

California Headlands, South of San Francisco



# Surviving *Difficult* Conversations



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



With Jeff Russell  
Russell Consulting, Inc.

Port Townsend Harbor, Washington

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. Actions to restore safety
6. Embracing the *Mutual Learning Mindset*.
7. 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, or needs/wants, (b) feelings and emotions run strong, and (c) the consequences or stakes are important to all parties.

# A Difficult Conversation

- No **safety** (no one able or willing to tell the truth).
- **Emotions** define the conversation.
- **No listening**, no dialogue.
- Both going for a “**win**” (forcing the other to “lose”).
- Each side **playing a role**: victim, villain, helpless martyr, etc.

# Why Do We Self-Destruct?

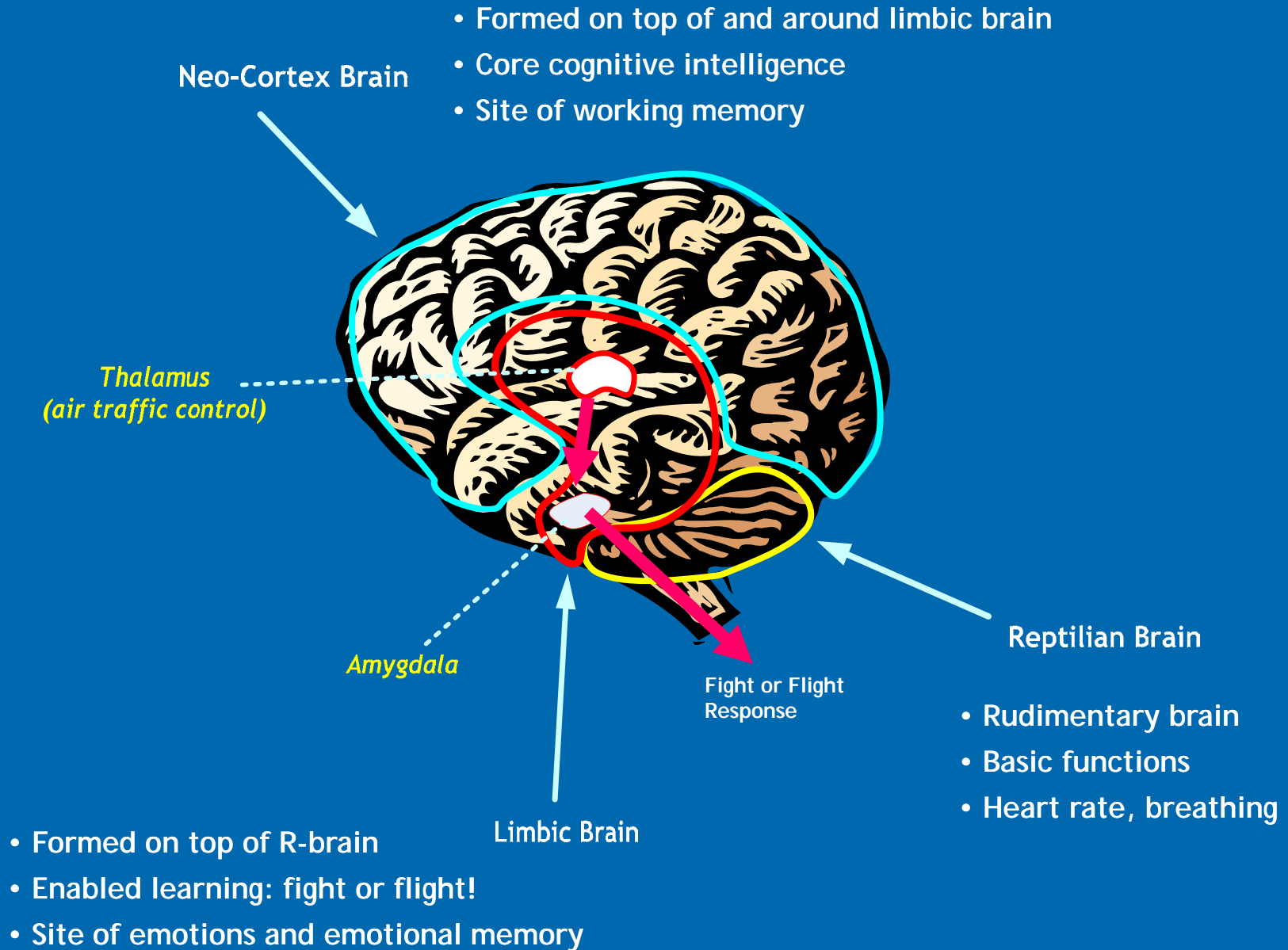
1. Our fight or flight response.
2. We're not prepared (*Where did THAT come from?*).
3. We don't know what we want.
4. We don't have the skills.
5. We fear a loss of control (and control is *everything!*).
6. We're embarrassed or feel vulnerable.



