

## FOREWORD

---

Welcome. The book you are beginning is not a typical “self-help” or “self-improvement” book, although it can certainly support you in helping yourself and improving yourself in a number of ways. In a bigger way, this is also an introduction to an emerging way of thinking, a new way of understanding ourselves, our language and our ways of learning, growing and relating to each other. It’s also in this larger light that I invite you to move through these pages.

We are living in extraordinary times, and are facing changes and challenges in virtually every aspect of our lives. The nature of the transformation that humanity is currently living through demands that we re-examine and quite possibly change our fundamental assumptions in every single area of life. And as we know very well, this is an enormous task for multiple reasons.

First of all, we don’t live our assumptions as assumptions, we live them as “that’s the way things are.” This forces us to go through a reflective process that is not only intellectually challenging but also emotionally demanding. We must first identify our assumptions that are hidden in the transparency of living. Then we must confront the reality that the remainder of our thinking is resting on these assumptions. This confrontation—being forced to revise many realms of our understanding—can make us feel like we’re in a free fall.

Secondly, the simple idea that “truths” that I have known all my life can be superseded by other beliefs is, to say the least, threatening. Therefore, we fall into the tendency to oppose change, to seek refuge in some unquestionable and final truth. The fundamentalist in us is awakened.

In times like these, when assumptions of all kinds in many different domains of our thinking are called to critical examination, social unrest, governmental repression, religious cultism, crime, terrorism, and mental illness increase. But also we witness the creation of new disciplines and practices, and the expansion of possibilities in a wide range of fields. In other words, “nothing vast comes to human territory without bringing its shadows with it.”

Throughout history, we have had some assumptions that have been particularly resistant to change, remaining engraved in our common sense for millennia. ***This is the case for the fundamental assump-***

*tions we have about human language as a descriptive consensual code and as a passive phenomenon.* In these assumptions, language was limited to describing what we perceived or felt or what we thought about things, but had nothing to do with those “things” themselves. Speaking did not change anything; language was passive, fundamentally separated from action. And the inability to change these particular assumptions has resulted in a great cost for humanity: ***we have not been able to tap consistently into one of the most powerful self-transformational forces available to us.*** The assumptions have always held that we could *describe* and *analyze* ourselves but, bottom line, we couldn’t *change* ourselves. We have lived in a kind of inherent resignation, essentially transparent to us.

This began to change during the “linguistic revolution” that took place in philosophy at the beginning of the last century. The English philosopher J.L. Austin began a critical revision of those assumptions. Today, we realize that language is not only a descriptive phenomenon, as unquestionably it is, but it is also a *generative* and *active* one. Our language is an essential element in constituting each of us as the unique observer we are, in creating the “me” who sees what I see and the “you” who sees what you see. Through the power it grants us to make distinctions, and by enabling us to make things happen, we are able to design ourselves as well as to alter the world in which we participate.

The last great philosopher who claimed the transformative power of language before Austin and other “philosophers of language” had been Heraclitus, at the end of the sixth century before Christ. He claimed that “Logos,” the word, was the basis of all that existed and was the force that transformed chaos into order. After him, language was never again thought of as generative and creative until the beginning of the last century.

I have been an “ontological coach” for over twenty years. I know the power of language not from an intellectual approach but from recurrent encounters with people who attend my programs in pursuit of a *learning* that goes beyond gathering information or conquering effective action. They attend out of a disturbing and also freeing realization: there must be a *learning that transcends the traditional kind of learning*—a learning that aims beyond the descriptive informational approach and beyond the utilitarian goal of effective action. They realize that those may be important steps at some level but, ultimately, they are insufficient to deal with their quest for **effective living**. And here, language is of the essence.

So what connections can we make between language and living? Between language and being? Between language and happiness? Let's start by realizing that we live in language in the same way that fish live in water: it is transparent to us. It's not that we don't know that we speak and listen, but rather we are unaware that language is *shaping* the world as we see it. When we see the sky after an astronomer shares with us distinctions about celestial bodies, we are able to see what we were unable to see before that conversation. We see galaxies, planets, and satellites where before there were only a bunch of "stars." This happens to us all the time when we engage in conversations with people who share with us distinctions we did not have before. Why do those things appear to be obviously there now but were not there a few seconds ago? How much am I unable to observe because I lack distinctions? What might I be missing? How does all of this affect my possibilities for action if, of course, I can't intervene in a world I don't see?

We also live with the illusion that *we have conversations* when, in reality, most of the time *our conversations have us*. It takes a strong process of reflection to escape from our conversational inertia with all of its limiting consequences. We belong to historical discourses, old cultural and societal narratives and interpretative traditions that have a hold on us. Waking up to that fact generates a freedom that's unimaginable before the experience! The way to happiness requires a process of initiation, a reflection that allows us to see that most of the time what we call "my thinking" is nothing more than a historical burp. And to notice that the claim "that's the way I am" isn't rooted in any biological or psychological facts. Instead, these point more to our having participated in a lifelong interpretive path that we did not personally or consciously choose. As Heidegger would say, it's more accurate to say that we find ourselves "thrown" into the particular conversations we're living in. Becoming aware of this opens the door to a new way of learning, a new set of choices, an entirely different set of possibilities.

Finally, let me say that language lives braided with emotions. Language is never isolated, never separated from the world of moods and emotions. There is no such thing as unemotional thinking or unemotional conversing. Our every internal and external conversation is already coming from a particular emotional space, as well as holding the built-in potential to impact and change the emotional state of others. Emotions are predispositions for action; that is, they have the result of pre-disposing

us *toward* certain actions and *away* from others. And, as we have already learned, language is action. It's clear that our moods and emotions are tremendously important in shaping and creating "the world we have in front of us," as well as our ability to adapt, change and learn. They are tightly connected to language in some obvious and not-so-obvious ways. A new understanding of language is essential for managing our moods and emotions, as well as for more effectively designing our personal and professional relationships.

And in times like these, a new way of understanding language may very well be essential for bringing about more effective and more beneficial ways of relating, living, learning and solving problems—at a multitude of levels. If all of this interests you, I am glad you have this book in your hands. You are about to initiate a wonderful voyage into a world that often will challenge your common sense understanding and your views about beginning a new kind of learning. I invite you to stick with it. It's worthwhile all the way.

***Julio Olalla***  
Boulder, Colorado  
April, 2004