

# Connecting Across Differences

2ND EDITION

Finding Common Ground With  
Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime

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# 1

## Another Way to See the World

*Feeling and longing are the motive forces behind  
all human endeavor and human creations.*

—ALBERT EINSTEIN

*Sticks and stones can break my bones  
but names can never hurt me.*

—CHILDREN’S RHYME

When people first hear the term “Nonviolent Communication,” they may be surprised and confused. We are accustomed to thinking about violence as physical force, and it can be puzzling to think of communication—mere words—as aggressive. In fact, communication is usually seen as an *alternative* to violence. Negotiations are attempted before acts of war in order to avoid physical conflict. Police (ideally) will say, “Stop! Drop your gun!” before firing when they see an armed person committing a crime. If a parent sees her child hitting a playmate or grabbing a toy away—an act of physical force—the child might be reminded to “use your words.” As the children’s rhyme goes, “Sticks and stones can break my bones but names can never hurt me.”

Yet we all know that words can generate much hurt and pain. While the hurt may not be physical, our thoughts and words inform the kinds of actions we take. If we have critical thoughts or images of another group or person, it becomes far more likely that physical force or a destructive act will ensue.

If you reflect on physical violence and what leads to it, you may, in each case, first blame a physical act or stimulus—“He hit me first!” or “He cut me off on the road!” But if you reflect further, you will find that before a person strikes physically, even in perceived retaliation, words or thoughts precede the act: “How dare you!” “What a jerk!” “I’ll teach you a lesson.” Violent actions follow from talking to ourselves in this kind of way.

Violence can be most broadly defined as a breakdown in human connection and understanding. When such fissures occur, opportunities for physical violence become more likely. In contrast, if we love and care for someone, the last thing we want is for them to suffer or experience harm. While we may not be able to love and care for everyone else with equal energy and attention, learning *how* to connect compassionately with others can contribute to resolving conflicts when they arise and to fostering greater understanding where connection already exists. It is this kind of “Nonviolent” or “Compassionate” Communication that we address in this book.

## Beyond Boxed-Up Thinking

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*Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I will meet you there.*

—RUMI

*Much of our daily interactions with our fellow human beings is empathic because that is our core nature. Empathy is the very means by which we create social life and advance civilization.*

—JEREMY RIFKIN

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Communicating compassionately involves changing our thinking. It involves challenging a primary assumption that has informed our culture for thousands of years: that it is useful to classify people and things as “right” or “wrong.” According to this kind of thinking, some people are good, some bad; some smart, others stupid; some caring, others insensitive. This yo-yo,

right-wrong thinking can be found at every level of our society. Comic book heroes fight arch villains; in TV and films, the police are out to get “the bad guys”; President George W. Bush, when launching the Iraq war, referred repeatedly to an “axis of evil.” A popular bumper sticker reads, “Mean People Suck!” This assumes that some people are mean, others

are nice, and, implicitly, mean people are mean all the time. Meanness is the very definition of who they are. If this is so, why bother with them? Mean people, according to this kind of thinking, should be avoided—or even controlled or punished.

Who’s right? Who’s wrong? Who deserves sympathy, understanding, and support? And who should be excluded, judged, punished, fired, executed, or (in the case of countries) attacked? When I was in college, I spent hours discussing questions like this with my peers. We talked about relationships, family, and politics. We wanted to understand the world and the choices people were making. Even today, I can find such questions compelling. I want to understand the cause of a given situation and know who is responsible. I want to be informed and aware, have a sense of safety and security in the world, and be confident about there being accountability, restoration, hope, and change. I know I’m not alone in this. The popularity of “confessional” talk shows and courtroom programs such as *Judge Judy* attests to a continuing interest in right-wrong thinking as a means of solving problems and understanding the world, ourselves, and those around us.

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*Reality is much more complex than any judgment of right and wrong encourages you to believe.*

*When you really understand the ethical, spiritual, social, economic, and psychological forces that shape individuals, you will see that people’s choices are not based on a desire to hurt. Instead, they are in accord with what they know and what worldviews are available to them. Most are doing the best they can, given what information they’ve received and what problems they are facing.*

—MICHAEL LERNER

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This kind of thinking has a long tradition (at least in the West) and lies at the core of our dominant cultural norms and beliefs. According to the Old Testament, it accounts for the very start of human history: Adam and Eve were cast out of paradise (punished) for their *wrongdoing*. According to Walter Wink, this Myth of Redemptive Violence, as he calls it, dates back even earlier to a Babylonian creation story from around 1250 BCE,<sup>1</sup> upon which all later myths involving punitive violence are based. This myth still informs much of our culture today, impacting almost every institution, belief, and practice in our society; it is seen as natural, obvious, and the “truth.” As Wink points out, “. . . [A] story told often enough, and confirmed often enough in daily life, ceases to be a tale and is accepted as reality itself.”<sup>2</sup>

So if right-wrong thinking is so popular and prevalent and has been around for thousands of years, why change it? Clearly, it meets some needs. It can offer us a sense of safety, meaning, fairness, and order. It can seem effective in making choices and distinguishing values. And it’s familiar, so it can feel comfortable and easy—even

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intrinsic to human nature.

