

Mel May
Mel Interview 1
Sampling Day 1

Below in black is a word-for-word transcript of the October 10 interview with Mel that is available on YouTube at <https://youtu.be/yAy3Ai36jOY>. In brown are conversations about the Descriptive Experience Sampling process that took place during the interview. In green are Russ's comments, and in blue are Julian's comments about and explanations of the Descriptive Experience Sampling process inserted after the interview. If you have corrections, suggestions, or questions, please post them as YouTube comments.

RTH = Russ Hurlburt

JBK = Julian Bass-Krueger

Mel = Mel May

0:01 JBK: And how was your experience of sampling, Mel, for the first day?

0:10 Mel: Um it was interesting. I was very... I went for a walk around Central Park with a friend beforehand and so I was like, telling her about it. And I was like, it was hotly anticipated. I was like yep, I'm gonna like do that this afternoon, so I was like excited. And then... um, I was quite startled [laughs] when the first beep went off like y'know I was like *oh my gosh. It's happening!* Um, and then I was trying to make myself go about my day and ignore what I was doing, y'know? Like as in like [Phone rings, disrupts audio] ...what I was doing, y'know like as in like what you had said last time, Russ, like the idea is to not be consciously aware that you're doing sampling. So I was like trying to do that. Um, and I feel like I settled into that a bit more like after, maybe three beeps, then I kind of was chill about it. But I think when you first start, you kind of an, like, waiting for them a little bit. [JBK: Um hmm.] But then like that kind of normalized. Um and yeah like I went out and about with it in, and so was like, doing jobs and stuff like I was trying to like, live my day rather than change what I was doing because I was doing this, if that makes sense.

0:10 Julian comments: It's interesting that Mel describes anticipating the beep, though this kind of experience doesn't show up in her samples. If lots of samples did show anticipation for the beep, it would be worth questioning if the DES method was a good fit for Mel. In this case, however, perhaps experience of anticipation didn't fall right on beeped moments, or maybe Mel's cognitive biases lead her to overestimate the degree that it occupied her experience. In any case, I start with general questions about the sampling experience (rather than getting right into specific samples) to more broadly gauge a participant's comfort with the method. It's not useful for getting knowledge about experience with the scope of DES samples themselves.

Russ comments: I have frequently used the metaphor of diamonds vs. glass:

Most people recognize that the truth about themselves is uniquely precious, the diamond among the polished glass heap of narrative, mask, defense, and so on. Most people, when they apprehend 24 or 30 diamonds, particularly after they have observed the glass being swept away by the DES questioning, recognize that 24 or 30 small diamonds are far more valuable than the pile of glass. (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006, p. 255)

Chapter 17 (really the entire book) made the point that bits of pristine experience are radically non-subjective – they have particular, pretty darn directly apprehendable characteristics – and that distinguishes them from other presumed mental structures or processes that are matters of inference, opinion, or impression. Let's call the radically non-subjective bits "diamonds" (following Hurlburt & Heavey, 2006, p. 255) and the other presumed structures/processes "glass"; I invoke that metaphor to highlight the relatively unyielding phenomenal nature of bits of pristine experience. (Hurlburt, 2011 p. 347)

The point of that metaphor is that I think that there are lots of things (piles of glass) that look more or less like actual experience, but are really soft and worthless—we don't really know what people are talking about. And then there are few things that are diamonds—we have gotten ourselves into a position (mined the diamonds) where we know what we are talking about.

DES is simple, in my view: know the difference between diamonds and glass. If you really do know that difference, then DES is simply the process of sorting through the heap of shiny things looking for the actual diamond, and then discarding the rest.

In my view, JBK's opening question (0:01: "And how was your experience of sampling, Mel, for the first day?") is a glass question. It invites her to give all sorts of non-diamond self-characterizations, which she happily does. In my view, the question and its answer is just piling on glass that I am eventually going to have to work to brush away. For example, she says "And I was like, it was hotly anticipated. I was like yep, I'm gonna like do that this afternoon, so I was like excited," and Julian finds that interesting. I find it a shiny bit that is going to be an impediment to get to the diamonds. I accept that it is true that Mel was excited, but that is a glassy-kind of characterization. When, exactly, was she excited? Consistently throughout the period? Really bodily excited? What kind of excitement? We don't know the answer to any of those questions, and probably can't know the answer to any of them, which means, as it seems to me, that JBK has, right off the bat, started colluding with Mel in the pretending to know what you're talking about when you talk about experience.

It may seem that I am being picky, which I am. But I think that if JBK really, down deep, understood the difference between diamonds and glass, it would not occur to him to ask a glass question. He doesn't have to ask glass questions. He could have asked, for example, "Do you have any questions?" Or he could have said, "I'm eager to get to the beeps." Or "Should we be talking about anything before we get to the samples?" There are lots of things that could be said that don't ask for her to give glassy characterizations of her experience as does "And how was your experience of sampling, Mel, for the first day?"

1:28 JBK: Um hmm. Sounds like you went about it right.

1:29 Mel: Okay, um.

1:34 RTH: And, and, I, and I would add to that, that what you reported was pretty much standard procedure—she was startled by the first beep, sort of hard to get rid of the beeper for the first couple of beeps, then sort of fading away. That’s pretty, pretty vanilla response.

1:53 Mel: Thanks. So far so average. [laughs]

1:53 RTH: That’s right!

1:57 Mel: I said, “so far you’re average.”

1:58 RTH: So, Julian, we haven’t decided what we’re gonna do. Do you wanna, you wanna do the first beep and I’ll do the second beep and back and forth like that?

2:09 JBK: Yeah, that sounds good.

2:11 RTH: And, and I would say, Mel, we will, we will alternate back and forth and within the questioning if, if I have something to say I’ll talk to Julian and if, if I’m questioning and he’s got something to say he can talk to me as well. And there’s no rule about how, how we do this other than we’re trying to get at your experience, and we’re also trying to give Julian a little feedback about what I think. And he can give me feedback about what he thinks and, [Mel: Okay.] and you can give us both feedback about what you think. There’s, we don’t have a choreo, choreographed plan here.

SAMPLE 1.1 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

2:48 JBK: So, let’s get into it, first beep.

2:51 Mel: Okay, so.

2:55 JBK: What was in your experience, *if anything*, at the time of the first beep?

3:10 Mel: Yeah, so I like how you say ‘if anything’ because that was like, I struggled a little bit I think with a bit of a perfectionism complex here because so, this becomes a bit of a thread. But so first beep went off at 1:49 PM and I wrote down that in my head before that was *grab the spray and wipe the kitchen down* because I was in the process of cleaning, and like that was quite literally the next thing I was about to do. So like, just before the beep went off like I think I’d just watered the plants and I was truly just about to open the kitchen cupboard and grab the spray and wipe down the kitchen bench. So like that’s...what was in my brain.

3:46 JBK: So you say um “grab the spray.” What was the full phrase that you just mentioned “Grab the spray and...”?

3:46 Russ comments: That is a risky question, because Mel had not said anything about “saying.” (She had said “I wrote down that in my head before that was *grab the spray and wipe the kitchen down.*”) JBK’s question pushes Mel in the direction of having said something, which is not (at least not yet) warranted. I return to discuss this in my 8:25 comment.

Julian comments: My question isn’t about her experience yet. I’m not alluding to the phrase “grab the spray” being in her experience, rather that she just now used the phrase “grab the spray”. Here I’m trying just to clarify what she said now to be sure I got it right. When I say “So you say um “grab the spray” I don’t mean that at the time before she said that (innerly or otherwise) but that right now in the interview she said that. The follow-up asking about the “phrase that you just mentioned” attempted to make this clear. I’m not sure if it was entirely clear to Mel, but her follow-up did indeed clarify. It’s still perhaps not a perfect start of questioning and hanging too much on her words. But maybe this is a different matter (that we get to very soon).

Russ comments: I’m no mind reader, but the grammar of the question seems more directly aimed at her experience than at her report. Either way, it is a risky question.

3:52 Mel: “Grab the spray and wipe the kitchen down.” *But* I wouldn’t say it was *articulated* in like that... direct phrase. Like it wasn’t that, it wasn’t um, it wasn’t my voice telling me to do that. It was the idea of like, that’s like instinctively, that’s the thing I’m going to do next if, that makes sense.

3:52 Russ comments: Good! Mel resists JBK’s (3:46) leading question. Good! It indicates that she will not cave in to our questions.

Julian comments: Here I don’t think you understood what I was asking. I think Mel did understand actually. She clarified the phrase and then answered a question I would have followed up with. Again, for me it was a clarification question. If she did understand it the wrong way and clung to the notion of verbal thought, I would have pushed back against this as I often do on early training days where preconceptions of necessarily verbal thought are common.

Russ comments: It seems to me that Mel understood the question as being at least in part about her inner experience.

4:21 JBK: Okay. So it wasn’t those words. It wasn’t a voice. But it was the idea. Um.

4:21 Russ comments: “It was the idea” is far too leading, in my view. It suggests that there was a directly apprehended mental/cognitive/idea, when there may have been no mental experience at all.

Q: She said it was “it was the idea”! JBK is simply repeating her words.

A: No, I think he is not simply repeating her words. He is taking her words out of context, making a simple, straightforward, declarative statement when Mel’s original was highly subjunctified, highly tentative, and is functionally a part of the denial of

what JBK had implied in his previous turn. JBK's 4:21 turn suggests something much cleaner than Mel's 3:53 turn warrants.

I am not suggesting that we should *rule out* the possibility of a mental/cognitive/idea experience. It may well turn out to be that. I *am* suggesting that we shouldn't get out ahead of Mel. If her experience is of a mental idea, and we give her space, she will tell us about it, and in *that* circumstance, we can have a bit of confidence that she has conveyed that aspect of her experience. But if we lead her into it, and then she assents, we will have no reason to be confident about anything.

Julian comments: I agree with this. A better phrasing could have been. "But it may have been an idea." I'd like to note though that I hadn't fixed the experience as being an idea (you'll notice no audible stress on 'was'). I was trying to explore Mel's own descriptions to get at her experience, keeping in mind that these descriptions could change. However, I am hanging too much on Mel's words. An enlightening bit of advice that you later give is that *DES isn't about the words!* Words are merely a tool we use to get at the important thing: *what was actually happening in experience*. Even by repeating or paraphrasing what Mel says there's still a risk of fixing experience into something it's not.

Russ comments: I think "But it may have been an idea" would *not* have been a better phrasing. It still pushes far too hard in the direction of there having been an experienced thought. (See the table in the 8:25 comment.)

- 4:27 Mel: But I knew that that's what I was gonna do and that was the thing I thought of and that's what was in my brain. But it wasn't a voice saying "grab the spray and wipe down," like no, if that makes sense.
- 4:43 JBK: Yes, umm, as far as your ability to discern (because I mean like this is the first sample, it might be you had something different in your experience altogether). Um, but, were there words at all, to this? Or no.
- 4:59 Mel: I don't think so for this.
- 5:01 RTH: So can, so can I back, can I back us up, ah, back us up a step here? Because I'm concerned that we have... she, she said that this was in her head but, but I'm skeptical because that's just the way I am.
- 5:17 JBK: Yeah I'm staying skeptical too. That's why I tried to say that it might have been another experience altogether. But I guess what I'm trying to do is see if we can get precision about this and if there are signs that it, uh, it might be inaccurate, to try to discern that from questioning.
- 5:17 Russ comments: Particularly on the first day (and probably always), I think it is undesirable to try to get precision. That puts a distorting objectifying pressure on the process. (The issue here is not about the word "precision"; the issue is about trying to get more from Mel than she is naturally able or ready to give.)

I want us, on the first day (and probably always), to be conveying to Mel that we are interested in her experience as she actually experiences it, that we want to walk alongside Mel as we figure out together how and what she will/can tell us. I have a genuine interest in Mel's inner experience, and as we walk together, I suspect that Mel will cultivate in herself a genuine interest in her own inner experience, and as she tells me about it, and discovers that I really am genuinely interested, she will probably try to tell me with more and more precision about her experience. But that will *not* be because I have pushed, or pressed, or tried to get the details. It will be because I am interested, and she will want to tell me the details.

The next few turns discuss these issues.

