

1

Another Way to See the World

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

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

*Sticks and stones can break my bones
but names can never hurt me.*

—CHILDREN’S RHYME

When people first hear the term “Nonviolent Communication,” they may be surprised and 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 in order to avoid physical conflict. Police (ideally) will say, “Stop! Drop your gun!” before firing when they see an armed person committing a crime. 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.” As the children’s rhyme goes, “Sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never hurt me.”

Yet we all know that words can generate much hurt and pain. While the hurt may not be physical, our thoughts and words 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 or a destructive act will ensue.

If you reflect on physical violence and what leads to it, you may, in each case, 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 person strikes physically, even in perceived retaliation, words or thoughts precede the act: “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 can be most broadly defined as a breakdown in human connection and understanding. 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 for them to suffer or experience harm. While we may not be able to love and care for everyone else with equal energy and attention, learning *how* to connect compassionately with others can contribute to resolving conflicts when they arise and to fostering greater understanding where connection already exists. It is this kind of “Nonviolent” or “Compassionate” Communication that we address in this book.

Beyond Boxed-Up Thinking

*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing
and rightdoing, there is a field. I
will meet you there.*

—RUMI

*Much of our daily interactions
with our fellow human beings
is empathic because that is our
core nature. Empathy is the very
means by which we create social
life and advance civilization.*

—JEREMY RIFKIN

Communicating compassionately involves changing our thinking. It involves challenging a primary assumption that has informed our culture for thousands of years: 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 caring, others insensitive. This yo-yo,

right-wrong thinking can be found at every level of our society. Comic book heroes fight arch villains; in TV and films, the police are out to get “the bad guys”; President George W. Bush, when launching the Iraq war, referred repeatedly to an “axis of evil.” A popular bumper sticker reads, “Mean People Suck!” This assumes that some people are mean, others

are nice, and, implicitly, mean people are mean all the time. Meanness is the very definition of who they are. If this is so, why bother with them? Mean people, according to this kind of thinking, should be avoided—or even controlled or punished.

Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Who deserves sympathy, understanding, and support? And who should be excluded, judged, punished, fired, executed, or (in the case of countries) attacked? When I was in college, I spent hours discussing questions like this with my peers. We talked about relationships, family, and politics. We wanted to understand the world and the choices people were making. Even today, I can find such questions compelling. I want to understand the cause of a given situation and know who is responsible. I want to be informed and aware, have a sense of safety and security in the world, and be confident about there being accountability, restoration, hope, and change. I know I’m not alone in this. The popularity of “confessional” talk shows and courtroom programs such as *Judge Judy* attests to a continuing interest in right-wrong thinking as a means of solving problems and understanding the world, ourselves, and those around us.

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 worldviews 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

This kind of thinking has a long tradition (at least in the West) and lies at the core of our dominant cultural norms and beliefs. According to the Old Testament, it accounts for the very start of human history: Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise (punished) for their *wrongdoing*. According to Walter Wink, this Myth of Redemptive Violence, as he calls it, dates back even earlier to a Babylonian creation story from around 1250 BCE,¹ upon which all later myths involving punitive violence are based. This myth still informs much of our culture today, impacting almost every institution, belief, and practice in our society; it is seen as natural, obvious, and the “truth.” As Wink points out, “. . . [A] story told often enough, and confirmed often enough in daily life, ceases to be a tale and is accepted as reality itself.”²

So if right-wrong thinking is so popular and prevalent and has been around for thousands of years, why change it? Clearly, it 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.

I hate having to choose sides. Last year, a couple I was friendly with got divorced and there were hard feelings between them. It seemed like each one wanted me to support them in blaming the other for the break-up, that it was all the other person’s fault. I wanted to remain friends with both of them, but at the time, I couldn’t figure out how to do that and wound up losing one friend. I really would like to do things differently.

—PAULA

Yet right-wrong thinking diminishes human connection. It separates us from one another and ourselves. It draws a line in the sand: You are either with us, or against us. Innocent or guilty. Deserving of reward or punishment. Saved or damned. It negates 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” or “just” people must stop or control

them. This view confuses a person's *behavior*—the particular acts a person chooses to take—with who the person *is*. And if someone is intrinsically evil, what hope is there for learning, connection, compassion, or change? It is this kind of thinking that leads to conflict and violence, in all its forms.