*I hate having to choose sides. Last year, a couple I was friendly with got divorced and there were hard feelings between them. It seemed like each one wanted me to support them in blaming the other for the break-up, that it was all the other person’s fault. I wanted to remain friends with both of them, but at the time, I couldn’t figure out how to do that and wound up losing one friend. I really would like to do things differently.*

—PAULA

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Yet right-wrong thinking diminishes human connection. It separates us from one another and ourselves. It draws a line in the sand: You are either with us, or against us. Innocent or guilty. Deserving of reward or punishment. Saved or damned. It negates the complexity of life and full human experience. It implies a static view of human beings and their behavior. According to such thinking, “bad” people will always do “bad” things and “good” or “just” people must stop or control

them. This view confuses a person's *behavior*—the particular acts a person chooses to take—with who the person *is*. And if someone is intrinsically evil, what hope is there for learning, connection, compassion, or change? It is this kind of thinking that leads to conflict and violence, in all its forms.

Empirical research paints a very different picture, showing that human behavior is fluid and primarily determined by what we *think* about the situation we find ourselves in. Given our circumstances and our cultural conditioning, we are all capable of doing “bad” things. The proportion of college students, for example, who admit to behavior that could be classified as a felony is consistently more than 90 percent (for example, damaging other's property, giving illegal substances to those under the age of eighteen, or entering a premises and taking an item that belongs to another). When asked if they would commit various illegal acts if they were 100 percent guaranteed that they wouldn't get caught, the proportion of students who said they would steal, cheat, or physically hurt someone who has hurt them in some way is very high. In effect, if you want to get someone to cheat, make the stakes high enough and the chances of getting caught low enough.

As the writer Jorge Luis Borges has observed, we human beings live by justification alone—even if only to bring a glass of water to our lips. What Borges means is that we all have reasons for doing what we do. Our given circumstances and our needs—not who we intrinsically *are*—determine the course of action we take. It's safe to say, for example, that most human beings would abhor eating human flesh. Yet when stranded by an accident and given the choice of starving or eating the bodies of dead companions, you might choose to eat. There are well-documented cases, involving climbing and airplane accidents, of people making this choice. If you reflect on an action you took that you now regret, you can probably find some need or important value that motivated that action—even if you're not fully happy with the choice or its impact.

Research also documents that while right-wrong thinking is the norm in our society today, early humans lived very differently,

based on compassion and connection. Riane Eisler, in *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History and Our Future*, explores recent evidence that paints a very different picture of pre-human history from the popular cliché of a caveman with a wooden club. Historical, anthropological, and archaeological data suggest that “just as some of the most primitive existing societies, like those of the BaMbuti and !Kung, are not characterized by warlike caveman dragging women around by the hair, it now appears that the Paleolithic was a remarkably peaceful time.” Indeed, popular notions of early human society as aggressive and violent can be seen more as an extension of our current way of viewing the world than an accurate representation of how early humans actually lived:

The old view was that the earliest human kinship (and later economic) relations developed from men hunting and killing. The new view is that the foundations for social organization came from mothers and children sharing. The old view was of prehistory as the story of “man the hunter-warrior.” The new view is of both women and men using our unique human faculties to support and enhance life.<sup>3</sup>

Biological and cognitive research confirms this view: all mammals, and especially humans (with our more developed neocortex), are “particularly hard-wired for empathy . . . the empathic predisposition is embedded in our biology.” Newborn infants, for example, are “able to identify the cries of other newborns and will cry in return” and toddlers “will often wince in discomfort at the sight of another child’s suffering and come over to him to share a toy, or cuddle, or bring them over to their own mother for assistance.”<sup>4</sup>

The limitation of right-wrong thinking is that it diminishes our natural capacity for empathy and compassion for ourselves and others. It takes us out of the moment, distracting us from specific needs and circumstances and obscuring the choices we can make that are fully aligned with our values. It also curtails the possibilities

for the kind of world we can collectively envision and create. In this book, we explore how a different kind of analysis, focused on feelings and needs, can enrich our understanding of human behavior and foster greater compassion and connection—for human beings and all life on the planet. It is this kind of orientation, based on empathy and compassion, that can transform how we relate to others and ourselves and bring us closer to recreating what Eisler calls a “partnership-based” culture, transforming “our world from strife to peaceful co-existence . . . [with] conflict productive rather than destructive.”<sup>5</sup>

## EXERCISE 1: Force and Feeling

- A. Take a moment to reflect on an act of physical force or violence that you have considered, fantasized about, or acted upon. This could involve simply slamming your books on a table, breaking an object, or physically hurting someone. What was the stimulus for the action you took or wanted to take? What were you feeling and thinking at the time? What is the link between your thoughts and the action, real or imagined?
- B. Make a list of social institutions’ beliefs and practices, including, for example, how schools and learning are structured, the criminal justice system, policing, religious beliefs, health care, etc. How does right-wrong thinking inform their beliefs and practices? For example, in schools, it is common practice to give grades, which can be seen as a form of reward.
- C. Consider recent and historical events, such as wars or highly publicized court cases. How do you see right-wrong thinking in the language (justification) and actions that took place? How was one side presented as the “enemy,” or morally wrong, or less than the other?