- 5:37 RTH: So I think there's already signs and so what I, I would like us, before we, before we buy into the fact that there is ah, some kind of a phrase (which was your word, I think, Julian) but before we buy into, that there was *anything* there about that other than this was just an act that was, that was about to happen. I think that's the distinction that we have to make. So, I would like to, I would like to know whether this was, whether at the moment of the beep there was basically I'm shifting my, my *action* from having, I forget, when we were down there having watered the plants to ah, being about to wipe down the kitchen; or whether there is some thought-y kind of a thing that's, that's there. So the question for me is, that is this just a sequence of actions that if I had to *say* what was in my brain, what my brain *must have been saying* or must have been *conveying* or must have been phraseology-ing or something, *Well I'm, I'm, I'm about to do that*. Or whether this is just: my body is doing it; I've finished this task and I'm about to do that task.
- 6:42 Mel: I think the latter is probably more accurate but I have some hesitation based on this being the first beep. So, I find it a little bit hard to differentiate that, but I think what you're describing is what I felt of like, that was the next thing I was going to do and that's... so, so, for me it's kind of like well there was sort of nothing going on in here because I was doing that activity and I was about to do that activity, but that feels like it's not answering the question.
- 7:14 RTH: So that, that is a great description of why, why I think we have to go really slow about, about assuming that there's something going on mentally or whatever, which ah, which is, what I, what I think Julian's line of questioning ran the risk of. So I totally agree with what Mel said, that she's—that it's the first day she doesn't know. What I *don't* want us to do on the first day on the first beep is to... intimate to her, give her the impression that there *has to have been* something mentally going on there. Maybe there was and maybe there, maybe there wasn't. And that was what I was worried about the, the line of questioning.
- 7:49 JBK: Yeah. Understandably. Sometimes I try to, if there's something specific mentioned I try to uh, see if more detail can be gathered about it, and then after that back up and say, "Um, well maybe the details aren't there, so maybe it was something else." But I-
- 8:09 RTH: I, I think that's a risky, a risky strategy [JBK: Okay, yeah.] because the, because it runs the risk of after having asked about it for half a minute or a minute or a couple minutes or whatever then it seems like it was ment-, seems like it was mental.

8:25 JBK: Yeah so, so Mel, you're saying that, um, it may just have been the action you're involved in, and then you attributed this thought, this thought component after the fact to this action.

8:25 Russ comments: I think saying to Mel that "you attributed this thought ... to this action" misunderstands or oversimplifies what Mel had said. It might be worthwhile for me to say how I understand what Mel had said in her original account (in Mel's 3:10 turn):

Mel said in her original (3:10) turn	Russ understands
Yeah, so I like how you say 'if anything' because that was like, I struggled I think with a perfectionist complex here because so, this becomes a bit of a thread.	I should be alert: "I like ... 'if anything'" might signal that there is nothing in experience.
But so first beep went off at 1:49 PM and I wrote down that	DES participants often say "I wrote down..." when there was nothing in experience, or when they don't know what was in experience. That is, Mel did <i>not</i> say "At the moment of the beep I was thinking that I should get the spray," which would have been a natural thing to say if that was the case. Instead, she said that "I wrote down that...." I don't know why Mel said that (I am not a mind reader, and I have no reason to believe that Mel is like those other DES participants), but I do notice that Mel has twice indicated that there may be something other than a simple, straightforward account of at-the-moment-of-the-beep experience.
in my head before that was <i>grab the spray and wipe the kitchen down</i> because I was in the process of cleaning, and like that was quite literally the next thing I was about to do.	This is Mel's account of experience. It starts out as potentially mental ("in my head") but ends up being behavioral or explanatory.
So like, just before the beep went off like I think I'd just watered the plants and I was truly just about to open the kitchen cupboard and grab the spray and wipe down the kitchen bench.	"Truly" is a pretty strong word. Does that mean <i>please discount what I said earlier and now I am about to tell you what was actually in my experience</i> ? If so, what comes next is a behavioral description, not an experiential description (another reason to be alert to the possibility of nothing in experience). Or maybe "truly" has some other function for Mel. I don't know.

So like that's what was in my brain.	"In my brain" could be an experiential description, and it could be a physiological explanation.
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So to my ear, Mel's initial description had been: *maybe* she had an experienced thought, but maybe (and probably more likely) there had been no thought at all. The subsequent discussion focused on the thought, but that was more due to JBK's in-reply focus on the thought (4:21 "So it wasn't those words. It wasn't a voice. But it was the idea.")

All that is to make this main point about JBK's 8:25 turn: I think it attributes to Mel the accountability for having initiated a discussion about thinking, when the accountability was either mostly JBK's or shared by Mel and JBK (or perhaps by Mel, JBK, and RTH, because RTH set up the method that Mel is doubtless doing her best to enact). So, in my view, "and then *you* attributed this thought" would better be said "and then *we* attributed this thought."

(This discussion is *not* about words—I *don't* want JBK to learn how to say *we* instead of *you*. It's about trying to hear what Mel is trying to say, and about recognizing the complexities involved, and about forthcomingly acknowledging our own contributions/shortcomings. Out of that may come a time when we can apprehend Mel's experience with fidelity.)

Julian comments: RTH shows his black belt ninjutsu level DES skills here. Pulling back to question if anything at all was in experience is a necessary step, and I missed the 'tells' that he describes. As I explained, my method prior to this was to dig into any reported element and see if it becomes any clearer. If it doesn't get clearer, I'll say something like 'maybe something entirely different was in experience'. But RTH's step back may have saved half an hour of questioning (that also risked fixing Mel into certain preconceptions about her experience). My first day interviews are usually a tangled mess, with false starts, and dropped lines of questioning. As RTH later says, the iterative method is forgiving. Mistakes can be made that (might) later get ironed out on subsequent sampling days. Still, starting on firm ground saves a lot of confusion and RTH's questioning here is crucial.

8:39 Mel: Yeah I think so because I guess I was trying to prescribe something. So it was like *oh the beep went off, what was in my head?* Well I, I consciously decided that I was about to do this thing. So I guess that's what had just filled my brain. [JBK: Um hmm.] But beyond that sort of decision to do that... I can't come up with any other description of what was going on.

8:39 Russ comments: This turn (as all the others so far) is highly subjunctified (in DES, a subjunctifier is anything that indicates, or might indicate, that what is being said might not be a straightforward description of experience). Beyond the substantial gestures of discomfort in this turn, there are these subjunctifiers: 1. I think so, 2. Because, 3. I guess, 4. Trying, 5. So, 6. Like, 7. So, 8. I guess, 9. My brain, 10. But beyond that, 11. Sort of, 12. ..., 13., I can't come up with any other description. That's quite a lot of subjunctification, so to my ear, Mel is saying (from the depths of her grammar producer), *don't take anything I am saying here as being simply a straightforward description of experience.*

- 9:07 JBK: Um, and, and you, you mentioned a decision. Um. That's something we could probe if there was a decision. We could also hold the possibility that you were merely in the midst of an action and that later you call it a decision. [Mel: Um hmm.] Yeah the first beep, it's always—or the first *day* of sampling—you can try to get more detail but the first day is never used for analysis; it's always training. So, keep in mind, for all of this that the point isn't *oh we need to find out everything about this beep*, because I don't think we will, but whatever we say that's just to look out for that, on subsequent days. These are all things you can pay attention to more on the next days. [Mel: Um hmm.] Um, so with that in mind I think we can continue kind of probing this a little bit but to be very wary that that we might be making stuff up.
- 10:15 Mel: Um hmm.
- 10:17 JBK: Does that good to you Russ, to, to keep going a bit on this beep and then, then see what we can get out of it.
- 10:24 RTH: Go ahead, yeah, see, see how, see how it goes.
- 10:28 JBK: Haha, see how it goes. Alright, so um, so you mentioned kind of the “decision” to grab the spray. That's one word you used. And at another point you used the word that it was a “thought” to grab the spray. Um, so to the best of your ability to recollect now. Um, how would you, how would you characterize this experience?
- 10:28 Russ comments: She did use those words, but more powerfully (see the comment at 8:39) she said she didn't know, or at least wasn't sure, what was going on. So I'm not happy with JBK's focus on the words. Focusing on the words is what most interview methods do, but I think it heads in the wrong direction. We should be interested in Mel's *experience*, not what she has *already said* about her experience.
- 10:56 RTH: And I, I, I gotta add to that list, and she also actually *began* with her, her actual *first words* about this description was (if I, I'm recalling) like, something like “I'm glad we have the ‘nothing’ [inaudible]...”
- 11:11 JBK: Yeah, yeah.
- 11:15 RTH: ...so you gotta put ‘nothing’ into that list, [JBK: Yeah. Nothing (inaudible).] pro-pro-*prominently* into that list.
- 11:20 JBK: Yeah, yeah, that's important, that's also... that could be a possibility. So, kinda out of those possibilities we've mentioned or any other possibility, how would you describe this experience?
- 11:35 Mel: So, yeah I think *thought* is the wrong word to use, because that sort of suggests there was too much... consciousness about maybe like a decision-making process or something. Like I would say, I was... it was more instinctive than that. Um and so in that way I leaned towards this like nothingness, but this feels wishwashy to me. But in terms of trying to like describe it to you. But um, I was, it was just quite instinctual.

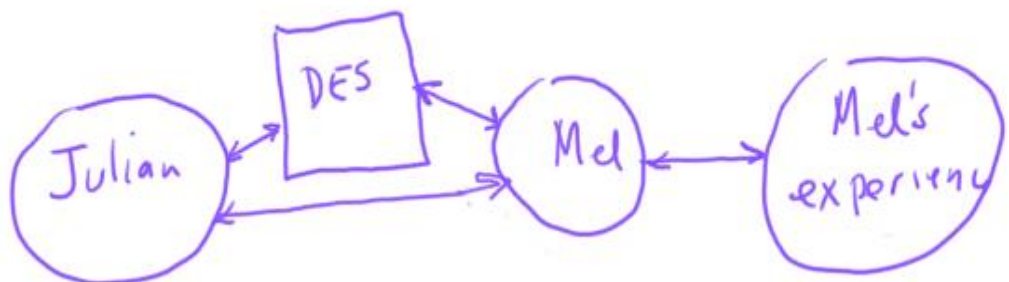
But like just before I *do* the action I *know* I'm gonna do the action. But it's not so much as like there's been a process in my head of like *oh what should we do next—should I pick up this and do that*—so like, it's not that much run-up. But before I grab this Spray n' Wipe, I know I'm going to grab this Spray n' Wipe. Does that make any sense?

11:35 Russ comments: Mel's "I leaned towards this like nothingness, but this feels wishwasy to me but in terms of trying to like describe it to you" is an insightful observation about introspective efforts: her perception of the DES requirements leads her *away* (or at least potentially away) from the characteristics of her experience—it seems it would be wishwasy to say just nothing was experienced. DES (or any method that aspires to fidelity) has to ally itself (or at least be ready to ally itself) with what is *not easy* to describe. That's why inquiring about what Mel *said* is a risky procedure—she *said* what she thought the process required, *not* what her experience was. DES is not about the words—not about what she said—but about her experience.

12:39 JBK: Okay, so you, um well I don't think we'll ever get to a hundred percent, but we can keep asking questions to, to give you an idea what to look out for. Um...

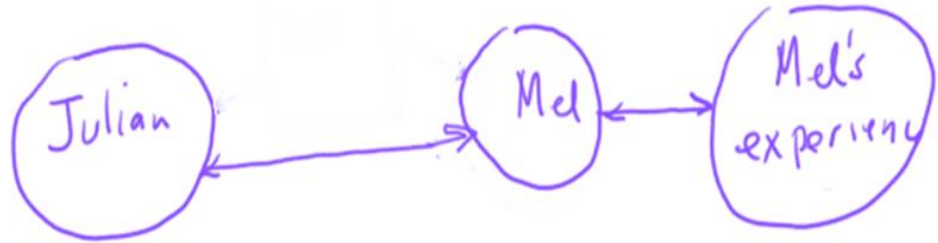
12:39 Russ comments: There have been several places in this interview where JBK has seemed to be instructing Mel how to do the DES task (as here where we will "give you an idea what to look out for"; at 9:07 "keep in mind ... to look out for that, on subsequent days. These are all things you can pay attention to more on the next days"). I think that is an undesirable strategy, for two reasons: first, it encourages Mel to focus on what JBK has *told her* to do, rather than focusing on her *experience*; and second, it connotes *I am the expert here, and I am going to instruct you how to proceed*. I would prefer to acknowledge the difficulty that Mel has just described and express a hope that, working together, we might figure out how to overcome those difficulties. The fact is, *I don't know* what to tell Mel about how to better apprehend her experience (and I doubt that JBK does, either). See the discussion in the interview at 17:18.

That is, while I agree that what Julian has said here about DES is generally true, I think it brings *DES as a thing* into Mel's task, invites Mel to react something like *Oh! I didn't know that about DES. I'll have to learn more about DES so I can do better*. To the extent that Mel is concerned with DES, she is not concerned with her experience, which is problematic. That is, giving instructions about DES might be schematize it like this:



I don't want Mel to be thinking about how to do DES; I want Mel to be

concerned with how to describe her experience to Julian, concerned about what Julian wants to know, about how to convey her experience to Julian, how it seems to Mel that Julian is understanding what she says. That is, schematically I would prefer:



To the extent that Julian is genuinely interested in Mel's experience, sooner or later, Mel will figure out what she has to do to tell him about it with fidelity. That is likely to be in accord with the principles of DES, because DES was crafted to facilitate talking about experience with fidelity. But it *won't* be because Mel has tried to do DES—it will be because she has tried to describe her experience.

(See the discussion at 17:18 and 32:55, and the comments at 47:21, 48:55, 50:01, 1:05:48, 1:11:35, and in the COMMENTARY ABOUT SAMPLE 1.4 ARISING AFTER THE INTERVIEW.)

