

CHAPTER · 2

HOW CAN WE EXPRESS WHAT'S ALIVE IN US?

OBSERVATIONS

“You can observe a lot just by watching.”

— YOGI BERRA



TO SAY WHAT'S ALIVE IN US REQUIRES SPECIFIC KINDS OF literacy. First of all, it requires being able to give answers to the question I asked you without mixing in any evaluation. I asked you to think of one specific thing that a person did that you don't like. That's what I call an *observation*. What do people do that we either like or don't like?

That's important information to communicate: To tell people what's alive in us, we need to be able to tell them what they're doing that is supporting life in us, as well as what they're doing that isn't supporting life in us. But it's very important to learn how to say that to people without mixing in any evaluation.

For example, I was working recently with a woman who was concerned about something her teenage daughter didn't do. So I said, "What was it that your teenage daughter didn't do?" And she said, "She's lazy." Can you hear a difference between the question I asked and the answer she gave? I asked what the daughter *does* and she told me what she thought the daughter *was*. I pointed out to this person that labeling people—diagnosing them as lazy—leads to self-fulfilling prophecies.

Any words we use that imply the wrongness of others are tragic, suicidal expressions of what's alive in us. They're tragic and suicidal because they don't lead to people enjoying contributing to our well-being. They provoke defensiveness and counter-aggression.

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When I first learned this lesson, it was very frightening to me because I saw how much my head was filled with moralistic judgments. I'd been taught throughout my education to think in terms of moralistic judgments. As I mentioned, the reason is this theory of human beings we have been inflicted with—that human beings are basically selfish and evil. Therefore, the prevailing educational process is one of making people hate themselves for what they've done. The idea is, you have to get them to see how terrible they are, and then they will be penitent and change the error of their ways!

The language I was educated to speak growing up in

Detroit was like that. When I was driving, if somebody else was driving in a way I didn't like and I wanted to educate them, I would open up the window and yell something like, "Idiot." The theory is they're supposed to feel guilty and repent, and they're supposed to say, "I'm sorry. I see that I was wrong. I've seen the error of my ways."

That's quite a theory, but it never worked. I thought maybe it was this particular dialect I learned in Detroit, but when I got my doctorate in psychology I learned how to insult people in a much more educated way. So now when I'm driving and somebody drives in a way I don't like, I roll down the window and yell something like, "Sociopath!" But it still doesn't work, you see.

Telling people what's wrong with them is suicidal and tragic—and besides, it's ineffective. We don't want these judgments to mix in when we try to tell people what they've done that we don't like. We want to go directly to the behavior without mixing in judgments. I was working with some teachers having a conflict with their administrator. I said, "What does he do that you don't like?"

One of them said, "He has a big mouth."

"No," I said, "I didn't ask you what size mouth he has. I asked you what he does."

Another one said, "Well, I know what he means. He talks too much."

I said, "*Too much* is another diagnosis, you see."

Another one said, "Well, he thinks he's the only one with any intelligence."

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“Telling me what you think he thinks is an evaluation. What does he *do*?”

With my help they finally got clear about defining behaviors without mixing in a diagnosis, but along the way they kept saying, “Boy, this is hard to do. Everything that comes into our head is a diagnosis or judgment.”

I said, “Yes, it isn’t easy to get this cleared out of our consciousness.” In fact the Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti says the highest form of human intelligence is the ability to observe without evaluating.

The teachers finally did come up with some behaviors. The first on the list was that during their staff meetings, no matter what was on the agenda, the administrator would relate it to one of his war experiences or childhood experiences. As a result, the average meeting lasted longer than scheduled. OK, now that was the answer to my question of what he did. That was a clear observation that didn’t mix in any evaluation.

I said to them, “Have any of you brought to his attention this specific behavior that concerns you?”

Then one of them said, “Well, we can see that the way we communicated it was in the form of a judgment, and we really didn’t just mention the specific behavior. No wonder he got defensive.”

