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Rank:

A Double Signal

RANK IS A DRUG. The more you have, the less aware you are of how it effects others negatively.

Remember a strict teacher who terrified you as a child. Some teachers are aware of their rank and use their power over children well. Others are oblivious. When they discipline children, they terrify them without teaching them anything. Their use of rank makes them unappealing and unapproachable.

We all have some form of rank. Our behavior shows how conscious we are of this rank. When we are heedless of rank, communications become confused and chronic relationship problems develop.

In the business world, those on top rarely understand why people below them complain. Executives forget their power and assume that people lower on the corporate ladder are to blame for the company's problems.

Educated individuals often assume that people who have less education and little experience are stupid and

immature. In psychological and spiritual circles, veterans think newcomers are undeveloped, ignorant, foolish and less valuable. Rank blinds us to the value of other people.

Nations forget the effect their power has on smaller, less developed countries. I helped facilitate a large international conference in Bratislava after the Soviet Union fell apart. A group of people from Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Romania, Muldova and Croatia lined up on one side of the room, united in their opposition to what a member of the Russian group had said in a speech. They claimed that the Russian speaker scared them. His vision of a "great new classless state" had reminded them of the power that, not long before, had emanated from Russia.

Defending himself, the Russian asked how mere talk could remind them of the old times. The Soviet Union had already fallen; the speech was meant for the betterment of all the states represented here. He could not understand why his listeners projected evil powers onto him. The other delegates couldn't believe how oblivious he was. A heated argument ensued.

People who belong to groups that once outranked others want to be treated as individuals once their power is lost. The Russian hoped to escape the Soviet image. Meanwhile, the Eastern Europeans, like most people who have been oppressed, felt misunderstood.

POWER BATTLES: WEAKNESS VERSUS WEAKNESS

In some ways, political process differs from country to country, but the structure of processes between the mainstream and the groups it disavows is similar everywhere. The mainstreamers who have, or have had, social power are, obviously, powerful. Not so obviously, they are also handicapped. They are less able to see their higher rank than those who are, or have been, under them. The result of this poor vision is that they cannot understand others. This creates the stalemates we read about in the news all the time — the stalled, stuttering, ongoing conflicts always present in our world.

In the Bratislava case, the Russian delegation could not imagine why the other Eastern Europeans were so upset with them. The problem for the facilitator working with such a conflict is this: if you try to enlighten those with rank (or those who have rank in the eyes of others), you are apt to meet with a complete

lack of comprehension. The feebler their awareness, the more violence it provokes in the group that feels powerless.

Insensibility to rank is irritating; it makes you want to cry out. Yet expecting those with rank to recognize their unconsciousness means asking that they be of a higher spiritual and intellectual caliber than the rest of the participants. While this demand seems, at first, to be warranted, it usually meets with resistance because those with rank experience themselves as being oppressed, first, by the participants who are criticizing them, then by the facilitators.

The people who revolt against rank are, in the moment of attack, not only victims, but also powerful in a sort of spiritual way. They feel empowered by their quest for "justice." Like those who provoked them, however, they are often unconscious of their power. Victims don't automatically deserve halos.

Facilitators usually want to protect those with less power. But when conflict erupts, those with more power are also vulnerable. They lack insight into what is happening. They are confused. They too need protection and assistance from the facilitator.

One group is hurt and weakened because its members have been socially oppressed; the other is psychologically weak because its members are blind to their social position. Breaking stalemates depends on understanding the interrelationships between power and weakness, social position and psychological momentum. How will the elder in you develop such understanding?

Eldership grows in part from having experienced the issues yourself, having known yourself as both victim and oppressor. It comes from seeing the weakness of the oppressor. What remains when the fire of your own desire for revenge has burned low is a sort of soothing cool that relieves everyone. It doesn't patronize. It expects only those who can to make the shift in consciousness from conflict to insight. Elders themselves have made the leap from one-sidedness to compassion.

RANK HAS MANY INDICATORS

Some people, reading about the conflict caused by Soviet rank, will think, "It's not my problem."

Wrong. Any single conflict is everyone's. The problem of rank cannot be solved in one place alone; it must be worked on

universally. After all, hierarchy is the social structure of culture. Culture stands behind our unconsciousness.

Consider the whites in Western countries. They forget People of Color, not only because of racism, but because educational systems have been entirely Eurocentric. Consider men. Globally we men have been unconscious of negating women, just as heterosexuals act as though gays were invisible. Those in good health cannot understand the violence of those in poor health. Parents think children go through "phases." Our culture teaches and reinforces these attitudes.

