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California Headlands, South of San Francisco



Surviving *Difficult* Conversations

Telling the Truth to those Who May Not
Want to Hear It!



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What makes a
conversation **difficult**?

Our Learning Objectives

1. What makes a conversation difficult?
2. Why we engage in self-defeating behaviors.
3. Avoiding the Amygdala Hijack!
4. Why people may not feel safe when interacting with others.
5. Embracing the *Collaborative Mindset*.
6. An integrating model for navigating a difficult conversation.

A Definition . . .

A difficult conversation is a situation in which at least two parties are engaged where (a) there are differing opinions, perceptions, and needs/wants, (b) feelings and emotions run strong, and (c) the consequences or stakes are important to all parties.

A Difficult Conversation

- **No listening**, no dialogue.
- **Emotions** (vs. reason) drive the conversation.
- Little **safety** (no truth-telling).
- Perceptions of a “**zero sum**” game.
- One or both parties going for a “**win**” (forcing the other to “lose”).
- Solidifying **positions** – going to extremes

Why Self-Defeating Behaviors?

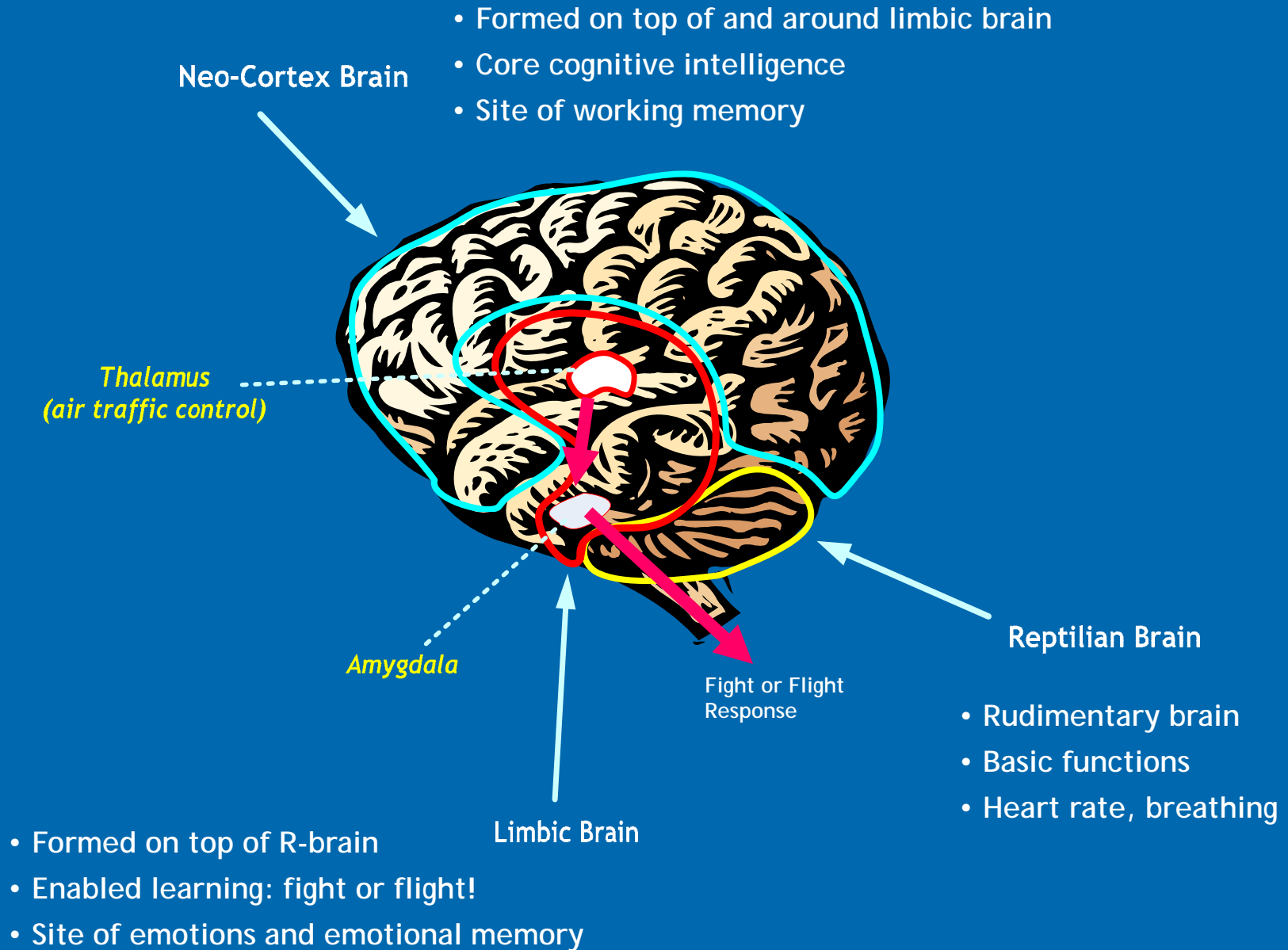
1. Our fight or flight response.
2. We're not prepared (*Where did THAT come from?*).
3. We don't know what we want or need.
4. We don't have the skills.
5. We fear losing control (*and control is everything!*).
6. We're embarrassed or feel vulnerable.
7. We tend to focus on blame, not cause.