So this is the first step in trying to tell people what’s alive

in us. It's the ability to call to their attention—concretely, specifically—what the person is doing that we like or don't like, without mixing in an evaluation.

EXERCISE:

Take a look at what you wrote down. See whether it had any evaluation mixed in. If so, see if you can now say it, being very specific, just describing what the person does that you want to talk to them about. Now that we have an observation in mind of what this person does, if we're to use Nonviolent Communication, we want to be honest with them about it. But it's honesty of a different kind than telling people what's wrong with them. It's honesty from the heart, not honesty that implies wrongness.

FEELINGS

*“Our feelings are our most genuine
paths to knowledge.”*

— AUDRE LORDE

We want to go inside of ourselves and tell people what’s alive in us when they do what they do. And this involves two other kinds of literacy. First, it involves *feeling literacy* and second, *need literacy*. To say clearly what’s alive in us at any given moment we have to be clear about what we feel and what we need. Let’s start with the feelings.

Let’s imagine we go to this person and we want to be honest with them. Let’s start by telling this person how we feel. Write down how you feel when the person does the behavior that you’re thinking of. What emotions do you feel when they do it?

One student in the university I was working with wanted to work on his roommate. And I said, “OK, what is the behavior that your roommate does that you don’t like?”

He said, “He plays the radio late at night when I’m trying to sleep.”

“OK, so now let’s tell him how you feel. How do you feel when he does that?”

He said, “I feel it’s wrong.”

I said, “I’m not making clear then what I mean by feelings. ‘It’s wrong’ is what I would call a judgment of the other person. I’m asking you how you feel.”

He said, "Well, I said 'I feel.'"

"Well, yeah, you used the verb *feel*, but that doesn't mean that what follows it is necessarily a feeling. What emotions do you feel? How do you feel?"

He thought for a while then said, "Well, I think that when a person is so insensitive to other people, it's evidence of a personality disturbance."

I said, "Hold it, hold it, hold it. You're still up in your head analyzing his wrongness. I'm asking, go into your heart, tell me how you feel when he does that."

He was sincerely trying to get in touch with his feelings, but he said, "Well, I don't have any feelings about it."

I said, "I hope that's not so."

He said, "Why?"

I said, "You'd be dead."

We have feelings every moment. The problem is we haven't been educated to be conscious of what's alive in us. Our consciousness has been more directed to make us look outward to what some authority thinks we are.

So I said, "Just listen to your body for a moment. How do you feel when he plays the radio that late at night?"

He really looked inside, and then he lit up and he said, "OK, I've got you now."

I said, "How do you feel?"

He said, "Pissed off."

"OK," I said, "that'll do. There are other ways of saying it, but OK."

But I noticed the woman sitting next to him, a faculty

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member's wife, seemed a little perplexed. She looked at him and said, "Do you mean *vexed*?"

There are different ways we might express our feelings, depending on what culture we grow up in, but it's important to have a vocabulary of feelings that really does just describe what's alive in us and that in no way are interpretations of other people.

That means we don't want to use expressions like "I feel misunderstood." That's not really a feeling; it's more how we are analyzing whether the other person has understood us or not. If we think somebody has misunderstood us, we can be angry or frustrated; it could be many different things. Likewise, we don't want to use phrases like "I feel manipulated" or "I feel criticized."

In our training, they're not what we would call feelings. Sadly, very few people have much of a feelings vocabulary, and I see the cost of that quite often in my work. If you'd like to see an extensive list of feelings, see the chapter on identifying and expressing feelings in my book *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*.

It's rather typical for me to have a conversation like this: A woman in a workshop might come up to me and say, "You know, Marshall, I don't want you to get the wrong idea. I have a very wonderful husband . . ."

I'm sure you can guess what the next word is. "*But* I never know how he's feeling."

I hear this a lot from people. I hear from people that they've lived with their parents for years and have never really known what their parents are feeling. How sad to live with people and not have this access to what's alive in them. So, take a look at what you wrote. Is it really an expression of what's alive in you, of your feelings? Make sure it's not a diagnosis of others—or thoughts about what they are. Go into your heart. How do you feel when the other person does what they do?

