

CHAPTER › 5

CONNECTING WITH OTHERS
EMPATHICALLY

*“Man did not weave the web of life, he
is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to
the web, he does to himself. All things are
bound together. All things connect.”*

— CHIEF SEATTLE



WE’VE NOW LOOKED AT HOW WE EXPRESS WHAT’S ALIVE in us and what would make life more wonderful. We see how it requires observations, feelings, needs, and clear requests. But those are the mechanics. It’s always important to realize that these mechanics have power only when they’re used in the service of the spiritual purpose of the process, which is to create a connection so people can respond out of divine energy, the joy of compassion, the joy of giving. If we do not have that intentionality, we’ve missed the whole thing.

For example, one mother came back on the second day of a workshop and said, “I went home and tried it last

night, Marshall, and it didn't work."

I said, "Well, let's learn from the experience. What did you do?"

She told me how she expressed herself to one of her children who hadn't done something she wanted. And she used the mechanics perfectly. She made a very clear observation, expressed her feelings, needs, and requests. But he still didn't do it.

I said, "So, what do you mean it didn't work?"

"Well," she said, "he didn't do it."

"Oh, so you're defining it as not working because he didn't do what you wanted him to do?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's not Nonviolent Communication; even if you used the mechanics, that's not the idea. Remember yesterday I said the purpose is to create a quality of connection that allows us to give to one another out of the joy of compassionate giving. It's not just to get what you want."

"Oh," she said, "so I'm just supposed to do all the work around the house myself . . .?"

She made the mistake that many people make by thinking that if we don't get people to do what we want, the only other option is to give up and be permissive, to have anarchy. And I showed her if we connect in the way I'm talking about, everybody's needs can get met. But if the other person senses that we have single-mindedness of purpose to get our request complied with, it changes the game. Then it turns our requests into demands.

RESPONDING TO THE MESSAGES OF OTHERS

“We cannot live only for ourselves. A thousand fibers connect us with our fellow-men; and along those fibers, as sympathetic threads, our actions run as causes, and they come back to us as effects.”

— HERMAN MELVILLE

Let’s consider a situation in which you’ve been honest with another person as defined in Nonviolent Communication terms. That’s half the process: learning how to express ourselves in this way. The other half of the process is how we respond to other people’s messages.

Let me tell you what many people are afraid will happen if they open up and reveal themselves. When they reveal honestly what’s alive in them and what would make life more wonderful, many people are afraid they’re going to get a free diagnosis from the other person. The other person is going to tell them what’s wrong with them for having these feelings, needs, and requests. They’re afraid they’ll hear things about how they’re too sensitive, needy, or demanding. This can happen, of course. We live in a world where people think that way, so if we are really open and honest, we might get back a diagnosis. Good news, though! Nonviolent Communication prepares us to deal with any response that might come back.

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Other people are afraid of silence. They say, “What if I open up and reveal myself and the other person doesn’t say anything?” We can prepare for that too. Many other people are afraid of a tiny two-letter word: No. They say, “What if I open up and say what I want and need and the other person says no.” Look at what you wrote down. We want to prepare for anything that can come back at us.

The other half of Nonviolent Communication shows us how to make empathic connection with *what’s alive in the other person* and *what would make life more wonderful for them*. Empathic connection has a very specific meaning and purpose. Empathy, of course, is a special kind of understanding. It’s not an understanding of the head where we just mentally understand what another person says. It’s something far deeper and more precious than that.

Empathic connection is an understanding of the heart in which we see the beauty in the other person, the divine energy in the other person, the life that’s alive in them. We connect with it. The goal isn’t intellectually understanding it, the goal

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is empathically connecting with it. It doesn’t mean we have to feel the same feelings as the other person. That’s sympathy, when we feel sad that another person is upset. It doesn’t mean we have to have the same feelings; it means we are *with* the other person. This quality of understanding requires one of the most precious gifts one human being can give to another: our presence in the moment.

You see, if we're mentally trying to understand the other person, we're not present with them in this moment. We're sitting there analyzing them, but we're not *with* them. Empathic connection involves connecting with what is alive in the other person *at this moment*. Look again at your prediction of how the other person might respond.

Let's say that you have told your boss you are frustrated at his or her asking you to stay late for the third night in a row and do additional work. You're frustrated because you have other commitments and needs that you'd like to take care of. So, you've been honest about your reasons for not wanting to do the overtime, and you ended on a clear request, like asking him if he would be willing to find someone else to help with the work this evening.

You've been honest and vulnerable, but now let's imagine that the boss says to you, "If you want to be unemployed, I'll do as you ask." What choices do you have now? Let me show you what choices you have with every message coming at you from another person.

