

Paul Burke Training Group

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Beyond training: Looking at learning MI in a whole new light!

Thoughts on Improved

Practice (TIP)
#1831



Then Kailyn said: “Let’s pretend that you are like Marvin the Martian and you don’t know anything about me. Let’s pretend that you don’t know nothing about me but-‘cept for my name. You’re not sure if I am a human or a cow or a horse or a cat or if I am a dinosaur or else I might be a German Sheppard. Because you don’t even know what is a cow or a horse! They don’t even have cows or horses on Mars, so how could you know anyways. All you can do is ask me questions to see if you can make me say what my mind is wondering about at this very minute.”

Let’s Play “Let’s Pretend That You Don’t Know!”

The “expert model” seldom operates as a friend when trying to chat with clients in an MI way. Still, for most of us, the “expert trap” is a hard habit to shake. And that’s odd - when you think about it. Most of us were never taught to be “experts”. We were never told to call ourselves that, and almost everyone who experiments with learning MI has a strong desire to honor our clients when we hear their behavior telling us that “I am the boss of me – not you!”

Somewhere along the line, it seems that many of us pick up a subconscious message that it is our job to “fix” our clients. Our work is supposed to be measurable in terms of obvious “outcomes”. Those outcomes are almost always pre-written (pre-scribed) in terms of what we (or our funders) want for our clients in terms of their behaviour change! The message seems to be that if we want to be competent, then we’ll find ways to turn things around so that we can “be the boss of them”. (We’re often told to be the boss gently, mind you, but gentle or harsh, the fact is that being the boss is being the boss.)

Somehow, as if by osmosis, some of us absorb a message that we must have knowledge. We must have lots of it. We must know it all. We must know what our clients should do, when they should do it, and how our “mandate” should be accomplished. Then, when we finally have that figured out, we’ll probably need to install some information into our “charges” – and maybe even to “drill it into their heads” – that we know what we are talking about. We went to school! We racked up thousands of dollars’ worth of student loans! We have tons of front-line experience! We know of what we speak!

Yikes. What a lot of grief! (As in: “Good Grief”!)

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Years ago, I learned a little game from my little niece. She has an amazing imagination – and this was never more the case than when she was about five! Sometimes, when I am feeling very pressured to “get results” (meaning “change the client”), I let myself play a game she taught me! It almost always produces very nice results. She called her game “Let’s Pretend – That You Don’t Know”.

So as to interrupt her boredom during a very long car ride, Kailyn would prompt me. “Uncle Paul?”, she would ask, “what if you were like Marvin the Martian?” That was my cue to inquire “what do you mean?” and she would reply with “Let’s play a game of Let’s Pretend”. “Ok”, I’d say (usually only half paying attention). “What are we supposed to pretend?”

“Let’s Pretend that you don’t know!, she’d reply.

“And what is it that I’m going to pretend that I don’t know? I’d ask.



“You pretend that you don’t know anything! Kailyn would reply, giggling, in her playful, five-year old tone. “Let’s pretend that you are like Marvin the Martian and you don’t know nothing about me. Let’s pretend that you don’t know nothing about me but-cept for my name. You’re not sure if I am a human or a cow or a horse or a cat or if I am a dinosaur or else I might be a German Sheppard. Because you don’t even know what is a cow or a horse! They don’t have cows or horses on Mars, so how could you know anyways. All you can do is ask me questions to see if you can make me say what my mind is thinking at this very minute.” (I could see that her mind was thinking pretty darned hard right about then!)

It was always fun, and I always played. Here’s how a round would typically play out:

Me: Are you thinking about your Mom?

Kailyn: Wrong! You can’t ask that, Uncle Paul. You have to pretend you don’t know! Don’t you know that Martians don’t know what Mothers are? If you want to know about that you have to say, “how did you get born?”

Me: OK. How did you get born?

Kailyn: ...because my Mom had me.

Me: Why did she have you? I asked.

Kailyn: ...because God wanted her to.

Me: Why did God want her to?

Kailyn: ...because I am special.

Me: Why are you special?

Kailyn: ...because I am adopted.

Me: Oh. When were you adopted?

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Kailyn: Wrong! Uncle Paul – you’re not trying! Martians don’t know what ‘adopted’ means.

Me: Oh, yah. Right. Sorry. So – what does “adopted” mean?

Kailyn: It means I got picked. Not out of my Mom’s tummy though. Out of the hospital.

Me: And why were you picked?

Kailyn: ...because I’m special.

Me: (Totally getting into this game by now) So - in what ways are you special?

Kailyn: Well, ...because I am black.

Me: And why are you black?