## The “F” Word: At the Heart of Empathy

How do we find a way to communicate that is free of judgment and blame while expressing and sharing with others our experience of their words and actions and what we see in the world? A core element in empathic connection is the awareness of our own and others’ feelings. The very definition of empathy is the capacity to “understand and enter into another’s feelings,”<sup>6</sup> with the root of the word, *pathos*, coming from the Greek word for “feeling.” Empathic connection means to “feel with someone,” extending ourselves toward understanding another’s view and walking—even if only for a moment—in their shoes.

While our ability to experience feelings gives us crucial social skills, unless we’ve done some form of training in this area (such as Emotional Intelligence), most of us are unaccustomed to paying attention to our feelings. We’re out of practice. How many times a day, for example, does someone ask you, “How are you?” When you see a neighbor, co-worker, or friend, this question most likely comes up. If you’re like most people, you probably answer in passing: “Fine,” “OK,” “Great,” “Not bad.” Yet like Morse code or shorthand for what we are actually experiencing, none of these responses are feelings, and none of them gives us much information. Perhaps the only time we answer this question fully and accurately is when asked by a doctor, counselor, or loved one. Even when talking to those we are most intimate with, we may also avoid expressing what we’re fully experiencing and feeling. In our culture, we’re not accustomed to talking about our emotions. We’re taught to be “polite”: to not say “too much” or assume others are interested in us or our concerns. We learn to be guarded and unrevealing. We associate feelings with weakness and vulnerability rather than strength, inner grounding, awareness, and resourcefulness.

In part, this is because in the West, since at least the Age of Reason and the development of empirical science, feelings have

been cast as subjective and untrustworthy. We are told instead to “use our heads” and not get emotional. The philosopher René Descartes summed up our very existence in our ability to think: “I think, therefore I am.” And we’re told that if we believe something, especially if it is subjective like an opinion or a feeling, we need to “prove it.” Logical thought, like a mathematics equation, can indeed be written out and tested step by step. Yet how do we “test” human emotion and feeling? From the scientific point of view and our rational way of looking at the world, feelings have little value.

For many men especially, feelings are a largely unknown and dangerous territory. Growing up, boys are told to “Take it like a man” and that “Only sissies cry.” Men are not supposed to have feelings, especially sadness, fear, or vulnerability. Perhaps the only feeling men are allowed or even expected to express is anger. One NVC trainer from Texas, Ike Lasater, says that for years the only feelings he was ever aware of experiencing were *good*, *bad*, and *angry*. Whenever someone asked him how he was feeling about something, his response was either “good” or “bad.” “Good” and “bad” could refer to many different experiences; in fact, they are not feelings at all—they’re adjectives marking approval or disapproval.

While it is more socially acceptable for women to show their feelings, their expression still is not valued. Historically, women have been discriminated against for the very qualities they are expected to exhibit. “Hysteria,” “wild, uncontrolled excitement or feeling,” comes from the Greek for uterus, *hysteria*, expressing the notion that women are prone to becoming hysterical. Cast as overly emotional, irrational, and unstable—“the weaker sex”—women were told for centuries that they were unfit for many occupations, including driving, voting, and working as doctors, soldiers, or scientists. Women, of course, have now proven themselves in all these areas. Statistically, for example, women drivers have lower accident rates than men. Yet as epitomized by the “Iron Lady,” the first female prime minister of Great Britain, Margaret Thatcher, women who

want to be successful are still often expected to exhibit toughness, “clearheadedness,” and indifference.

This way of thinking about feelings is especially true in Anglo American culture. In French, the word for feeling, “sentiment,” is not pejorative. Expressing feeling is socially acceptable and even desired. In English, the same root of “sentiment” turns up in “sentimental”: fake, overwrought, superficial, and cliché. We hear “Don’t be too sensitive” and are told to not “overreact.” Rather than being “sensitive” (aware of our feelings—and what we are

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*I always figured it was a good idea to ignore my emotions. I believed that our feelings are irrational and could lead me to do things I would regret.*

—ARTHUR

*If things go badly for you, my dad, who was in the Army, taught me you just have to “suck it up.”*

—JESSICA

*The last time I cried was when I was six years old.*

—ROBERTA

*If I am feeling bad, I just try to talk myself out of it, to not let it show.*

—HAROLD

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we want a solution—*now*. Like changing a TV channel or popping a painkiller, we either try to “fix” feelings—telling others and ourselves what to feel—or not: “Just get over it.” “Just suck it up.” “Get a grip.” In doing so, we fail to fully understand what we’re feeling and why.

experiencing), we’re supposed to be thick-skinned, with a stiff upper lip. The historical heroes we emulate are pilgrims, pioneers, and cowboys—all “strong, silent” types who were resilient and tough. Our modern pop heroes are equally strong and unfeeling. Athletic stars and those on “survivor” programs are admired for their endurance and putting “mind over matter.” Urban “gangsta” culture is about “coolness” and disaffection.

