t be obnoxious and a person of a thousand what’s and whys. You must be very sincere when asking people to define what they mean.

Try not to make them feel you are interrogating them or attempting to make them look thoughtless or stupid. You need to clearly state that what they are saying is important to you, and that you want to make sure that you clearly understand what they mean (read this again).

When you ask, please be careful to let them explain what they mean BEFORE you share your thoughts on what you thought they meant or what your definitions are. Otherwise, they may simply say, “Yup, that is what I meant”, when in fact, they did not and do not. They may not know what they meant, and simply accept your meaning in order to please you or to avoid looking stupid. Or their definition may have been different from yours, but they agreed with yours to make you happy or mislead you. Let them speak first.

You should ask only if you really care, which may be rarer than you think. We interact with humans a lot. How much of that dialogue is

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actually meaningful and valuable, and how much of it is just wasteful. Much of the wasteful dialogue is unavoidable, but I would argue that of all the listening and talking that we do, there is some significant percentage that we could do without, and quite frankly don't sincerely care about. Ask when you care and need to know more.

When you ask for clarity, it is ok for either of you to not know what you mean. But it is very important to **know** that you do not know.

## The Pot and the Black Kettle

I am talking a lot about getting THEM to define what they are saying, but what about you?

When you speak, do you truly know what thoughts and ideas you intend to convey when you use certain important words and phrases? How often do we all say things that if pressed to provide a clear definition and explanation, we would be at a loss for words?

Specifically, what do you mean when you tell a parent that you love them? (Feel free to write this down) How about a dog? A food? A place (oh I LOVE this place). What do you really mean? Do you genuinely know? Have you thought about it? Now is a good time to start.

Yes – you do need to expect and help others to define their terms since this is in everyone's best interest, but you also need to define yours – both with the person from whom you are seeking clarity, and in all cases, when you are speaking with others. Remember – when you speak to another person, they may be hearing something different than what you are saying (or emailing, faxing or whatever.) So how can you know if your definitions are different if you have never thought about what you mean by important words such as love, hate, trust, success, pain, afraid, near, close, far, etc.?

It is said that before you can truly love others, you must first be able to love yourself; equally true is that before you can ask others to define “what they mean?” you must first ask yourself.

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You need to know what you mean for two reasons. First, so you can compare the meanings of others to yours. Second, so when you use words of importance, you know exactly what you are saying and why.

## **Spare change for Einstein...**

- ❖ Are definitions relative to the situation?
- ❖ Can definitions adapt and change over time?
- ❖ Are definitions variable based on their context?

These are all important thoughts to consider. My eldest son is 9 years old. When he says that he hates someone, I know that means that he won't play with that person for at least 2 hours; however, when he is 16 years old, that "hate" may have a much more serious and potentially dangerous meaning...when does that change in definition occur? Will he realize it when the change occurs? Will I?

As we age, learn, experience and mature, it is natural for our definitions to change. What if your definitions change, but you fail to inform the persons you are communicating with that you now mean something different than you did before? Can this happen?

Your meaning of what you are saying may have changed, and you may not even realize it has. At what point does a childish and innocent, 'I love you' spoken by a young boy morph into a binding oral contract between two persons? I don't know.

## **Interlude**

We are roughly at the halfway point of the book. How are we doing? I am well. I have learned a lot getting us this far.

This book is not just about "defining terms." It is about knowing and understanding what the other person means and what you mean, then comparing the two for alignment, disconnect. And then, and only then

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deciding and taking action on what they are saying. Not before. It is about being brave enough to ask people to explain what they mean.

Why don't we ask people what they mean?

We tend not to do this.

Most of us are afraid to do this. Why?

Why are we so afraid to ask questions? It starts when we are in grade school, and we get stuck there. We sit there in the high school algebra class – clueless, but not asking the teacher to explain? Because we don't want the other kids (who are also clueless) to think we are stupid; or we don't want to be the only one asking questions, because we will be the “odd ball,” or maybe we don't even know what to ask or how to ask it – so we sit silently, and end up in summer school.

