

# COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION



AND  
WALDORF  
SCHOOLS

By  
John Cunningham

“Compassion is the radicalism of our age.”

*His Holiness the Dalai Lama*

## **INTRODUCING COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION**

### **Common Ground**

The purpose of this booklet is to introduce the practice of Compassionate Communication. I hope to show some of the ways that this practice can promote understanding and compassion within our Waldorf School communities.

Waldorf education has been a central part of my life for over twenty-five years as a parent, class teacher and AWSNA volunteer. I'm devoted to seeing this education thrive for the sake of our children and have met many other people over the years who share this commitment.

Each of us brings our unique talents, abilities, goals and aspirations into our communities and we hope to find ways to contribute and participate. Moment by moment we are doing the best we can to the best of our ability and we are drawn together by our common commitment and vision for the children. In that we are all alike.

Unfortunately, sometimes our diverse backgrounds lead us to differ on how to move forward in creating or sustaining our schools; or through miscommunication and misunderstanding, our well-intended initiatives go awry.

### **Spectator Language**

In those situations, much of our habitual languaging lets us down. Rather than improving the situation, it in fact contributes to further misunderstanding. The languaging I am referring to “traps us in a world of ideas about rightness and wrongness—a world of judgments. When we speak this language, we judge others and their behavior while preoccupying ourselves with who’s good, bad, normal, abnormal, responsible, irresponsible, etc.” (Rosenberg) Blame, criticism, labels, diagnoses and comparisons are various and common ways we judge one another.

These ways of communicating are referred to as life-alienating, analytical or demand-based. Each term highlights a particular quality. For me, I find it helpful to refer to this way of communicating

as Spectator Languageing. The experience of a spectator is one of otherness, isolation and duality. From our spectator consciousness, we form judgments of others. Tragically, this spectator languageing is creating a desperate shortage of understanding in the world.

In our schools, this languageing interferes with our intentions around working together, embracing differences and honoring the individual gifts of each. Too often, it takes its toll.

***Does this languageing serve us? Does it serve our school communities? Do we have any other choice?***

### **Participatory Languageing**

Three years ago I began learning a new model of communication most commonly known as Nonviolent Communication, or Compassionate Communication, the term I am using here. Compassionate Communication acknowledges Spectator languageing and gives us the freedom and choice to respond in a different way, a way that fosters connection. This alternative is called Participatory Languageing. It can help us unite in our shared commitments, honoring each person's voice, despite our unique backgrounds.

Participatory Languageing focuses on getting clarity on four key elements of communication: *observation, feelings, needs and requests*. We are asked to carefully observe specific behaviors or situations that are affecting us, sense what feelings are arising, identify the needs at the root of those feelings, and make clear requests to address those needs. Rather than analyzing what the problem is, implying who's fault it is, or devising strategies to get others to change their behavior or thinking, we focus on what is being observed, felt, and needed. We seek to *connect rather than correct*.

Imagine having the ability to respond to blame, judgment, or criticism by 'seeing' them as the tragic expressions of unmet needs. Imagine being able to stay connected and in process with others even when emotions flare up. Imagine this becoming possible simply through shifting your languageing and focus of attention. Each of us can do this. Furthermore, as we develop this capacity, we come to see ourselves and others in a new light, a wrong-free light, and it becomes possible to warm our interactions with greater compassion. Developing this capacity, which we call empathy, is the practice of Compassionate Communication.

## **Empathy**

What is empathy? We know it is of recent origin, entering the English language in 1912. Baruch Urieli, co-author of Learning to Experience the Etheric: Empathy, the After-Image and a New Social Ethic, describes empathy as the "interest in and compassion for our fellow human beings. It enables us to extend our own inner being into that of the other person and directly experience something of his essential nature." He remarks that it was during the 1950s that the American psychologist Carl Rogers first used the term to cognize this new faculty emerging in the younger generation.

Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, who worked briefly with Rogers as a graduate student, went on to devote his life to developing the languaging and practice of empathy that forms the basis of Compassionate Communication. Dr. Rosenberg's book, Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion, has now been translated into over ten languages.

The world is in an empathy crisis. Everywhere I travel I meet individuals who are longing to be understood, to receive some empathy for what it's like to be alive. Teachers need empathy for the enormous tasks they take up for our children. Parents need empathy for the challenges they face parenting in the modern world. Administrators and board members need empathy for the overwhelming needs they see in the schools and the limits of time, resources and support they might be experiencing. Children need empathy for all that comes up for them in the course of growing up. It is my hope that this booklet enlivens the activity of empathy and compassionate communication within our Waldorf schools.



*"This quality of inner interest, which demands a kind of 'turning' toward another, is to be found in its most archetypal form in Parzival's words, 'Uncle, what is it that ails thee?' Whenever one human being is willing to take an active interest in the existence and destiny of another, to turn toward him, a glimmer of Parzival's question breaks through and enables the person asking the question to extend part of his own being beyond its usual boundaries." Baruch Urieli, Learning to Experience the Etheric World*

## **PARTICIPATORY LANGUAGING & CONSCIOUSNESS: FOSTERING UNDERSTANDING & PARTNERSHIP**

*"The awakening through the soul of the other begins when attention is directed not only to the contents of another's words but to the soul gesture and soul movement which precedes the speaking."*

*Johannes Tautz, The Meditative Life of the Teacher*



### **OBSERVATIONS**

- Differentiate from **evaluations**.
- The stimulus, not the cause of my reaction.
- Factual, observable phenomena.
- What a video camera might record.
- Establishes a common ground.
- Remain open to clarification

### **FEELINGS**

- Differentiate from **thoughts**.
- Thoughts interpret; feelings inform.
- Feelings are messages that point to our needs.
- We are responsible for our feelings.
- "I feel that..." & "I feel like...", or "I feel you/she/they..." are thoughts, not feelings.

### **NEEDS**

- Differentiate from **strategies**.
- Needs are universal; strategies personal & specific.
- Needs are the root of our feelings.
- Needs are our shared, universal human nature.
- Identification of needs leads to understanding.
- Needs express the process of our becoming.

### **REQUESTS**

- Differentiate from **demands**.
- Demands have conditions; requests don't.
- Use positive language when making requests.
- Make requests concrete & presently doable.
- Clarifies what's been heard, what feelings are present, or what action might meet the needs.

## **SPECTATOR LANGUAGE & CONSCIOUSNESS:**

### **BEING RIGHT, AT ODDS & ALONE**



*“This language is from the head. It is a way of mentally classifying people into varying shades of good and bad, right and wrong. Ultimately, it provokes defensiveness, resistance, and counterattack. It is a language of demands.”*

*Marshall Rosenberg, Nonviolent Communication*

#### **JUDGING**

- Good/Bad & Right/Wrong
- Binary (i.e., Professional/Unprofessional)

#### **BLAMING**

- Thinking in terms of Wrongness
- Fault-Finding

#### **LABELING**

- Classifying & Categorizing
- Static Attributes & Stereotypes

#### **OBEYING**

- Denying Choice
- Denying Responsibility

#### **ASSUMING**

- Interpretations, Analyses & Diagnoses
- Jumping to Conclusions

#### **SHOULD**

- Inner/Outer “Shoulds”
- Deserve, as in Punishment & Reward

#### **COMPARING**

- Measuring, Testing, Grading & Tracking
- Competing for Winners & Losers

#### **BEING RIGHT**

- Convincing & Persuading
- Debating & Arguing



*“To live in love of action, and to let live in understanding of the other’s will, is the fundamental maxim of free human beings. They know no other “should” than the one with which their willing is intuitively in harmony.”*

*Rudolf Steiner, Intuitive Thinking as a Spiritual Path*

## **HOW WE LISTEN: FOUR CHOICES**

We can choose how we listen to, and makes sense of, what comes to us. If we reflect a bit, we see that our choices have quite different results. Given our default languaging, we are likely to react out of habit. Through Compassionate Communication, we see that we have a choice.