In our fast-food culture, we’re proactive and product orientated. We want effectiveness and immediate results. If something is “wrong,” especially if it’s unpleasant, stressful, or painful,

## True to Life—and in Our Limbs

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*Trust your feelings, Luke . . .*

—OBI WAN KENOBI

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We dismiss our feelings, thinking they're irrational and unreal. Yet in fact they are closely linked to our very physical bodies. When our

bodies need something, they tell us. If we're hungry, tired, hot, or cold, we experience physical sensations. Our bodies might tighten, our hairs stand on end, or our stomachs grumble or churn. As happens when we have physical needs, our bodies let us know when we're feeling emotions such as anger, happiness, sadness, or contentment. If we're angry, we may feel tension or heat. If sad, we may feel tightness or heaviness. If happy or content, we might feel lightness, openness, and expansiveness. Each of us experiences our emotions differently, via different sensations, yet there's no doubt that our emotions (feelings) have a direct relationship to our physical sensations. When we experience an emotion, there is, in fact, a chemical response in every cell of our organism. The fact that we use the same verb in English ("feel") for physical sensations and for emotional states (feeling "happy," "scared," "sad," "itchy," "hot," or physically cold) suggests the close relationship between these two types of experiences.

We are so accustomed to using our heads and disregarding our feelings and sensations that, in some ways, we are cut off from the rest of our bodies. We may not be fully aware of what our physical needs are, never mind our emotions. I know I lived this way for much of my life. At best, I ignored my feelings or sought to control or suppress them. I didn't understand them and found them to be a distraction and even a nuisance. As someone with a Ph.D., I valued rational thought over all else. For years, my way of relating to my body and my feelings was similar to what I now call my "mascot" during those years of my life (pictured on the following page):

I lived much of my life in my head and lacked, I now see, self-connection. Feelings were troublesome, irksome, and confusing. What triggered them? Sometimes it was clear, other times not. And what led my feelings to suddenly change, like clouds casting shadows over what had moments earlier been a bright, sunny day? I often had no understanding of this. I found some feelings painful (such as sadness or fear), and I thought I could relieve myself of them by practicing “mind over matter”: “Why are you feeling so nervous? You know everything is going to be all right. Be more optimistic!” Bullying my feelings in this way—trying to talk myself out of what I was experiencing—never really worked. I was seeking understanding, relief, and skill in managing what I was experiencing. Trying to force my feelings to obey my will only increased my suffering and confusion—and my level of disconnection from myself.

I know from talking with many others about how they relate to their feelings and observe sensations in their bodies that I am not alone in this “denial.” Many people, if asked how they feel about something, will give an assessment or opinion instead: information from their heads, not their hearts or bodies. At trainings I lead, when I ask participants to notice what they are feeling or what’s going on in their bodies, they often draw a blank. Most of us, unless we have had training or coaching in this area or do some form of bodywork (such as yoga or massage), simply are unaccustomed to paying attention to—and valuing—what’s going on inside of us as physical and emotional beings.

Yet our sensations and feelings serve as important indicators of what’s going on for us. Because we can feel heat, we are able to pull back from a hot stove before getting burned. Because we feel thirst and hunger, we know when we need to nourish and hydrate our bodies. Emotional states such as happiness and fear provide us with equally



Illustration by Hadassah Hill

All Head and No Body—What Happens When We Ignore Our Feelings

crucial information. Our feelings tell us something about what we're experiencing in our environment and what we're enjoying (wanting more of) or needing (wanting to modify or change). In the next chapter, we will look more closely at how our feelings relate to our needs.

For the moment, I'd like you to consider the value of feelings. Intimately related to our senses, feelings are part of being fully alive, "sentient" beings aware of our environment and our experience in the world. As can be seen in the etymology of "emotion," our feelings move us. They can lead us to action; they foster self-awareness. When we pay attention only to our thoughts and dismiss our feelings, we're playing with only half a deck. And why play with half a deck, especially when the other half has some of the most valuable cards with which to play the game of life?

Marshall Rosenberg, who developed the NVC model, has traveled to hundreds of countries around the world in his effort to share peacemaking skills with others. He has commented that in every country he has visited, the initial greeting is the same: How are you? It would seem that for us as human beings, this is crucial information—knowing how we and others are feeling—as well as a basic way of creating human connection and trust.

