



The “Describe everything” technique/discipline in the context of close personal relationships

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I. The “describe everything” technique/discipline outside of IA sessions: In chapters sixteen and seventeen of the big lion book,¹ I discuss how you can dramatically increase your ability to *feel the importance* of your mental content and to *accurately perceive the meaning* of your mental content by describing, out loud to another person, everything that comes into your internal mental awareness. In addition to being an important part of the Immanuel approach process, this simple-yet-powerful technique/discipline can be included as a routine part of many/most close relationships. For example, Charlotte and I have been practicing this relational discipline as a routine part of our marriage friendship for many years now. Prior to embracing this “describe everything” discipline as part of our marriage, there would often be long periods of silence during times when we were together, whether we were driving down the highway, sitting in the living room, or walking around the neighborhood. Each of us would be absorbed in our private internal mental content but not talking about it. Even more common would be constant internal editing during conversations. Lots of thoughts, images, memory fragments, and emotions would be flowing through our minds, *but we would only report the content that felt important, the content that made sense, and the content that had been put together into nice, tidy packages.*

Charlotte and I have spent some time trying to reconstruct a number of these interactions, to give a more concrete picture of what our experience has looked like “with” and “without” the “describe everything” relational discipline.

The “describe everything” discipline has been especially helpful when making decisions as a couple. In the past, when we would be discussing a decision that needed to be made, each of us would only share the mental content that felt important, made sense, and had been organized into nice, tidy, logical packages. Unfortunately, many pieces of information relevant to the final discernment did *not* feel important, did not yet “make sense,” and had not yet been adequately packaged. We would therefore not share this content, and much useful information would be excluded from the discussion. We were amazed to discover how much additional important information came forward and how much easier joint discernment became when we started applying the “describe everything” discipline during decision-making discussions.

For example, we were planning a celebration of some kind with a particularly delicious menu of grilled salmon and chocolate silk pie. As the date for our special celebration approached, Charlotte suggested that we invite several friends to join us, and asked if that would be all right with me. As we talked about this possibility I became increasingly unhappy. My unhappiness didn’t seem to “make sense,” and I could not come up with a logical argument to defend what I was feeling, but eventually I simply described what was happening inside: “I’m just noticing that I feel anxious and angry as we’re talking about this.” Pause. “And now that I’m saying it out

¹ The “big lion book” is the nickname that many in the Immanuel Approach community use for Karl Lehman, *The Immanuel Approach: For Emotional Healing and for Life*, (Evanston, IL: Immanuel Publishing, 2016).

loud, I'm realizing that my anxiety and anger are much stronger than I had perceived them to be before I said anything." At this point, Charlotte responded with something like, "If you focus on the anxiety and anger, and don't worry about whether or not it makes sense, can you notice anything else coming into your awareness?" After another pause to observe my internal mental content and get words to describe it, I reported: "If I just say exactly what I'm thinking and feeling inside, I feel like I want to say 'No,' but I don't have a good enough reason." "It feels like I'm not allowed to say 'No.' What feels true is that if I say 'No,' people will be angry with me, people will judge me, and people will inflict subtle relational punishment."

As Charlotte asked clarifying questions and I continued to describe whatever came into my awareness, I eventually noticed that memory fragments from a negative teenage experience were coming into my mind. I was 14 years old and our youth group was making homemade ice cream. As we were churning the ice cream, several of the older teens had the idea of inviting a number of additional youth from the neighborhood. I, being 14, immature, hungry, and not having much relationship with the teens they wanted to spend time with, protested that there would not be enough ice cream. In response to my protest the kids from our group who wanted to include their friends made angry, judgmental comments about my immaturity and selfishness, and expressed contempt in a variety of subtle ways throughout the rest of the evening. As I described this experience both Charlotte and I realized that it was the true source of my negative reaction; and as I recognized where my pain was really coming from, as Charlotte attuned to my pain, and as we both validated my concern that the celebration would not feel as festive with very small portions, my adversarial, defensive attitude towards her quickly resolved. Once we were "back on the same team," had resolved my triggered pain, and had identified my legitimate concern, I was happy to embrace Charlotte's desire to invite friends and we quickly and easily came up with a plan to make sure there would be enough food.