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."

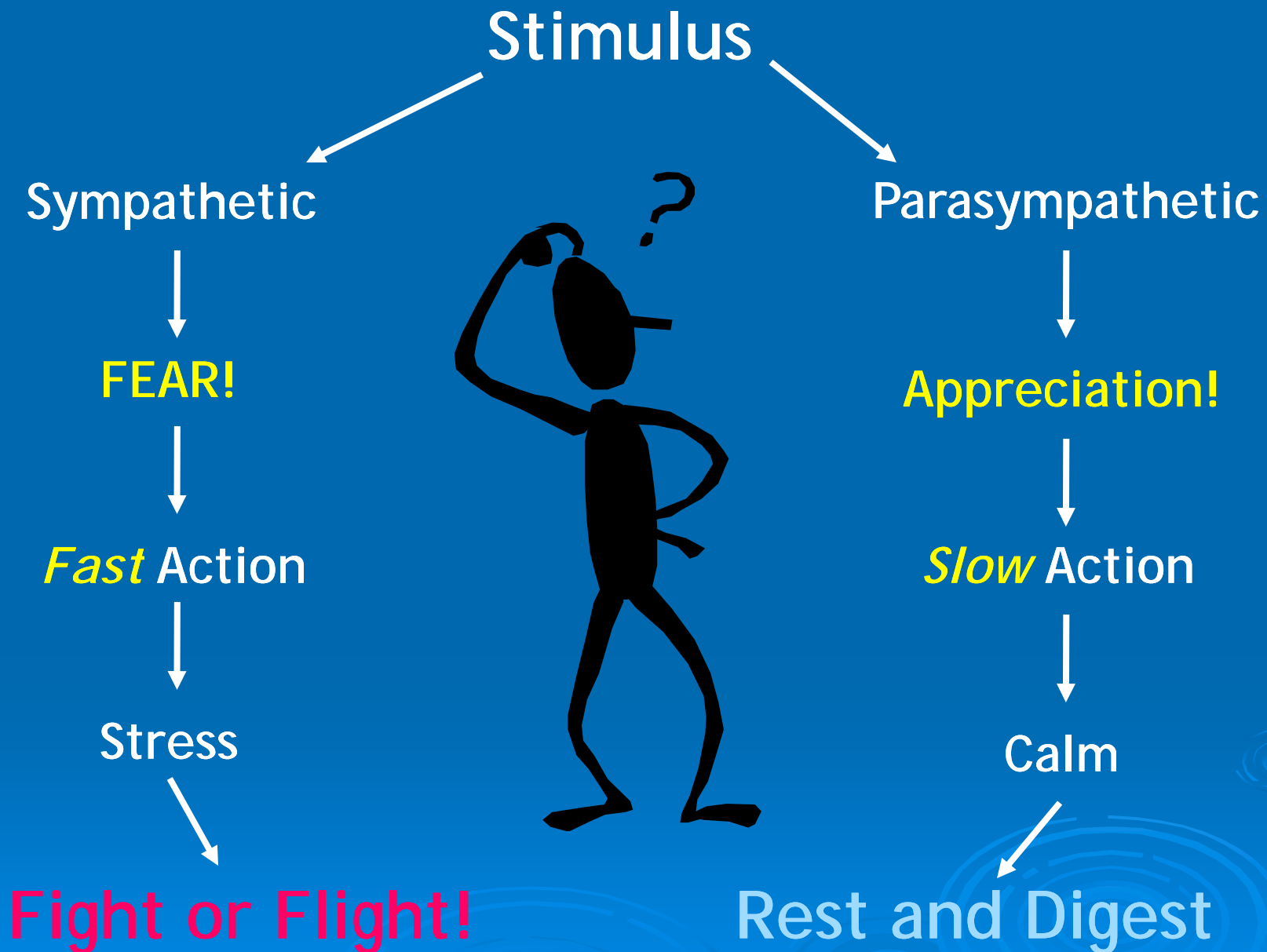
The officer negotiated an agreement for both women to have their canines do their duty on their owner's side of the backyard, DeSpain said.