## EXERCISE 2: Emoto-Meters

Our bodies are like "emoto-meters," highly tuned and sophisticated gauges that can help us ground ourselves in the present moment and be aware of what we're feeling and needing. By tracking how our feelings relate to physical sensations, we can gain greater awareness and fluency in naming them.

- A. Take a few minutes and brainstorm a list of words that describe physical sensations in your body. Be as specific as possible. For example, sensations may include tingly, itchy, numb, pressure, pulsating, or hot. (These sensations can occur in varied places in your body—in your feet, chest, fingers, or

head, for example—and with varying intensities. Some also overlap with feelings. “Warm,” for example, can describe both an emotional response/state *and* a physical experience.) See if you can come up with at least twenty sensation words. Once you’ve brainstormed your own list, you may wish to refer to the list in the appendix (see page 367).

- B. Observe your bodily sensations at this moment. What do you notice? What feelings (emotions) are connected to these sensations? For example, I am feeling happy (emotion); my body feels relaxed, with a light, open sense in my chest area (sensation). Or, I am feeling tired; I notice my eyes are sore and heavy. In noticing your feelings, you may find it helpful to refer to the list of feeling words on page 367.
- C. When learning to identify our sensations and feelings, it can be helpful to start with “strong” responses where the signals we’re receiving from our bodies are the loudest. Consider, for example, fear, depression, anger, surprise, joy, shock, peace, or excitement. What sensations do you notice in particular parts of your body—in your chest, head, hands, or limbs? When you imagine the last time you experienced each of these feelings, what is their intensity? Make a chart in your journal. Here’s an example:

<b>Feeling</b>	<b>Sensation</b>	<b>Location/Intensity</b>
Fear	tingling	hands/mild
	restriction, tension, breathless	chest/intense

To add specificity and fun to this exercise, you may wish to draw a rough sketch of a human body and then place sensation words on this sketch to match what you’re noticing in your body. For example, if you’re feeling “tingly” on the back of your head and scalp, place the word “tingly” on the head area of the body picture. This exercise helps build sensory awareness and self-connection.

### EXERCISE 3: The Rush of Feeling

Why do people like to see particular types of films? Clearly, a movie is a form of entertainment that can meet various needs, including fun, learning, relaxation, and companionship. Each film genre can elicit particular feelings, such as apprehension, anxiety, and fear (horror flicks) or tenderness, warmth, and hope (romances). Amusement park rides can also elicit certain physical and emotional responses: roller coasters and other daredevil rides are advertised as “thrilling”; the “tunnel of love” invokes feelings similar to those sparked by a romantic film. Sports can also generate strong emotions. Part of the appeal in playing or watching a game is the apprehension, excitement, disappointment, joy and/or relief we experience as “our” team misses, scores, wins, or loses.

Why do we enjoy activities that elicit emotional responses? Why do we like feeling anxious, thrilled, or ecstatic? Feelings are our lifeblood. When they are aroused—our hearts beating, blood pressure increasing, stomachs dropping, skin crawling—we are aware of being fully alive. When we can experience these intense, vibrant emotions in “controlled” environments (where there is little or no risk of injury or harm, such as when facing a scary monster in a film rather than being mugged on the street), we have both aliveness and control, with a sense of choice and security.

Make a list of some of your favorite activities. This can include hobbies, sports, entertainment, or other pastimes you enjoy, even taking a walk or meeting with friends. What feelings come up for you when you think about the last time you engaged in these activities? What sensations do you notice in your body? Make a chart including the following categories; we have started you off with an example.

<b>Activity:</b>	<b>Feeling(s):</b>	<b>Sensations:</b>
Cycling	happy, joyful, exhilarated	light, open, relaxed, energized



## Playing With a Full Deck: Developing Fluency in a Full Range of Feelings

There are hundreds of words in the English language for various feelings. Like colors in a paint box, there is a huge array, with a range of intensity and shades. Most of us, it's safe to say, only use about 10 percent of the vocabulary available. Out of all the available colors, we paint in only white and gray.

Happiness, for example, can range from feeling pleased and content to jubilant and ecstatic. Sadness can descend into brokenheartedness and grief or lighten into feeling blue or simply “down.”

At first you may find it challenging to identify what you're feeling and distinguish between different shades. I know that when I first started learning NVC, I often had no idea what I was feeling, and I remember thinking at one point, *I'll never learn to know what I'm feeling—or at least take less than ten minutes to figure it out!* Yet with practice, we can all develop this fluency.

Reading over the list of feelings on page 367, do you see any that are familiar to you? Which feelings belong in a similar group or “family”? After identifying a group, you may wish to organize them in intensity and degree. You may also want to jot down feelings that come up for you on a regular basis or keep a list of feeling words with you that you can refer to. You may also wish to ask, “Which feeling words would I be most comfortable with and likeliest to use at home? With friends? At work or school?” The next time you answer “good” or “bad” in response to “How are you?” you may wish to stop and ask yourself, “What am I *really* feeling at this moment?”