Before seeking revenge, first
dig two graves.

— Chinese proverb

Our Three Brains . . .



An Amygdala Hijack!!

- Your “fight or flight” response kicks in . . . heart races, blood pressure increases, sweating profusely, uneasy feeling in the “gut,” clenched jaw, twitching, tapping foot, cold extremities as the brain rushes blood to muscles needed for fighting or fleeing . . .
- Emotions overwhelm your thinking and actions.
- You are thinking and acting *against your own will!*
- You are unable to accurately read others’ emotions .
- You can’t find the right words . . . (stumbling, stuttering when you try to speak).
- You are unable to focus your thinking or actions.

Store worker charged in attack

EAU CLAIRE — A Radio Shack employee in Eau Claire is facing disorderly conduct and battery charges for allegedly punching a customer.

Former Canadian official accused in road rage death

By IAN AUSTEN
The New York Times

OTTAWA — As the high-profile attorney general for Ontario, Michael Bryant had championed severe and controversial traffic safety laws. On Tuesday, he was charged with criminal negligence causing death and dangerous driving causing death in an unusually violent episode of road rage.

The arrest of Bryant stemmed from a collision between a bicycle and an automobile in Toronto's most prestigious shopping district late Monday evening. The episode started off as minor but swiftly escalated, leading to the death of Darcy Allan Sheppard, 33, who was identified as a bicycle courier.

After the collision, Sheppard apparently grabbed the driver's side door and held on. Within moments, the police received reports of a Saab convertible rac-

ing past the fashionable shops of Bloor Street with a man clinging to its side.

Two construction workers doing repairs along the road told CTV, a Canadian television network, that the car accelerated and the motorist repeatedly mounted the sidewalk and drove near lampposts in what seemed to be an attempt to brush off the man hanging onto the side.

Several witnesses said that the clinging man flew off the car after striking a mailbox. Sgt. Tim Burrows of the Toronto police traffic division said Sheppard died shortly after arriving at a hospital.

The convertible raced into the covered driveway of a nearby luxury hotel, the witnesses said. Not long after, Bryant was filmed by television crews sitting in the back of a police cruiser.

On Tuesday, Bryant left a Toronto police station after being charged.

Dispute gets down and dirty

ment. She knew it was too big to be from her dog, so she shoveled it up and dumped it on Battles' stoop, figuring it came from her neighbor's dog.

"There is some dispute over how exactly the situation escalated from this point, but what is clear is that when the officer arrived, the women had shoveled up lots of feces," police spokesman Joel DeSpain said in an incident report.