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.



# SQR<sup>3</sup>

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.

# Steps to Finding Safety

1. Recognize the signs.
2. Stop the Amygdala Hijack!
3. Step out of the content of the conversation.  
Ask yourself:
  - Why do I or the other person feel unsafe right now?
  - Identify *what you really want/need* and what you don't want/need in this situation. Think of the wants/don't wants for yourself, for the other person, and for the relationship.
  - Identify what you *need to do right now* to achieve your wants/needs, communicate your don't wants/needs, and create safety for the other person.
  - **What can I learn** from the other person right now?

# Steps to Safety

## 4. Step back into the conversation.

- a) **Offer a genuine apology** – Identify what you may be doing that has contributed to the problem and then apologize. Demonstrate a real change of heart.
- b) **Tell the person what you don't want to see happen:** to feel as though you are not respecting their opinions/ideas or to mistrust your intentions and purposes
- c) **Tell the person what you do want to see happen** – for yourself, the other person, for your relationship

## 5. Verify that safety has been restored.

A scenic photograph of a coastline. In the foreground, there are dark, silhouetted evergreen trees. The middle ground shows a steep, forested hillside leading down to a rocky shore. The ocean is visible, with white waves crashing against the rocks. A thick layer of fog or mist hangs over the water and the lower slopes of the hills. In the background, a range of mountains stretches across the horizon under a clear, pale blue sky.