### EXERCISE 4: The Movement of Emotions

Have you noticed how quickly feelings can change for young children? At one moment, a child may be smiling and laughing,

and the next moment they burst into tears. There's no evidence that children experience more feelings than adults; regardless of age, we probably all encounter similar ranges. The difference may be that children tend to be more in touch with what they're feeling, more inclined to express it, and less experienced in hiding it.

As adults, our feelings can also shift in intensity and degree—from apprehension to fear or terror, from satisfaction to happiness or elation. Our feelings change in response to what we're experiencing in the moment, and how we interpret that experience. We may feel perfectly excited, happy, and satisfied as we head off in the sunshine to enjoy a day at the beach. Then, after being stuck in traffic for an hour and then cut off by a big SUV, we may feel completely different—frustrated, hot, and annoyed! Feelings are not frivolous or irrational; they are indicators of how we are responding to stimuli in the moment. That feelings change easily and quickly is simply a sign of how quickly circumstances, and our thoughts about them, can change; being aware of our feelings can help us respond effectively to what is happening in the here and now.

Think back over the day, or even the last three hours. What feelings have come and gone during that time? See if you can link those feelings to your thoughts about specific stimuli in your environment. Try keeping a “feeling and sensation journal” one day, or even half a day, this week. Note the time of the day, what you are feeling, any sensations you notice, and where you feel them. You may also wish to notice whether you can identify a stimulus (something in the environment and/or your experience that may have triggered the response you have). Below is an example:

<b>Time</b>	<b>Sensation(s)</b>	<b>Feeling(s)</b>	<b>Thought/Stimulus</b>
7 p.m.	clenching in chest	anxious	taxes due in two days— not started them!

## The Complexity of Feelings

In addition to noticing a range of feelings and the way they change throughout the day, you have probably also noticed how often you can feel more than one emotion at a time—and sometimes very different emotions. Have you ever felt both hopeful and excited (full of anticipation) and, at the same time, nervous or scared? (I'd probably feel this way if I were going alpine skiing for the first time!) When someone I love who had been ill and suffering passed away, I felt sadness, peace, and relief: sad to lose his everyday presence in my life and also peaceful and happy that he was now free of physical pain. If you reflect on this and the complexity of life and human experience, you can probably find many, many examples like this in your own life. Often this is the case for even everyday events; getting out of the bed in the morning, I can feel both tired and full of anticipation for events I have planned for the day.

Just as we can experience a mix of feelings at any given moment, it's common for one feeling to have others “behind” or underneath it. For example, if you are feeling hurt, this could include a mixture of feeling sad, disappointed and, perhaps, even scared. If you are feeling jealous, this could include heavyheartedness, fear, and sadness. Excitement can sometimes have hope imbedded in it.

### EXERCISE 5: Stimulation and Response

- A. Read over the following statements. For each statement, notice what sensations you experience in your body and what you are feeling. Be sure to notice the complexity of your feelings: whether you are both excited and concerned, for example.
1. You've been asked to an interview for your dream job.
  2. While shopping, you run into a friend you haven't seen for months.

3. You find a \$50 bill on the street.
  4. You walk fifteen minutes to the subway and realize that you've left your wallet (with your money and your subway card) at the house.
- B. Pick a feeling from the feelings list (see page 367) and remember the last time you experienced it. Were there other feelings mixed in with this primary one?
- C. What we see, hear, touch, taste, remember, imagine, or think about can all stimulate feelings in us. Often these responses are conditioned by associations with prior experiences or expectations based on prior experiences, even if these experiences are not fully conscious or currently present in our minds. While we may think our “trigger” is what's happening in the moment—what we're seeing or hearing—in fact *our thoughts* about the experience trigger our feelings and the physical sensations (responses) in our bodies.

