

Communication That Blocks Compassion

*Do not judge, and you will not be judged.
For as you judge others, so you will yourselves be judged . . .*

—Holy Bible, Matthew 7:1

In studying the question of what alienates us from our natural state of compassion, I have identified specific forms of language and communication that I believe contribute to our behaving violently toward each other and ourselves. I use the term *life-alienating communication* to refer to these forms of communication.

Certain ways of communicating alienate us from our natural state of compassion.

Moralistic Judgments

One kind of life-alienating communication is the use of *moralistic judgments* that imply wrongness or badness on the part of people who don't act in harmony with our values. Such judgments are reflected in language: "The problem with you is that you're too selfish." "She's lazy." "They're prejudiced." "It's inappropriate." Blame, insults, put-downs, labels, criticism, comparisons, and diagnoses are all forms of judgment.

The Sufi poet Rumi once wrote, "Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and right-doing, there is a field. I'll meet you there." Life-alienating communication, however, traps us in a world of ideas about rightness

In the world of judgments, our concern centers on "who is what."

and wrongness—a world of judgments. It is a language rich with words that classify and dichotomize people and their actions. When we speak this language, we judge others and their behavior while preoccupying ourselves with who’s good, bad, normal, abnormal, responsible, irresponsible, smart, ignorant, etc.

Long before I reached adulthood, I learned to communicate in an impersonal way that did not require me to reveal what was going on inside myself. When I encountered people or behaviors I either didn’t like or didn’t understand, I would react in terms of their wrongness. If my teachers assigned a task I didn’t want to do, they were “mean” or “unreasonable.” If someone pulled out in front of me in traffic, my reaction would be, “You idiot!” When we speak this language, we think and communicate in terms of what’s wrong with others for behaving in certain ways or, occasionally, what’s wrong with ourselves for not understanding or responding as we would like. Our attention is focused on classifying, analyzing, and determining levels of wrongness rather than on what we and others need and are not getting. Thus if my partner wants more affection than I’m giving her, she is “needy and dependent.” But if I want more affection than she is giving me, then she is “aloof and insensitive.” If my colleague is more concerned about details than I am, he is “picky and compulsive.” On the other hand, if I am more concerned about details than he is, he is “sloppy and disorganized.”

Analyses of others are actually expressions of our own needs and values.

It is my belief that all such analyses of other human beings are tragic expressions of our own values and needs. They are tragic because when we express our values and needs in this form, we increase defensiveness and resistance among the very people whose behaviors are of concern to us. Or, if people do agree to act in harmony with our values, they will likely do so out of fear, guilt, or shame because they concur with our analysis of their wrongness.

We all pay dearly when people respond to our values and needs not out of a desire to give from the heart, but out of fear, guilt, or shame. Sooner or later, we will experience the consequences of diminished goodwill on the part of those who comply with our values out of a sense of either external or internal coercion. They, too, pay emotionally, for they are likely to feel resentment and decreased self-esteem when they respond to us out of fear, guilt, or shame. Furthermore, each time others associate us in their minds with any of those feelings, the likelihood of their responding compassionately to our needs and values in the future decreases.

It is important here not to confuse *value judgments* and *moralistic judgments*. All of us make *value judgments* as to the qualities we value in life; for example, we might value honesty, freedom, or peace. Value judgments reflect our beliefs of how life can best be served. We make *moralistic judgments* of people and behaviors that fail to support our value judgments; for example, “Violence is bad. People who kill others are evil.” Had we been raised speaking a language that facilitated the expression of compassion, we would have learned to articulate our needs and values directly, rather than to insinuate wrongness when they have not been met. For example, instead of “Violence is bad,” we might say instead, “I am fearful of the use of violence to resolve conflicts; I value the resolution of human conflicts through other means.”

The relationship between language and violence is the subject of psychology professor O.J. Harvey’s research at the University of Colorado. He took random samples of pieces of literature from many countries around the world and tabulated the frequency of words that classify and judge people. His study shows a high correlation between frequent use of such words and frequency of incidents. It does not surprise me to hear that there is considerably less violence in cultures where people think in terms of human needs than in cultures where people label one another as “good” or “bad” and believe that the “bad” ones deserve to be punished. In 75 percent of the television programs shown during hours when American children are most likely to be watching, the hero

Classifying and judging people promotes violence.

either kills people or beats them up. This violence typically constitutes the “climax” of the show. Viewers, having been taught that bad guys deserve to be punished, take pleasure in watching this violence.