12:49 Mel: Hmm.

12:53 JBK: And you said that nothingness was wishywashy. Um, but there's, I don't think it is. If, if nothing was in your experience, that's okay. [Mel: Yeah.] You can say that. Um, so you also mentioned a kind of *knowing* you were about to grab it. And previously you mentioned a *decision* to grab it. So these, these are different things. [Mel: Um hmm.] Um, and any of them could be true or none of them. Um so, so with that in mind how would you, how would you characterize it?

12:53 Russ comments: For my taste, this puts too much pressure on the words *decision* and *knowing*.

13:32 Mel: Um, knowing a hundred percent. Not decision. Knowing.

13:37 JBK: So more about the knowing, so not like a decision, a conscious decision, *I will do this*. So more about *knowing that*—and how would you describe that that knowing?

13:51 Mel: Um, the word I always keep coming back to is *instinctual*, like just that is the... it's almost actually... another word that comes to mind is kind of like *autonomous*... (Wait, is that right? Or maybe it's the opposite to that.) But in terms of like... Yeah, no like *autopilot*, actually. That's sort of the word I want. Like, um, so it's a knowing that I'm going to do this and, and then that is the doing and... my brain is sort of... like... relaxed into that autopilot mode. There's no... um... Yeah like, decision-making process. Does that make any sense?

13:51

Julian comments: I noticed that in the transcription there's some condensation of 'active listening'. I say 'mmhm' or 'yeah' almost every sentence. And often so does Mel. It would be distracting to keep it all in. Do you have any suggestions for how often a transcript should indicate those active-listening gestures?

Russ comments: This is a difficult question. I try to make the transcripts convey with fidelity the interview. So I insert active-listening indications when I think it faithful to convey that active listening was taking place, but not so often as to distract from the main speaker. I accept that that is a loose, artistic, not-objectively-scientific procedure, but in my view it is better than the alternatives. There are many qualitative interview techniques that count and display the number of milliseconds of each pause, display each vocalization, and so on, so very scientific. But those methods, in my view, miss the big picture—that they haven't taken adequate pains to know what they're talking about in the first place.

Julian comments: More generally, do you have opinions on 'active listening' in the DES interview?

Russ comments: Regarding Mel (and DES participants in general): I think signs of active listening, like gestures, squirms, and so on, are part of what leads to my sense that I know what we are talking about. Regarding JBK (and DES interviewers in general): I don't have a strong opinion. I think it desirable to cultivate a genuine interest in inner experience as it actually occurs, and to communicate that interest to the participant. To the extent that you have that genuine interest, then that interest will be displayed in a variety of ways, including active-listening gestures. I do *not* recommend for or against active listening. To the extent that you are genuinely interested in Mel's experience, then active listening gestures will flow out of you at a rate that corresponds to your interest, skill, and personality.

14:34 JBK: Yeah, so you use these, yeah you say *autonomous*, *autopilot*, and *instinctual*. And yeah I think this goes back to what Russ was saying that it might be... y'know to not ignore the nothingness part of it. [Mel: Um hmm.] Those, so those words also make it sound like it could just be an automatic process potentially.

14:34 Russ comments: To my ear, good! JBK is giving adequate emphasis to the potential for nothing.

(As a fine point, it would have been better if he had not mentioned the words *autonomous*, *autopilot*, and *instinctual*—that runs the risk of going down another word rabbit hole. His turn would have been (I think) more effective if he had eliminated the entire first sentence and eliminated "Those, so those words also make it sound like" from the last sentence; that is, it would have been more effective to aim at what Mel might be conveying, *not* at the words she has (so far) used to convey it. It is not about the words, but discounting the words is a difficult skill to master.)

15:05 Mel: Um hmm, *automatic* is the word I would use.

15:07 JBK: Yeah. Would you say... to the best of your ability, would you say you're conscious of it *at all*? Or no?

- 15:20 Mel: Um, h- how do you mean?
- 15:25 JBK: Hmm, are...hmm... is it, is it possible that it, it wasn't in your experience, that it was just something you were doing but—
- 15:35 Mel: That I was just doing. Yeah I mean if you go down that line, then yeah I was, I was doing the stuff I was doing, and my brain wasn't doing anything else beyond being present to do the thing we were doing. Like maybe in that sort of way like, my, my brain was like [laughs] the same space and time that my body—like I wasn't drifted off I wasn't like, thinking about um... anything more than just doing the action that I was doing.
- 16:11 JBK: Okay. So I I think I would leave this questioning there. I wouldn't try to probe too much more. Um, on other days there may be more to probe. Y'know, if we could get into things like, how this appears to you? Um, but for now I think we started off on a diff- a different track, which was you, you phrased it more as a thought: *grab the spray and and wipe the kitchen down*, and then we transitioned to, to seeing that it might not have been that at all—it might been something more instinctual and automatic [Mel: Mm-hmm] so on on future days to keep that in mind; to really be precise about how you describe things. And, and you don't have to formulate them in a way that you think will be useful to *us* or not wishy-washy. Like if, if you didn't experience something at all you can say that. If it was autopilot and barely there, you can, you can say that. Um, Russ would you have any other things to ask about this beep?
- 17:18 RTH: No, I think leaving the beep is good, I'm, I'm in favor of that.
I *wouldn't* have given the kind of instructions that you, that you just gave, because I think it's sort of counterproductive to give any kind of instruction. (See the comments at 12:39, 47:21, 48:55, 50:01, 1:05:48, 1:11:35, and in the COMMENTARY ABOUT SAMPLE 1.4 ARISING AFTER THE INTERVIEW.); see also the interview at 32:55.) To the extent that she listens to you and tries to do what it is that you asked her to do, then she's no longer just trying to get at her experience her way. She's trying to get at her experience, *Julian's* way. [JBK: Okay.] And so, instead of doing that what I would have said was something like, "you're doing a great job here. This is a very difficult task. We're not, but particularly on the first beep on the first day, we're not making, we're, we're not committing ourselves to anything. We're, we've given a, we've given a shot at it. You're doing great, we're doing great." I would have said something like that *rather than*...
- 18:09 And, and, and, and it seems to me (so now I'm going to switch gears). It seems to me that you and I sometime, Julian—and maybe today maybe—we're gonna have, we're gonna have a conversation about the importance or lack thereof of words, as because DES really has nothin' to do with what she says. So uh, I *don't* want her to try to be *precise* about what she says. What I want her—because that makes it about the words and DES is not at all about the words. That's the, that's, I, I think what, that's going to be an interesting conversation that will unfold for Julian and me, my guess is, over some number of weeks. But it's not about the precision of the words; it's about

whether she's conveying about experience. It has, has almost nothing to do with the words.

18:57 JBK: That's interesting. I guess I'll see more what you mean. I wouldn't disagree that the phrasings, the phrasings aren't important. What's important is conveying it.

19:09 RTH: That's correct.

19:09 JBK I guess our, our reach to, to how it's conveyed is a lot of time through words but also expressions and all that. So I'll keep that in mind as, as we go.

19:22 RTH: What, what I, what I think I would say at, in, in this draft of what I, what we're going, the conversation would be something like: To make it about Mel's words is to put the responsibility onto Mel, which is not where I think it belongs. This is a first-person-plural game. It's about *Julian's reception* of her words as much or more as about her production of the words. And so I would, to my, to my antennae on the questioning that, that you just did, you were, you were trying to convey, you were trying to clarify *her meaning of words*, which is not the deal.

20:05 JBK: Oh, I see what you mean by that. Yeah I don't know if I always do that. [laughs] I just like, because my intention was to not use my *own* words [Mel: Um hmm.] um... to stick to or to, to, maybe not... yes, I think I stressed words too heavily. The intention was: you've conveyed this in different ways; that could mean different things. You, you conveyed it in a way that could mean you made a decision about something, or a way where it was more automatic. And to try to reconcile those different descriptions. But, yes I don't wanna, yeah lean on the idea *you have to use the right words*. Yeah because I think, as Russ says, that's important.

20:06 Russ comments: There are a lot of important issues there. Most people, when they use their own words, do so either because they didn't really hear what the other was saying (heard only their own conceptualization); or because they aim to coerce the other into their own vocabulary and conceptualization. Neither of those is a good thing if the object is to apprehend Mel's experience with fidelity.

But Mel's words are probably not very good. She has used words like *thought*, and *know*, and *decision-making*. Those words are probably not apt, so simply using her words is not a good idea, either. The DES task is to try to get in a position to apprehend Mel's experience, as conveyed by the words she uses, the gestures she uses, the subjunctification that she applies, and so on. There is only one way that I know of to get there—to convey to Mel that I want to grasp her experience with fidelity, that I accept her word choices as being imperfect (as are my own questions), and that, together, we might figure out a way for me to ask better questions and her to give better answers. It's *not* that *I know how to do it but I'm not telling you! Ha ha!* It's that I hope we can genuinely figure out how to do it. That doubtless requires an iterative procedure.

The more genuinely interested you are in Mel's experience (as opposed to trying to learn DES, or trying to impress me or Mel or yourself), the easier it will be to recognize that it is not about Mel's words. The more you accept that it is not about Mel's words, the easier it will be to let her words convey what she genuinely wishes to

convey (and not more or less). The more you accept that her words are imperfect gestures in the direction of what she genuinely wishes to convey, the easier it will be to help her convey with greater fidelity what she genuinely wishes to convey (which will require a constructive skepticism about what she has already said). The more you can help her convey with fidelity, the less worried you will be about your own choice of words, and will use words that genuinely help her to convey what she genuinely wants to convey. The more she conveys what she genuinely wants to convey, the more genuinely you will be interested in Mel's experience (which is where this paragraph began). That is, it is a virtuous cycle if you can let it be; and it is an iterative process all the way down.

Said another way, the more you are accepting of your own inadequacies and blindnesses, the more you will be accepting of Mel's inadequacies and blindnesses. The more you are genuinely accepting of Mel's inadequacies and blindnesses, the more likely Mel will be to accept her own inadequacies and blindnesses and be willing to try to help you overcome your own inadequacies and blindnesses and, together, to get to her experience with fidelity. The closer you get to her experience with fidelity, the more accepting you will be of your own inadequacies. That is, it is a virtuous cycle if you can let it be; and it is an iterative process all the way down.

Said yet another way, the more you think you know what you're doing, the more you will tell Mel what to do. The more you tell Mel what to do, the less Mel will be able to focus genuinely on her own experience. The less Mel genuinely tells you about her experience, the more you will feel the need to tell her what to do. The more you tell her what to do, the more you will think you know what you're doing. That is, it is a vicious cycle all the way down.

20:48 Mel: Hmm.

SAMPLE 1.2 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

20:50 RTH: [To Julian] So shall I ask about beep number 2? [Julian: Yeah.] [To Mel] Beep number 2, what was in your experience? [Mel: I, yeah.] *If anything!*

20:59 Mel: I, uh, yeah much? It was 2:14PM and I was vacuuming my house, [laughs] and all I wrote down was I was vacuuming and I was just completely consumed by that action. [shrugs] Like, there was nothing of note in my brain.

20:59 Russ comments: When DES participants lead with "I wrote down," they are often signaling that either there was nothing in experience, or that for some reason they are having difficult apprehending or describing what is in experience. If they have access to their experience, they typically just tell me about it. Whether that is what Mel is conveying, we shall see. (See the comment at 8:25.)

21:20 RTH: Nothing in your brain *at all*? I'm, I'm just mindlessly vacuuming?

21:27 Mel: Mindlessly vacuuming.

21:36 RTH: And attending to any particular aspect of the vacuuming? The bodily feeling of it? The seeing of it? The carpet of it? The floor of it? The sound of it?

- 21:39 Mel: Um... I, I noted (and I note these later, too) I noted that like I felt um... y'know like a relaxation and a contentment and things like that. Um. But I wasn't noticing any, like I wouldn't say I noticed the sound so much or the particular part of the floor or any— Like I was just, like the phrase sorta *autopilot*, again, feels relevant.
- 22:08 RTH: And the relaxation portion of it: is that something that you can look back after the beep and say *well I was relaxed while I was doing that?* Or is relaxation something which is before the footlights of your consciousness at the moment.
- 22:08 Julian comments: Question for Russ. Do you worry that phrases like “before the footlights of your consciousness” will confuse interviewees? Do you find that they generally get the gist of new terminology?
- Russ comments: First, I did not say “before the footlights of your consciousness”; I said “<undermining pause and gesture> before the footlights of your consciousness.” So yes, I am worried and showed it. But actually, I am worried about *all* phrases, and I am continuously monitoring how my phrases are landing (as revealed, indirectly, by how Mel, or whoever, responds).
- 22:26 Mel: Um, I think... maybe both parts is true, if that makes any sense. Like I did note that like I was having a lovely... what, what day was this, Monday? But I was having a real sort of Sunday vibe. So I was very like, I was in a really lovely mood yesterday, and I didn't really have anywhere to particularly be and um... so I like, I was, I was in quite a relaxed mood generally for my day.
- 22:53 RTH: Okay.
- 23:00 Mel: Um, and I think that that's reflected in each of the beeps: that my, um... my inner experience each time seems to be like, pretty consumed in the action that I was doing. And I think that's directly relevant to this state, the overall state of being I was in for the whole day.
- 23:21 RTH: So what, what makes it, life difficult in, and makes our conversation difficult (and not, not uniquely *your* conversation but, but I would say in general, the DES conversations), is, is whether that... that state of, state of relaxation is a *context* thing [Mel: Mmm hmm.] and out of that state of context, out of that state of relaxation *comes this* relaxed vacuuming. Or whether the, the recognition of / the noticing of the relaxation is actually present at the moment of the beep.
- 24:03 Mel: Well, I find that really hard to articulate. Um, in terms of like, so this one in particular right? Like that's all I wrote down, like I was like *oh my god, the beep's gone off and I was just vacuuming* and there was, I didn't notice anything else. So, in that sense I felt like, annoyed from a perfectionist [laughs] standpoint, but of like, I wanna have words to put down on a page but *nothing* is, is nothing was particularly obvious to jot down.