According to a police report, Battles said Bell threatened to cut her with a razor if she threw feces on Bell's new green Saturn. But when an officer arrived, Bell's Saturn and Battles' beige Oldsmobile "had large amounts of dog feces piled and smeared across their windshields," the report states.

"During the flinging of the feces, some

ended up on Bell's clothes, and before the battle was over, both women had squared off with the shovels, although neither delivered an actual blow to the other," DeSpain said.

"The officer observed that the entire backyard was covered in a winter's worth of dog defecation made much more obvious with the melting snow," he added.

There are three dogs in the apartment building with a common backyard — a pit bull, a border collie and a Rottweiler, DeSpain said, noting, "The officer said it was impossible to determine which went where."

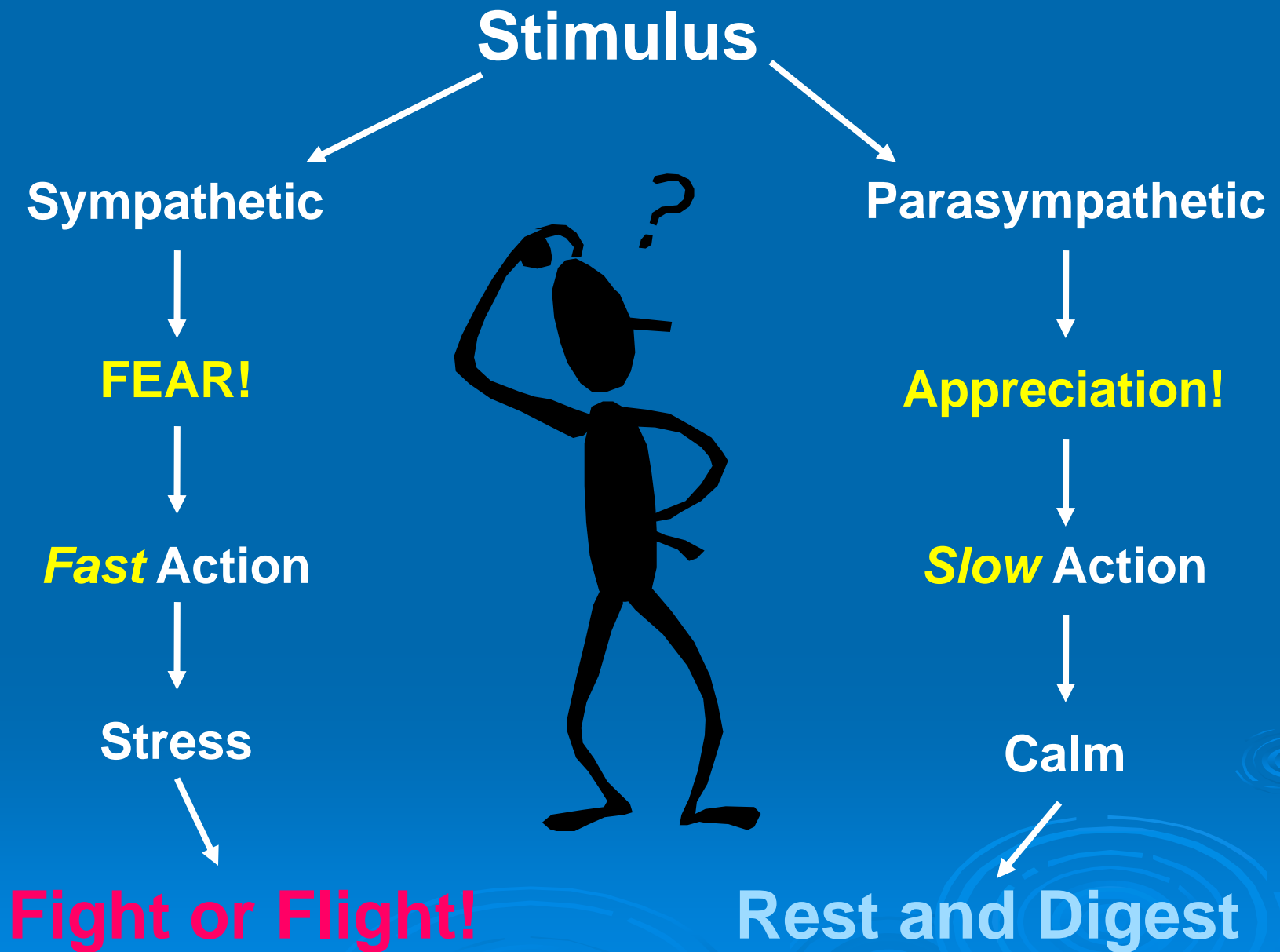
The officer negotiated an agreement for both women to have their canines do their duty on their owner's side of the backyard, DeSpain said.