At the root of much, if not all, violence—whether verbal, psychological, or physical, whether among family members, tribes, or nations—is a kind of thinking that attributes the cause of conflict to wrongness in one’s adversaries, and a corresponding inability to think of oneself or others in terms of vulnerability—that is, what one might be feeling, fearing, yearning for, missing, etc. We saw this dangerous way of thinking during the Cold War. Our leaders viewed the U.S.S.R. as an “evil empire” bent on destroying the American way of life. Soviet leaders referred to the people of the United States as “imperialist oppressors” who were trying to subjugate them. Neither side acknowledged the fear lurking behind such labels.

Making Comparisons

Another form of judgment is the use of comparisons. In his book *How to Make Yourself Miserable*, Dan Greenburg demonstrates through humor the insidious power that comparative thinking can exert over us. He suggests that if readers have a sincere desire to make life miserable for themselves, they might learn to compare themselves to other people. For those unfamiliar

Comparisons are a form of judgment.

with this practice, he provides a few exercises. The first one displays full-length pictures of a man and a woman who embody ideal physical beauty by contemporary media standards. Readers are instructed to take their own body measurements, compare them to those superimposed on the pictures of the attractive specimens, and dwell on the differences.

This exercise produces what it promises: we start to feel miserable as we engage in these comparisons. By the time we’re as depressed as we think possible, we turn the page to discover that the first exercise was a mere warm-up. Since physical beauty

is relatively superficial, Greenburg next provides an opportunity to compare ourselves on something that matters: achievement. He turns to the phone book to give readers a few random individuals to compare themselves with. The first name he claims to have pulled out of the phone book is Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. Greenburg lists the languages Mozart spoke and the major pieces he had composed by the time he was a teenager. The exercise then instructs readers to reflect on their own achievements at their current stage of life, to compare them with what Mozart had accomplished by age twelve, and to dwell on the differences.

Even readers who never emerge from the self-induced misery of this exercise might see how powerfully this type of thinking blocks compassion, both for oneself and for others.

Denial of Responsibility

Another kind of life-alienating communication is denial of responsibility. Communication is life-alienating when it clouds our awareness that we are each responsible for our own thoughts, feelings, and actions. The use of the common expression *have to*, as in “There are some things you have to do, whether you like it or not,” illustrates how personal responsibility for our actions can be obscured in speech.

Our language obscures awareness of personal responsibility.

The phrase *makes one feel*, as in “You make me feel guilty,” is another example of how language facilitates denial of personal responsibility for our own feelings and thoughts.

In her book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which documents the war crimes trial of Nazi officer Adolf Eichmann, Hannah Arendt quotes Eichmann saying that he and his fellow officers had their own name for the responsibility-denying language they used. They called it *Amtssprache*, loosely translated into English as “office talk” or “bureaucratese.” For example, if asked why they took a certain action, the response would be, “I had to.” If asked why they “had to,” the answer would be, “Superiors’ orders.” “Company policy.” “It was the law.”

We deny responsibility for our actions when we attribute their cause to factors outside ourselves:

- Vague, impersonal forces—*“I cleaned my room because I had to.”*
- Our condition, diagnosis, or personal or psychological history—*“I drink because I am an alcoholic.”*
- The actions of others—*“I hit my child because he ran into the street.”*
- The dictates of authority—*“I lied to the client because the boss told me to.”*
- Group pressure—*“I started smoking because all my friends did.”*
- Institutional policies, rules, and regulations—*“I have to suspend you for this infraction because it’s the school policy.”*
- Gender roles, social roles, or age roles—*“I hate going to work, but I do it because I am a husband and a father.”*
- Uncontrollable impulses—*“I was overcome by my urge to eat the candy bar.”*

Once, during a discussion among parents and teachers on the dangers of a language that implies absence of choice, a woman objected angrily, “But there are some things you have to do whether you like it or not! And I see nothing wrong with telling my children that there are things they have to do, too.” Asked for an example of something she “had to do,” she retorted, “That’s easy! When I leave here tonight, I have to go home and cook. I hate cooking! I hate it with a passion, but I have been doing it every day for twenty years, even when I’ve been as sick as a dog, because it’s one of those things you just have to do.” I told her I was sad to hear her spending so much of her life doing something she hated, because she felt compelled to, and I just hoped that she might find happier possibilities by learning the language of NVC.

I am pleased to report that she was a fast learner. At the end of the workshop, she actually went home and announced to her family that she no longer wanted to cook. The opportunity for some feedback from her family came three weeks later when her two sons arrived at a workshop. I was curious to know how

they had reacted to their mother's announcement. The elder son sighed, "Marshall, I just said to myself, 'Thank God!'" Seeing my puzzled look, he explained, "I thought to myself, maybe finally she won't be complaining at every meal!"