Empirical research paints a very different picture, showing that human behavior is fluid and primarily determined by what we *think* about the situation we find ourselves in. Given our circumstances and our cultural conditioning, we are all capable of doing “bad” things. The proportion of college students, for example, who admit to behavior that could be classified as a felony is consistently more than 90 percent (for example, damaging other's property, giving illegal substances to those under the age of eighteen, or entering a premises and taking an item that belongs to another). When asked if they would commit various illegal acts if they were 100 percent guaranteed that they wouldn't get caught, the proportion of students who said they would steal, cheat, or physically hurt someone who has hurt them in some way is very high. In effect, if you want to get someone to cheat, make the stakes high enough and the chances of getting caught low enough.

As the writer Jorge Luis Borges has observed, we human beings live by justification alone—even if only to bring a glass of water to our lips. What Borges means is that we all have reasons for doing what we do. Our given circumstances and our needs—not who we intrinsically *are*—determine the course of action we take. It's safe to say, for example, that most human beings would abhor eating human flesh. Yet when stranded by an accident and given the choice of starving or eating the bodies of dead companions, you might choose to eat. There are well-documented cases, involving climbing and airplane accidents, of people making this choice. If you reflect on an action you took that you now regret, you can probably find some need or important value that motivated that action—even if you're not fully happy with the choice or its impact.

Research also documents that while right-wrong thinking is the norm in our society today, early humans lived very differently,

based on compassion and connection. Riane Eisler, in *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History and Our Future*, explores recent evidence that paints a very different picture of pre-human history from the popular cliché of a caveman with a wooden club. Historical, anthropological, and archaeological data suggest that “just as some of the most primitive existing societies, like those of the BaMbuti and !Kung, are not characterized by warlike caveman dragging women around by the hair, it now appears that the Paleolithic was a remarkably peaceful time.” Indeed, popular notions of early human society as aggressive and violent can be seen more as an extension of our current way of viewing the world than an accurate representation of how early humans actually lived:

The old view was that the earliest human kinship (and later economic) relations developed from men hunting and killing. The new view is that the foundations for social organization came from mothers and children sharing. The old view was of prehistory as the story of “man the hunter-warrior.” The new view is of both women and men using our unique human faculties to support and enhance life.³

Biological and cognitive research confirms this view: all mammals, and especially humans (with our more developed neocortex), are “particularly hard-wired for empathy . . . the empathic predisposition is embedded in our biology.” Newborn infants, for example, are “able to identify the cries of other newborns and will cry in return” and toddlers “will often wince in discomfort at the sight of another child’s suffering and come over to him to share a toy, or cuddle, or bring them over to their own mother for assistance.”⁴

The limitation of right-wrong thinking is that it diminishes our natural capacity for empathy and compassion for ourselves and others. It takes us out of the moment, distracting us from specific needs and circumstances and obscuring the choices we can make that are fully aligned with our values. It also curtails the possibilities

for the kind of world we can collectively envision and create. In this book, we explore how a different kind of analysis, focused on feelings and needs, can enrich our understanding of human behavior and foster greater compassion and connection—for human beings and all life on the planet. It is this kind of orientation, based on empathy and compassion, that can transform how we relate to others and ourselves and bring us closer to recreating what Eisler calls a “partnership-based” culture, transforming “our world from strife to peaceful co-existence . . . [with] conflict productive rather than destructive.”⁵

EXERCISE 1: Force and Feeling

- A. Take a moment to reflect on an act of physical force or violence that you have considered, fantasized about, or acted upon. This could involve simply slamming your books on a table, breaking an object, or physically hurting someone. What was the stimulus for the action you took or wanted to take? What were you feeling and thinking at the time? What is the link between your thoughts and the action, real or imagined?
- B. Make a list of social institutions’ beliefs and practices, including, for example, how schools and learning are structured, the criminal justice system, policing, religious beliefs, health care, etc. How does right-wrong thinking inform their beliefs and practices? For example, in schools, it is common practice to give grades, which can be seen as a form of reward.
- C. Consider recent and historical events, such as wars or highly publicized court cases. How do you see right-wrong thinking in the language (justification) and actions that took place? How was one side presented as the “enemy,” or morally wrong, or less than the other?