Wis. State Journal 3/10/2010

Understanding Our Physiology

Fear and **appreciation** cannot both be present in a person at the same time.

- When we are **afraid**, our ability to appreciate, express concern, demonstrate empathy, listen, and so forth goes down.
- When we **appreciate/listen**, we tend to extinguish fear and loathing.



Calming Your Amygdala!

- What actions can we take to *calm our own* Amygdala?
- What actions can we take to help *calm others'* Amygdala?

SQR³

Stop

Quiet

Respirate (breathe!)

Reflect

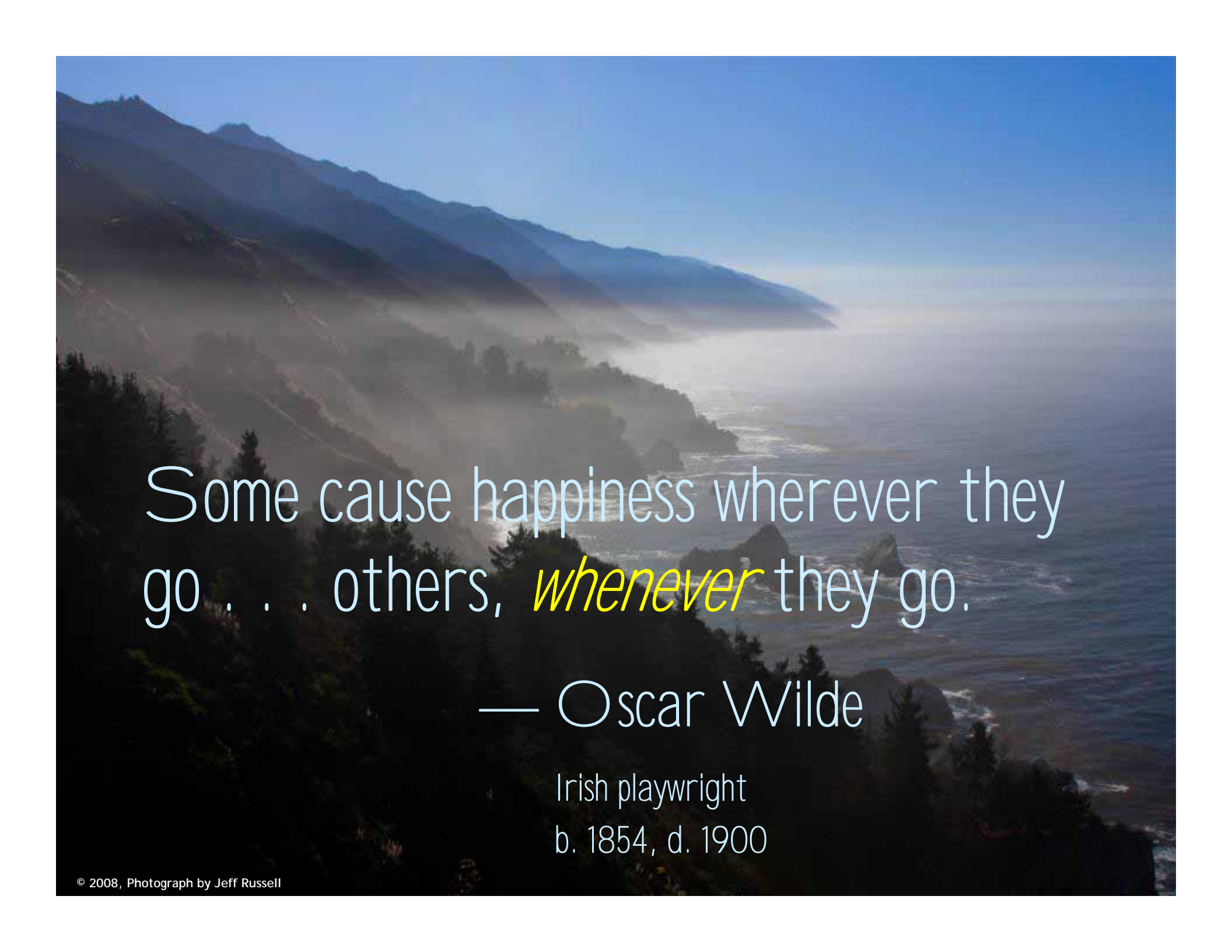
Respond!