- 24:03 Russ comments: This is Mel's second reference to perfectionism. I am filing that away—sooner or later (see 29:56) I will want to allay Mel's concerns—I want us to try to get *good* at talking with each other, not *perfect* at it.
- 24:36 RTH: So, that's *great* as far as I'm concerned. If, if there's nothing going on; there's nothing going on other than vacuuming; I'm vacuuming; I'm just vacuuming; that's, that's it. If that's, if that's it, that's *fine* with me. And, and, and there's... I'm not looking for anything that is *beyond that if* there is nothing beyond it.
- 24:55 Mel: Yeah, for this one that was definitely the case like I... That's all I wrote, I was like there was nothing else to note.
- 25:03 RTH: Okay, I'm happy that. Julian. you got questions about that?
- 25:11 JBK: Um, so just vacuuming. I, I don't know if we can get 100% detail but um... when you say you were just vacuuming, were you still experiencing this vacuuming? Would you say?
- 25:33 Mel: Experiencing how?
- 25:33 JBK: Mmm, well, possibly you're, you're vacuuming and it wasn't so present in your awareness but, but it was still in, in there, it was still part of what you're experiencing. Or, potentially your, your mind was completely blank and nothing was in your experience.
- 25:59 Mel: Good question, um. No, I think I was present in the action. I don't think my mind was like so completely blank that I wasn't like... Yeah, it's a really, that's a tricky distinction though, because it's wasn't... it feels like a pretty unconscious sort of act... and presence, yeah, y'know?
- 26:19 JBK: Yeah, and, and Russ before... um, kinda asked, if there is a bodily component or a sound of it or, or something like that. Um, and yeah I wanted to like, a little extra deep discussion of that, because that is kind of introducing new ideas, um, that, that *could* bias, I don't, I don't think they, they will. But um, so you wouldn't say any of that was particularly present at this moment?
- 26:52 Mel: The sound or like the, the physicality and things of what I was doing? [JBK: Yeah.] Nah. Truly the overwhelming feeling (which, this feels frustrating to me that maybe it's good for you) but because this becomes a bit of a theme, but like there wasn't anything notable to note. [laughs] And I like, racked my brain and I understand what I need to do, but it was like I was just vacuuming and I was just there. I didn't necessarily notice anything. My mind wasn't drifting to something. I was just doing the thing.
- 27:30 JBK: Okay, yeah I'm, I'm happy with that beep. I don't think I found anything new. Um. But Russ, a question to you about, so when you ask questions that might give our other examples... like *were you noticing the sound, the smell, the sight* [see 21:36]. Um, I guess it's not technically content neutral because you are introducing other things for

them to think about. What's, what's your approach to do—I mean I do that too when I do DES, because I find it can give examples and the key would just not to be, to stress anything too much, just to kind of give things as possibilities.

28:11 RTH: So I think it is risky to do it, because if I had said “well y’know is it something, are you hearing something?” and she had come back and said “Yes, well I was paying attention to the sound of the vacuum cleaner,” then I probably wouldn’t have believed that report because I would have primed it and she would have... I made it a multiple-choice test and she picked ‘A’—then that, that to me is the lowest kind of evidence or pretty close to zero kind of evidence in favor of that. I *did* it, I think, because I wanted to, I wanted to open the window on... sort of that there was nothing going on in, in experience, and I, I wanted to look sort of around the edges of that... description and see whether by *nothing* she really meant sort of *nothing* in experience or, or whether she was.... There’s a lot of people in DES who have a hard time talking about sensory kinds of things and so I was giving her the oppor—the option of doing that.

29:06 If we went back and looked at it, looked at the recording of what I said, hopefully I would have said that in a way that, that was not um... *invested* in it. Hopefully, I would have said. “Well y’know, was there seeing or hearing or seeing a carpet or smelling it or whatever?” and, and, and by saying it in that sort of sardonic or I don’t know exactly what, what tone, how you would describe that tone but, but, but an *uncaring* kind of, kind of way I would have given her the option of talking about that but without suggesting that I thought that was there. That would have been the....

29:06 Russ comments: The original is at 21:36. Viewers can judge for themselves whether RTH’s 21:36 turn pressured Mel into endorsing any of the options.

29:45 JBK: –Yeah, that, that was the tone that I got from it. That you mentioned on day zero this kind of... you can give opportunities but, but don’t stress them like, don’t, don’t stress anything too much. Yeah.

29:56 RTH: And that’s, that’s what I would *guess* I was trying to convey by that. And... so I, I think it’s risky to introduce things, and I think it’s risky *not* to introduce things. That’s the, that’s the dilemma. And... and so what I, what I would be trying to convey to, to Mel on the first day, is *I’m interested. I’m, I’m wading into your waters. You’re saying there’s nothin’. You’re* (this is what I’m conveying to Mel) *you’re, you’re perfectionistic about it, you say, and you’re a little worried that maybe you’re not doing the right thing. And I’m going to be trying to convey that I’m, I’m hearing you. You’re saying that, that, this is difficult. I understand that it is difficult and the distinction for you that’s difficult is between doing nothin’ and, and, and experiencing somethin’.* [Mel laughs] And, and, and even in what I’m saying right now I, I hear myself saying that in a way that is *not technical*. That’s... I’m, I’m trying to, I’m trying to... hold Mel’s hand, I guess you would say, as we, as we step into waters where we can’t see the bottom of, the bottom of the ocean and and, and yet and indicate that, that I’ve heard what she said, y’ know? It’s, and, and I guess *particularly* that, that I want to, I want to indicate to Mel that I wanna, I wanna hear it *Mel’s way*, rather than I have categories that it

has to fit in. It has to be either this or it has to be that it has to be with this other thing. I *don't* wanna say that to her.

31:50 JBK: Alright.

31:50 Mel: Yeah, I guess, can I just add on that like I, I find that really helpful, (and I think that it probably says a lot about my personality) but, because I am conscious of like, there is this part of me that I feel like I'm not (and I know it's day 1 as well) but like that I'm not doing this *well* or I'm not um... describing things *right*, or not on the right track. And I know that like, none of that is even... like there is no right or wrong [laughs] (and like you could do a deep dive into what this says about my personality) but, that is a thing that I'm feeling of like wanting to um... like [clenches her fists] do a good job, [laughs] y'know?

31:50 Julian comments: Interesting that "[clenches her fists]" is the first mention of Mel's physical behavior in the transcript. RTH, are there other visual signs that are especially useful to you when you interview? I find myself much more focused on language.

Russ comments: As to whether it is good to put it in the transcript, please see what I said about active listening at 13:51. The question I would ask here is: Is the transcript more faithful to what Mel was conveying with or without the "[clenches her fists]"? Viewers can decide for themselves, but I think "like do a good job, y'know" (with no para-linguistic comments) substantially distorts Mel's communication. I think it would be far more authentic to describe the action [Mel clenches her fists powerfully and shakes them with emphasis] *and omit the words altogether*, than to provide the words and omit the emphasis. Finding the proper balance is a matter of art, of course, but a scientific reliance on the words is not a solution.

As for useful signs, I would say that the language is perhaps the *least* useful aspect of Mel's conveyance (another instance of *it's not about the words*). More useful is the prosody or other paralinguistic features: pitch, tone, stress, rhythm, intonation—anything that conveys emphasis, emotion, and meaning beyond the literal words spoken. Gestures, too, are sometimes important.

32:33 RTH: So I think that's actually generally true. I think, I think most, most samplers wanna do a good job. They, they do want—'wanting to do good job' is different for each one. You, you do it your particular perfectionist way and somebody else does it their particular perfectionist way or whatever. Everybody, most everybody wants to do a good job and don't, don't know what a good job is.

32:52 Mel: Um, it's a weird thing to struggle with at the moment.

32:55 RTH: It is. It is which, which doubles back to what I was saying about the first beep [see the comment at 12:39 and the interview at 17:18], when, when I was saying to Julian that I *wouldn't* have told her how to do it. Because that, that has implicit in it *well, y'know, you're not doing a good job*. And, and, and everything that we do... I think in a way is 'you're not doing a good job because we're going to try to get better at that'—that implied in that is 'you're not doing a good job'. But, but the difference is that it's *we're* not doing a good job. *We* haven't yet gotten it. *We're* going to, we're going to figure

this out. *Mel and, Mel and Russ and Mel and Julian and Mel and Russ and Julian*, we're going to try to figure this out. [JBK: Yep.] And, and if we can get that across on the first day... well, to the extent that we can, we can get that across in the first day we will have accomplished something.

33:50 Mel: Yeah, yeah. Try to be authentic and um, that's like, I need to just, be okay with that. There's like a pressure thing that's totally internal it's not like based on anything you've said, but that's like the thing I'm feeling trying to do this, of like, putting pressure on myself to like *perfectly articulate* my experience, I guess.

34:13 JBK: Hmm. But everything that you seem to be a bit nervous about like *oh, I can't just write that. Oh, if I'm doing nothing I can't just say that.* [Mel. Yeah.] As far as DES goes, that's, that's, all fine. That's all well and good. And nothing to be worried about. Should we, should we go to beep 3? [RTH: Yep.]

34:13 Russ comments: At the risk of repetition, there is a stark difference between what JBK says at 34:13 and what RTH conveys (for example) at 32:55. JBK conveys: *I am the DES expert and you're doing fine.* RTH conveys: *We are not doing fine, but maybe, together, we can figure out how to do better.* JBK is *not* an expert about what Mel should do. (Neither am I, which is why I don't tell her what to do.)

SAMPLE 1.3 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

34:34 Mel: Beep 3. It's, is the most wishy washy [laughs] (to use that again) of them all, I would say. So I, it went off at 2:40 PM and I was sitting on the couch having a cup of tea and I've written... I was like the, the... I've written, "I was in a state of content. I was relaxed and I was present and there honestly wasn't really a thought or overwhelming feeling beyond this state of contentment."

35:05 JBK: Um hmm. And um, was this state of contentment more something overall during this period or was it also present right before the beep as well?

35:06 Russ comments: JBK inquires about the state of contentment as if it were an existing experience—the only question about it was when it occurred. But to my ear, Mel has not said that there is an experienced state of contentment. The most powerful part of her statement (to my ear) is "this is the most wishy washy ... of them all," and then she says she was "present and there honestly wasn't really a thought or overwhelming feeling." So I worry that JBK's question will push Mel in the direction of saying that she directly experienced contentment, rather than allowing for the possibility that there wasn't really much directly apprehended.

35:16 Mel: No, I think right before the beep as well like I felt definitely like in that exact moment I, I felt that.

35:16 Russ comments: Mel says that with substantial definiteness, more definite than I would have expected if JBK's question had pushed her in that direction. So maybe she did really feel that contentment at the moment of the beep. Her definiteness is a surprise to me, so I file that away.

Julian comments: Yes, it originally also seemed to me that “state of content” was likely a retrospective way of describing state of being rather than an actually experienced phenomenon. I was trying to distinguish between the two. Mel’s reply and firmness did surprise me as well, but I still wanted to keep other possibilities open, hence my hedging in the next question (“still holding in mind...”)