Kailyn: ...because in the olden days I was from Africa.

Me: What part of Africa were you from?

Kailyn: Wrong! Martians don’t know about Africa. You have to say, “is Africa a place or what?”

Me: Is Africa a place or what?

Kailyn: It is where black people come from.

Me: What makes people there black?

Kailyn: Actually, they aren’t exactly black. That is just a saying for it.

Me: What do you mean?

Kailyn: They are really more like brown.

Me: What other colors are there?

Kailyn: My Mom is white.

Me: What is a “Mom”?

Kailyn: Wrong! Uncle Paul – pay attention! I already said what my Mom was. She is the lady who adopted me.

Me: Oh, yah. Right. Sorry. I remember now.

Kailyn: So?

Me: So, what?

Kailyn: So – keep pretending that you don’t know.

Me: Why are you so smart?

Kailyn: ...because I am special.

Me: What does special mean?

Kailyn: It means I have amazing ideas.

Me: Like what?

Kailyn: Like what if you really were a Martian and I was just a human and you wanted to learn about humans and you could not read about it or find anything out from a movie.

Me: Do you think about this kind of thing a lot.

Kailyn: Yes.

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Me: What would you be thinking right now if I really was a Martian?

Kailyn: I would be thinking you are a quite a fat Martian.

Me: Do you think I am fat?

Kailyn: Wrong! Uncle Paul! You can't ask me that! That is not a nice thing to say!

Me: I am pretending that I don't know.

Kailyn (pausing a while before she answers) Oh. Ok. True. Ok, well then, I would say that I think you are a bit of a chubby Martian. Most Martians are skinny.



Me: Why are most Martians skinny.

Kailyn: (laughing hard) ...because they do not eat potato chips and cake.

Me: Why don't they eat potato chips and cake?

Kailyn: The police put you in jail on Mars if you eat any junk food things.

Me: So, if I am from Mars why don't I know that already?

Kailyn: (Long pause) Uncle Paul! That is not fair! You do know that one! You are just pretending that you don't know.

Me: OK.

Kailyn: So, pretend about earth people again.

Me: OK. So, why do earth people like potato chips and cake

Kailyn: ...because they taste better than salad

Me: Is there such a thing as a potato chip salad?

Kailyn: That is a stupid question, Uncle Paul.

Me: Why is that a stupid question?

Kailyn: ...because if you put salad dressing on it, everything would be soggy

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Me: What does “soggy mean”?

Kailyn: It means squishy.

Me: If you have squishy potatoes, are they called “mashed potatoes?”

Kailyn: Wrong! You have to pretend that you don’t know nothing! You don’t know about the idea of mashed potatoes

Me: Is there such an idea as mashed potatoes?

Kailyn: Well, of course there is. They have milk and butter mixed in.

Me: How much milk?

Kailyn: Wrong! Don’t you know? You are a Martian. Martians don’t drink milk!

Me: How do you know that Martians don’t drink milk?

Kailyn: They don’t got any cows.

Me: What is cow?

Kailyn: It is large black and white creature that makes milk.

Me: Why don’t Martians have any cows?

Kailyn: ...because cows are not green. They are black and white.

Me: So, if I am a Martian, why am I not green?

Kailyn: ...because you are just pretending to be a Martian

Me: Why am I pretending to be a Martian?

Kailyn: ...because you totally love playing fun games with your favorite niece.

Me: Why are you my favorite niece?

Kailyn: ...because I am special

Me: Yes, my dear, I must admit, I think you are quite special indeed!

Kailyn: Wrong! Uncle Paul! You are supposed to pretend that you don’t know.

And on, and on, and on it could go for hours. It was fun! *Kailyn was a great teacher. She helped me to learn how to get into a head space of not knowing. Playing such games can be fun (and useful) sometimes when you are getting a bit stuck with a client. Not knowing opens up all kinds of possibilities to be surprised by the answers that come along! Try it! Play “Pretend that I don’t know nothing”. In the next few days, pretend that you are a Martian and you want to learn exactly what your client is wondering about her situation “at this very minute”. Get curious. Explore her way of viewing the situation. Listen up for interesting twists in her logic. Pretend that you don’t know why she should change. Imagine that you don’t understand her reasons for being the way she is – let alone her reasons for needing to change. Allow your ideas, and beliefs, and pre-conceived theories to empty themselves into a quiet place for a while. Challenge yourself to see if you can pretend you have no idea what abilities, or strengths, or attributes the client might have that they could apply to their current concerns. Make a game out of it. See if you can get them to tell you.*

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul Burke". The signature is stylized with a long horizontal line underneath the name.