For example, suppose someone says to us, "Do you have any idea how thoughtless you've been?" What are our choices?

### **When I hear this comment, I can choose to respond by...**

**Taking it personally.** I internalize the judgment, blame myself for being thoughtless, tell myself I should be more thoughtful and begin a free fall toward shame, guilt and depression. I choose, "I'm at fault & to blame."

**Concluding I'm under attack.** I interpret what's been said as a critical judgment and react defensively. "That's not true. What about what you did!" I choose that the other person must be wrong & therefore to blame.

### **Or I have another option. I can choose to respond by...**

**Sensing my own feelings and needs.** I can take a breath and connect to whatever might be stimulated in me when I hear what the other person is saying to me. I ask myself, "What am I feeling...frustrated, confused, scared? What am I needing...consideration, understanding respect?" I choose to empathize with myself. This is self-empathy.

**Sensing the feelings and needs of the other.** I seek to sense what the person is feeling...frustrated? What the person is needing...consideration?" I might guess to see if I understand them as they would like. If my guess "lands", the person will feel understood. If not, they will say it again. It's not about me guessing correctly. I can try again. I am choosing to empathize. This is empathy.

***Choosing consciously leads to greater compassion, freedom, and connection in all of our relationships.***





## **DIFFERENTIATIONS THAT CLARIFY OUR CHOICES**



### **PARTICIPATORY**

**INTENT TO CONNECT**—Goal is to create mutual understanding, enabling all needs to be met.

**LIFE-SERVING**—Tends to reconnect us to what is alive in the moment in ourselves, in others & in the world.

**HEART**—Thinking, speaking & listening from the heart. Sustaining connection.

**BECOMING**—Life is a process of eternal becoming.

**CHOICE**—Self-initiated activity in line with my own feelings, needs & values.

**INTRINSIC MOTIVES**—  
Creating our own meaning & purpose while honoring the choices of others.

**POWER WITH OTHERS**—  
Creating relationships where everyone's needs matter & are considered. Lasting solutions address everyone's needs.

**VALUE JUDGMENTS**—Based upon values & needs.

**"GIRAFFE"**—Has the largest heart of any land animal; its long neck suggests courage, vulnerability & a broad view, & saliva dissolves thorns!



### **SPECTATOR**

**INTENT TO CORRECT**—Goal is to analyze situations, find what's wrong and correct it.

**LIFE-ALIENATING**—Tends to alienate us from what is alive in the moment in ourselves, in others & in the world.

**HEAD**—Thinking, speaking & listening from the head. Making judgments.

**BEING**—Life is analyzed into its intellectually grasped elements.

**DEFY OR COMPLY**—Reacting to external pressure. Conditioned to authority.

**EXTRINSIC MOTIVES**—  
Conditioned to act either to gain approval or reward, or to avoid consequences.

**POWER OVER OTHERS**—  
Creating relationships where one person exerts power over another through fear, guilt or shame. Solutions imposed.

**MORALISTIC JUDGMENTS**—  
What's good/bad, right/wrong.

**"JACKAL"**—Packs organized based on the "top dog" enforcing hierarchical social structure; pack or gang mentality.

## **CORE FAMILIES OF FEELINGS**



### **JOY & CONTENTMENT**

Adventurous	Curious	Giddy	Loving	Satisfied
Affectionate	Delighted	Glad	Moved	Stimulated
Alive	Determined	Grateful	Overjoyed	Surprised
Amazed	Eager	Happy	Peaceful	Thankful
Amused	Ecstatic	Hopeful	Pleased	Thrilled
Astonished	Encouraged	Inspired	Proud	Touched
Calm	Excited	Intrigued	Refreshed	Tranquil
Confident	Fascinated	Invigorated	Relaxed	Trusting
Content	Friendly	Joyful	Relieved	Upbeat