- 35:25 JBK: Okay. And, so let’s, let’s dive into that, still holding in mind that um it’s possible, y’know, it might not have been there. It’s possible that it was. But um, so this this state of contentment, how would you describe that?
- 35:50 Mel: A lightness, um, a almost, unconsciousness, um, but a positiveness to [energetic hand gestures]. Like it, um, but these sort of descriptions come to mind in terms of um like, state of being rather than being anything like particularly, uh, y’know, easy, easy to label beyond like, feelings.
- 36:31 JBK: So, so nothing easy to label. Do you know if there is a, a felt bodily component or, or not, or you’re not sure.
- 36:39 Mel: Don’t think so, um beyond the sort of like maybe lightness that I could describe. But otherwise like no.
- 36:46 JBK: Yeah, so about the lightness. Would you say that’s using that metaphorically or, or you don’t know? You’re not sure?
- 37:00 Mel: Um, like, I mean, predominately yes, but, but, I just felt, um, yeah... when I reflected on before the beep went off what was going through my brain like truly not much. I just felt good, I guess.
- 37:22 JBK: This good contentment feeling.
- 37:24 Mel: Yup. At ease.
- 27:28 JBK: At ease peaceful light content, um.
- 37:30 Mel: Yeah, I was having a good day.
- 37:33 RTH: So I’m, I’m, I’m still worried about this in the same way I think I was worried about the in the, in the first two beeps as well. Is it, is it, is what, is what you’re trying to describe that I was content and light and at ease and, and that was, that was the way I *was* at that moment? Or are you trying to say *I felt that*, that there was that this was somehow thematically or front, frontally, or in the foot, footlights of my consciousness or, or whatever that, that.
- 37:33 Julian comments: This is a crucial question. It’s another step back to get at the core of how Mel’s describing her experience. Before this question I was treading water. I was repeating some words Mel said but struggling to come up with a question. I think there was some sense that Mel and I had become too locked into a particular

description (the contentment feeling). I would like to make myself more omniscient in retrospect and say that I sensed this feeling could be misreported. I'm not sure this is the case. I think I overlooked crucial parts of Mel's reporting like: "when I reflected on before the beep went off what was going through my brain like truly not much." I latched more on to the sentence right after that: "I just felt good I guess." It's harder to latch on to a negative description ("not much") than a positive one (felt good). I mean negative here in the sense of an absence, rather than in terms of value (good or bad).

So while it's presumptuous (or wrong) to say "oh I would have ended up with similar questioning as RTH," there was a sense that I was struggling to get at Mel's experience. Often if participants *are* experiencing feelings, further questioning adds clarity. But here clarity wasn't coming. It was difficult to disentangle how metaphorical Mel's descriptions were.

Russ comments:

RE "oh I would have ended up with similar questioning as RTH"

That is quite possible true. Here, as is frequently the case in multiple-interviewer sessions (as DES almost always is), it is a dilemma for me whether or when I should insert myself into your line of questioning. I want to give you the chance to work things out for yourself; but I don't want to get the process too far off track. I'm pretty sure I get that balance wrong some or much of the time.

RE "I would like to make myself more omniscient in retrospect and say that I sensed this feeling could be misreported.... It's harder to latch on to a negative description ('not much') than a positive one (felt good)"

I agree that it is hard, but a big part of DES (perhaps the heart of it) is cultivating the taste for being ignorant, for being *non*-omniscient, for happily accepting that you *don't* know about Mel's experience, for trying to be *even more* ignorant (recognizing other possible alternatives that you hadn't yet considered). If you couple that taste for increasing ignorance with a genuine interest in Mel's experience and a faith in the iterative process, eventually you and Mel will figure out a way to reduce that ignorance. What makes it counterintuitive is that *at every step of the way, you are cultivating the increase in ignorance*, with the result that ignorance *decreases*. (See also the comment at 43:42.)

38:19 Mel: Hm, hm, yeah I've, yeah.

38:20 RTH: And "I don't know," and "I don't know" is a perfectly good answer to that question. [JBK: Um hmm.]

38:27 Mel: Yeah I don't know if anything I probably lean towards, um... the earlier one of like... yeah perhaps I'm, I'm reaching too much and trying to find descriptions too hard. And in reality like again it was easier to describe as like kind of a nothingness. But then I'm leaning into like my mood, y'know, because I'm reaching for words... maybe.

39:00 JBK: So, the possibility that this contentment was maybe your ongoing kind of mood at this time but in the exact moment before the beep, it might have been present, like experienced [trailing off] to this degree.

39:00 Julian comments: I intended to say “not”. “It might [not] have been present...” Oops. So RTH’s upcoming interjection (“Or like nothing”) again is useful.

39:17 RTH: Or like nothing.

39:19 Mel: Yeah, it definitely was experienced at that point, like that is it certainly something that I was like (I don’t wanna use the word *aware* because again that feels too like um, like the whole thing feels too conscious). Like, like maybe this is um, getting a little bit too sort of prescriptive again, but like y’know when people sort of articulate like a flow state I would say like that is sort of a relevant term to my experience, um, at that time (and a little bit for like the vacuuming one as well) of like I was just sort of in this light nothingness... that... my brain felt at ease and I felt nice and whatever, but there’s nothing. There’s no audio. There’s no visual. There’s no what it like, I just was... I was present and felt that.

Julian comments: I make a mental note to be wary of this report, especially when Mel switches away from the first person: “y’know when people sort of articulate like a flow state.” This is a description of a theoretical concept and other people’s presumed experience and not of Mel’s experience. My questioning focuses more after this and (thanks to RTH’s intervention) I’m able to get more clarity.

40:18 JBK: Yeah. You’re unsure of any bodily sensation I mean—

40:22 Mel: No I didn’t really particularly note any.

40:27 JBK: You didn’t note any? Um but I guess still the possibility. So might nothingness could be kind of different from like feeling content. Do you think it was the peaceful and, and being content is like something was there? Or just kind of the absence of anything negative?

40:53 Mel: I think I lean more towards absence. [JBK: Okay.] But, but in the sense that um yeah... the opposite is not true. So I guess yeah, it’s maybe like, absence of stuff but I note that it’s like, it feels positive and stuff because it wasn’t the opposite to that if that sort of makes any sense. But maybe that’s getting a little off track.

41:19 JBK: Um hmm. And, and you mentioned at first some context: you’re having tea on your couch, I think. Was any of that experienced at all or, or no, or you’re not sure?

41:26 Mel: Um, no I don’t, I don’t think so like I, I, was ah, present in that moment and doing that, but I wasn’t in my brain being like, um, *I’m having a cup of tea*, or like *ooh I’m enjoying the taste if this tea*, or something like that. Absolutely not. The beep went off, and I, was like, *here I am*. There wasn’t—no.

41:55 JBK: Okay I’m, I’m done with my questioning. Russ, anything?

41:58 RTH: So, so I think that was good. [coughs] Excuse me. What I, what I would say (and I would, and I would say this if this were just, just Mel and me or whatever) I would say

that, the, the aim of our first conversations (or all, all of our conversations) is really as much or more aimed at *next week* than as at today. And, and so what we're, we're having difficulty here, which is good! And we're working at it, which is good. And it's frustrating, which is good. And it's, and, and *maybe*, out of this... pondering or whatever, what, however you wanna describe this, maybe on some subsequent day we'll get better at describing some of the details. And maybe we won't. We don't really know the, know the answer to that. But, but I'm happy as a clam as to what we're doing here. We are working at trying to be honest with each other about, about what the experience is. And....

43:05 JBK: And yeah, thanks, Russ, for getting back to the other possibility because I did try to ask about it if maybe this was context or was it directly felt. And, and Mel you said it *was* directly felt. And then later... so I kind of had some skepticism in my mind but I didn't know how to kind of probe again. So Russ kind of probed again and, and got that, um we might have been kind of making something too concrete when it wasn't, like the satisfaction. [Mel: Um..]

43:42 RTH: So, so from that, that articulates what I would say is the, the... *for Mel*, the importance of the first day (or for Mel and Julian or for Mel and Julian and Russ, for *us*) the, the important thing for the first day is *let's, let's, let's try not to over-articulate*. [Mel: Um hmm.] We'll try and not to *under-articulate* either. But it looks to me like we have more of a risk of over-articulating [chuckles] than we do of under-articulating, so I'm probably going to be coming down on the left-hand side of that, that... And because *every word* that we use, every word that *Mel* uses, *we* don't know what she means. And every word that *we* use, *Mel* doesn't know what we mean. [Mel: Um hmm.] And so when, when we try to articulate the difference between context and actual experience, well, *I know what I mean if I were to say that*, but I'm pretty sure Mel doesn't know what I mean when, she's, when I, I say that. [Mel: Um hmm.] And, and so we have to, we have to be, we have to recognize that all, that all these words, word stuff is are just sort of a rubbery concepts; that sooner or later we're going to, like silly putty or whatever, we're going to let those words eventually get to mean something for us. But in, on the first day, well they're, they're pretty amorphous.

43:42 Russ comments: DES is sometimes understood as being about figuring out what participants mean when they say X, about removing the ambiguities in X. In some contexts, that is fundamentally true. But DES is also about patiently preparing to let ambiguities *remove themselves* on subsequent sampling days. Particularly on the first day (but to some degree throughout), I *don't* want us to answer (or try to answer) difficult questions. I want us to grapple with difficult questions; I want us to figure out how to help each other get in a favorable position to answer difficult questions *next week or the week after*.

So rather than figure out whether contentment is a directly apprehended state or some kind of ongoing mood or context, I'd rather have us recognize that that is an interesting question, that we'd like to figure out how to give a high-fidelity answer to that question, what we need to do to avoid falling into traps in these discussions. It's the long game.

This is another way of making the *cultivate ignorance* point I made in my comment at 37:33.

45:15 Mel: Hm, yeah, want me to go to the next one?

45:16 RTH: Yep, number 4.

SAMPLE 1.4 DISCUSSION STARTS HERE

45:20 Mel: Um [laughs] I was reading a book. So this went off at 3:08 PM, and I've written, "I was reading about creativity and was just sort of reading that concept, and I, I'd actually stopped on that paragraph and I'd read it a few times and that's when the beep went off, when I was in the moment of sort of letting that sink in." That's what I was doing.

45:46 RTH: And is there anything experiential about that? Or, or is this a...

45:46 Russ comments: As a way of illustrating the discussions that have been ongoing about the previous sample (1.3), notice that Mel's opening turn here is quite parallel to her opening turn at that sample (34:34). But where JBK (at 35:25) began by asking about Mel's presumed state ("this state of contentment. How would you describe that?"), RTH began by taking a position of uncertainty ("Is there anything experiential...?"). I think the begin-at-uncertainty position is better, because there is no retraction necessary.

45:50 Mel: No, not particularly. Like I was just trying to... So I find I have a, um, pretty bad memory so I highlight books when I read, and I, if something goes like *ooh* [snaps her fingers], like that to me when I read something, I'll often reread it. And yeah, in terms like um, experience of reading, I suppose maybe um, some.. I find that I have to read it a couple of times to try to make it sink in because, when I read, it's not, um, audible. Like if I'm reading that sentence, I'm not hearing that or if.. so when I go back over it, it's um.. I really don't wanna over-articulate things, as well, here, Russ, so like call me out if you think I'm being an idiot. But um, like, it's kind of conceptual, y'know what I mean? So I read this cool phrase and I read that and I was like, *oh that feels nice*, and I've just... my eyes go over it again and I'm brushing through that again but it's.... I then find that very hard to retain. So that's sort of what I was going through, of... In terms the exact experience that was happening, I'm trying to soak in what I'm reading, and how does that soaking-in process go in my brain? It's like... almost like a light, sort of like there and then it's not, once I've move onto the next thing.

45:50 Russ comments: Notice that Mel's response here is hardly at all about her experience at the moment of the beep. She has given a general theory of her memory ("I find I have a, um, pretty bad memory so I highlight books..."), and some metaphorical characterizations of that theory ("soaking in," "like a light"). Other methods use techniques that try to dig into what leads Mel to craft that description the way she does, or to use the words or metaphors that she does. DES does *not* do that. Russ will basically ignore that talk (because it doesn't describe experience) and try to bring the interview back to Mel's experience at the moment of the beep, if there is any.

47:21 RTH: So the way that sounded to me was a description of your sort of reading in general: *this is what reading is like for me*. [Mel: Um hmm.] And I would like us to, I would like

to encourage us to stay as close as we can to what was happening at the moment of this particular beep, whether that was typical or atypical of reading in general. So, [Mel: Well...] so what is going on at this particular moment, if anything?

47:21

JBK: I make a note of RTH's response here. While I also noted that Mel's original description contained only generalization and theory, I don't always say this to interviewees. I'd probably ask a question aimed at redirecting. But RTH does give more instruction to Mel. He tells her that she gave a general description and that he would like her to stay "as close as we can to what was happening at the moment." I'm sometimes nervous about saying this because it could give the impression that she gave the wrong answer or went about the method wrong. But I do think it's useful to instruct interviewees. Mel now has in mind for subsequent beeps to stay as close as possible to actual experience.

And even if you don't instruct interviewees, they could probably sense when you're pleased or displeased with a certain answer. It feels more honest to let them in on the process.

Russ comments: To the extent that you think/judge/evaluate/believe that she did the method wrong, then you *should* be nervous about telling her that she did the method wrong. Because if anyone did the method wrong, it is *you* (or perhaps you and me). *You* (or perhaps you and I) didn't train her adequately, didn't convey your (our) interest adequately, and so on.

This provides another opportunity to notice that it is not about the words. I am genuinely confident that I am genuinely interested in Mel's experience, and that the iterative method will help us out in the long game. Out of that interest comes my turn at 47:21. The first sentence is about *me* ("the way that sounded to me"); the second sentence is about *us* ("I would like to encourage us to..."). *None* of that is a criticism of Mel. But that is *not* about the words—that I have learned to say *us* when I really mean *you*. It is that out of a genuine interest in Mel's experience and acceptance of the procedure, the words that come out of my mouth are not critical of Mel, even though in some sense she is not doing what I would prefer that she do. On some other occasion, I might say *you*, but such a critique will not sting because the source of those words will be clear.