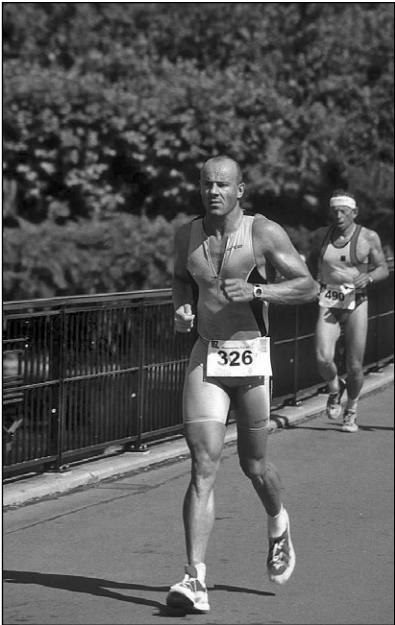
### *Part One*

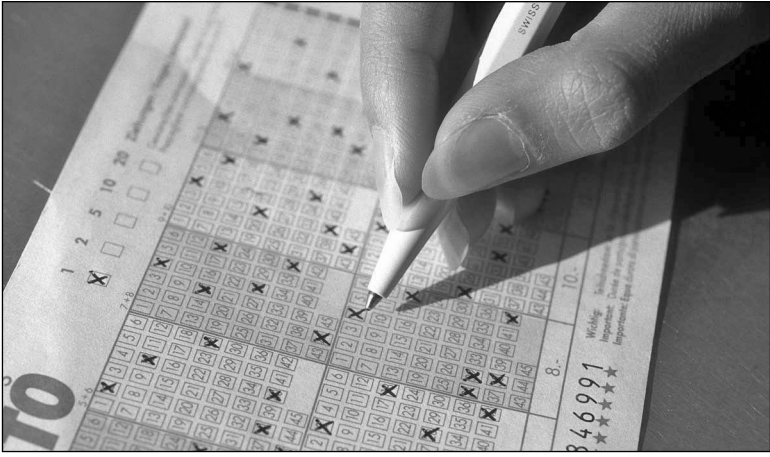
Look at one of the photos on the following pages (pages 30–31).

1. How do you feel when looking at the picture? What sensations do you notice in your body? Again, you may wish to refer to the lists of sensations and feeling words.
2. Now take a moment to consider what thoughts or associations are going through your mind about the picture. Is there a connection between your thoughts and associations and how you are feeling when looking at the picture? Is what you see in the picture triggering what you are feeling—or are your thoughts about what you see the trigger?

*Example:* Looking at the picture of the children standing together and smiling in the village, I notice I feel open and relaxed in my chest and happy and expectant. I am thinking about how much I love to travel and how I would love to take a trip to Africa. Seeing the children's smiles, I also feel wistful, since I would love more fun

and play in my life and it looks like they are having fun together. Seeing the building behind them, I'm also feeling some sadness, thinking about how so many people in the world survive on such limited means.





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### *Part Two*

Look in a daily newspaper and choose several photos you find of interest. Again, identify what you're seeing in the photo, how you're feeling as you look at this image, and any thoughts and associations you may have.

### *Part Three*

Go to an art museum and/or look at some art in a book. Choose a work of art that you find moving. How do you feel looking at this piece? What do you specifically see that's stimulating your feelings? What associations do you have with what you see?

## **Disentangling Thoughts and Feelings**

It can be hard at first to identify what we're feeling. It's also easy to confuse feelings with thoughts. As we've already explored, the verb "feel" has different uses. We can talk about how we feel in relation to both physical sensations and emotions. We can also use "feel" to talk about thoughts, opinions, and judgments. When we say, for example, "I feel that capital punishment is wrong," what we're really expressing is what we *think* or *believe* about capital punishment—not how we are *feeling* thinking about it. If we unpacked the feelings in this statement, we might find that the speaker is feeling angry, sad, or scared.

Often there are passionate feelings behind our opinions; we're simply not naming them. Using the verb "feel" with an opinion can be an effort to express that passion. For example, "I feel like this always happens!" could express the speaker's frustration and exhaustion and his interpretation that this particular action or event has happened before. "That's racist!" could express fear and anger in addition to naming how a person sees certain words, depictions, or actions. Regardless, when we hear the combination of "feel + like," it is certain that what we are hearing is an opinion, evaluation, or

judgment. To support understanding and connection, we can choose to listen at such moments for what the person *is* feeling.

Sometimes we say “I feel . . .” when we want to give an opinion with a somewhat softer or gentler edge (as a way to acknowledge or emphasize that what we’re saying is subjective). For example, “I feel she does want to help.” In this context, we could just as easily say, “I personally believe (or think) she does really want to help” rather than “I feel.” Regardless, when using the word “feel” in this context, it can be helpful to remember that what follows is different from what we mean by “feel” in NVC. When using the word to offer a thought or opinion, we are invited to go back into our heads (the realm of analysis and evaluation) rather than into our bodies or emotions.

How do we recognize when the verb “feel” is followed by a thought rather than a feeling? The easiest way is to see if the word “feel” is followed by the words “like,” “that,” “that if,” or “as if,” either explicitly or implied. If these words can be inserted after the word “feel,” we are talking about thoughts and opinions—not feelings. For example, “She feels (that) because he left her, he has no heart”; “Tom feels (that) it should be done by noon”; “I feel (that) if it’s packed this way, it will be safer.” We can also look for subjects, such as “I,” “you,” “he,” “she,” “they,” “it,” or other words that follow a predicate in English. We can also check to see that the word following the verb “feeling” does, in fact, refer to the experience of a feeling or sensation: “hot,” “aggravated,” “joyful,” “excited,” and the like. The following table summarizes how the word “feel” is used to express thoughts.