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

— Oscar Wilde

Irish playwright

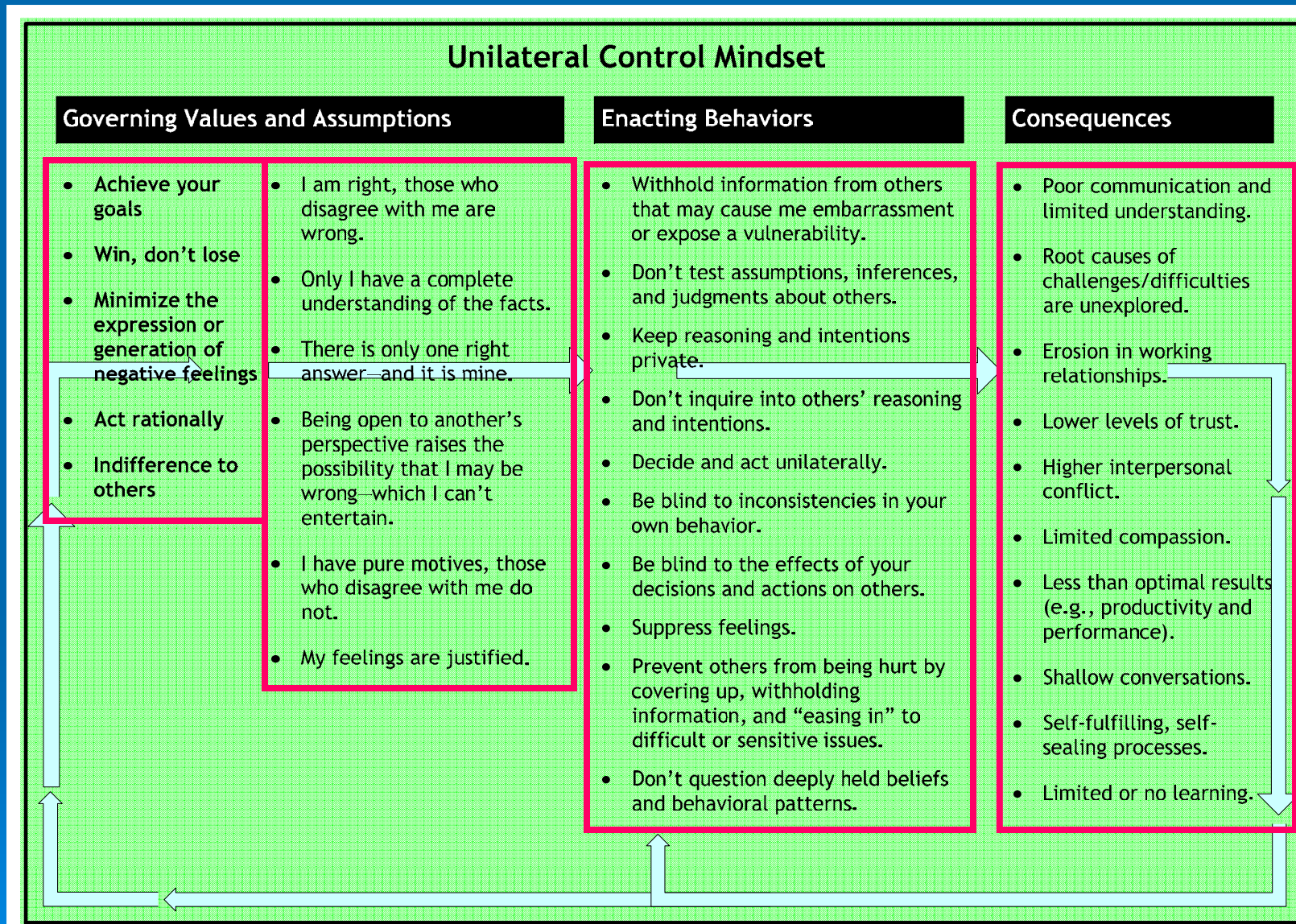
b. 1854, d. 1900

# When Under Stress . . .

In stressful situations, we tend to adopt a *unilateral control* 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 . . .



