

Compassionate Communication: A Practice of Meditation for the Voice

By Mary Kay Reinemann

August 23, 2009

Last May I went to hear Sharon Salzburg speak. Most of you probably know of her—she is a well-known meditation teacher. At one point in her talk, she asked us if we ever took a few minutes at the end of the day to reflect on how the day had gone. “Do you ever sit and think ‘oh, there was that thing I wish I’d said’ ... or ‘There was that stupid thing I said at that meeting at lunch ...’ or ‘There was that time I said the completely wrong thing! I wish I’d just been quiet!’”

“Do thoughts like that ever cross your mind?” she asked.

Since I teach compassionate communication, and Sharon is one of the most officially compassionate people I know, it really hit me that every example she gave of something one might regret at the end of the day had to do with how we speak to one another.

Why is this so hard?

Statistically it makes sense, that if we spend more time speaking to one another than anything else, there are more opportunities to blow it. On the other hand, practice is supposed to make perfect—and we practice talking constantly.

Is it possible that we are practicing the wrong things? Have we learned how to speak in ways that don’t communicate what we really mean?

I was introduced to Marshall Rosenberg, a psychologist who studied with Carl Rogers here in Madison, through several stories he told in a newspaper interview. He told a story about mediating between two tribes in Nigeria. They had been feuding, and a quarter of the population in their village had been killed in the previous year. It had taken weeks to get the chiefs of the Muslim and Christian tribes to sit down at the table to discuss rebuilding the marketplace and the number of stalls each side would have.

As they were walking into the room, the interpreter whispered to Marshall that there were people in the room whose children had been killed by others sitting at the table.

Marshall began by saying that he was sure that once they understood the needs of each party, they would be able to resolve their differences. He invited anyone to begin by answering his question: “What do you need to make the marketplace work for you?”

A Christian Chief yelled across the table: “You people are murderers!”

As the mediator, it was Marshall’s job to interpret, so he said, “Chief, are you saying that you have a need for safety, and you’d like to know that whatever happens, people will find some way of resolving the problem without resorting to violence?”

The Chief looked astonished, because people aren’t used to being heard in this way, and then he said, “Yes, that’s exactly what I mean!”

Marshall asked if someone on the Muslim side could repeat what the chief had said his need was.

At that point a Muslim Chief screamed back, “Then why did you kill my son!”

This man was in a lot of pain, and he couldn’t hear the needs of the Christian chief until he had received some “emergency empathy.”

Finally, someone on the Muslim side could repeat that the Christian Chief had a need for safety.

It took about an hour and a half for each side to be able to repeat one need that the other had expressed. At that point a man jumped up, very excited, and said, “If we knew how to talk to one another like this, we wouldn’t have to kill each other!” A team of trainers was invited and when Marshall revisited the village about a year later, he found a thriving community.

I thought, “Hmm, if he could use this in war zones in Africa, maybe it would work in Madison!”

In developing this process, Marshall says he realized that his professional training and cultural conditioning led him to focus attention on places that made it unlikely for him to get what he wants, so he developed compassionate communication as a way to train his attention, to shine the light of consciousness—on places that have the potential to help him get what he needs.

Compassionate communication is a *consciousness* supported by a *skill set*.

The process is composed of four steps, four *behaviors* we can practice:

First, we learn to **observe** the concrete details that are affecting our well-being. This is Observation *without evaluation*. Krishnamurti says this is the highest form of human intelligence.

- In the Talmud, it says, “We do not see things as they are; we see them as *we* are.”

- The Chinese say, “We see what is behind our eyes.”
- Observation is a practice for seeing things as they are—in front of our eyes.

The second step is: How do we **feel** in relation to what we are observing?

- We distinguish between universal human emotions and thoughts; we acknowledge that our feelings aren’t caused by what happens, so much as by what we are telling ourselves about what happened.

For example, if we had an appointment to meet at 6 pm and it is 5 after 6 and you aren’t here, I might be furious if I’m telling myself that it took me six months to get this appointment, and we are about to miss it because you aren’t here on time. Or, I might be delighted and relieved if I am preparing a presentation for you and I’m not quite ready to go. Now I’m enjoying a few extra minutes to prepare. The feelings are caused not by the “late” arrival but by the story that goes with it in my mind.

Third, we study the **needs and values** that underlie our feelings.

- We learn to tell the difference between *needs* and *strategies*; food is a need—going to a restaurant or planting a garden is a strategy.

And last, we **request** an immediate, doable, and concrete action in order to meet needs and enrich our lives.

- We distinguish between *requests* and *demands*. This is a practice of power with, not power over, others. It is rooted in the belief that while our strategies for getting needs met might be in conflict, our actual needs are never in conflict, and that none of us is ever truly satisfied until everyone’s needs are met. We believe that by simply changing our focus from our strategies to our needs, we can discover a world of abundance and enjoy contributing to each other’s well being.