### **FEAR & ANXIETY**

Afraid  
 Alarmed  
 Anxious  
 Apprehensive  
 Bewildered  
 Cautious  
 Concerned  
 Confused  
 Disconcerted  
 Disturbed  
 Dubious  
 Embarrassed  
 Impatient  
 Jittery  
 Nervous  
 Overwhelmed  
 Panicky  
 Perplexed  
 Puzzled  
 Reluctant  
 Restless  
 Scared  
 Shocked  
 Stressed  
 Terrified  
 Worried

### **ANGER & FRUSTRATION**

Aggravated  
 Agitated  
 Angry  
 Annoyed  
 Appalled  
 Cranky  
 Disgusted  
 Exasperated  
 Frustrated  
 Furious  
 Impatient  
 Indignant  
 Infuriated  
 Irritated  
 Resentful  
 Upset

### **SADNESS & GRIEF**

Bored  
 Depressed  
 Disappointed  
 Discouraged  
 Disheartened  
 Dismayed  
 Despairing  
 Exhausted  
 Helpless  
 Hopeless  
 Hurt  
 Lonely  
 Melancholic  
 Sad  
 Tired  
 Troubled

### **FAUX FEELINGS**

*Interpretations  
 masquerading as feelings*

Abandoned	Ignored	Neglected
Abused	Intimidated	Put Upon
Attacked	Invisible	Rejected
Betrayed	Let Down	Rushed
Bullied	Manipulated	Unappreciated

## **NEEDS & VALUES: RHYTHMS IN BECOMING**



### **SUBSISTENCE**

Clean Air & Water  
Food  
Rest  
Shelter  
Sustenance

### **PROTECTION/SECURITY**

Fairness  
Honesty  
Justice  
Keeping Agreements  
Nurturance  
Openness  
Order  
Safety  
Space

### **PARTICIPATION**

Accomplishment  
Belonging  
Capacity  
Community  
Competence  
Connection  
Dependability  
Encouragement  
Harmony  
Interdependence  
Opportunities to Help Others  
Power With  
Recognition  
Respect  
Support  
To Enrich Life  
To Serve Life  
To Share Life's Joys & Sorrows

### **CREATION**

Creativity  
Expression  
Inspiration

### **AFFECTION**

Companionship  
Friends  
Intimacy  
Kindness  
To Matter to Someone

### **IDENTITY/MEANING**

Acknowledgement  
Appreciation  
Challenges  
Clarity  
Dignity  
Integrity  
Learning New Skills  
Privacy  
Self-Development  
Self-Mastery  
Solitude  
To Be Someone  
To Make Sense of One's World

### **LEISURE**

Celebration  
Comfort & Ease  
Play & Fun  
Recreation

### **FREEDOM**

Autonomy  
Choices  
To Speak One's Mind

### **UNDERSTANDING**

Empathy

### **TRANSCENDENCE**

Beauty to Behold  
Goodness  
Love  
Peace  
Rhythm  
Spiritual Communion



## **EXPRESSING HONESTY**

### ***When I observe (see, hear, imagine or recall) ...? OBSERVATIONS***

What am I observing that is stimulating these feelings that are coming up? What is (or isn't) contributing to my present well-being? I want to express this without mixing in my evaluations or thoughts about what is happening.

#### ***I'm feeling ...?***

#### **FEELINGS**

What am I feeling? Am I clear that I am sharing a feeling rather than a thought or a mental image?

#### ***Because I'm needing/I value...?***

#### **NEEDS**

What am I needing? What values might be in question? What's at the root of my feelings? What is the universal human need underlying my feelings?

#### ***Would you be willing...?***

#### **REQUESTS**

What do I want to request from the other person that might meet or satisfy my need? Is my request positively framed and presently doable?