And now decades later, I sit in weekly meetings with groups of hospital executives. At almost every meeting, the CEO uses a word or phrase that I am certain most of my colleagues do not understand. For example, a few weeks ago, he was talking about finance and that we are reporting based on accrual basis not a cash basis – and everyone was nodding their heads like sheep in the field – I asked him to explain the difference between accrual and cash basis accounting. After the meeting, four of our executives thanked me for asking the CEO to explain because they were totally lost.

When the advertisement says “low fat”, what is that exactly? What about “new and improved?” What do THEY mean? Do you know? Do you ask?

## **Are we stupid?**

Sometimes you will hear words that you may not know the meaning of, or have even heard of. When this happens, it is not that you have different meanings from someone else – you simply do not know the word or its meaning. Most people pretend to know the meaning, and rarely ask – ever. Probably because they are concerned they will look

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stupid. The real truth is that **stupid people don't ask questions; intelligent people always ask questions and seek clarity.**

I ask more now than I did when I was younger. It keeps the conversation alive and most of the time, the person using the word is not fully clear on what it means either. In fact, it has become fun and interesting to ask people to help educate me. I am learning a lot by asking for explanation and clarity. I am not worried about appearing dumb. I accept that we are all basically unknowing and learning. Regardless of how smart we think we are – there is always a lot more out there that we do not know – than what we do know – or ever will.

If someone uses a word or phrase that you are not familiar with, you will be doing both of you a favor if you simply say: “I do not know what that means?” You can make a slight joke of it to get by, saying something like – “I was not programmed with the meaning of that word at my hatching – can you please explain it to me?”

Accept that we know a lot less than there is to know, we are all basically ignorant about most things – so it is ok to ask. Scientists ask, explorers ask, you can ask - and should.

## Brain Freeze

A few months ago I heard my kids saying a funny rhyme: "Girls go to college to get more knowledge; boys go to Jupiter to get more stupider." I don't think we really need to go anywhere to get stupider. We appear to be doing a dandy job of that by staying put right here on Earth. Somewhere along the line between birth and death, we stop proactively learning.

Soon after we are born, we start asking a lot of questions. What, where, how and why...why...why? And then we mature and eventually stop asking. Why?

Kids ask, Adults don't. Why not?

Why do we stop asking and when does it happen? I don't know – but I know it is not a good thing.

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Kids are continually asking questions because they need to. They need to learn in order to survive. But somehow our ability or desire to ask gets broken. Does our brain just assume that we know it all, or know enough to stay out from in front of trains and rabid school teachers?

Why does my boss rarely ask, "what does that mean?" when I know damned well that he does not know what "it" means? Sometimes I am tempted to put in made up words in the papers I write, words like - transgaliance, whoruptetude and convilience - to see if anyone asks me "what does that mean?"

We learn a lot by asking. Ipso facto – if we stop asking – then we retard our learning and our brains atrophy into boring adulthood. Do the schools do it to us? Our peers? Our families? Are we overloaded with too much force fed data...so we don't want to invite additional cramming?

Learning is partially about sitting in classes and reading text books, but it is also about asking questions, and lots of them. Listening is not enough – you must ask. What good is listening if people are not clear, or you are not clear? Ask people "what do you mean?" – often. Thaw out your brain, ask some questions; I guarantee that you will be persnerzed and cadcheezled if you do.

## **I love you**

I do apologize for getting back on this horse again, but this is a phrase that has caused a mountain of trouble for countless people. We could replace it with other phrases such as "the house is close" or "I hate you" but this "I love you thing" really rings a lot of bells.

What is your definition of LOVE? What do you mean when you say "I love you?" What do you think other people think when they say it? Does your definition differ when you say it to a lover, parent, child, friend – or about a place, food, pair of shoes or sport? Probably.



## **What do you mean?**

Take a moment to reality check this. Get out a paper and pencil (I like the feel of writing with pencils) and write down your various definitions of love. How many do you have?

You probably have a different “love” for a parent, place, friend, sibling, spouse, idea, thing, cause...

What is love not? Is your love a noun, verb or both?

How do I love thee...let me count the ways....

## **Maybe Baby**

Just give this some thought.

Maybe the other person does not have a clear definition of what they mean when they are speaking with you. Hard to believe, but trust me, it happens – a lot.

Maybe they are not telling you the truth about what they mean. Sometimes people do not tell the truth because they don't want to, or they can't.

