

# CHAPTER 1

## Why We Are Alienated From Ourselves

*Our intellectual world is made up of categories, it is bordered by arbitrary and artificial frontiers.*

*We need to build bridges, but for that there is a need for knowledge, a greater vision of man and his destiny.*

YEHUDI MENUHIN  
U.S. and British violinist  
and conductor

### **Preamble**

I have no words to describe my loneliness, my sadness, or my anger.

I have no words to speak my need for exchange, understanding, recognition.

So I criticize, I insult, or I strike.

Or I have my fix, abuse alcohol, or get depressed.

Violence, expressed within or without, results from a lack of

vocabulary; it is the expression of a frustration that has no words to express it.

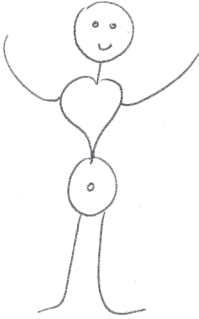
And there are good reasons for that; most of us have not acquired a vocabulary for our inner life. We never learned to describe accurately what we were feeling and what needs we had. Since childhood, however, we have learned a host of words. We can talk about history, geography, mathematics, science, or literature; we can describe computer technology or sporting technique and hold forth on the economy or the law. But the words for life within . . . when did we learn them? As we grew up, we became alienated from our feelings and needs in an attempt to listen to those of our mother and father, brothers and sisters, schoolteachers, et al.: “Do as Mommy tells you . . . Do whatever your cousin who’s coming to play with you this afternoon wants . . . Do what is expected of you.”

And it was thus that we started to listen to the feelings and needs of everyone—boss, customer, neighbor, colleagues—except ourselves! To survive and fit in, we thought we had to be cut off from ourselves.

Then one day the payment comes due for such alienation! Shyness, depression, misgivings, hesitations in reaching decisions, inability to choose, difficulties to commit, a loss of taste for life. Help! We circle ’round and ’round like the water draining from a sink. We are about to go under. We are waiting for someone to drag us out, to be given instructions, and yet, at the same time, recommendations aren’t exactly welcome! We’re snowed under with “You must do this . . . It’s high time you did that . . . You should . . .”

What we need most of all is to get in touch with ourselves, to seek a solid grounding in ourselves, to feel within that it is we who are speaking, we who decide and not our habits, our conditioning, our fears of another’s opinion. But how?

I like to introduce the process that I advocate by using the picture of a little man born of the imagination of Héléne Domergue, a trainer in Nonviolent Communication in Geneva, Switzerland.



- **Intellect**  
(or observation)
- **Feelings**
- **Needs**  
(or values)
- **The request**  
(or concrete and negotiable action)

## 1. Intellect (or observation)



### *Intellect*

- Judgments, labels, categories
- Prejudices, *a priori*, rote beliefs, automatic reflexes
- Binary system or duality
- Language of diminished responsibility

The head symbolizes *mind*. The main beneficiary of our educating is the mind. It's the mind that we have honed, toned, and disciplined in order to be effective, productive, and fast. Yet our *heart*, our emotional life, our inner life, has not enjoyed such attention. Indeed, we learned to be good and reasonable, to make well-thought-out decisions, to analyze, categorize, and label all things and place them in separate drawers. We have become masters of logic and reasoning and, since childhood, what has been stimulated, exercised, refined, and nuanced is our intellectual understanding of things. As for our emotional understanding, it has been encouraged little or not at all, if not overtly repressed.

Now, in the course of my work, I observe four characteristics of the functioning of the mind that are often the cause of the violence we do to ourselves and others.

## Judgments, labels, and categories

We judge. We judge others or situations as a function of the little we have seen of them, and we take the little we have seen for the whole. For example, we see a boy in the street whose hair is orange and combed into a crest; he has his face pierced in various places. “Oh, a punk, another rebel, a dropout feeding off society.” In a flash, we have judged, faster than the sun creates our shadow. We know nothing about this person, who is perhaps passionately engaged in a youth movement, a drama troupe, or computer research and who is thus contributing his talent and his heart to the evolution of the world. However, as something about his looks, his difference, generates fear, mistrust, and needs in us that we’re unable to decipher (perhaps the need to welcome difference, the need for belonging, the need to be reassured that difference does not bring about separation), we judge him. Look how our judging does violence to beauty, generosity, the wealth that may well lie within this person whom we have not seen.

Another example. We see an elegant woman dressed in a fur coat, driving a large car. “What a snob! Just another woman who can’t think of anything better to do than display her riches!”

Again, we judge, taking the little we have seen of another for her reality. We lock her into a little drawer, wrap her up in cellophane. Once again, we do violence to the whole beauty of this person, which we have not perceived because it lies within. This person is perhaps quite generous with her time and money, and she may be engaged in social work, giving support to destitute people, or pursuing other unknown endeavors. We know nothing about her. Once again, her looks awaken fear, mistrust, anger, or sadness in us and put us in touch with needs that we don’t know how to decode (need for exchange, need for sharing, need for human beings to contribute actively to the common good) as we judge, so we imprison others within a category; we close them away in drawers.

We take the tip of the iceberg for the whole, whereas another part of us realizes that 90 percent of the iceberg is under

the surface of the sea, out of sight. It is worth recalling the words of Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*, “We only see well with our hearts; what is truly important is invisible to our eyes.” Do we really look at others with our hearts?

### **Prejudices, *a priori*, rote beliefs, automatic reflexes**

We have learned to function out of *habit*, to *automate thinking*, to presumptively have *prejudices* and *a priori*, to live in a universe of concepts and ideas, and to fabricate or propagate *unverified beliefs*:

- Men are macho.
- Women can't drive.
- Officials are lazy.
- Politicians are corrupt.
- You have to fight in life.
- There are things that have to be done, whether one wants to or not. That's the way it always has been done.
- A good mother, a good husband, a good son . . . must . . .
- My wife would never put up with me speaking to her like that. In this family, one can certainly not raise an issue like that.
- My father is someone who . . .

These are expressions that basically reflect our fears. Using them, we enclose ourselves and others in beliefs, habits, concepts.

Once again, we do violence to the men who are anything but macho, who are open to their sensitivities, their kindness, the nurturing “feminine” that lies within them. We do violence to the women who drive much better than most men, having both more respect for other motorists and greater safety in traffic. We do violence to the officials who give of themselves generously and enthusiastically through their work. We do violence to the politicians who do their jobs with loyalty and integrity, working idealistically and selflessly for the common good. We do violence to ourselves and others regarding all the