## **RECEIVING WITH EMPATHY**

### ***When you observe (see, hear, imagine or recall)...? OBSERVATIONS***

Here we are listening for & clarifying what might be stimulating the other person's reactions.

#### ***Are you feeling ...?***

#### **FEELINGS**

Here we are sensing what they might be feeling, checking to see if we are understanding clearly.

#### ***Because you're needing/you value...?***

#### **NEEDS**

Here we are sensing what their needs might be. What might be alive for them in this moment or this situation?

#### ***I'm wondering if...?***

#### **REQUESTS**

Here we are guessing what they might be requesting that would meet or satisfy their needs.

## **TWO EXAMPLES OF EXPRESSING & EMPATHIZING**

1. **PARENT SAYS TO TEACHER:** *"The class is out of control & my daughter's miserable."* **PARENT REPHRASES:**

- **When I see** how unhappy my daughter is when she comes home and tells me about some things that happen to her at school, (observations)
- **I'm feeling** heartbroken and alarmed, (feelings),
- **Because I need** clarity about what's going on for my daughter. I need to know that she is safe & supported at school. (needs for clarity & doing what's best for one's children)
- **Would you be willing** to share with me what you see happening and the steps you're taking to foster harmony among the children? (request)

**TEACHER REPLIES IN FRUSTRATION:** *"Parents expect teachers to work miracles. Parents are so busy they're barely involved."* **PARENT EMPATHIZES:**

- **When I bring** my concerns about Emily's unhappiness in school and some of the behavior she has described (observations),
- **Are you feeling** overwhelmed and frustrated? (feelings)
- **And needing** some understanding around the challenges you face as well as support for your efforts? (needs for understanding & support)
- **I'm wondering if** I've understood you the way you'd like and whether there's something more you'd like to share? (request)



2. **TEACHER SAYS TO PARENT:** *"It seems like Jason is spending way too much time watching screens and he can't focus at all in class."* **TEACHER REPHRASES:**

- **When I see** how Jason struggles to stay focused on his school work and he tells me he spends a lot of time at home watching TV or on the computer, and I reflect on what I've read about sensory-integration and child development. (observations)
- **I feel** concerned and helpless, (feelings)
- **Because I need** support for my efforts to protect this process of human development that happens in childhood. (need for support)
- **Would you be willing** to tell me what you're hearing me say? (a request)

**PARENT BLAMES HERSELF:** *"I'll never be a good enough Waldorf parent. I just can't do it all."* **TEACHER EMPATHIZES:**

- **When I share** my concerns about Jason and his difficulty staying focused in class and how it might be related to his screen time, (observations)
- **Are you feeling** overwhelmed and discouraged? (feelings)
- **Because you're needing** some acknowledgment for your efforts, and some understanding for how difficult it might be to make some of these changes at home? (needs for acknowledgment & understanding)
- **I'm wondering if** you'd like to schedule some time for us to talk about how we might work together to support Jason? (request)

## **AN INVITATION TO COMPASSIONATE CONNECTION**

*“What I want in my life is compassion, a flow between myself and others based on a mutual giving from the heart.”*

Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication*

We use the four steps—observations, feelings, needs and requests—in order to be understood, in order to understand others as they want to be understood, and to create the quality of connection that enables everyone to get their needs met through natural giving.

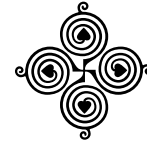
At first, the step-wise structure of the Participatory Languageing model is off-putting. I want to suggest a couple of ways to think of the model in the beginning, and add a gentle reminder. If it looks formulaic, think of it as a boat that you’ll sail to the other shore, or a pair of shoes you’ll wear until you can go inside, leaving them at the door. If it sounds stiff and clunky, you might remind yourself you’re learning a new language which, of course at first, you’ll speak with a very thick accent. Think of it as enabling you to first visit and then reside in this new, compassionate land. I assure you that a clear mastery of these elements will inevitably foster a compassionate, more participatory consciousness.



