

and listen to them with empathy when they are in distress. This is not easy when we have been trained as parents to want to jump in and give advice, or to try to fix things.

So when I'm working with parents, we look at situations that are likely to arise where a child might say something like, "Nobody likes me." When a child says something like that, I believe the child needs an empathic kind of connection. And by that I mean a respectful understanding where the child feels that we are there and really hear what he or she is feeling and needing. Sometimes we can do this silently, just showing in our eyes that we are with their feelings of sadness, and their need for a different quality of connection with their friends. Or it could involve our saying out loud something like, "So it sounds like you're really feeling sad, because you aren't having very much fun with your friends."

But many parents, defining their role as requiring them to make their children happy all the time, jump in when a child says something like that, and say things like, "Well, have you looked at what you've been doing that might have been driving your friends away?" Or they disagree with the child, saying: "Well, that's not true. You've had friends in the past. I'm sure you'll get more friends." Or they give advice: "Maybe if you'd talk differently to your friends, your friends would like you more."

What they don't realize is that all human beings, when they're in pain, need presence and empathy. They may want advice, but they want that after they've received the empathic connection. My own children have taught me the hard way that, "Dad, please withhold all advice unless you receive a request in writing from us signed by a notary."

### *The Limitations of Rewards*

Many people believe that it's more humane to use reward than punishment. But both of them I see as power *over* others, and Nonviolent Communication is based on power *with* people. And in power *with* people, we try to have influence not by how we can make people suffer if they don't do what we want, or how we can reward them if they do. It's a power based on mutual trust and

respect, which makes people open to hearing one another and learning from one another, and to giving to one another willingly out of a desire to contribute to one another's well-being, rather than out of a fear of punishment or hope for a reward.

We get this kind of power, power *with* people, by being able to openly communicate our feelings and needs without in any way criticizing the other person. We do that by offering them what we would like from them in a way that is not heard as demanding or threatening. And as I have said, it also requires really hearing what other people are trying to communicate, showing an accurate understanding rather than quickly jumping in and giving advice, or trying to fix things.

For many parents, the way I'm talking about communicating is so different that they say, "Well, it just doesn't seem natural to communicate that way." At just the right time, I read something that Gandhi had written in which he said, "Don't mix up that which is habitual with that which is natural." Gandhi said that very often we've been trained to communicate and act in ways that are quite unnatural, but they are habitual in the sense that we have been trained for various reasons to do it that way in our culture. And that certainly rang true to me in the way that I was trained to communicate with children. The way I was trained to communicate by judging rightness and wrongness, goodness and badness, and the use of punishment was widely used and very easily became habitual for me as a parent. But I wouldn't say that because something is habitual that it is natural.

I learned that it is much more natural for people to connect in a loving, respectful way, and to do things out of joy for one another, rather than using punishment and reward or blame and guilt as means of coercion. But such a transformation does require a good deal of consciousness and effort.

### *Transforming Your Habitual Communication*

I can recall one time when I was transforming myself from a habitually judgmental way of communicating with my children to the way that I am now advocating. On the day I'm thinking of, my oldest son and I were having a conflict, and it was taking me

quite awhile to communicate it in the way that I was choosing to, rather than the way that had become habitual. Almost everything that came into my mind originally was some coercive statement in the form of a judgment of him for saying what he did. So I had to stop and take a deep breath, and think of how to get more in touch with my needs, and how to get more in touch with his needs. And this was taking me awhile. And he was getting frustrated because he had a friend waiting for him outside, and he said, "Daddy, it's taking you so long to talk." And I said, "Let me tell you what I can say quickly: Do it my way or I'll kick your butt." He said: "Take your time, Dad. Take your time."

So yes, I would rather take my time and come from an energy that I choose in communicating with my children, rather than habitually responding in a way that I have been trained to do, when it's not really in harmony with my own values. Sadly, we will often get much more reinforcement from those around us for behaving in a punitive, judgmental way, than in a way that is respectful to our children.

I can recall one Thanksgiving dinner when I was doing my best to communicate with my youngest son in the way that I am advocating, and it was not easy, because he was testing me to the limits. But I was taking my time, taking deep breaths, trying to understand what his needs were, trying to understand my own needs so I could express them in a respectful way. Another member of the family, observing my conversation with my son, but who had been trained in a different way of communicating, reached over at one point and whispered in my ear, "If that was my child, he'd be sorry for what he was saying."

I've talked to a lot of other parents who have had similar experiences who, when they are trying to relate in more human ways with their own children, instead of getting support, often get criticized. People can often mistake what I'm talking about as permissiveness or not giving children the direction they need, instead of understanding that it's a different quality of direction. It's a direction that comes from two parties trusting each other, rather than one party forcing his or her authority on another.

One of the most unfortunate results of making our objective to get our children to do what we want, rather than having our

objective be for all of us to get what we want, is that eventually our children will be hearing a demand in whatever we are asking. And whenever people hear a demand, it's hard for them to keep focus on the value of whatever is being requested, because, as I said earlier, it threatens their autonomy, and that's a strong need that all people have. They want to be able to do something when they choose to do it, and not because they are forced to do it. As soon as a person hears a demand, it's going to make any resolution that will get everybody's needs met much harder to come by.

### *“Chore Wars”*

For example, my children were given different tasks to do around the house. My youngest son, Brett, then twelve, was being asked to take the garbage out, twice a week, so that it could be picked up by the garbage removal people. This involved a simple act of removing the garbage from underneath the kitchen sink, and taking it out on the front lawn where it could be picked up. This whole process could be done in five minutes. But it created a battle twice a week when the garbage was to go out.

