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You can't hide from Patti Wood

The body language expert to the stars tells us what local celebs are really thinking

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Here are some thoughts that might cross your mind when you're sitting across a table from Patti Wood, whose comments on celebrities' body language is in practically every issue of Us Weekly:

"I'm crossing my arms. I need to not do that. She'll think I'm hiding something."

"Why did I just look past her? She'll think I'm not valuing the importance of her words."

"Oh shit. My right hand is resting just above my crotch. ... I'm totally signaling my sexual prowess! What am I, an idiot?"

And on and on.

The good news is that Patti Wood - body language expert, sales trainer, Decatur resident - makes it a point not to "read" the people she's talking to, unless they absolutely insist. So she sits there and smiles and laughs and jokes about what her friends call her "secret powers."

To Wood, there's nothing secret about it. Since she was a little girl, she's been fascinated with how people carry themselves - how they walk, how they talk, and, mostly, how they interact with the people around them. At Florida State University, she studied non-verbal communications, and after graduating from FSU, she went on to get a master's at Auburn University. She settled in Tallahassee and set up her own consulting company. Businesses would hire her to coach their salespeople on the body language best suited to making

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Patti Wood
(Jim Stawniak)

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a pitch. CEOs who were stiff public speakers would call on her to help them emerge from their shells.

U.S. Rep. Cynthia McKinney

One day four years ago, ABC came calling. Connie Chung had just landed an interview with Gary Condit, the congressman suspected of having a hand in the disappearance of Chandra Levy. Would Patti look at the tape and tell the world what she thought?

Bobby, Whitney and Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon

Wood said yes. She noticed Condit's face - blank and impassive. There were his lips, which he pursed and sucked inward more than 14 times during the interview. A sign of restrained aggression. There was his tongue, which swept often across his dry lips. "Perhaps he is sweeping away his discomfort, sweeping away the lies," Wood speculated.

Jennifer Wilbanks

More repressed hostility could be seen in his steepled hands and his finger pointing. Wood's conclusion? Condit was "angry and he is hiding something."

After the Condit critique, Us Weekly was a natural next step. The glossy mag, which lives and dies by its photos of celebrities doing everyday things like feeding parking meters and carrying groceries ("Stars - They're Just Like Us!"), called on Wood to tell readers what the celebrities' body language was saying.

Soon, the magazine was devoting two pages almost every week to Wood's commentary on what Ben Affleck's open eyes meant when he kissed Jennifer Lopez, or how Tom Cruise's embrace of Katie Holmes from behind represented a "classic ownership gesture."

Thanks to Us Weekly, the photo reading soon took on a life of its own. Other magazines sought out Wood. Serious news organizations too. The BBC asked her opinion of Saddam Hussein's body language. And just last month, The London Mail asked Wood what she thought of a freeze-frame image of the London bombers on the morning of the deadly explosions. ("They are keeping a social distance apart [that's] closer than complete strangers, but further apart than friends would be. ... Look at their feet. They are walking in sync with each other, giving the impression they are a unit.")

On her website, www.pattiwood.net, she offers her services (around \$150) to read photos of "regular" people. Want to know what your girlfriend thinks about you? Send Patti some pictures of the two of you together.

Today, Wood's niche as a "body language expert" has her on the road three times a month, leaving behind her spastic mutt named Bo and her impressive collection of plastic snow globes, to which she's consistently adding with every airport gift shop she visits.

Not long ago, CL paid a visit to Wood. We came armed with pictures of local notables, such as Shirley Franklin, Ralph Reed and, of course, that lovable train wreck of a couple, Bobby Brown and Whitney Houston. Wood's strategy is to look at a photo quickly and then write down her gut reaction. She says humans can get an accurate first impression in as little as 1/40th of a second.

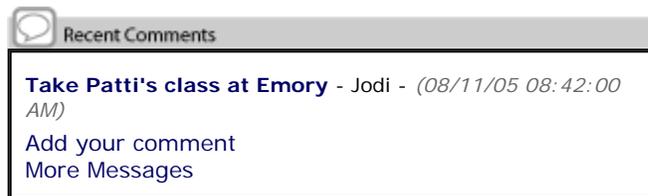
Wood then examines the components of the photograph - facial

expressions, distance between the people in the photo, hand position. All of these are cues that reflect the subject's inner self, she says.

Wood made detailed reads of the photos we showed her, although she says she prefers reading pictures that show the entire body. "The most honest portion of the body is from the waist down, as it's less under our conscious control," she says. "Where the feet point, the heart follows."

Often, Wood's comments seem glaringly obvious once you look again at the photos. She calls this the "Where's Waldo" effect - he's easy to spot only after you know where he is. So she urges people to read photos themselves first, then see if their interpretations match hers.

Who knows? Maybe you have the secret powers, too.



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