The cause of our feelings is not other people's behavior.



Feelings can be used in a destructive way if we try to imply that other people's behaviors are the cause of our feelings. The cause of our feelings is not other people's behavior, it's our needs. The observation you wrote down about what the other person did is a *stimulus* for your feelings, not the *cause* of your feelings. I'm sure most of us knew this at one time.

When I was six years old in my neighborhood and somebody would call us a name, we used to chant: "Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me." We were aware, then, that it's not what other people do that can hurt you; it's how you take it.

Unfortunately, we were educated in guilt-inducing ways by authorities—teachers, parents, etc.—who used guilt to mobilize us to do what they wanted. They might have expressed feelings this way:

"It hurts me when you don't clean up your room."

“You make me angry when you hit your brother.”

We’ve been educated by people who tried to make us feel responsible for their feelings so we would feel guilty. Yes, feelings are important, but we don’t want to use them in that way. We don’t want to use them in a guilt-inducing manner. It’s very important that when we do express our feelings we follow that expression with a statement that makes it clear that the cause of our feelings is our needs.

EXERCISE:

Write down the following in relation to what the other person has done. Identify how you feel about what happened and write it this way: “When you do what you do I feel ____.” Put into words how you feel when the other person behaves as they do.

NEEDS

*“Understanding human needs is half
the job of meeting them.”*

— ADLAI STEVENSON

Let's look at the third component of expressing what's alive in us: needs. Just as it's difficult for many people to observe without judgment and to develop a literacy of feelings, it's also very difficult for them to develop a literacy of needs. Many people associate needs with something negative. They associate needs with being needy, dependent, and selfish.

Again, I think that comes from our history of educating people to fit well into *domination structures* so they are obedient and submissive to authority. I'll talk more about domination structures later on, but for now just think of them as organized control over others. Most governments, schools, companies—and even many families—operate as domination structures.

The problem with people who are in touch with their needs is that they do not make good slaves. I went to schools for twenty-one years, and I can't recall ever being asked what my needs were. My education didn't focus on helping me be more alive, more in touch with myself and others. It was oriented toward rewarding me for giving right answers as defined by authorities.

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Take a look at the words you were using to describe your needs. The main thing is to make sure we don't get needs mixed up with what we're going to talk about next.

In a workshop I was doing recently, a woman was upset with the way her daughter was not cleaning up her room. I said, "What needs do you have in this situation that aren't getting met?"

She said, "Well, it's obvious. I need her to clean up the room."

"No," I said, "That's going to come next. That's the request. I'm asking what needs you have."

And she couldn't come up with it. She didn't know how to look inside and see what her needs were. Again, she had a language for diagnosing what was wrong with the daughter, that the daughter was lazy. She could tell what she wanted the daughter to do, but she didn't know how to identify her

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own needs. And this is unfortunate because it's when people see the needs of another person it stimulates their enjoyment of giving—because we all can identify with needs. All humans have the same basic needs.

When we can connect at the need level, it's amazing how conflicts that seem unsolvable start to become solvable. We see each other's humanness at the need level. I do a lot of work with people in conflict. Husbands and wives, parents and children, tribes of people. Many of these people think they have a conflict that can't be resolved.

It's been amazing to me over the years of doing conflict resolution and mediation work what happens when you can get people over their diagnosis of each other, and get them to connect at the need level to what's going on in one another. When this happens, it seems as if conflicts almost resolve themselves.

At this point, we have listed the three pieces of information that are necessary to say what's alive in us: what we're observing, what we're feeling, and the needs of ours that are connected to our feelings. (These are listed in the section at the back of this book titled *Some Basic Feelings and Needs We All Have*.)

EXERCISE:

Please write down the following in relation to what the other person has done and how you feel about it. Identify what needs are creating your feelings, and write it this way: "I feel as I do because I need ____." Put into words that need of yours that isn't being met by the other person's behavior.