Choice number one: You can take it personally, as though what you requested indicated there was something wrong with you. So, if the boss responds to you that way, you could immediately think, *I am being selfish* or *I'm not a very good employee*. You could take what the boss says personally.

We have been educated that when authorities tell us what's wrong, we think there is something wrong with us. I suggest that you never, never, never listen to what other people think about you. I predict you'll live longer and enjoy

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life more if you never hear what people think about you. And never take it personally.

The second choice we have when somebody speaks to us like the boss spoke is to judge the boss or the other person for what they said to us. We could either think or say aloud, *That's not fair, That's stupid*, or whatever. We

could blame the other person for what they said. I wouldn't recommend that. The recommendation I have is to learn to connect empathically with any message coming at us from other people. To do that you have to see what's alive in them.

I've been quoted on the subject of empathy in a recent book edited by Josh Baran titled *365 Nirvana Here and Now: Living Every Moment in Enlightenment*. The author excerpts a passage in which I compared empathy to surfing. I said that empathy is like riding on a wave; it's about getting in touch with a certain energy. But the energy is a divine energy that's alive in every person, at every moment.

Unfortunately, many of us are blocked from that divine energy by the way we've been taught to think. But for me empathy is getting with that energy that's coming through the other person. It's a divine experience. I feel as if I'm really in a flow with divine energy. And when two people connect in that way, any kind of conflict can be resolved so that everybody's needs get met.

When we teach people to empathize with people from

other cultures who are behaving in ways we don't like, we find ways of resolving our differences peacefully. So empathy is a beautiful experience when we have it. And it's powerful to work toward peace in diplomatic relationships based on empathy, not on our usual adversarial tactics.

Now, when we can empathize with what's alive in another person, it's amazing how much healing can go on. Unfortunately, there's a lot of healing that needs to happen in the world because of the pain people are in, and I'm often called to help individuals who have been victimized by people with different religious beliefs.

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For example, I did some healing work with a woman from Algeria who had been dragged outside by people who didn't like how she and her friend were dressing. She was forced to watch while they tied her friend behind a car and dragged her to her death. Then they took this woman into the house and raped her in front of her parents. The people were going to come back the next night and kill her, but fortunately she got to a phone and called some colleagues of mine in Geneva, Switzerland, who are skilled at getting people out of difficult situations.

They got her out, called me up, and said, "Marshall, could you see this woman for some healing work? She's in terrible pain. She's been in Switzerland now two weeks, crying day and night."

I said, "OK, send her out this evening. I'd be glad to do the work with her."

They said, "One thing you need to know, Marshall: She's afraid she'll kill you."

I said, "You explained that I will play the role of the person, but that I'm not the other person?"

"Yes, she understands that. But she said that if she even imagines you as the other person, she might hurt you. And Marshall, you should know this about this woman: She's a rather large woman."

I said, "Thank you for the warning." Because she would be speaking a different language than I speak, I said, "Well, tell her I'll have my interpreter. He's a man from Rwanda who's in the training I'll be doing in the afternoon and, after the violence he's been exposed to, I don't think this will scare him. See if she'd feel safe doing the work with the two of us in the room."

So I met with her and played the role of the religious extremist who had done these things to her because he didn't like the way she and her friend were dressing and behaving. This took quite awhile. For about an hour and a half she screamed at me the pain she felt. I empathized in the Nonviolent Communication way, just hearing the deep pain in her at this moment. And then she screamed at me, "How could you do it?"

And I said, "I'd like to tell you what was going on in me when I did, but I first want to tell you how horrible I feel when I now see your pain." I mourned first, then I told her

what was alive in me that caused me to do what I did. Then she got startled and said, “How did you know?”

I asked, “What do you mean?”

She said, “That’s almost exactly what he said. How did you know?”

“The reason I knew is that I am that man, and so are you, and so are we all.”

At the core of our humanity, we all have the same needs. So when I do this healing work, I don’t go up into my head and think what’s going on with this other person. Rather, I put myself in that role and say what would have been going on in me were I to do something like that. When she could hear that, it was amazing the healing that went on for her after all she’d been through. I’ve been in touch with her for nearly eight years now, and I know that the healing has sustained itself.

EXERCISE:

To prepare us to see how Nonviolent Communication suggests responding to other people, let's go back to your situation and use your imagination. Imagine you will try out what we've learned so far. You decide to go to this person and be honest with them, using the four steps to answer the two questions. You tell the other person the four things I've asked you to write down: what they've done that you don't like, how you feel, what needs of yours aren't met, and what your request is. Now, predict how they might respond and write that down.