Rank doesn't show in the mirror. It results in a subtle state of mind. If you are part of a group which is the most favored in your culture, you imagine that you are normal and anyone unlike you is marginal. You ignore the role that belongs to your class and repudiate past evils. "Who me? My forebears were Polish peasants, not the Southern aristocrats. As for me, I wasn't even around when your ancestors were sold as slaves."

Rank shows up in countless ways, in feeling confident, for example. The subconscious influence of rank determines how we feel about ourselves and others. High or low self-esteem does not come just from our teachers, family or subculture. Since all of these sources are linked to mainstream culture, the whole world is the final source of our sense of self-worth and the worth of others. Mainstream culture is insidious. It gets into our thinking, our feelings, and even our dreams.

Feeling secure and cared for are forms of psychological rank. You may wonder, "These people with all the inferiority feelings, why are they so insecure?" We forget those terrifying moments when no one was there looking after us — not parents, not teachers, not a partner, not friends, not even the gods.

Psychological rank is a drug that suppresses our awareness of other people's pain and encourages us to look down on others as nothing more than "victims." It enables us to imagine that we transcend other people's problems: we are above it all, aloof from the problems of the disadvantaged. Our egos insulate us. Even if we suffered oppression in the past, we don't demonstrate any willingness to help relieve oppression now. We insist that others be where we are instead of extending ourselves to understand where they are.

As I have said, rank is a drug that makes us feel good. We forget we are on it. Like heroin, we need more and more of it to feel well. We steal from the well-being of others and the environment to support our habit. Finally, the others can't take it anymore and they revolt.

USING RANK CONSCIOUSLY

Rank is not inherently bad, and abuse of rank is not inevitable. When you are aware of your rank, you can use it to your own benefit and the benefit of others as well. You remember your past. You don't forget that some of us grew up in houses when other children lived on the streets; that it was safe to go to your school, whereas other teenagers went every day to a place of violence and addiction; that your vocabulary reflects an education which others may not have received. Remembering one phase of life after another, you see that you were privileged; somebody else had less than you.

Rank-conscious people know that much of their power was inherited and is not shared. They do not look down on less powerful individuals who don't have many things or abilities. They are humble and yet can feel good about themselves, for rank can be a medicine as well as a disease.

Power struggles are ubiquitous. People with less power are jealous, hurt and furious when others are not conscious of rank. Rank-consciousness reduces struggle universally.

As children, we transcended rank, and we also transcend it whenever we are near death. At times we have other transpersonal or transcendent experiences. These give us a spiritual rank — power that is independent of culture, family and the world. Using this power unconsciously, we either ignore or marginalize the suffering of others. People who engage easily in transcendent experiences may become elitists. It's easy to be forgetful of rank in the context of religious belief and spiritual practice. We think we are following the path of love. Peace is so highly valued in many religions that followers may ignore the conflicts caused by thinking others are less spiritual.

The objective in worldwork is not to transcend, but to notice rank and use it constructively.

SENDING MIXED SIGNALS

Some of your messages and signals are intended; others are unconscious. I call intended messages "primary signals," and unintended ones "double signals."

For example, if you try to act happy when you are unhappy, you send double signals. The intended message may be a smile or a little laugh; the double signal may be hanging your head or speaking in a low tone.

If you are not conscious of your double signals, people's reactions to them are likely to surprise you. If you know your signals, you will never be surprised by anyone's response.

Consider a white upper middle class man I encountered at a town meeting in a small city in Oregon. At the time, gay rights were vehemently debated in that state. He stood to express his beliefs about homosexuality. He was in his early 60's. Unlike most of the participants, who wore casual clothing, he had on a white shirt and a tie.

Smiling confidently, he said, "I am a humble person. I believe the Bible. I believe that gays are disconnected from God and therefore lost. They need to be saved."

His primary message was that he was a humble man who thought gays were mixed up and in trouble spiritually. That's what he intended us to hear. He held a Bible in his hand to reinforce that message. He sent a double signal with his smile, which was felt by others to indicate a sense of superiority. The Bible was a double signal which conveyed that the man felt a sense of majority rulership. His smile and the Bible were interpreted as condescending: "No need to listen to anyone else, dear people: I am the truth."

His double signals elicited mixed emotions, confusion, and finally irritation. The gay and lesbian activists squirmed in their eagerness to get back at him. Others, too, had negative reactions to his smugness.

Double signals describe secondary processes — things you might not want to identify with if you realized you were saying them. This man did not realize he was condescending. He thought he was open to everyone.

Most double signals are dream-like, as I explained in *The Dreambody in Relationships*.¹ Double messages convey a person's deepest feelings, spiritual experiences and unconscious sense of power and

rank. The man's double signals were saying, "I am superior, and you must listen to me, because what I am saying cannot be debated."