# Unilateral Control Mindset – A Losing Proposition



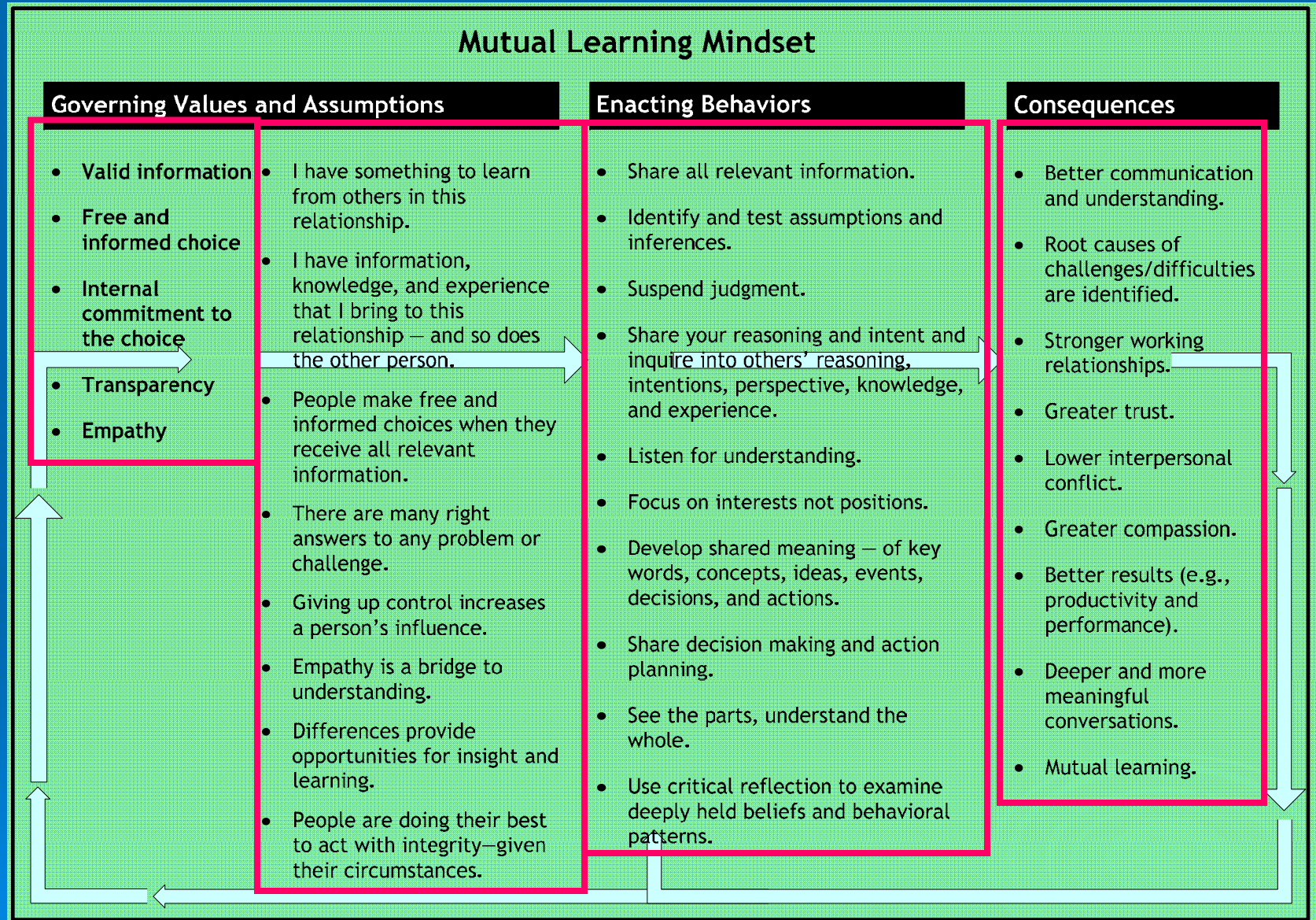
# But, We have a Choice!

- We can follow the *Unilateral Control Mindset* and let it lead us toward ineffective relationships and results.
- Or . . . We can consciously engage in an alternative approach: the *Mutual Learning Mindset*.

# Mutual Learning Mindset

- Based on an alternative set of governing values.
- Focuses on understanding and learning.
- Assumes that we know and understand only 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.

# Mutual Learning Mindset – A Winning Approach



# Governing Values . . .

- **Valid Information** – All relevant information is shared so that everyone understands what they need to know
- **Free and Informed Choice** – People make their independent decisions based upon valid information, not on pressure
- **Internal Commitment to Decisions** – Individuals take responsibility for the decisions that they participate in
- **Transparency** – Individuals feel comfortable with open, honest, and direct communication with no “hidden agendas” or undiscussables
- **Empathy** – Individuals have compassion for others and differing viewpoints and a genuine interest in understanding another’s perspective.