You saw in the examples on the previous pages that there are two reciprocal activities involved in a conversation—expressing what lives in us and seeking to “read” what lives in the other. At any moment we can choose to listen for feelings and needs. Self-empathy provides the basis for both expressing and receiving. Every conversation becomes a weaving back and forth. From a self-ful inner emptiness, we give our presence unto the other, seeking to connect to their becoming. As we integrate this into our lives, our schools will increasingly meet the needs for understanding, community and deep connection that we all long for. I hope this booklet has opened a door for you. I invite you to enter into the dance.



## **FOR FURTHER REFLECTION**



“During the 1950s the American psychologist Carl Rogers noticed the presence of a new faculty in the younger generation for which he used a word originally coined in 1912: *empathy*. In fact, what he was describing is a process which has become part of the experience of an ever-increasing number of those born after the end of the Second World War. Empathy arises out of sympathy, love, interest in and compassion for our fellow human being; it enables us to extend our own inner being into that of the other person and directly experience something of his essential nature.”

*Baruch Luke Urieli, Learning to Experience the Etheric World*

“When man faces man the one attempts to put the other to sleep and the other continuously wants to maintain his uprightness. But this is, to speak in the Goethean sense, the archetypal phenomenon of social science...” [This sleeping-into] “we may call the social principle, the social impulse of the new era: we have to live over into the other; we have to dissolve with our soul into the other.”

*Rudolf Steiner (11.10.1919)*

“A person who wants to understand another has to be willing to be put to sleep by him for a moment. He is social insofar as he gives up his own consciousness & is filled by the nature of the other. Directly, however, his asocial drive rises up once again, throwing out the other to assert its self-consciousness. The other becomes the opposite, the object once again. Steiner calls this oscillation between the social and asocial moment—the *social archetypal phenomenon*.”

*Dieter Brüll, Anthroposophical Social Impulse*

“Through training we can become aware of the subtle clues which are hidden in the form of a sense object and which reveal the way in which it came into being. The form then begins to reveal its motion of becoming, its gesture. Our vision shifts out of space and into time, the stage of the ongoing work. With a time vision we can experience all sense objects as verbs instead of as nouns. Each object becomes itself in time.”

*Dennis Klocek, Seeking Spirit Vision*

“Individuality is always in the process of coming to be. The closer we can get to this sense of individuality, the more possible it becomes to also experience the world as always in the process of coming to be. To be able to stay in this creative realm in which we and the world are activity, whatever content is gained as a result of experience must be constantly relinquished as a tool to be used, for otherwise we are relying on what we already know, and are not usually conscious that we are confronting the ever-new. The challenge of encountering the world through individuality is to meet the world through what we are coming to be, not through what we already know. This challenge is particularly acute in the domain of relationships.”

*Robert Sardello, Love and the Soul*

“He rose to his feet again and asked, “Uncle, what is it that ails thee?”

*Wolfram von Eschenbach, Parzival*

*Serving all that...*



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I really enjoy providing  
Compassionate Communication  
trainings for Waldorf communities  
and other organizations.  
I'm also working on a website  
for people involved or interested in  
Compassionate Communication, Anthroposophy & Waldorf Education,  
I invite your participation when the website is ready  
in early 2003. At that time, a PDF file of this booklet  
will be available for download. Until then, I invite you to copy and  
freely distribute this booklet.



Warmly,

*John Cunningham*



P.S. My deepest gratitude to Linda Wemhoff, without  
whom this booklet wouldn't be. Her encouragement,  
enthusiasm and commitment to clear simplicity met  
my needs for collaboration & support.  
Please visit her website at: [www.RecipeForPeace.com](http://www.RecipeForPeace.com).



**The Center for Nonviolent Communication**

For further information,  
visit the website at [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org)



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