Maybe their definition of what they mean will change and they will not tell you, or even realize their definition has changed.

Maybe yours has changed, and you did not realize it was gradually happening.

Maybe you will not like or agree with their explanation of what they mean.

Maybe.

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### Wanting, expectations and projection

When someone speaks to you - Do you hear what you want to hear? When some one says “we may go shopping soon,” do you hear “we will go shopping tomorrow” when they may mean “maybe sometime next week?”

Or do you hear what you “expect” to hear. If you fully expect them to have a certain opinion about something, or be a *certain way* – does that effect what you hear?

If your opinion of someone is negative, do you color everything that comes out of their mouth as having a negative or evil meaning? You may do this and not know you are doing it. The opposite holds true. If your image of someone is that they are a good and wholesome person, then you may hear all they say as positive and good meaning – when in fact it may not be.

You may project definitions to words based on what you know and are familiar with, and thus comfortable accepting. You simply may not *hear* something that is different from what you *know* to be true. For example - if I start talking to you about the moon and the stars and then get to the point where I mention the eight planets of the solar system revolving around the sun, you may simply let the conversation run, having heard the nine that your mind has been programmed to hear for many years – missing the fact that poor Pluto is no longer a planet (this is assuming that you do not already know this sad fact).

## **What do you mean?**

### **You hear as you are**

If I say “I will take this book” a good and honest person may hear, “I intend to buy this book, borrow this book, or simply take it down from my own bookshelf to read it; while an evil and dishonest person may hear of my intention to steal the book.

Do good people bias what they hear towards goodness, evil people towards evil, sad people towards sadness? If I tell a sad person “it was cold inside” maybe he thinks I did not like it because cold is like a crypt and like death; when in fact, it was very hot outside and I was so happy that it was cold inside.

Also, many times we just hear what we want to hear somehow magically ignore the rest. Sometimes we simply and honestly do not hear, or are not paying attention because they are distracted or forget what was said (who me?).

### **Pencil time**

I read many books and when they include tests, questions or whatever, I rarely fill them in. I just read past them. Feel free to skip this part if you want, but at least give it a quick thought. And if you happen to have a pencil and paper, then play along. Consider this an investment in your life. You are worth it.

What are your definitions of the following words? Do you have more than one definition for the same word depending on what it refers to?

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Here we go:

Love	Success
Relationship	Believe
Large	Far
Hate	Pain
Trust	Friend
Honesty	God

The list, of course, could go on for quite a long time. Not quite forever, but for very long. You can, and should, add many words to this list as you learn more about what you are not clear about and what is important to you.

## Relationships

You are one... a unique person. You may choose to be in a “relationship” with another person – be it a friendship, dating, marriage, business partnership, etc. You may also choose to play on teams, work with a group of people, and be part of a community, city, state and country.

Why? For what purpose?

This is not a “relationship” book, but a book about clearly understanding what we mean when using important words and phrases. It is important to all of us to have a clear understanding of what we mean by the word “relationship” since they will be a key part of our lives – until we are dead, and in some cases even after that.

Let’s just focus on a basic two-person “relationship.” *What is your definition of a “relationship” and the “purpose” of a relationship?*

This is greatly important. If you are going to be in a relationship, it is critically important to know what each of you requires, expects and needs from it – at the onset. If you have not taken the time to think about what you want from “any” relationship (your definition), then you may end up in a relationship with a person that has a different definition from yours. This is a prime reason why so many business

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partnerships fail, rock bands break up and people get divorced. What is a relationship for you, and what is it not?

## **Tribal Voices**

The following is something I learned from living and working in South Asia and the Middle East for more than a decade. If I had known this a decade earlier, it would have saved a lot of time and avoided a lot of confusion and pain.

It is not only the meaning of what we say, but actually how we say it that can lead to immense confusion. Here, I am not referring to tone, inflection or body language, but the actual organization and structure of how we share an idea with another person.

Allow me to explain with some gross generalities.

When speaking with others, Americans and most Westerners start off with the main topic, theme or idea, and then provide all the supporting information afterward, in as great detail as they feel is necessary. This is referred to as Deductive Communications. Meaning that: some people say the main thing first. This is the key to the Western saying, “get to the point.”

