



CHAPTER ONE: Another Way To See the World

“Feeling and longing are the motive forces behind all human endeavor and human creations.”

*—Albert Einstein, 20th century American physicist
and Nobel Prize winner*

“Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names could never hurt me.”

—Children’s rhyme

When people first hear the term “Nonviolent Communication,” they can be surprised or confused. We are accustomed to thinking about violence as physical force and it can be puzzling to think of communication—mere words—as aggressive. In fact, communication is usually seen as an *alternative* to violence. Negotiations are attempted before acts of war and used to stop physical conflict. If a parent sees her child hitting a playmate or grabbing a toy away—an act of physical force—the child might be reminded to “use your words.” The parent may be assuming, as the children’s rhyme goes, “...names could never hurt me.”

So what do words have to do with violence? If you think about it, there often is a connection. The language we use and the thoughts we have inform the kinds of actions we take. If we have critical thoughts or images of another group or person, it becomes far more likely that physical force will be used. If you reflect on physical violence and trace back what leads to it, you may at first blame a physical act or stimulus—“He hit me first!” or “He cut me off on the road!” But if you reflect further, you will find that before a strike is taken, even in perceived retaliation, that words or thoughts

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preceded it: “How dare you!” “What a jerk!” “I’ll teach you a lesson.” Violent actions follow from talking to ourselves in this kind of way.

Violence most broadly defined can be seen as a breakdown of human connection and understanding. Certainly, when such fissures occur, opportunities for physical violence become more likely. In contrast, if we love and care for someone, the last thing we want is that they suffer or experience harm. While we may not be able to love and care for everyone in our lives with the same level of energy and attention, learning *how* to connect compassionately with others can contribute to resolving conflicts when they arise and to fostering even greater understanding where connection already exists. It is this kind of Compassionate Communication that we address in this book.

Beyond Boxed-Up Thinking

“Beyond right and wrong, there is a field. I will meet you there.”

—Rumi

Communicating compassionately involves changing our thinking. It involves challenging a primary assumption that has informed our culture for hundreds and thousands of years. This assumption tells us that it is useful to classify people and things as “right” or “wrong.” According to this kind of thinking, some people are good, some bad; some smart, others stupid; some heroes and others villains. This right-wrong thinking can be found at every level of our society. Comic book heroes fight arch villains; the current President of the United States talks about an “axis of evil.” A popular bumper sticker reads, “Mean People Suck!” This assumes that some people are mean, others nice, and that mean people are mean all the time. Meanness is the very definition of who they are.

Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Who deserves our sympathy, understanding, and support? And who should be excluded, judged, or punished? When I was in college, I spent hours discussing

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questions like this with my friends. We considered relationships, family, and politics. We wanted to understand the world, and the choices being made. Even today, I find questions like this compelling. I want to understand the cause of a situation and who is responsible. I want to be informed and aware, prepared to face something similar and to have clarity about what

“Reality is much more complex than any judgment of right and wrong encourages you to believe. When you really understand the ethical, spiritual, social, economic, and psychological forces that shape individuals, you will see that people’s choices are not based on a desire to hurt. Instead, they are in accord with what they know and what world views are available to them. Most are doing the best they can, given what information they’ve received and what problems they are facing.”

—Michael Lerner

to do. I know I’m not the only one. The popularity of “confessional” talk shows and courtroom programs such as Judge Judy attests to a continuing interest in this kind of right-wrong thinking for solving problems and understanding the world.

So if right-wrong thinking has been used for thousands of years and is still so popular today, why change it? Clearly, this way of thinking meets some needs. It can offer us a sense of safety, meaning, fairness, and order. It can seem effective in making choices and distinguishing values. And it’s familiar, so it can feel comfortable and easy—even intrinsic to human nature.

Yet right-wrong thinking doesn’t foster connection. It separates us from each other and ourselves. It draws a line in the sand: You are either with us, or against us. Innocent or guilty. Right or wrong. Deserving of punishment—or reward. As such, it can be seen as lacking the complexity of life and full human experience. It implies a static view of human beings and their behavior. According to such thinking, “bad” people will always do “bad” things and “good”