If we had had this conversation without the "describe everything" discipline, these thoughts and emotions from underlying memories would have been barely recognized even in my own mind, I would have had minimal insight regarding where these thoughts and emotions were really coming from, and I would not have shared any of this with Charlotte. My unrecognized and unspoken thoughts and emotions would have resulted in my continuing to be defensive and adversarial towards Charlotte, seriously hindering our ability to work together as a team in coming to a good decision, and neither of us would have had enough information regarding the underlying dynamics to know how to fix the problem.

Note that our experiences with the "describe everything" discipline have not always involved big, important, intense issues. Sometimes we apply the "describe everything" discipline when we are trying to resolve conflicts. Sometimes we apply the "describe everything" discipline when we are trying to discern the factors contributing to important decisions. And, of course, we routinely apply the "describe everything" discipline in Immanuel emotional healing sessions. But the most common context for our "describe everything" practice are the less dramatic thoughts and feelings of everyday life. For example, sometimes as we are walking around the neighborhood, various landmarks, such as a particular house or tree, will remind me of events from my childhood. In the past I would let these memory associations slip in and out of my awareness without commenting on them. Now, as we walk through the neighborhood, I will share this content with Charlotte: "I was just noticing that big rock on the corner, and remembering the sense of accomplishment I felt when I was finally able to climb on top of it," or "As we walk past this building, I'm remembering delivering newspapers to the back porches, and how spooky the rear stairwell would be in December when it would get dark so early." Both Charlotte and I have

experienced these shared memories as a subtle but significant source of additional intimacy and connection.²

II. Many benefits: As you practice this relational discipline over time, you will slowly but surely train your brain to pull all spontaneous mental content through your prefrontal cortices. As this happens, you will become increasingly aware of the stream of thoughts, images, emotions, and physical sensations that flow through your consciousness, and you will also become increasingly able to feel the importance and perceive the meaning of these thoughts, images, emotions, and physical sensations. And as you become more aware of, more able to feel the importance of, and more able to perceive the meaning of spontaneous mental content, you will receive a number of benefits:

A. You will become more self aware, in general: I think this one is self explanatory. As you become more acutely aware of your spontaneous mental content, and as you become increasingly skilled at feeling the importance and perceiving the meaning of this content, you will become more acutely aware of your spontaneous mental content, more able to feel it's importance, and more able to perceive it's meaning. Like I said, I think this one is self explanatory.

B. You will bring previously unrecognized content into conscious awareness: All of us have important mental content that we can't "find" because we don't "see" the clues that would show us the way. However, as you become more acutely aware of your spontaneous mental content, and as you become increasingly skilled at feeling the importance and perceiving the meaning of this content, you will realize that many clues have been passing before you each day, but you simple did not *recognize* them. And you will then begin to "see" these clues that will lead you to important memories, connections, issues, insights, defenses, etc that you had previously been unable to "find."

C. You will expose defenses that hinder emotional healing: As you become more acutely aware of your spontaneous mental content, and as you become increasingly skilled at feeling the importance and perceiving the meaning of this content, it will become much easier to spot unpleasant thoughts and emotions that you choose to turn away from. This will make it easier to see the places where you are using psychological defenses to avoid unresolved painful content. And this, in turn, will make it easier to engage with the Lord to dismantle these defenses. You still have to choose to do this, but the defenses will be more apparent and the choice will be more clearly focused.

D. You will develop "basic skills" that are important in many contexts: In basketball, being able to dribble the ball without looking at it is a basic skill. No matter what else you are trying to do, mastery of dribbling will contribute to accomplishing your goals. In hockey, skating is a basic skill. No matter what else you are trying to do, mastery of skating is a foundational skill that will contribute to success. Similarly, being able to feel the importance and correctly perceive the meaning of mental content are basic skills that will contribute to accomplishing many larger goals.

² Just in case you are wondering, we are not talking all the time. Both of us still feel the need for times of quiet, and it has been fairly easy to negotiate ways to care for these needs as we each "describe everything" in our conversations about this concern. Also, this "describe everything" relational discipline is *not* the same thing as a triggered need to talk all the time.

1.) Following mental content trail to underlying memories: Feeling the importance and perceiving the meaning of mental content will contribute to being able to follow the trail of spontaneous mental content to underlying traumatic memories.

2.) Recognizing and understanding clues regarding blockages: Feeling the importance and perceiving the meaning of mental content will contribute to being able to recognize and understand clues regarding blockages and the interventions needed to resolved them.