Many non Westerners tend to start with a wide variety of topics, matters and supporting information that will eventually lead up to “the point” or the main idea. Which means that: some people leave the main thing until last. This is referred to as Inductive Communications. In the same way you can “induce labor,” these people are hoping to induce the idea to form in your mind.

This does not apply only to how these people speak, but to how they hear as well. Westerners hear the first thing said as “the big deal” and Easterners hear the first thing said as only part of a lot of initial supportive fluff that they can take or leave, waiting for the “big idea.”

So even if you overcome the challenge of speaking different languages either via a translator or agreeing on using one common language (such as English) to communicate in, it is still highly likely that you will use

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the same words, and maybe even have the same meaning – and still fail to communicate because one person will be speaking (and hearing) deductively and the other inductively. This is critically important for persons from both the East and West.

The result – a Westerner starts talking and knocks out the key point of their message in the first 10 seconds while the Easterner is just warming up their mind for the conversation, anticipating having to sort through the wheat and the chaff until the main point arrives. So they may in fact miss the main point.

And the other way around, an Easterner wishing to communicate with a Westerner starts into his planned litany of supportive detail and tosses out a few opening supportive softballs. The Westerner grabs onto the first one, assumes this is the main point and may totally tune out for the rest of the talk. Or at best, lessen the importance of the closing commentary (which happens to be the most important part of the conversation).

In both cases, each party misses the main point. Communication has failed and misunderstandings may have occurred.

Is this limited to Easterners and Westerners? I have no idea, but what I do know is that it does happen, and can really screw up how people communicate with one another.

A solution may be to simply ask the other person this: “is the main thing you wanted me to know the following [insert your understanding here]”. If they say yes, then there is a slight chance you may be ok. A slight chance. When dealing with different cultures, there is also a myriad of other issues that may not allow them to tell you that you are not able to understand what they are saying, but that is well out of the scope of what we are talking about here.

And for those overly arrogant Westerners out there who think that the deductive, “get to the point” way of speaking is in any way superior or more effective, remember, you are also the ones that say that the best way to get someone to agree with an idea, is for them to believe it is “their” idea. And this is best accomplished by communicating in an

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“inductive” manner – feeding all the support information first – and then letting the other person “get it” on their own.

In addition to the challenges of induction and deduction, some languages have more words than others. So if you happen to be communicating with a person whose native language is other than yours, their language may have various and different words and phrases than yours. For example, in Greek, there are five words for LOVE: Eros, Philia, Agapē, Storge and Thelema. And in Hindi there is Prem, Sneh, Mamta, Anurag, Kaam... and if a male is speaking, the word choice is different than if a female is speaking, and age difference may come into play as well.

Point being, if you are a native English speaker, you are armed with your one rather lame and limited Love and they are coming at you with an arsenal of Loves. Good luck.

Please just take away that some people speak inductively and some people speak deductively; and some languages are more refined and specific than others. A foreigner may have learned your one word and not found a way to express his various other definitions.

Talking is not communication.

## **Play the Game**

Let's have some fun. This is a great game in that it is not only enjoyable, but educational, helpful and more. You will learn and help others and be entertained. What more could you ask for out of a simple game? In addition to being a very serious way to learn some important things, it is also a great way to be interesting at parties, a bar or on the subway.

You can play the game with anyone, anywhere. Married couples, daters, singles, gay, straight, confused, old, young, children (please). Everyone. Culture, socio-economic status or education is not relevant.

So what is the game? Simply ask someone these two questions:

## **What do you mean?**

1. What is your definition of love?
2. What is the purpose of a relationship?

The purpose of ‘The Game.’ Simply to get the players thinking about defining their terms and expecting others to do the same.

When you enlist others to play the game, at first you may get some resistance, but stay the course, it will be great.

Is ‘The Game’ too simple, boring, obvious? Go ahead and give it a try – you will be amazed. In its simplest form, invite a married couple to play. Give them each a pencil and piece of paper, and ask them each of the above questions. Have them write their answers without speaking to the other or sharing their answers. When they have finished, have them swap papers. Sit back and watch the fun begin as they realize they have different meanings for fundamentally important aspects of their lives. If they happen to share the same definitions, congratulate them, for that is very rare.