# The Enacting Behaviors

1. Share all relevant information.
2. Identify and test assumptions and inferences.
3. Suspend judgment.
4. Share your reasoning and intent and inquire into others' reasoning, intentions, perspective, knowledge, and experience.
5. Listen for understanding .

# The Enacting Behaviors

6. Focus on interests, not positions.
7. Develop shared meaning of key words, concepts, ideas, etc.
8. Share decision making and action planning.
9. See the parts, understand the whole.
10. Use critical reflection to examine deeply held beliefs, and behavioral patterns

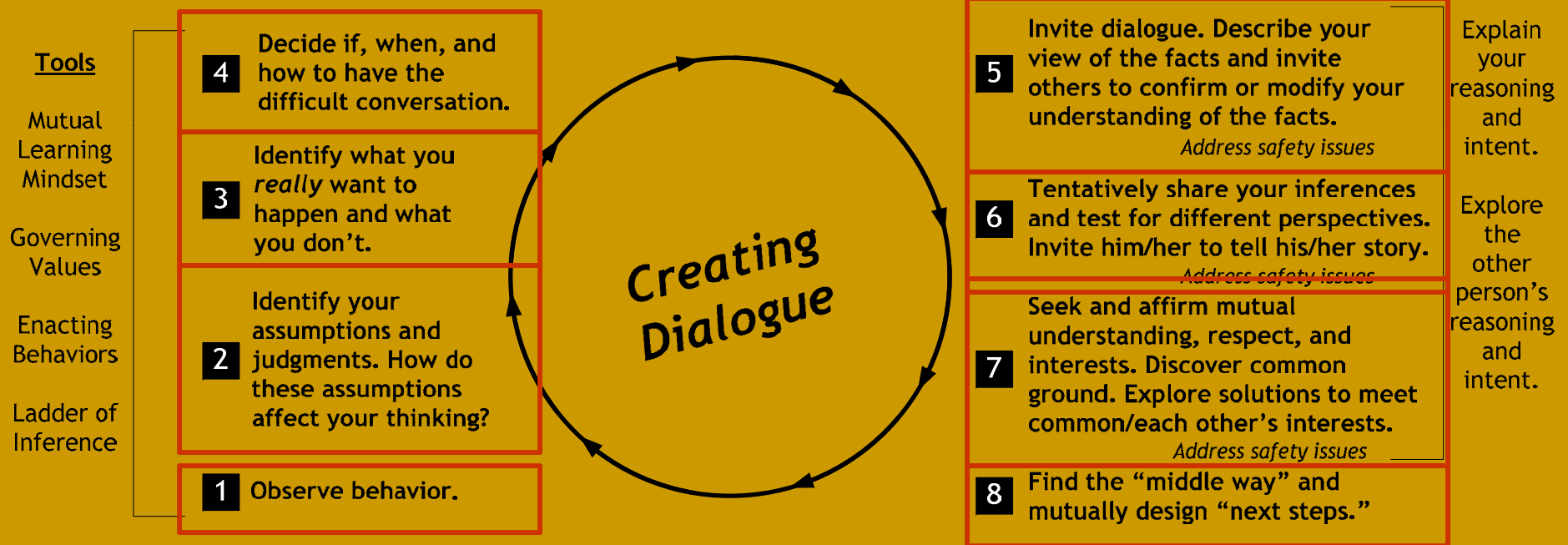
# Why Do We Use the *Unilateral Control* Mindset?

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!