So I am specifically *not* recommending that you set aside your nervousness—you *should* be nervous about sounding critical until you genuinely are not critical. Then it doesn't matter how you sound.

RE "But RTH does give more instruction to Mel."

No, he did not. Instruction refers to the future, but RTH spoke only about the present and the past. Instruction is telling Mel what to do, but RTH spoke only about his desire and about us. Your quotation of RTH ("he would like her to stay 'as close as we can to what was happening at the moment'") misrepresents both aspects of what RTH actually said. Your "he would like *her* to stay" is about what *Mel* should do, when RTH actually spoke about *us*. Your statement was that RTH liked Mel *to do*, when RTH actually spoke about liking *to encourage us*—there was no *doing* involved. And you omit the end of RTH's sentence, making it seem like an instruction about the future when the entire sentence is actually explicitly about the present: "stay 'as close as we can to what was happening at the moment of *this particular beep, whether that was*

typical or atypical of reading in general”). Those are big differences; see the discussion at 17:18 and 32:55, and the comments at 48:55, 50:01, 1:05:48, 1:11:35, and in the COMMENTARY ABOUT SAMPLE 1.4 ARISING AFTER THE INTERVIEW.

RE “It feels more honest to let them in on the process.”

I think I was absolutely 100% honest about the process. Julian would apparently like me to be honest about a process that seems to be something like: I am the expert about what steps we should take, and I am going to instruct you about what those steps are. However, that is *not* the DES process. The process is exactly what I said to Mel: I would like to encourage us to stay as close as we can to what was happening at the moment of this particular beep, whether that was typical or atypical of reading in general.

47:55 Mel: Well, like I was conscious of the words that I was reading, definitely.

48:04 RTH: Which words?

48:06 Mel: The words on the page.

48:10 RTH: And what were those words?

48:11 Mel: I knew you’re gonna ask that! [laughs, inaudible] But it was some sort of concept about creativity, like y’know we are the roots of our creativity, like blah, blah, blah something. Um.

48:21 RTH: So [coughs] if what, what I would like to know is, if the words were... You, you *said* that you were conscious of the words, or the words were present to me, or something like that. [Mel: Um hmm.] The..., are..., were there particular words, whether or not we can remember what those were now? But whether there, were, were there particular words? And if so were there one word? Or two words? Or ten words? Or the whole page worth of words? Or...?

48:55 Mel: [Umff. Pause] I don’t, I don’t think, I could say that there *were* particular words. Like I know I was reading the *thing*, but, like I remember like when the, the beep went off, it’s like it caught me in the middle of a *concept* rather than like particular words that I could identify, [grimaces] if that makes any sense.

48:55 Russ comments: Recall that at 47:55, Mel had said (with seeming conviction), “I was conscious of the words that I was reading, definitely.” But now she’s not nearly so sure. Note that Russ never said or implied that he didn’t believe her. Instead, he asked, carefully, about the words, and Mel herself came to question whether words were present.

This illustrates the difference between instruction and genuine interest (see the discussion at 17:18 and 32:55, and the comments at 47:21, 50:01, 1:05:48, 1:11:35, and in the COMMENTARY ABOUT SAMPLE 1.4 ARISING AFTER THE INTERVIEW). RTH never instructed Mel. Instead, he was genuinely interested in Mel’s experience and (I think) conveyed that, and (probably as a result), Mel seems to be working at refining her description.

- 49:19 RTH: And is, it, ah is, can you identify the concept?
- 49:21 Mel: Well I know all, I can identify is that it was about creativity and whatever it, what like I've forgotten what it was already. But at the time it, it struck me, and so I was like mulling that over. But I can't remember specifics about that. But, that's what I was caught in at the time, of like going back over it because I thought it was interesting, but it was like, that's a idea... [appears frustrated] This is... I know [laughs].
- 50:01 RTH: So we, ah we have to figure out what we mean by this, and that's, that's, that's what makes this work difficult. And it also makes it exquisitely interesting, from my point of view, because, it seems to me, that, Mel, you're trying to tell us what's going on in your experience and that's not an easy thing to do. And, and we're trying to *hear* it, and that's not an easy thing to do either. And yet we're, we're all of us trying to do that, which is cool. And, and we haven't yet figured out how to do it which is, ah, which is okay or *perfect* as far as I'm concerned, because that's what I think, that's what I think we're trying to do.
- 50:01 Russ comments: The reader may wish to contrast what RTH said here with what JBK had said at 16:11. See the longish discussion from 16:11 to 20:48.
It also illustrates that RTH expresses genuine interest and has *not* given Mel any instruction. (See the discussion at 17:18 and 32:55, and the comments at 47:21, 48:55, 1:05:48, 1:11:35, and in the COMMENTARY ABOUT SAMPLE 1.4 ARISING AFTER THE INTERVIEW.)
- 50:38 RTH: [continues] So, is there a *going-back* experience of this? Or, or is it more I'm just, I'm taking the time to absorb this particular passage. And, and in, in the real world or the actual-words-on-the-page world, it's about creativity, and I'm understanding something about creativity, and I'm in the process of trying to absorb or whatever, something about that. And that's all it can be said?
- 51:11 Mel: Yeah, yup I think "absorb" is a good word. I like that, because that feels like a good description of what was happening. Of like trying to ah, absorb it but any more like *defined* than that I don't think is a fair assessment. But I was definitely like... presently trying to absorb that.
- 51:31 RTH: So there are words involved, but not a particular word. I couldn't say that I was focused on the phrase that said, y'know "creativity is measured by..." or whatever (I don't know what the reading was) but....
- 51:45 Mel: I don't, I don't think so. I think it was more ah like um, that ah trying to absorb an *idea* more so than any *specific* words... Ah, um, so like, say, I just read the sentence and then I was like rereading it. But not like so when the beep went off, it wasn't like *oh I was stuck on the word 'rooted in creativity' and so I was thinking conscious, was thinking of like those particular words*—it definitely wasn't that. It was just like, *oh you caught me in the midst of absorbing this concept*.

- 52:26 RTH: And so does that make this sort of like vacuuming? I'm, I'm, I'm vacuuming. I'm happily vacuuming. I'm not thinking about the vacuuming. If I vacuum and, and it turns out that there's a piece of lint that I missed then I would go back and re-vacuum that kind of a thing. But I wouldn't think to myself *aha, there's a piece of lint*. I would, but I would be... I would be skillfully going back, whatever, to pick up what I, what I didn't get on the first pass. And now I'm doing that sort of the same kind of thing with the reading? I'm reading, and if I see a piece of lint in the reading that I didn't see, then I would go back?
- 53:03 Mel: Yep. I would, I notice and I do... and then I and, and I rectify that. Or, and, I, I notice, and I re-notice, but, but, not so um... deliberately. But yes.
- 53:15 RTH: And so is there any difference, then, in, in experiential difference between reading and vacuuming in, in this case?
- 53:24 Mel: Not, not overwhelmingly. No, they both feel relatively autopilot. I mean, I would say the only sort of difference, perhaps, is that when I'm, when I was reading I was attempting to absorb content, concepts. That was definitely a thing that was happening. Whereas with the vacuuming, there's no concept. I am just doing the physical action.
- 53:55 RTH: So the *fact of the matter* is that when I'm *reading* I'm trying to absorb the contents, and when I'm *vacuuming* I'm trying to clean the carpet. And those are both sort of the contexts of the *effort*, I guess I would say. [Mel: Um hmm.] This is when I read I'm trying to *learn* something when I vacuum, I'm trying to *clean* something. Does, does that change my experience about it? Or is it...?
- 54:21 Mel: Noooo... [shifts position] not, not it, it feels slightly more... um that there's maybe a little more awareness in the reading as opposed to the vacuuming.
- 54:32 RTH: And what do you mean by *awareness*?
- 54:38 Mel: Umm... [laughs] like um, when we go back to like ah, ah, me absorbing what I'm reading... I'm, I'm thinking about what I'm reading and I know using the word *thinking* doesn't help us. But like um... I'm going over words in a page. Yeah, use like, the lint analogy, like something of interest, absorbing that, and continuing; as opposed to when I'm vacuuming, I might, yeah, notice lint and go back over it but I'm not... that's not resonating as deeply as perhaps when something, while I'm reading does.
- 55:27 RTH: [pause. Sighs] So, so I'm, I'm happy with that beep. [sighs] And I, my role as timekeeper is that we're coming up in an hour. You have anything more that you wanna say about that, Julian?
- 55:40 JBK: Um, I would ask a bit more with the knowledge that it might lead us into the weeds and get a bit off track. But I would still like to... Because you mentioned... so this, this thing about creativity, and you're, you're letting it soak in. Or maybe you're not and the whole thing is just more automatic. [Mel: Um hmm] But assuming there's this, this aspect of trying, trying to understand: would we know more about your experience by

knowing the exact content of, of this thing about creativity? Or would that not tell us anything?

- 55:40 Russ comments: This line of questioning asks Mel to presume, or hypothesize, or theorize about her general reading process. That's a risky procedure, because DES tries to avoid such presumptions/theorizings.
- 56:21 Mel: I don't, I don't know if that was question for me or Russ. [JBK: Yeah, it was for you.] but from I don't think so because I think that the same experience happens no matter what I'm reading. If I was reading the *New York Times* and the same thing: if something struck me I would go back over it and, and mull that over in the same way or try and absorb the information in the same way. I don't think it's, I don't think it's necessarily relevant because I was reading about more of a sort of fluid concept.
- 56:51 JBK: So this mulling or, or absorbing, there's no difference to it whether it's the *New York Times* or you're reading *Harry Potter* or you're reading this book on creativity.
- 57:04 Mel: I don't think so. I think it's just how I try and um, ah like try and retain information.
- 57:10 JBK: Okay, and how would you characterize this mulling if, if it's there, if it's present at all?
- 57:10 Russ comments: It seems to me that, translated into plain but pedantic English, this question says: "Mulling is for you a clearly defined state that you can characterize. Maybe it is present at the moment of the beep, maybe not. But if it is, characterize it." That is, this question has an underminer in it—that underminer points at the now-or-then-ness of the state of mulling.
- I think the underminer should be more fundamental, more early in the process. The question should (in my view) say: "You grunted 'mulling', which is perhaps aimed at an experience (or perhaps not), or perhaps there is state which is adequately or inadequately characterized as mulling (or perhaps not), and all of that is perhaps relevant to experience at the moment of the beep (but perhaps not)."
- All of those perhaps-s cannot possibly be said in every utterance, so I think a general rule of thumb is to put the underminer as far upstream as possible; something like, here, "You grunted 'mulling'; maybe we can figure out something about it."
- Q: You're being pretty picky about your critique of JBK.
- A: Yes; I'm aiming my comments at those who would like to refine their DES skills. The overarching issue here, it seems to me, is that JBK is not adequately accepting of his ignorance. It's ignorance all the way down, until we have developed a joint way of understanding how to communicate with Mel.
- Q: So it's ignorance all the way down, except that *you* get to tell JBK how to do DES!
- A: Regarding Mel's experience, it's ignorance all the way down, equally for me and Julian (and Mel). Regarding DES, I have a 40-ish year head-start on JBK, and have thought quite a bit about these things for quite a long time. For sure that doesn't make me an infallible authority. Instead, I am trying to clearly state what I think; Julian and the viewer are free to disagree, clarify, etc.

Julian comments: As we started this project, I was wondering “well, RTH keeps saying DES isn’t about the words” but he’s pretty picky about the words that I use as an interviewer. I still do wonder, does “*words don’t matter*” apply to the interviewer as well?

I do see that it’s more about intention. Many of my word choices betray some misguided intention—that I’m latching on too fixedly to a concept. It is hard, though, to gauge intention after the fact. Here, Mel mentioned some ways that this experience is different from the vacuuming experience, and she used a number of different words—soak, absorb, mull. The general intention (I think) was to see if experience of this sort was really present at this moment, and if so to see what it’s like.

Was this intention incorrectly expressed? Or were there competing intentions? Perhaps I already did have some fixed idea in my mind of what mulling or absorbing is like and this somehow guided my word choice. Either way, it’s hard to say. But I think discussing correct phrasings for questions is important inasmuch as it makes you rethink what you’re really trying to ask. And I do think that for interviewers, *words do matter* at least somewhat more than for interviewees. We do have the luxury/responsibility of being able to practice and try to improve our research methods.

Russ comments: *Words don’t matter* applies to the interviewer as well. It does not matter what words JBK used to probe Mel’s mulling. For example, at 57:10, JBK says “Okay, and how would you characterize this mulling if, if it’s there, if it’s present at all?” The words themselves are not problematic. But the prosody of the noises that come out of JBK’s mouth are, to my ear, decidedly problematic. The prosody of the expression conveys something like (to my ear): *There’s this mulling. Tell me about that.* [pause] *Oops I forgot to say “if it’s there” so I’ll add that.* That prosody conveys that JBK has been captured by the word *mulling*, and is encouraging Mel to describe mulling as if it were an experiential object.

