Less Afraid to Be Yourself · About 4 minutes

A Word Can Help, and It Can Miss

Letting your description remain open to correction

What is it like to be listened to with great care and hear your own feeling come back in a word that belongs to somebody else?

A listener may be kind, thoughtful and completely convinced that you are anxious. You may even agree at first. Then you notice that their advice about courage keeps missing something. The difficulty is more practical, or angrier, or less clear than the word they have chosen.

Lucian's story is fictional, but the misunderstanding is ordinary. He has been offered a larger role in a neighborhood project. His friend suggests that he is afraid of the responsibility. Lucian initially agrees. As they talk, however, he realizes that the planning meetings regularly happen while he is at work. He wants to contribute. He is frustrated about being asked to lead something he cannot help shape.

That correction changes the problem. Encouraging him to be braver would continue answering an explanation he has withdrawn.

Let the description move

Gendlin's introduction to Focusing describes checking whether a word or phrase fits experience and allowing the wording to change.[1] You can borrow that willingness without doing an inward bodily exercise. Ordinary statements can be precise: "The meetings are held when I'm working." A feeling word may add something, but it does not have to unlock a hidden truth before practical discussion can begin.

Lucian might say he feels excluded. That conveys an effect of the arrangement; it does not establish that the organizers intended to exclude him. He might prefer "frustrated," or decide that he has said enough with the scheduling fact. The language should remain answerable to his experience.

A responsive friend could say, "I was thinking about confidence. You're telling me the meeting times are the difficulty." That leaves room to help with the real problem, if Lucian wants help. It also gives him a chance to say, "That's closer, but there's something else."

"Not quite" can be a useful answer. So can "Only part of it" or "I don't know yet." You need not supply a better explanation immediately to ask someone to put an inaccurate one aside.

If you are listening, notice what you do next. Do you become more curious, or repeat the original interpretation more gently? Does the person's correction actually change your advice? Silence after a correction is not agreement with the first account.

There are limits to what clearer language can accomplish. The project may be unable to change its meeting time. Another person may have a conflicting access need. Lucian may decide that this particular role does not fit his availability. Accurate words bring those realities into view; they cannot resolve them on their own.

Still, something important has changed when Lucian no longer has to work on an imagined fear before discussing an actual obstacle. He can decide whether he wants the role with more of the situation before him. His friend can offer care to the person who is there, rather than to the person the first explanation created.

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The longer reading follows what happens when experience is allowed to correct the explanation. Here Lucian gets to say which word fits.

The word can be taken back. With any luck, the person across from you stays interested in what you were trying to say.

Companion reading · Less Afraid to Be Yourself

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Less Afraid to Be Yourself (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Gendlin, E. T. (1996). An introduction to focusing: Six steps. The Focusing Institute. Source.

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