We use the four steps, the actual skills we practice, to express **two things**, called the *two parts* of compassionate communication: *empathy and honesty*, which I offer to myself and to others.

The process is simple:

Observe what is happening, what was said, what could be recorded with a video camera.

- *We agreed to meet at 6. That clock shows 10 minutes after 6.*

Identify the universal **feelings** associated with the observation

- *I am worried ...*

Identify the universal human **need** that the feeling is pointing to,

- *Maybe predictability, security, understanding*

Make a concrete **request**.

- *Could I have your cell number?*

Simple, but not easy.

It isn’t easy to switch our attention from our evaluations and our thoughts and our strategies and our demands over to observations, feelings, needs, and requests. But it is possible; it can be learned, and it has transformed my life, as well as those of others I know and work with. For example:

I have a friend who is a psychiatric nurse. She works with incarcerated people who have mental illnesses. She tells me “this is just good nursing practice.” She taught compassionate communication to everyone in her medium security unit, and in three years this reduced the incidence of seclusion and restraint by over 90% and time lost from work due to staff injuries from several months to zero. Then she moved into a maximum security unit. In a little more than a year there, she reduced the incidence of violence (as measured by several key indicators) by over 50%.

Recently she told me that she had gotten a phone call from the colleague who has continued Donna’s program in the medium security unit. The colleague had been called into the office and asked what she wanted to do with the money she had in her account.

“What money?”

“We had all this money budgeted for injuries in your unit and you didn’t use it. It’s yours.”

The patients and staff decided to use the money to turn the seclusion room into a “comfort room.” Both of these nurses will be receiving international awards this fall.

I have another friend who introduced compassionate communication into her 7th and 8th grade classrooms this past year. The kids made cards with

She taught compassionate communication to everyone in her medium security unit, and in three years this reduced the incidence of seclusion and restraint by over 90% and time lost from work due to staff injuries from several months to zero.

“feelings and needs” on them. Every once and a while they get out their cards and express their feelings and needs to the class. She told me that sometimes it can take as long as 20 minutes for the students to say their piece, but it’s not a problem because, once they’ve had the opportunity to talk about how they are, they are completely ready to do the class work, and she can get more done in those 30 minutes than she normally expects to accomplish in 50.

The patients don’t want to leave Donna’s unit; they call it a sanctuary. The kids want to come back to Lori’s classroom; she, too, has created a sanctuary. A big part, not the only part, of what they do is teaching and showing people how to connect when they exchange a word. They teach and practice compassionate communication.

We are starving for empathy . . . and yearning for honesty. And when we share these things, we enter into the realm of compassion.

I remember a night over 30 years ago, drifting off to sleep with an aching heart, quite desperate and hopeless, not knowing where to turn or what to do; the world, the school where I taught, the handful of people, the single child I had spent my life’s energy and joy trying to help was slipping deeper into despair by the day. The circumstances are quite irrelevant, really, anyone’s worst nightmare will do.

As I was lying there an image appeared in my mind—in my heart, actually, not my mind. I saw my heart and coiled around it was a small dragon—and the dragon was eating my heart. There was a gaping, bleeding hole where it was chewing with a kind of desperation. It hurt.

“Greed,” I thought, “it’s greed. I don’t *love*, I *want*. I want things to be the way *I* think they

should be. And when they aren’t like that, I think something is wrong—I think everything is wrong. I watched the dragon eating my heart—“It’s me, I am the dragon. I want.”

The Lakota say that the name of the first human being is *wacin*, “I want.”

So this is what it is to be human: I want.

I watched the dragon and saw how desperate it was, and realized that it was starving, that it was eating because it was so hungry. It needed nourishment, to be cared for, to be fed. It was so sad. And then, for perhaps the first time in my life, I felt compassion for the dragon, the wanting, for myself, for all of us.

I want.

Oh . . . I want . . . this is what it is to be *human*. Then my heart broke open.

I enfolded the dragon, the heart, all of us, all of me, all those I loved and grieved for, in the arms of my heart and went to sleep. I was still sad but no longer desperate. I got up the next morning and did the next thing I needed to do, and the thing after that, and so on, and here I am.

Now I look back on this story with the eyes of Marshall Rosenberg and see *needs* instead of *greed*. How much easier it might have been to understand all along that we have needs.

And to understand that when we speak to one another or to ourselves, it is simply a beautiful need, a life potential, seeking expression and fulfillment and joy: life calling to life through the sacred medium of the word.

We can learn to use our words to take us to the heart of compassion. We can learn to make every word, like every step, a prayer.

Imagine that—every word, a prayer.