I emphasize that I am not a mind reader; I am a careful (and sometimes misguided) listener, and I encourage others to listen for themselves

RE “But I think discussing correct phrasings for questions is important inasmuch as it makes you rethink what you’re really trying to ask.”

I agree with everything you said in your paragraph up to that. I do *not* want to encourage you or anyone to use correct phrasings. I think much of the modern world is in turmoil in part because people have been insisting that others use correct phrasings. *It is not about the words.* I would much rather have you use incorrect phrasings (and discuss what that reveals about what you incorrectly think), and then again use incorrect phrasings (and discuss again what that reveals about what you incorrectly think), and then again and again until eventually the inclination to use problematic phrasings diminishes.

Said another way, I don’t want you to learn how to use words like a good DES investigator. I would prefer that you learn to be a good DES investigator.

57:24 Mel: [grimaces] It’s very difficult to articulate, actually, because it’s not um, like I keep, y’know, sort of saying like it’s conceptual, like it doesn’t feel like something that’s black and white, or that’s like really um... clear, like it’s almost kind of like a hazy sort

of thing of like I read, I read the words and I'm, there's an, ah there's certainly an idea of a concept that I'm trying to take in but that is not like vivid.

57:58 JBK: Mhmm. Umm, and... just this is more for context. You had mentioned you had read and now you were rereading? [Mel: Um-hmm.] And, and letting it sink in. And were you in the process of, of reading (whether or not it was, like you were experiencing it in words) where you kind of reading it, or you kind of just like processing what you read, or would you not know?

58:27 Mel: I would say it's a, ah combo of both and probably why I tried to sort of explain how, ah how the process of reading is for me. Because I like remember when the beep went off like my eyes were halfway through scanning over like the sentence again. So that certainly process was happening. But um, the way I absorb what I'm reading is not like hearing the words as I'm over them. It's more that hazy conceptual thing that I'm saying of like, I know I'm going back over that, but in that way where it's not necessarily like each word articulated, if that makes any sense.

59:10 JBK: Yeah, and it does make sense. But, but going back to what Russ said earlier about being careful about generalizing your experience of reading, like how you normally do it, because, because we're most interested in, in this moment right here. And yeah, it is a challenging sample for, for I guess for me and, and you, and all of us. Um, I don't, I don't think my other questions would be productive, I don't know quite what to ask.

59:47 RTH: Um, so let me, let me, let me give a sort of a general overview. The way you find out what's a good question is not by consulting Russ and, and having him tell you what's a good question or not. But, but, it's by consulting what *Mel* says. And if you ask a question and Mel tells you about *something in general*, then the question that you asked was a bad question, sort of by definition. And, and if you ask a question and Mel looks... as best you can do, is trying to access her experience, trying to, trying to look directly at her experience, then you asked a good question. That's the, that's the heart of DES. It's really quite simple, but it's not easy to do in practice.

1:00:37 So, now I'm going to compare your line of questioning to my line of questioning. Your line, your line of questioning resulted in Mel telling you about reading the *New York Times* and all, a bunch, of bunch of other kind of stuff, which is to say she was talking about reading in general, which means *whatever your question was*, it pushed her in the wrong direction, because she ended up telling you about something in general. By contrast, *my* question was about... were you vacuuming, was this reading just like vacuuming? *It* caused her (it looked to me) to try to figure out what vacuuming was like, and to try to figure out what reading was like, which is to say to look at those specific feelings, for those, not feelings, those particular moments (whatever). And so I would say, by my definition, that that was a good question because, it looked like Mel ended up pondering her... her experience of reading and her experience of vacuuming. And whether, whether we found out anything useful about her experience, *probably not*—it's a first day of sampling, we're not, we're not, this is going to be, this gonna be a difficult process, probably, to try to tease these concepts apart. But it, but so um, I guess maybe that's all I wanna say about that is....

The object is to help Mel talk about four moments of her experience, and do whatever we have to do to get her to do that. And not talk about (really it's, it's worse than that or better than that or whatever) it's to get her to confront *for herself*, to contact for herself, to be interested in for herself, what her experience is like. And then sooner or later, she's going to be able to tell us about it. Maybe! Maybe not. Maybe her experience doesn't translate easily into words. But the first part of it's gotta be: get her in, into moment, kind of into contact with moments, the moments that the beep happen to identify.

1:03:07 JBK: Yeah, me by the end, I don't think the questioning, my questioning was productive, although, I kind of wanted to, to probe if there's... because for me like, I was wondering if you, if this was another more automatic moment, because many times you mentioned, um y'know processing, or letting the words soak, or trying to understand, and I was trying to see, if this, y'know, if it was experienced, and how it was experienced.

And to me the question of I mean, ah to, to me you mentioned the *New York Times* and saying that it, it *wouldn't* be different. Um, that was interesting to me, whether or not was it's true, because maybe it could mean you weren't so focused on the content. I mean that's something I was wondering about like how much the content was in your experience or not. Um but yeah I still have a lot of questions left about the sample. Maybe it's best to leave them.

1:03:07 Russ comments: In my view, perhaps the worst thing (there are, I suppose, worse things, but this is a bad thing) to do in any investigation of inner experience is to enter into a collusive arrangement with the participant, where the investigator asks the participant to say things that are beyond the participant's ability to report faithfully but reports anyway (probably because she's a nice person and she's trying to please the investigator), and the investigator believes she has answered his question, and the participant infers from his response that she has answered his question, and so next time answers with more confidence, so the investigator asks more questions, and so on, a vicious cycle.

To avoid that, the investigator has to develop the skill of asking questions within the realm of what the participant is capable of answering. That does leave a lot of seemingly interesting questions unasked and unanswered. The good news is that by sticking to questions that the participant can answer, the participant can give answers for which there is warrant to believe, and as that cycle continues, the answers that emerge will be recognized as being even more interesting than the investigator's original questions (because the answers are given with fidelity).

CONVERSATION AFTER SAMPLE DISCUSSIONS

1:04:20 Mel: Um I can go to the next one if you want. I feel like the last three are sort of in the same vein. So...

1:04:26 JBK: But we've, we've done an out... Normally DES is just one hour of sampling...

1:04:28 Mel: So you don't need the other one.

1:04:30 JBK: ...so will kind of preserve all of our y'know mental concentration. Um, [Mel: Yeah] and the point is to not get to every beep, but to do the best we can and a [inaudible] job with the, the beeps we can get to. What would you say Russ?

1:04:46 RTH: I would agree with that. And so we get we ask for six beeps because maybe we can talk about six beeps in an hour. But maybe we can't. [Mel: Okay.] And the, the risk of going forwards is that then we start to feel the pressure of time or something, and that's probably not a good idea. And, and, and fatigue and whatever. This is hard, it's hard work to... *And*, and, and, and beyond that, it's a, it's a good idea to let what we have done sort of sink in and but, and then get transformed, or rejected, or amplified, or whatever, and so that *next time* we can come back at it with... having profited from the experience that we had this way in whatever in, whatever way that means. And I don't think we need to or could possibly, actually, articulate what it means to have profited by it. But we've, we've done what we can do.

1:05:48 And, and in that towards, that end I would give us one more admonishment. And that is that *today* we spent quite a bit of time trying to distinguish between nothing and something, or between context and moments, or whatever we did. And that was good—I'm happy, happy, we did, we did that. But I, I *wouldn't* want us to think, going forwards, *well, that's the important deal*, that, this is the way Mel's experience is going to be and she's got, I gotta be, if, if I were Mel thinking, well I gotta be more careful and trying to distinguish between something and nothing, or between context and whatever. That's, maybe the next round of beeps will be entirely different from these, in which case what we said today will be sort of irrelevant. Or maybe they'll be the *same* kind of a thing. But what I, what I *don't* want is to do is to *prejudge* what they're going to be, and to, and to *go looking for* the kinds of experiences that we had today.

1:05:48 Russ comments (see the discussion at 17:18 and 32:55, and the comments at 47:21, 48:55, 50:01, 1:11:35, and in the COMMENTARY ABOUT SAMPLE 1.4 ARISING AFTER THE INTERVIEW): Note here that Russ does *not* say: "A *principle of DES* is that we try to start from zero on every new sampling day." Instead, he talks about what *we* (Mel, Russ, and Julian) said *today*, and what *we* (Mel, Russ, and Julian) might say *next week*. This is an invitation to *Mel* (and to Russ and Julian) to think about how *Mel* (and Russ and Julian) might think about *Mel's* next sampling. Here again, this is not an application of a DES rule (although it certainly is informed by Russ's DES experiences). And it does *not* invite Mel to try to master the DES rulebook. It invites her to try to be faithful to her experience.

1:06:51 JBK: That's interesting, I normally would tell people kind of what you told me *not* to do like, "this might be something to pay attention on other days."

1:07:00 RTH: That's, I hate, I hate that, I hate that.

1:07:00 Russ comments: Most non-DES methods do encourage this kind of return-to-what-we-did-already talk. I think that is immensely risky. A DES participant's first-day descriptions generally come from some messy amalgam of specific-at-the-moment-of-the-beep experience and presupposition. A subsequent attempt to return-to-what-we-did-already *reduces* the specific-experience portion (because some of the specific

details of that specific experience, as with all episodic memory, will have been forgotten) and therefore *amplifies* the presupposition portion (because presuppositions are ongoing, constant pressures, not tied to a particular episodic memory, and therefore are likely to charge into the gaps where the specific memory has faltered). That is, if you value the bracketing of presuppositions, encouraging the return-to-what-we-did-already does exactly what you *don't* want to do.

This is another way of recommending having faith in the iterative process. If the feature of experience talked about on the first day is important, it will reappear at new samples on subsequent days. Then, starting fresh with new samples, and viewing the phenomena with fresh eyes from a fresh perspective, we can discover something about the phenomenon that is *not* parochially tied to one instance.

1:06:51 JBK: And I don't know if I read that in your work. I, I don't know, I don't know where I got that from. But um, yeah, if they say "oh I had words in my head," I might ask "do y'know what they were?" And maybe they do or maybe they don't. And then I say, "that could be something you could look out for if they are or if they aren't." So it's just more approach of...

1:06:51 Russ comments: Julian's questioning as he describes it here veers *away* from experience at the moment of the beep. To be concrete, let's call the participant "Barb."

	What was said	My commentary
Barb	oh I had words in my head	
Julian	do y'know what they were?	That question aims at Barb's current mental state; it does not aim directly at Barb's experience at the moment of the beep.
Barb	I don't recall	
Julian	that could be something you could look out for if they are or if they aren't.	That encourages an abstract viewpoint. It implies: <i>The presence or absence of words is important, and people who do DES correctly should inspect all experiences for the presence or absence of words.</i>

I would prefer to keep the focus directly on real experiences of the real participant, with no abstraction. So here is my preferred alternative:

	What was said	My commentary
Barb	oh I had words in my head	
Russ	What were they?	That question aims directly at Barb's words at the moment of the beep. There is no abstraction.
Barb	I don't recall	
Russ	Well, I'm interested in words (among many other things), so if you have an experience that includes	This is a statement about Russ (and Russ's interests) and Barb (and Barb's experiences) as particular individuals. There is nothing abstract about it. It says, <i>I, Russ, am</i>

	words (in your head or elsewhere), I'd like to know what they are.	<i>interested in the details of your (Barb's) experience, whatever your experience happens to be.</i> It does <i>not</i> say that words (or their absence) are important.
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DES is simple: to be interested in the participant's experience, and to express that interest. Being simple does not necessarily mean it is easy.

Julian comments: This is the second main methodological revelation to me in this interview session (after *the words don't matter*). I had always thought of DES in terms of training participants. "Train" is indeed a word RTH uses frequently in his writing. But it's a different kind of training than in many domains. If you train in chess, you remember all kinds of positions and sequences that could come in handy in later games. In judo you remember different throws. In piano you remember pieces or chord progressions.

In DES, through questioning, we are training participants how to observe. But the crucial difference, I see now, is that it's a kind of empty training. We don't tell them what to look out for or which distinctions to make. These distinctions have to be driven by experience itself. Of course, they may remember things from a previous sampling day. Barb could think *oh before, Julian tried to see which exact words were present and what that experience was like. This sample also had words so let me note down all the details I can.* But that's a different kind of thing from Barb thinking *oh Julian told me to look out for words. Did this thought have words to it? Well now that I think of it, it did.* That involves a further remove of trying to remember previous instructions and letting that potentially bias understanding of experience.

Is there another kind of training like DES? I don't know, and maybe the 'training' metaphor falls short. It could be like training in music, but less about memorization than about learning how to be open, curious, and interested in sound.

I don't think this distinction is heavily stressed in the DES literature. For example RTH's book *Investigating Pristine Experience* gives around 100 constraints for how to do DES correctly, but this distinction isn't one of them. I think it's important and worth stressing in further DES instruction.

Russ comments: I don't know the answers to these important questions. I can speculate, for what it is worth.