POWER TRAPPED IN A DOUBLE SIGNAL

At the same meeting, a white woman described having been hurt by slanderers of homosexuals. She looked down at the floor as she spoke. At the same time, she clenched her fists. She spoke of a feeling of powerlessness and injury. She reported going home from a party and weeping until dawn. She said she once didn't leave her apartment for three days, she was so fearful of being hurt again.

Speaking about being hurt and looking at the floor were primary signals, but the clenched fist was a double signal. When she had finished speaking, I asked her if she would give her attention to her fist and clench it as hard as she could.

At first, she did not realize that she had been making a fist. Then she thought about it and became a very different person as she stated, "I want to defend myself and others for their viewpoints! I want to defend that man for his viewpoint, though I don't agree with it. But I want to protect my viewpoint as well."

There was a lot of power in her double signal. That power didn't want to be cooped up inside her. Since she was unaware of it, the only way for the power to come out was in a double signal. Double signals are often the keys to unlocking the intricacies and depths of relationships.

THE MISCHIEF OF DOUBLE SIGNALS

Communication between nations, groups, institutions and individuals requires awareness of double signals. Unconscious messages are apt to elicit unconscious responses.

The man in the case above smiled and responded to the lesbian woman. "Why are you so irritated by me? You get so emotional!"

He was still identified with his primary statement — that he wanted to save her — and oblivious to his smile and the effect it was having on her. Thus he couldn't understand her irritation. At first, she couldn't understand it either. His words depressed her, but his smile provoked her to anger and released her power.

Most misunderstandings originate in double signals, which are often as hard to unravel as dreams. For example, suppose a macho man dreams of a small, vulnerable child. He is unconscious of the child's vulnerability within him. Nevertheless, that child makes himself known to other people in double signals. The man inadvertently asks for mothering. He seems and acts powerful, but the child inside him sends needy double signals that say, "Take care of me."

Another man thinks of himself as powerless, but dreams of a boxer. This man wonders why people are always challenging him to fight. He doesn't realize that he sends double signals of wanting to box.

Institutions also send double signals. Let's say you belong to a group that considers itself caring and aims to help others or the environment. Many people join the group because of its primary identity, its great vision. Now, for some reason, other groups suddenly feel threatened by your group and enter into competition with it. Is this because the other groups are mean-spirited? Perhaps. But they could also be responding to your group's double signals. Your group's primary signals indicate helpfulness and caring, an intent to be spiritual or to embody an alternative culture. Meanwhile, its double signals may be saying, "Watch out, we are here to stay. We want to raise the most money. We want to convert members from other groups." Double signals, as long as they are not made conscious, make mischief and upset relationships.

INTERNATIONAL RANK AND DOUBLE SIGNALS

The Bible-carrying man's smile was a double signal that revealed rank — the rank of a white upper middle class male, college-educated and a member of a dominant, mainstream religion. His rank alienated people he meant to help.

Something analogous happens in international relationships. The United States characterizes itself as a democracy and sends out primary signals of equality and goodness. Its secondary signals tell a different story: other countries experience the United States as dictatorial and dominating. They cannot understand why the U.S. has supported the decimation of Native and African Americans and why it supports repressive regimes around the world. Yet most white Americans are not aware of

their country's repressive and dominating policies. When they travel abroad, they are surprised to be met with hostility. They are amazed to discover that people in other countries think of them as pushy, insensitive and arrogant.

Notice the double signals in this passage by historians from an industrialized nation: "Governments of the Third World nations have struggled, usually ineptly, to lift their countries from impoverishment, and while some have made marginal progress, many others are merely marking time or slipping even further behind."² The authors go on to say that these countries have enormous foreign debts, which they cannot pay, and this indebtedness threatens the stability of the wealthier Northern nations.

While the authors' primary signals indicate a concern for the situation of Third World and industrialized nations alike, their rank reveals itself in the way they side with the North (whose financial stability is threatened by the South) and look down on the South, whose nations "struggled, usually ineptly," and make only "marginal progress." The authors' double signals imply that the Third World is an inept and struggling loser, while the more advanced North bears no responsibility for global economic troubles. The very tone of detachment and objectivity with which the authors write carries a double signal of condescension: they have made Third World countries specimens for their analysis.

RANK AS A DOUBLE SIGNAL

In the United States, People of Color have less social rank than whites. Most whites have little awareness of their cultural rank and how it affects their behavior. Facilitators must be quick to read double signals if they are to forestall violent confrontation.

People who are not conscious of rank don't realize what they are doing, and others don't understand why they have taken a dislike to them. Neither knows what they are arguing about, and the situation can quickly escalate towards a fight.