Now, how did this battle start? It usually started with my simply mentioning his name. I would say, “Brett.” But of course, the way I said it he could pick up that I was already angry because I was judging him as not doing what he should do. And even though I was saying his name loud enough so that the neighbors two blocks down could hear it, what does he do to keep escalating the war? He pretends that he doesn't hear me, even though he's in the next room. Well, what do I do? I get even angrier of course, and I escalate further, and now I say the name even louder the second time than the first time, so that even he can't pretend that he doesn't hear me. And what does he do? He says, “What do you want?” I say, “The garbage isn't out.” He says, “You're very perceptive.” And I say, “Get it out.” And he says, “I will, later.” And I say, “You said that last time but you didn't do it.” And he says, “That doesn't mean I won't do it this time.”

Look at all that energy going into the simple act of getting the garbage taken out. All the tension it creates between us, all

because at that time I had it in my mind that it was his job to do it, that he should do it, that it was necessary for him to learn responsibility. So in other words, it was being presented to him as a demand.

People receive requests as demands if they think they will be punished or blamed if they don't do the task. When people have that idea, it takes all the joy out of doing anything.

One night I had a talk with Brett about this at a time when I was starting to get the point. I was starting to see how my thinking that I knew what was right, that my job as a parent was to get the children to behave, was destructive. So one night we had a talk about why the garbage wasn't going out, and by this time I was starting to learn how to listen better, to hear the feelings and needs that were behind his not doing what I asked. And I saw so clearly that he had a need to do things because he chose to do them, and not to do them simply because he was being forced to do them.

So when I saw this, I said to him, Brett, how do we get out of this? I know I really have been making demands in the past in the sense that when you didn't do things I wanted you to do, I would make judgments of you as being not a cooperative member of the family. So how do we get out of this history that we have, and how do we get to a place where we can do things for each other out of a different kind of energy? And he came up with an idea that was very helpful. He said, "Dad, how about if I'm not sure if it's a request or a demand, I ask you, 'Is that a request or a demand?'" I said: "Hey, I like that idea. It would force me to really stop and look at my thinking, and really see whether I am actually saying, 'Hey, I'd really like you to do this, it would meet my need, but if your needs are in conflict I'd like to hear that, and let's figure out a way to get everybody's needs met.'"

I liked his suggestion, to stop and really see what kind of assumptions were going on in me. And the next day, before he went to school, we had three chances to test this out. Because three times in the morning I asked him to do something, and each time he looked at me and said, "Dad, is that a request or a demand?" And each time I looked inside, I saw that it was still a demand. I still had this thinking in me that he should do it, that

it was the only reasonable thing for him to do. I was prepared that if he didn't do it, to get progressively more coercive. So it was helpful that he called this to my attention. Each time I stopped, got in touch with my needs, tried to hear his needs, and I said to him: "OK, thank you. That helps. It was a demand, and now it's a request." And he could sense the difference in me. And each of those three times he did it without question.

When people hear demands, it looks to them as though our caring and respect and love are conditional. It looks as though we are only going to care for them as people when they do what we want.

### *Unconditional Love*

I remember one time, years ago, when Brett was three years old. I was wondering if I was communicating an unconditional quality of love to him and my other children as well. But he happened to be the one that came upon me at that time when I was thinking about this subject. As he came into the living room, I said, "Brett, why does Dad love you?" He looked at me and immediately said, "Because I make my potties in the toilet now?" I felt very sad the moment he said that because it was so clear, how could he think differently? How differently I respond to my children when they do what I want, than when they don't do what I want.

So I said to him, "Well, I do appreciate that, but that's not why I love you." And then he said, "Well, because I don't throw my food on the floor anymore?" He was referring there to a little disagreement we'd had the night before when he was throwing some food on the floor. And I said: "Well, here again, I do appreciate it when you keep your food on your plate. But that's not why I love you."

Now he gets very serious, and looks at me and says, "Well, why do you love me, daddy?" And now I was wondering, why did I get into abstract conversation about unconditional love with a three-year-old? How do you express this to someone his age? And I blurted out, "Well, I just love you because you're you." At the time, the immediate thought I had was, that's pretty trite and vague, but he got it. He got the message. I just saw it in his face.

He brightened up and he looked at me and he said: “Oh, you just love me because I’m me, daddy. You just love me because I’m me.” The next two days it seemed like every ten minutes he was running over to me and pulling at my side and looking up and saying: “You just love me because I’m me, daddy. You just love me because I’m me.”

So to communicate this quality of unconditional love, respect, acceptance to other people, this doesn’t mean that we have to like what they’re doing. It doesn’t mean we have to be permissive and give up our needs or values. What it requires is that we show people the same quality of respect when they don’t do what we ask, as when they do. After we have shown that quality of respect through empathy, through taking the time to understand why they didn’t do what we would like, we can then pursue how we might influence them to willingly do what we ask. In some cases, where people are behaving in a serious way that threatens our needs or safety and there’s not time or ability to communicate about it, we may even use force.

But unconditional love requires that no matter how people behave, they trust that they’ll receive a certain quality of understanding from us.

### *Preparing Our Children*

Now of course, our children are often going to be in situations where they’re not going to receive this unconditional acceptance and respect and love. They’re going to be in schools, perhaps, where the teachers are using a form of authority that’s based on other ways of thinking, namely that you have to earn respect and love—that you deserve to be punished or blamed if you don’t behave in a certain way. So one of our tasks as parents is to show our children a way of staying human, even when they are being exposed to others who are using a form of coercion.

One of my happiest days as a parent was when my oldest son went off to a neighborhood school. He was twelve years old at the time. He had just finished six years in a school where I’d helped train the teachers, a school based on principles of Nonviolent Communication where people were expected to do things not