Why We/Others Don't Feel Safe

- **Feeling Threatened** — We may feel unsafe if we think that the other person's intentions and goals are aimed at frustrating or preventing us from achieving what we want in a given situation.
- **Feeling a Loss of Control** — We may feel unsafe if another person is taking control of our situation, circumstances, fate or future.

Why We/Others Don't Feel Safe

- **Feeling Exposed or Vulnerable** – We may feel unsafe if we believe that some perceived personal weakness, vulnerability, mistake, or failing will be revealed or exposed by the other person.
- **Feeling Disrespected** – We may feel unsafe if we think that the other person is dismissive and disrespectful of our ideas, opinions, performance, contributions, effort, and so forth.

A scenic photograph of a coastline. In the foreground, there are dark, silhouetted trees and a rocky shore. The middle ground shows a body of water with white-capped waves crashing against the shore. In the background, a range of mountains stretches across the horizon, partially shrouded in a thick, white fog or mist. The sky is a clear, pale blue.

Some cause happiness wherever they
go . . . others, *whenever* they go.

— Oscar Wilde

Irish playwright

b. 1854, d. 1900

A Mindset Continuum

My-Way
Mindset

*I am right, you
are wrong.*

*I'm in charge,
you're not.*

*My version of
the truth is the
right one.*

*I need to win,
you need to
lose.*



Collaborative
Mindset

*I have
something to
learn.*

*People are
doing their
best.*

*I only know
part of the
story.*

*We both can
win.*

**In every situation and in every relationship
you always *choose* a position on this Mindset
Continuum.**

Where are you now?

How do we typically
respond to stressful and
uncomfortable situations?



When Under Stress . . .

In stressful situations, we tend to adopt a *My-Way Mindset* that seeks to protect us, to enable us to avoid the threat, dodge the bullet, regain control, pass the blame, escape the embarrassment, and run for cover . . .



But, We have a Choice!

- We can follow the *My Way Mindset* and let it lead us toward ineffective relationships and results.
- Or . . . We can consciously engage in an alternative approach: the *Collaborative Mindset*.

Collaborative Mindset

- Based on an alternative set of governing values.
- Focuses on understanding and learning.
- Assumes that we only know and understand just a part of the puzzle.
- Honors other people's perspective — *especially* when there is disagreement.
- Is more likely to lead to effective relationships and positive results.

The Collaborative Mindset – A Winning Approach

Outcomes reinforce values, assumptions, and behaviors.

Outcomes

- Better communication and understanding.
- Root causes of challenges and difficulties are identified.
- Stronger and healthier relationships.
- Greater trust.
- Lower interpersonal conflict.
- Greater compassion.
- Better results (e.g., productivity and performance).
- Deeper and more meaningful conversations.
- Collaborative learning.