If you go deep enough, I think all the disciplines are in some sense the same. I suspect that the genuine chess master is genuinely interested in the board and the person in front of her, without comparison to any other set of games. She makes what seems like the right move.

I don't know what the best way to "train" DES practitioners is, or whether it is possible to train them.

I don't know whether there is any other training like DES. I suppose it is in some ways like being a 100% deaf musician teaching someone to play the violin. I think that is possible, because whereas you can't hear the ultimate goal (beautiful sound), you can see or feel things that are related to the ultimate goal (finger movements, bow technique, vibrato movement, etc.). Maybe that would be enough.

Julian comments: Now for a more minor quibble. RTH compares my hypothetical question about words in experience “do y’know what they were?” to his preferred “What were they?” According to RTH, my question “aims at Barb’s current mental state; it does not aim directly at Barb’s experience at the moment of the beep.” I don’t think this is true. “Do y’know what they were?” is a ‘polite’ way of saying “do you know what they were, and could you tell me?” If you ask someone “do you have a favorite movie,” you’d be taken aback if they just said “yes” and ended there. They’d probably say something like “Yes, it’s *The Land Before Time*.”

True, RTH’s phrasing is more direct. But it also carries the risk of interviewees being embarrassed if they can’t remember. I do think it is preferable to be direct. Many conventions for being ‘polite’ circumvent directly asking what we want to know. But I still don’t think this phrasing is the main issue with this line of questioning.

Russ comments: If Russ believed that Julian adequately differentiated between Mel’s experience at the moment of the beep and all else, then he wouldn’t have raised this issue (after all, he thinks that words don’t matter). But Russ thinks (correctly or incorrectly) that Julian has some things yet to learn about being genuinely interested in Mel’s experience, about not cluttering up an interest in Mel’s experience with extraneous stuff. So he pointed out that JBK’s question was not actually pointed at Mel’s experience at the moment of the beep.

In response, Julian clutters up Mel as a specific individual with some unenumerated (and therefore nonexistent) imaginary group of interviewees who *might be* embarrassed. I never interview such an imaginary group. I interview Mel, or I interview Lena, or I interview Ryan, or I interview some other individual. And I convey that I’m genuinely interested in their individual experiences. Out of that genuine interest comes, I suspect, genuine politeness.

- 1:07:20 RTH: Yeah, it’s, it’s, it’s, it’s back, that’s backwards from what I would do, I would, I would like us to *forget entirely* what we did today and come back at it come back at it anew, but, but with, with, the with, ah with the profit that we have gotten (whatever that profit is) but without, without presuming to know what that profit was.
- 1:07:46 JBK: And, and I also appreciate because I mean I, I read up, ah a lot on the technique of the method and questions to ask, but there’s a lot more in kind of soft skills around it. Um, that it, like I appreciate getting to know because I did have one participant who was a bit nervous, and we couldn’t quite get past that—she was kind of worried she wasn’t doing the method right. And I would keep saying “no, it’s okay as long as y’know, as long as you tell us what you are or aren’t certain about, you’re doing the method right.” But um, it’s good to see your approach, Russ on how to...
- 1:08:35 RTH: So let me, let me tell you how I, how I would do that. So what you just said the, the reassurance of “yeah you’re doing it, you’re doing it good” or whatever, that I think is what psychologists are trained to do. And I think it’s a mistake. And, and be- because it (I think) it puts you into the judgmental role of *I know what you’re supposed to do, and I’m telling you, as the authority, that it’s okay what you’re doing. Instead*, what I would do (and what I did with Mel, I think, earlier on; we can rewind the tape and see), is to say, “This is difficult. It’s difficult for me, and it’s difficult for you. And I’m with you; I’m, I’m with you there, trying to figure it out. And maybe we’re going to be

able to do it and maybe we're not." And the, the difference there is: it's not *me* judging *Mel*; it is recognizing that this is a first-person-*plural* enterprise. Maybe, maybe the match between Mel and Russ isn't any good, because she doesn't like me or whatever. That's, y'know that's, that's not Mel's *fault* and it's not my *fault*. It's the, it's the *we*-ness of it. Maybe it's gonna work and maybe it's not gonna work. And... and so I don't, I don't, I don't feel myself in a position to *judge* Mel, actually, one way or the other, either that she's doing a good job or that she's doing a bad job. The question is whether *we*.... So, so now, so I think, I think Mel's on her side of the chasm and I'm on my side of the chasm and I can, I can really only deal with what's on my side. But I, I want to be honest with Mel, I want to be candid with Mel and... that's about as far as I can go. [Julian laughs] And Mel's either going to learn to be candid with me or we're, we're going to reach across the chasm and, and see whether we can, we can do something that both of us find satisfy- satisfying. Or not, we'll find out about that.

1:10:45 Mel: Yeah, yeah, and I feel like um, 'better' [gestures air quotes] at it in terms of being a little more... not like natural with it, I guess like also kind of accepting of, like the, the thing I struggled with on this round was that I was looking for, I was looking to be able to articulate stuff really well, when in actual fact like, a lot of my experience feels like nothing. And so, and so um, I'll get better at trying to not reach for phrases that perhaps like aren't, like, there, because I wanna like do a good job and articulate my experience as accurately as possible. Like I need to like, not overthink it as well a little bit. [JBK: Mm-hmm]

1:11:35 RTH: It's a challenging enterprise. There's no question about it. [Mel: (inaudible)] And, and I think it's a *totally interesting* exercise. I think it's, I think the particular Mel / Julian / Russ kind of struggle is, is peculiar, probably, to Mel, Julian, and Russ. And if it were three different people or two different people or one different person in the mix, the struggle would be different and... And that's just the way it is. And, but that's part of what makes it interesting... That we have to, we have to, we have to figure out what the struggle is and how to do it. And that, that's going to be different for, for all of us, each individually as well as the collective. So can we do it again?

1:11:35 Russ comments: This is another way of saying that RTH is *not* instructing Mel how to proceed because he genuinely doesn't know how to proceed—the proceeding will depend on the particular idiosyncrasies of the participants. (See the discussion at 17:18 and 32:55, and the comments at 47:21, 48:55, 50:01, 1:05:48, and in the COMMENTARY ABOUT SAMPLE 1.4 ARISING AFTER THE INTERVIEW.)

Comment: There is additional commentary about sample 1.4 at the end of this transcript, in the section called COMMENTARY ABOUT SAMPLE 1.4 ARISING AFTER THE INTERVIEW.

1:12:33 JBK: Yeah, I mean up to you [Mel].

1:12:35 Mel: [laughs] Yeah, um, well I guess if it works for everyone, it still works for me to do this time next week, if you wanna do that again.

1:12:43 RTH: Um, that would be October 17th at eight o'clock.

1:12:48 Mel: The same times as today. Does that work? Is that what [RTH: Works for me.] you were thinking for like, y'know another week, a week? Is that fine.

1:12:52 RTH: That's fine with me.

1:13:00 JBK: A week is, yeah, a week works for me. Before I usually did actually... sequentially every day. Is, what's, what's kind of your standard op, operation, Russ?

1:13:13 RTH: Um I don't think I have a standard operation. To the extent that I have a *modal* operation I would say it's once a week. But I... if I would say I, I would prefer more often than once a week if it were really up to me, but I would, once a day sounds too heroic to me.

1:13:38 JBK: Too much. So, I mean I'm, I'm also fine with bi-weekly. Um, because kind of you're in it. You, you kind of [laughs] I don't know how to describe, but I guess it's up to, to you Mel, really.

1:13:56 Mel: Well, yeah I could do, um this same time but on Friday, the thirteenth of October if you'd prefer this Friday.

1:14:06 JBK: That, that works for me too.

1:14:12 RTH: Um... that does not work for me. [Mel: Okay.] I could do Friday... If it were Friday, it would have to be later by a couple hours, probably.

1:14:25 Mel: Yeah I could, I could do I could maybe do yet 2 hours later, and that's all, though.

1:14:32 RTH: Ten o'clock on Friday the thirteenth I can probably do, ten o'clock that would be ten o'clock my time, one o'clock, and like seven o'clock Julian's time. Or we can just go for next, next Tuesday next... The, the reason that the modal time on Tuesday works is that..., the, the modal time *weekly* works is that most people, most people's schedule works out in a way that we can, we can do it.

1:15:01 JBK: Yeah. Sounds like that might be easier.

1:14:59 Mel: Okay. Let's try that and then, and then see moving forward as well. But okay if we do same time Tuesday then.

1:15:10 JBK: Okay I'll send out the invites and the email and the recordings and all of that.

1:15:17 RTH: Okay.

1:15:19 Mel: Awesome! Do you have anything else to add that's needed? You're just gonna say "no, and just keep doing what you doing and..." [laughs] [JBK: Keep on at it.]

- 1:15:30 RTH: Um I I think I've said everything that I would, w, would like to say about that. [Mel: Okay.] I think, I think I've been as transparent as I know how to be about it and... [Julian: And I agree.]
- 1:15:50 Mel: Yeah, okay. Alright, well, we'll do it all again next week. Thank you(!) for listening to my mutterings!
- 1:15:54 RTH: Um, well we, we appreciate it, it, it's ah, it's a totally interesting thing. There is very little in the world I think that's more interesting than it.
- 1:16:06 Mel: I completely agree.
- 1:16:07 JBK: I also, also think it's fascinating. So I'm glad to be doing this.

COMMENTARY ABOUT SAMPLE 1.4 ARISING AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Within a few days of the interview (DES aspires to perform this task within 24 hours of the interview), JBK wrote a brief description of each sample. As part of the description of sample 1.4, he wrote "Mel described herself as automatically absorbing the reading."

Russ comments: It seems to me that that writing "Mel described herself as..." is either irresponsible or meaningless. That is a common usage in the psychological world, a usage that I think generally means: *Mel said that, and I want you to accept that it is true because in some way it buttresses the theory that I have about her (whether stated or unstated), but really I don't know whether it is true or not, so I don't want you to hold me responsible for saying that it is true, so I'll quote Mel, and then if it turns out to be contentious for any reason, I can assure you that I was just accurately quoting her. That is, I am going to use the quote to make a point that I want to make, but I will blame her for it if the going gets rough.* I think that is irresponsible because if one doubts that something is true, the responsible practice would be either simply not to state it or to state it along with an explicit acknowledgment of doubt.

In the DES world, everything we say about Mel is meant to be a genuine characterization of what we have come to believe about Mel's experience. All such characterizations arise from what Mel has said, how she has said it, what she hasn't said, and so on. There is no special reliance on Mel's words—we accept that much of what Mel says is wrong or misleading; we encourage her at every step of the process to revise, withdraw, correct, expand, extend, and otherwise modify or amend what she has already said. The DES process is *not* about what Mel *said* about her experience—it is about how *we* (Mel, Julian, and Russ) *came to understand* Mel's experience. That understanding may or may not align with anything that Mel said anywhere in the interview. So if we believe that Mel was automatically absorbing her reading, there is no reason to quote Mel in that regard—we should just say it. If we doubt it, we should say something like: "we discussed whether reading was automatically absorbed and couldn't resolve that aspect." That does *not* blame Mel; it accepts responsibility for the group and its chronicler.

For example, JBK did not write at beep 3, "Mel described herself as drinking tea." Why not? I presume because he judged as true the tea-drinking aspect, so there was no need to quote. That implies, in my view, that JBK intended the phrase "Mel described" in the description of her reading absorption to convey doubt without stating it. That's what I think is irresponsible: if you doubt what she says, then you should explicitly say you doubt her (and why).

Julian comments: Your comments are very interesting to me. I am trying to break away from this overly academic form of writing that chokes clarity. So what you say makes sense. I use “described herself” to indicate doubt. It’s doubt for Mel’s way of describing her experience but also doubt for my own ability to apprehend it. I think this kind of doubt is important to DES, but, yes, better left in the brackets. I revised the passage to add: “or was not experiencing anything”. I originally shied away from writing it plainly.

I also think your comment is interesting in that it breaks away from the main way I’ve conceptualized DES. I’ve thought of DES primarily as a method based around skepticism. Whereas some qualitative methods take participant reports at face value, DES operates on the belief that we can be mistaken about our experience. Questions often aim to break participants away from preconceptions. But I see that being skeptical isn’t enough. We have to be genuinely honest about our skepticism. If we don’t trust a report we should say why plainly and work with participants to get at direct experience. I think this genuineness is key to why DES participants rarely feel put off by what can seem like a barrage of skepticism coming from DES interviewers. The skepticism is honest, voiced, constructive, and aimed at mutual understanding. I see DES now as a method based more on genuine honesty than on skepticism.

Russ comments: Genuine skepticism aspires to honesty. When most people say “I am skeptical,” they mean to say (and would so say if they were being genuinely honest) “I don’t believe you.” The skepticism that underlies DES is an honest acceptance of the human condition: that what people say about their inner experience is often an impure mixture of experience and presupposition.

Likewise, genuine honesty aspires to skepticism. The human condition is always a mixture of truth and misleading (except perhaps in nirvana, about which I have no personal experience).