You can play ‘The Game’ with anyone – friends, family, and strangers in a bar. It is a great way to excite conversation, thinking, learning and growth. When you are in a conversation that is getting dull and going nowhere, just pop out “what is your definition of love?” I guarantee your conversation will come alive in some fashion.

Here is a very important note, as important as the answers to the questions are; it is also interesting to pay attention to the initial response you get when you ask the questions. You may get these:

- Oh....you know what I mean.
- THAT is a stupid question
- I have no idea
- “Why are you asking?”

Was the person you were asking open, ready and willing to play the game, or were they cautious, concealing, and paranoid about you wanting to get to know them more?



## What do you mean?

And be prepared, it is fair play for the players to turn the tables on you and ask you the same, or different questions.

Asking unique and challenging questions shows your mind is awake and that you care.

## When is a game not a game

This is not all semantic pickiness and game playing. Everyday, we make huge mistakes in speaking with one another. Here is an example:

If today is Sunday, and I ask you to meet me on the summit of the tallest mountain on earth next Thursday, you may rightly toddle to the top of Mount Everest in four days time. Good for you.

And if you did, you would find yourself there all alone – because when speaking with you I had every intention of getting airlifted to the summit of Mauna Kea (Hawaii) one eleven days later.

Using the same words, we would both be in different locations at different times. How could that happen?

I am “taller” than my children, but if they are in an airplane up near the clouds and I am on the ground – they are “higher” than me. There is a difference between *taller* and *higher*. Everest is higher; Kea is taller (really – go check).

Here is another example:

Today I had to pay our maid. I told her this is her pay for July. Later she was very concerned (pained) that I forgot to pay her for June and was now only going to pay her for July. We were both confused for a few minutes, experiencing small amounts of painful discomfort and wasting bits of our life, and then I realized the problem.

I *name* ‘the pay’ after the month that I hand her the money, which in this case I was paying her at the beginning of the month of July for work she had done in June. She *names* the pay as being for the month

## **What do you mean?**

she did the work. Thus, this was June's pay which she was receiving in July.

You don't need to become an overly analytical jerk about looking deeply at everything someone says, by constantly asking "what do you mean?". If someone asks - "do you like ice cream?" You don't need to ask them what they mean. Just eat it – with sprinkles on top.

Just be aware, that these miscommunications happen every minute of every day. So if you are getting ready to take action on something someone says, be sure you both get clear on what is being said.

## **Fishhooks of life**

To restate: We often make important decisions and take actions based on what another person says. And of course, others do the same based on what you say.

Most of the time when you make these decisions and take these actions, you can unwind or undo them. But on many occasions, you cannot (like pulling out a fish-hook). These are called "irrevocable decisions" and they really suck if you have made a mistake. If you make an irrevocable decision based on mistaken understanding, you are very likely going to experience pain, cause pain or both (try pulling out that fishhook).

Here is an extreme example to get the point across.

You and a new friend are walking across a bridge in your town. You have never been across this bridge and ask your new friend "Is the water deep?" He says "Yes it is."

In an effort to impress your new friend you dive off the bridge into the water... quickly whack the bottom, break your neck and die. "Deep" for him meant above his head – but certainly not deep enough to dive into, idiot! Once you dived, you made an irrevocable decision. It is hard to argue with the forces of gravity.

## **What do you mean?**

All of this applies to both personal and professional dealings. Thus – it is very important that you achieve clarity and specificity before acting based on what someone “says.”

## **The Parade of Sevens**

There are Seven Habits, Seven Ways and even the Seven Dwarves. Of course there are Dante’s seven terraces of Purgatory and seven deadly sins. I could not come up with Seven of anything to fit with the cool carnival of Sevens – I have five (I owe you two).

Do these things in this order – and you should be ok:

1. Define what you mean
2. Find out what the other person means
3. Compare and contrast yours and theirs
4. Decide on your response
5. Take action based on your response

Your action could be any of the following:

- Accept things as they are
- Modify your meaning, their meaning or both.
- Leave, exit – terminate the process/encounter/relationship.

## **The Worlds Greatest Killer**

This is a story I hope my kids tell their kids.