Another time, when I was consulting for a school district, a teacher remarked, "I hate giving grades. I don't think they are helpful and they create a lot of anxiety on the part of students. But I have to give grades: it's the district policy." We had just been practicing how to introduce language in the classroom that heightens consciousness of responsibility for one's actions. I suggested that the teacher translate the statement "I have to give grades because it's district policy" to "I choose to give grades because I want . . ." She answered without hesitation, "I choose to give grades because I want to keep my job," while hastening to add, "But I don't like saying it that way. It makes me feel so responsible for what I'm doing."

"That's why I want you to do it that way," I replied.

I share the sentiments of French novelist and journalist George Bernanos when he says,

We can replace language that implies lack of choice with language that acknowledges choice.

We are dangerous when we are not conscious of our responsibility for how we behave, think, and feel.

I have thought for a long time now that if, some day, the increasing efficiency for the technique of destruction finally causes our species to disappear from the earth, it will not be cruelty that will be responsible for our extinction and still less, of course, the indignation that cruelty awakens and the reprisals and vengeance that it brings upon itself . . . but the docility, the lack of responsibility of the modern man, his base subservient acceptance of every common decree. The horrors that we have seen, the still greater horrors we shall presently see,

are not signs that rebels, insubordinate, untamable men are increasing in number throughout the world, but rather that there is a constant increase in the number of obedient, docile men.

—George Bernanos

Other Forms of Life-Alienating Communication

Communicating our desires as demands is yet another form of language that blocks compassion. A demand explicitly or implicitly threatens listeners with blame or punishment if they fail to comply. It is a common form of communication in our culture, especially among those who hold positions of authority.

My children gave me some invaluable lessons about demands. Somehow I had gotten it into my head that, as a parent, my job was to make demands. I learned, however, that I could make all the demands in the world but still couldn't make my children do anything. This is a humbling lesson in power for those of us who believe that, because we're a parent, teacher, or manager, our job

We can never make people do anything.

is to change other people and make them behave. Here were these youngsters letting me know that I couldn't make them do anything. All I could do was make them wish they had—

through punishment. Then eventually they taught me that anytime I was foolish enough to make them wish they had complied by punishing them, they had ways of making me wish that I hadn't!

We will examine this subject again when we learn to differentiate requests from demands—an important part of NVC.

The concept that certain actions merit reward while others merit punishment is also associated with life-alienating communication. This thinking is expressed by the word *deserve*

Thinking based on "who deserves what" blocks compassionate communication.

as in "He deserves to be punished for what he did." It assumes "badness" on the part of people who behave in certain ways, and it calls for punishment to make them repent and

change their behavior. I believe it is in everyone's interest that people change, not in order to avoid punishment, but because they see the change as benefiting themselves.

Most of us grew up speaking a language that encourages us to label, compare, demand, and pronounce judgments rather than to be aware of what we are feeling and needing. I believe life-alienating communication is rooted in views of human nature that have exerted their influence for several centuries. These views stress humans' innate evil and deficiency, and a need for education to control our inherently undesirable nature. Such education often leaves us questioning whether there is something wrong with whatever feelings and needs we may be experiencing. We learn early to cut ourselves off from what's going on within ourselves.

Life-alienating communication has deep philosophical and political roots.

Life-alienating communication both stems from and supports hierarchical or domination societies, where large populations are controlled by a small number of individuals to those individuals' own benefit. It would be in the interest of kings, czars, nobles, and so forth that the masses be educated in a way that renders them slavlike in mentality. The language of wrongness, *should*, and *have to* is perfectly suited for this purpose: the more people are trained to think in terms of moralistic judgments that imply wrongness and badness, the more they are being trained to look outside themselves—to outside authorities—for the definition of what constitutes right, wrong, good, and bad. When we are in contact with our feelings and needs, we humans no longer make good slaves and underlings.

Summary

It is our nature to enjoy giving and receiving compassionately. We have, however, learned many forms of life-alienating communication that lead us to speak and behave in ways that injure others and ourselves. One form of life-alienating

communication is the use of moralistic judgments that imply wrongness or badness on the part of those who don't act in harmony with our values. Another is the use of comparisons, which can block compassion both for others and for ourselves. Life-alienating communication also obscures our awareness that we are each responsible for our own thoughts, feelings, and actions. Communicating our desires in the form of demands is yet another characteristic of language that blocks compassion.