3.) Recognizing and utilizing intuitive guidance: The final “output” of the right hemisphere intuitive guidance system is your spontaneous internal mental content. Being able to feel the importance and perceive the meaning of mental content are the basic skills you use to recognize and utilize this intuitive guidance “output.”

4.) Recognizing when your are triggered: Feeling the importance and perceiving the meaning of mental content strongly contribute to being able to recognize when your are triggered.

5.) Recognizing and utilizing the guidance of the Holy Spirit: The Holy Spirit often guides us through the thoughts, emotions, images, memories, and physical sensations that spontaneously come into our awareness. Being able to feel the importance and perceive the meaning of spontaneous mental content are the basic skills you use to recognize and utilize this form of guidance.

III. Noticing and describing spontaneous mental content can be included in many relationships: Charlotte and I started with practicing this relational discipline in our marriage, but as we have continued over many years and become increasingly comfortable with it we have discovered that we can include it in many relationships.³ With most of our family, friends, and colleagues we will now often notice some piece of mental content, and then simply report it. For example, during a discussion with friends at church about a possible block party, I might notice and comment: “I don’t know why, but I’m just noticing that I’m feeling anxious as we talk about this block party idea; and I don’t see the connection, but I’m noticing that as we talk about the block party I’m remembering a boy scout trip that didn’t turn out well.” On many occasions, important insights and connections become clear *as I get words for the mental content that is spontaneously coming into my awareness and then share it with others.*

IV. Several important caveats:

A. Not an excuse to be hurtful: The “describe everything” relational discipline is *not* an excuse to say things you know will be hurtful to the other person. For example, if you are having angry, hurtful thoughts towards your spouse, the “describe everything” discipline is not an excuse to throw kidney punches, such as “The thoughts that come to me are: ‘You’re just a selfish, mean, arrogant pinhead, and your complaints are stupid and immature.’” If these are the thoughts coming into your awareness, you can choose to present them much more gently, such as “I’m having thoughts that are really angry and judgmental towards you.”⁴ Furthermore, if the

³ To varying degrees, as appropriate. Keep the caveats in mind, and use good judgment

⁴ In certain situations it can be valuable to describe the specific angry, judgmental thoughts coming into your awareness because the details will provide clues. If the relationship you are in has the maturity and capacity to handle this kind of intense content, you and the person you are with should be able to discern this together. One of the most

relationship you are in does not yet have the capacity to handle even this gentler statement, you can choose to withhold it, and, instead, discuss it later with the Lord and/or some other wise, trusted person.

The “describe everything” discipline is trying to address the problem of choosing to not describe mental content because it **does not *feel* important**, because it **does not “make sense”** (you don’t yet understand how it pertains to your current conversation), or because it **has not yet been organized into a nice, tidy package**. This is about practicing the brain/mind skill of pulling all your mental content through your prefrontal cortices. The key in this process is to practice being more aware of your spontaneous mental content, and to practice sharing it, out loud, with another person whose face you can see. And for this part of the discipline and practice, the point is to get better at noticing and describing *content that does not feel important, content that does not make sense, and content that has not yet been nicely packaged*, as opposed to forcing yourself to say things that will be hurtful. Choosing to not describe mental content because it would be hurtful to another person is a completely different phenomena.

B. Not a mandate to say things you are not yet comfortable disclosing: The “describe everything” relational discipline is *not* a mandate to force yourself to say things that you don’t yet feel comfortable saying. For example, if a particularly painful, vulnerable, unresolved traumatic memory comes to mind, the “describe everything” discipline is not a mandate to force yourself to talk about it. One option is to describe the painful content in general terms, so that the other person will have some idea of what you’re dealing with. Instead of describing the excruciating details, you might say: “A memory has come to mind that I know is important, but I’m not comfortable saying more about it.” Furthermore, if your relationship with the person you’re talking to is not yet safe enough to handle even this more cautious statement, you can choose to remain silent regarding the painful memory, and, instead, discuss it later with the Lord and/or some other wise, trusted person.