In Chapter One, I described a scene in Los Angeles in which a white man refuses to listen to a Black man's fury. On one level, the white man appears to say, "Let's talk," but the hidden signal says, "You are no good." All the white man sees is the Black man's growing anger, not the double signal of white privilege that is partly responsible for it.

The white man gives out another primary signal: "I don't like anger." But the double signal of white privilege appears when the white man turns away from the Black man, implying that he does not have to endure the Black man's behavior if he doesn't want to. In this way, social pressure is brought to bear on the Black man to make sure he endures the white man's behavior.

With his primary signals, the white man calls himself a liberal. But with double signals, he announces that he is supported by the white majority, who insist that the Black man keep his anger to himself. The Black man cannot easily defend himself against the white man's double signals because they are submerged, unarticulated, subtle and indirect.

Rank is most often an invisible power, a double signal which inadvertently abuses others.

TYRANNY: A GHOST IN RELATIONSHIPS

Democracy, or sharing power, requires awareness of rank, not only in politics, but in face-to-face interactions. Rank implies power differences. Everyone has both more and less rank than someone else. Rank is everyone's problem in a democracy.

The trouble is, most of us are aware only of the rank or power we do not have. We forget to notice the rank and power we do have. Even while we are fighting revolutions to make world change, we may simultaneously put others down and think we are just telling the truth. This is why social activists, while fighting against oppression, are often bogged down by infighting in their own communities around issues of power and rank.

We begin learning about rank when we are very young. In gangs I knew when I was growing up near New York, the leader had the most rank, while younger gang members and outsiders had the least rank. You had to prove yourself to get a higher rank. But once you had some rank, you were "in" and everyone liked you.

Gang life, where rank was overt, was actually easier to negotiate than mainstream life, where rank is submerged. Whenever I talk about rank today, people who have a lot of it either don't know what I am talking about or get upset. The concept of equality is so prized as a primary signal in democratic countries that mainstream liberals imagine they live in a classless society. They

do not realize how they often outrank others. They think only conservatives and non-democratic countries are oppressive.

Tyranny is a ghost in democratic countries, a ghost projected onto other countries. This is the ghost that ensures that many of the poor in the United States are People of Color. This ghost creates the glass ceiling that keeps women and People of Color from reaching the top of the social ladder.

GLASS CEILINGS: DOUBLE SIGNALS IN ACTION

I remember a homeless Latina woman speaking up courageously about this glass ceiling in an open forum in central California. Three hundred people attended this meeting — Latinos, Blacks, whites and Asians. Their occupations ranged from farm workers to college professors. The tense atmosphere grew more tense when the woman said that the glass ceiling couldn't be seen. No one seemed to understand her.

She had hit the nail on the head. A glass ceiling is a double signal that is unconscious on the part of the originators. Furthermore, it is invisible to its victims, who can only feel it.

Suddenly someone criticized the angry tone of the homeless and working class people. I suggested that this criticism was itself a glass ceiling. Its purpose was to keep people's voices from breaking through and being heard. They would be permitted to go so far and no further in expressing their complaints.

A fiery debate ensued. Finally a Black man said that he had already turned down his fire so much he was living on a pilot light, and if he reduced the flame any further he would be dead. Then everyone understood. Social rank appeared as a clear signal of repression, creating the glass ceiling which had been invisible.

PSYCHOLOGICAL AND SPIRITUAL RANK

We are only scratching the surface of rank when we speak of social, economic and national privilege. Some people have a great deal of psychological power which is not included in the idea of social rank. For example, by surviving any kind of suffering, you gain power. People from marginalized groups who survive social abuse may acquire a different power than comes with social privilege. We need only think of Malcolm X or Martin Luther King.

To survive, marginalized people often turn to spirituality, which enables them to center and provides the power to both feel and survive their pain.

A tough life destroys many people. But for others, it can lead to insight, power and psychological radiance that, communicated in double signals, can intimidate and educate the mainstream.

Racism, sexism, homophobia, religious persecution, childhood abuse and ill health destroy many people. They hurt us all. They are meant to fill their victims with despair, depression, hatred, vengeance, and self-loathing. But there are the few who are transformed by those evils into compassionate human beings. I don't want to suggest that suffering is positive. Still, instead of letting trouble get you down, it can raise your consciousness and give you the power of understanding. Used with awareness, this power becomes compassion — that incredible tenderness that makes life worthwhile.

NOTES

1. Mindell, *The Dreambody in Relationships*, p. 4.
2. Wayne McWilliams and Harry Piotrowski, *The World Since 1945: A History of International Relations*, p. 2.