Behaviors

- Speak honestly.
- Share all information that's pertinent to the situation.
- Identify and test assumptions.
- Suspend judgment.
- Share my reasoning and intent and inquire into others' reasoning, intentions, perspective, knowledge, and experience.
- Listen for understanding.
- Focus on exploring mutual interests, not defending positions.
- Develop shared meaning of key words, concepts, ideas, events, decisions, and actions.
- Share decision making and action planning.
- See the parts; understand the whole.
- Use critical reflection to examine my deeply held beliefs and behavioral patterns.

Assumptions

- I have something to learn from others in this relationship or situation.
- I have information, knowledge, and experience that I bring to every situation—and so do others.
- People are able to make free and informed choices when they receive all relevant information.
- There are many right answers to any problem or challenge.
- Giving up control increases a person's influence.
- Empathy is a bridge to understanding.
- Differences provide opportunities for insight and learning.
- People are simply trying to do the right thing under the circumstances they face.

Values

- **Authenticity.**
- **Valid information.**
- **Free and informed choice.**
- **Personal commitment to the choices made.**
- **Transparency.**
- **Empathy.**
- **No one person's truth is absolute.**

Why Do We Use the *Unilateral Control* Mindset?

1. Our fight or flight response.
2. It's what we learned from our parents, siblings (for survival), school yard encounters . . .
3. We don't have good role models.
4. We don't have the skills.
5. We didn't know that there *was* an alternative!

An Integrated Approach for Creating/Sustaining Dialogue

Diagnosis and Planning

Creating/Sustaining Dialogue

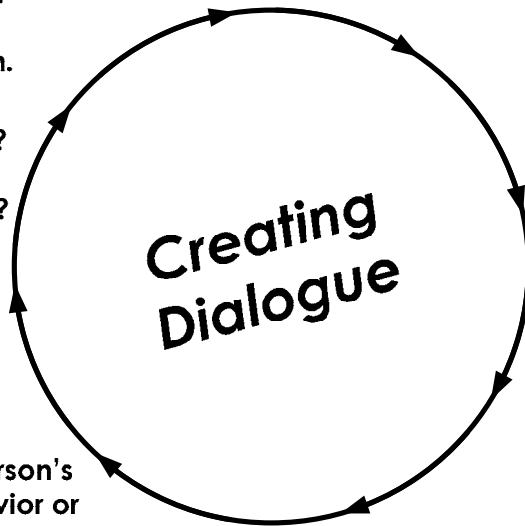
Tools

Collaborative Mindset

An Open Mind

The Ladder of Inference

- 4 Decide if, when, and how to have the difficult conversation.
- 3 What are your goals? What do you/don't you want to happen?
- 2 Identify your assumptions and judgments. How do these affect your thinking?
- 1 Identify the other person's problematical behavior or results.



- 5 Invite dialogue. Describe your view of the facts and invite the other person to confirm or modify your understanding of the facts.
- 6 Tentatively share your assumptions and test for different perspectives. Invite him/her to tell his/her story.
- 7 Discuss the issue. Listen deeply. Seek and affirm mutual understanding, respect, and interests. Discover common ground. Explore solutions that meet common/each other's interests.
- 8 Find the "middle way" and mutually design "next steps."

Explain your reasoning and intentions.

Explore the other person's reasoning and intentions.