As mentioned above, the “describe everything” discipline is trying to address the problem of choosing to not describe mental content because it **does not *feel* important**, because it **does not “make sense”**, or because it **has not yet been nicely packaged**. Choosing to not describe mental content because it’s too embarrassing, too frightening, or too upsetting for some other reason is a completely different phenomena. If something comes into your awareness that you don’t want to talk about, you do *not* have to describe the details if you don’t feel comfortable doing so.⁵

C. Not a mandate to say things that will cause conflict/be upsetting to others: The “describe everything” relational discipline is *not* a mandate to force yourself to say things, *right*

important indicators that this is the case is that the two of you are able to talk openly about this issue, and you *both* agree it would be helpful to know the details. Even in this situation you can choose to present the words as gently as possible. For example, with an apologetic look on your face, and speaking quietly, you can say: “Boy, I realize these are really angry, judgmental words, but I think it might be helpful to get them out in the light. The thoughts that have been coming to me are.....” In contrast, you can present the exact same words in a much more toxic fashion by glaring at the person and spewing the hurtful words directly at them in a loud, angry voice: “Well, I think you’re...etc.”

⁵ In your closest relationships, can push on this boundary as an exercise in transparency, vulnerability, honesty, and humility, but these issues are not the purpose of the “describe everything” discipline.

now, that will cause conflict/be upsetting to others. For example, let's say your daughter's birthday party is supposed to start in ten minutes, and just as you are putting the last touch on the cake you notice a certain look of preoccupation, anxiety, and guilt on your husband's face. Several other recent observations spontaneously come into your mind, and with a sinking feeling you realize: "In the past, whenever I've noticed this same pattern it has always eventually come out that Pete has gotten back into pornography." The "describe everything" discipline is not a mandate to force yourself to share all of this with Pete *right now*. At some point it will be important to tell Pete about the things you have observed, the sinking feeling in your gut, and the thought that came to you regarding pornography. But not ten minutes before your daughter's birthday party is supposed to start.

In other situations it's important to wait until you are in a better place. For example, let's say you are in a heated conflict with your wife, and spontaneous thoughts come into your mind regarding ways in which her weaknesses are contributing to the problem. However, you also notice that you are triggered, judgmental, and that your relational connection circuits are off line. Putting all this together, you realize that if you "describe everything," you will make comments about her weaknesses that will be unnecessarily hurtful due to the anger, judgment, and lack of compassion that would necessarily be associated with your comments if you make them *right now*. At some point it will be important to share the thoughts that came to you, but they will be less hurtful and more constructive if you first take time to resolve your triggering, release your judgments, and re-establish access to your relational connection circuits.

As already mentioned, the "describe everything" discipline is trying to address the problem of choosing to not describe mental content because it **does not feel important**, because it **does not "make sense"**, or because it **has not yet been nicely packaged**. Choosing to not describe mental content because it would cause conflict/be upsetting to others, *and you perceive that this is not the right time and/or place to address the issue*, is a completely different phenomena. Feel free to save it for later if something comes into your awareness and you perceive it would not be helpful to describe this particular mental content at this particular time.

D. Not left hemisphere analysis: The "describe everything" relational discipline is *not* about giving left-hemisphere theoretical/analytical monologues every time something reminds you of a subject you have thought a lot about. For example, if I'm in a conversation and the other person mentions psychological trauma, her comment might remind me of an essay I have been working on and I could easily launch into an hour of extemporaneous comments related to the topic. The person I'm talking to might even be interested in the topic and welcome my comments, but this would *not* be an application of the "describe everything" discipline we are presenting here. In contrast, application of the describe everything discipline would look like this: I'm in a conversation, the other person mentions psychological trauma, and her comment reminds me of the essay I've been working on. At this point I notice both the association and my internal response to it, and comment: "I've just spent the last week working on an essay about faith-based interventions for resolving psychological trauma, and your comment brings to mind some of the stuff I've been studying and writing. And I can feel an emotional response as well – just thinking about it for a few seconds, I can feel how passionate I am about the subject. In fact, as I focus on the energy I'm feeling right now, the thought comes to me that I might even have some triggered energy. If you ever want to hear more I'd be happy to tell you about it."

Once again, the “describe everything” discipline is trying to address the problem of choosing to not describe mental content because it **does not *feel* important**, because it **does not “make sense”**, or because it **has not yet been nicely packaged**. Choosing to not talk about the content of my essay because other considerations and social cues indicate this is not the place for a lecture on psychological trauma is a completely different phenomena.