# Creating/Sustaining Dialogue

## Diagnosis and Planning Steps

## Creating/Sustaining Dialogue Steps

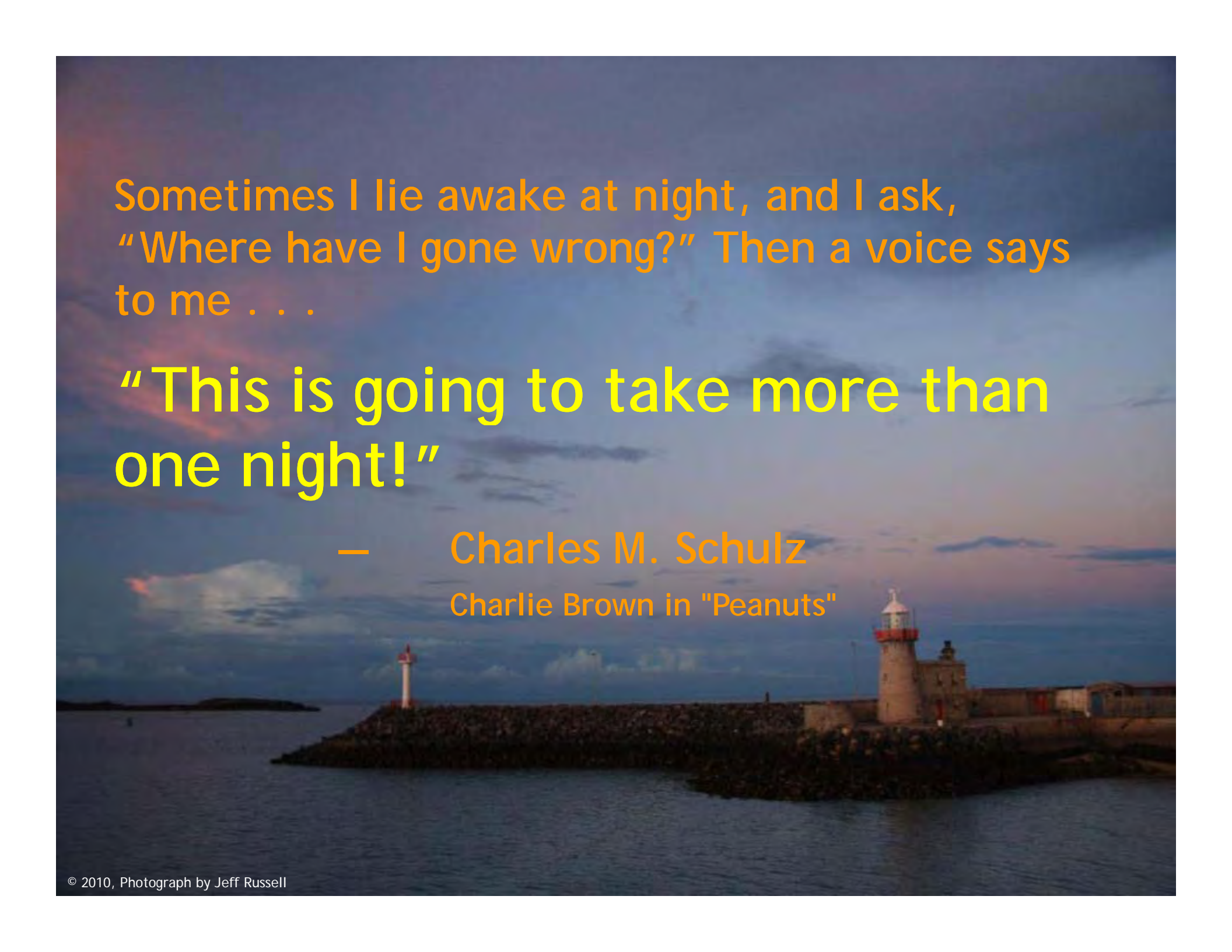


A photograph of a sunrise over the Santa Lucia Range. The sun is low on the horizon, partially obscured by a mountain peak, creating a warm, golden glow. In the foreground, tall, feathery grasses are silhouetted against the bright light. The sky is a clear, pale blue. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

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!*

The PPT will be on our website by Monday.

Give me your b-card if you want to a free subscription to our newsletter.

Visit RCI at [www.RussellConsultingInc.com](http://www.RussellConsultingInc.com) for more information on our training and consulting services.