Active listening

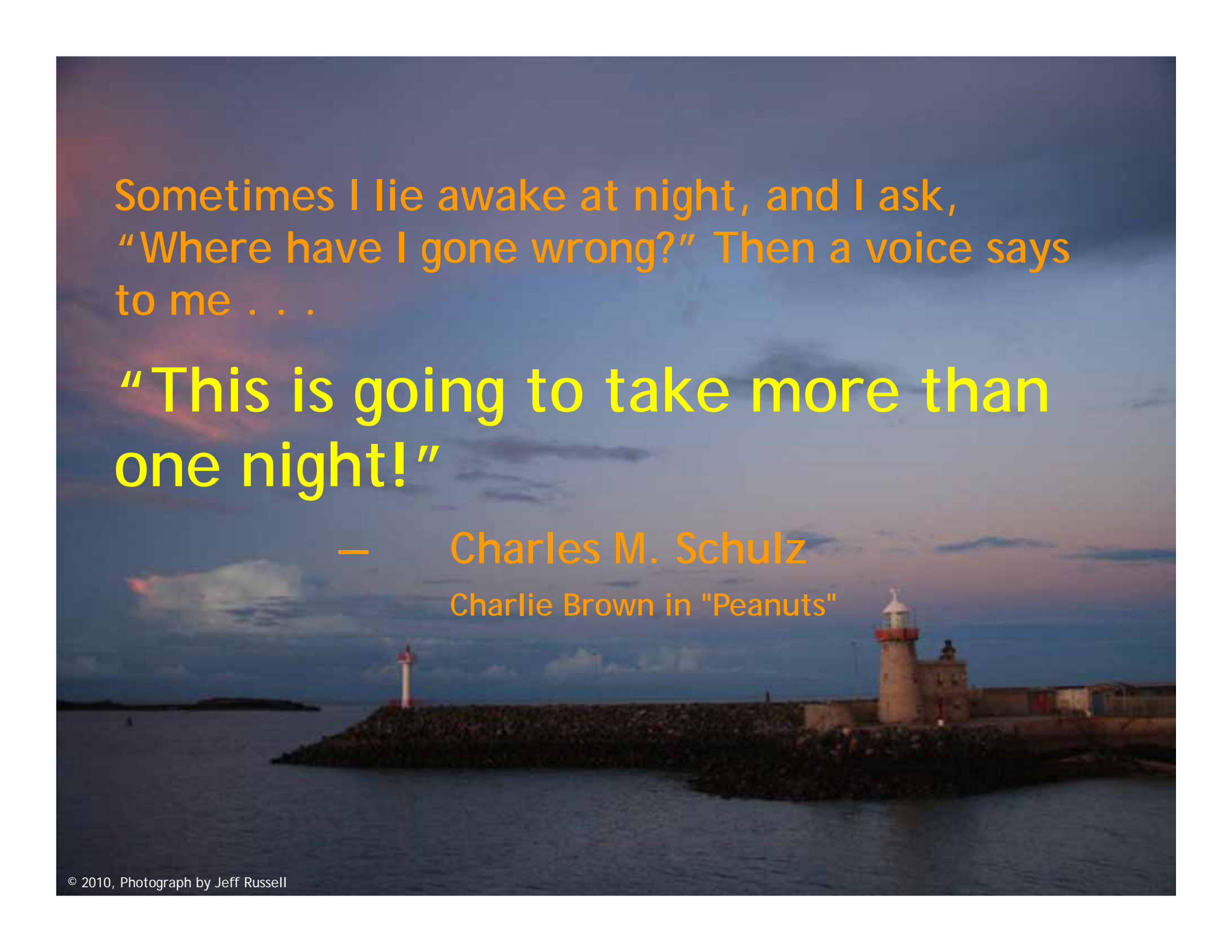
Creating shared meaning.

A photograph of a sunrise over the Santa Lucia Range. The sun is low on the horizon, partially obscured by a tall, thin grass stalk on the left. The sky is a deep blue, and the water in the distance is calm. In the foreground, there are several tall, golden-brown grass stalks with feathery heads, some in sharp focus and others blurred. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

Sunrise over the Santa Lucia Range

Everything that irritates us about others
can lead us to an understanding of
ourselves.

— Carl Jung
Swiss psychiatrist
b. 1875, d. 1961



Sometimes I lie awake at night, and I ask,
“Where have I gone wrong?” Then a voice says
to me

“This is going to take more than
one night!”

— Charles M. Schulz
Charlie Brown in “Peanuts”

Thank you!

Good luck with your *difficult conversation!*

Visit RCI at www.RussellConsultingInc.com for more information on our training and consulting services.