Humans have for many years enjoyed keeping non-human animals as pets. Michael Jackson had his Never Land Ranch, and he supposedly proposed to buy the Singapore ZOO. They wisely turned him down. Others have invited kangaroos and ostriches into their homes. The ancient Egyptians, Assyrians and modern Indians tamed cheetahs for hunting. There was an eccentric Rothchild who road around the streets of London in a carriage pulled by Zebras. The Ainu people of Japan captured young grizzly bears to tame and later eat. And I believe there

## What do you mean?

are several thousand tigers living as pets in peoples homes in the USA. Crazy stuff, huh?

Not too long ago, there was once a wise old king of a distant land who wanted to have the most dangerous animal in the world as a pet.

The king made a proclamation stating that the person who brought him the most dangerous animal in the world would live a life of leisure as long as the king were alive, and would take over the rule of the kingdom upon the king's death.

He set a date of six months later for everyone to present their dangerous animal before him and his court.

Immediately, the most experienced and fearless hunters and explorers fled to the farthest corners of the earth in search of the most dangerous animal to be found. Many died terrible deaths in the process.

The six months passed and on the agreed date and time, they all met in the king's courtyard for the presentation of the worlds most dangerous animals.

The walls were stacked with cages and there were huge pens erected holding a variety of exotic creatures laced with chains and ropes. The members of the king's court were quite nervous and jittery being so close to so much potential death.

Sir Loukas of Lucania (ΛΟΥΚΑΣ) was the first to present and thus produced an enormous Elephant. Certainly the largest beast on the planet. The massive Elephant stood still, staring at the king. He then dropped a huge pile of turds on the ground and proceeded to step repeatedly onto them. Yes, this was a big beast, but certainly there must be something more dangerous.

Jesper of Persia produced both a lion and a tiger at the same time that the gallant warrior Ásgeirr of the North produced a large fat hippopotamus. Jesper and Ásgeirr argued about who should present first, so the king decided to toss all three beasts into the courtyard and let them sort it out. The Hippo ate both the lion and the Tiger, and then promptly went to sleep – showing no desire to do any more damage for

## **What do you mean?**

quite some time. Yes impressive, but possibly not the most dangerous in the world.

Lady Blanche of Normandy came forth with four servants carrying a large basket, from which she produced a most elegant Black Mamba snake. She ensured the king that this was the most venomous of all snakes and that a small amount of its venom can instantly kill even the greatest warrior. She placed the snake on the ground, and it quickly slithered towards and then under and out the main gate, where it was promptly trampled to death by a fat horse.

The parade of danger continued for many hours – falcons, spiders and even a shark in a huge barrel, but all proved to be marginally dangerous and then really only if you gave them a good kick to get them riled.

A cocky young man came forth with a two meter high box and opened it to reveal his brother, a man known to be a great warrior, claiming that Man was the most dangerous animal on the planet due to all the killing of others they have done. An interesting concept, but still suspect in the eyes of the king.

The sun was setting and the king was getting bored just as he saw a small white hand poking up from among his court. It was the hand of Élisabeth, the young daughter of his court physician from Castile. She requested to approach the king, and her request was granted.

She leaned closely to the king and whispered into his ear. The king leaned back with a rather puzzled look on his face, thought for a few moments and then whispered into the ear of the young girl.

With that, she smiled and gently cupped her hands over the king's bare left arm as if capturing nothing but air. She opened her cupped hands a small bit to allow the king to peek inside to see – a small mosquito. As he squinted to see the small creature, she said a few words in a very soft voice that could only be heard by the king.

The king smiled, nodded and asked her to sit by his side proclaiming that he had found the most dangerous animal in the world and the heir to his throne.

## What do you mean?

Years later, after the king had died - a close friend approached Élisabeth asking what she had whispered to the king those many years ago. She replied, "I said 'King, when you say *most dangerous* – what do you mean?' After some thought, he replied to me, 'I mean that I want the animal that is the most dangerous to my people; the animal that kills more of my people than any other animal.'" Élisabeth then told her friend, "My father is the court doctor and he has told me for years that the female mosquito carries more than 100 potentially fatal diseases, and each year kills more people than any other animal. Thereby making it the most dangerous animal in the world – according to the king's definition. I am now ruler of this kingdom, simply because I was brave enough to ask 'what do you mean?'".

Yes, insects are animals