<b>Sentences in which the word “feel” is used to express thoughts</b>
I feel you look better in blue = I personally believe you look better in blue
<b>(Pronouns—e.g., I, you, it—after “feel” indicate a thought)</b>



I feel I am worthless = I'm convinced that I am worthless
<b>(Pronouns—e.g. I, you, it—after “feel” indicate a thought)</b>
I feel John is sad = I believe that John is sad
<b>(Nouns—e.g. John—after “feel” indicate a thought)</b>
I feel <i>like</i> I'm a loser = I think I'm a loser
<b>(Like indicates a thought)</b>
I feel <i>as if</i> you hate me = I'm sure you hate me
<b>(As if indicates a thought)</b>
I feel fat = I think I'm fat
<b>(Fat is an evaluation, not an emotion)</b>

### EXERCISE 6: Real Feeling

Complete the following sentences with a judgment or opinion. Then go back and “unpack” the feelings you are experiencing when thinking about this issue.

*Example:* “I feel because he didn’t call that I’m not important to him.” Feelings: sad, disappointed, lonely

Opinion: \_\_\_\_\_

Feeling(s): \_\_\_\_\_

A. I feel as if . . . \_\_\_\_\_

B. I feel if . . . \_\_\_\_\_

C. I feel when you . . . \_\_\_\_\_

D. I feel that . . . \_\_\_\_\_

E. I feel because . . . \_\_\_\_\_

## Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

We also confuse feelings in another way. Just as the word “feel” can be used with a thought, we frequently use words that appear to be feelings but are in fact feelings mixed with thoughts, evaluations, or judgments. These words occur in the same place feeling words occur, and we commonly interpret them as feelings. Yet upon closer examination, we can see that there is a thought or judgment mixed in with them. Feeling “misunderstood,” for example, refers to a person or concept that has not been accurately understood. Where is the feeling here? We don't know for sure: probably the speaker giving this evaluation is feeling frustrated, disappointed, or hurt. All we know for sure is that they think there has been a misunderstanding. Here's another example: “I feel ignored.” What is the feeling here? We don't know for sure. What we do know is that the speaker is not receiving the attention or recognition they'd like. This is an evaluation.

How can we distinguish? Feelings concern what is going on *inside* ourselves (what am *I* feeling?) or what is going on for another person *inside* that person (what are *you* feeling?). Feelings are internal experiences. As such, we can't argue or disagree with them. If you are sad, hurt, peaceful, or excited—whatever your feeling is—it is your feeling. In contrast, if you say “You misunderstood me” or even (in the passive) “I feel misunderstood,” the other person could easily disagree: “I didn't misunderstand you! You were the one not listening to me!” On the most basic grammatical level, feeling words in English do not take an object. We don't say “You sad me.” You can say, however, “You misunderstood me” (an evaluation, not a feeling). Saying “I feel misunderstood” is a short (passive tense) form of the same evaluation. Implicit is the belief that someone did something *to* you. Feelings, in contrast, are what we are experiencing inside ourselves.

Let's look at an example. When we say, “I feel abandoned,” there is, in part, a feeling at play. We probably are feeling sad and lonely. Yet “abandoned” includes much more than a feeling: the

thought wrapped up with it is a judgment of what someone (or a circumstance) has done *to* us. Thus “I feel abandoned” could be more directly expressed as “I’m so lonely, and it’s your fault because you left me.” Or it could mean, “I feel scared and uncertain that no one is ever going to care for me.” In effect, the word “abandoned” is a shorthand way of blaming a person or situation for what we are feeling inside. It is a mixture of an internal experience (a feeling) with something we are imagining, thinking, or seeing (perception of the world).

There are many judgment-feeling words that mix feeling information with judgments or interpretations. Some of them include:

Abused	Interrupted	Provoked
Attacked	Intimidated	Put down
Betrayed	Left out	Rejected
Cheated	Loved	Screwed
Cherished	Manipulated	Threatened
Defeated	Misunderstood	Unappreciated
Devalued	Neglected	Unheard
Discriminated	Nurtured	Unwanted
against	Overworked	Used
Forced	Patronized	
Harassed	Pressured	

With each of these words, you can uncover both a feeling and a judgment. “Unappreciated,” for example, could mean sad and disappointed, combined with “You did this by not expressing your gratitude.” “Overworked” could mean disgruntled and annoyed, plus “You asked that I work late every night this week.” An easy way to identify these “judgment-feeling” words is to ask yourself, “Did someone do something *to* me in this situation?” “Have they *made* me feel this way?” “Whose fault is it?” If you’re placing responsibility for your feelings (and circumstances) outside yourself, you may very likely be using a feeling mixed with judgment.

Since judgment-feelings involve blame (what someone did to you), they easily lead to breakdowns in communication. At the very moment we want to be understood, by using judgment-feelings, our words can trigger defensiveness and denial. This response is not surprising: no one likes to be judged. If we want mutual understanding, we will succeed more frequently if our statements of feelings reflect only our feelings and not our judgments.

Using judgment-based words can also obscure that fact that we have autonomy, personal power, and choice. Even though we often say, “That makes me feel . . .,” no one’s behavior can make us feel anything. By clearly stating a feeling without criticism or blame, we are taking full responsibility for our response. In doing so, we can experience greater awareness, empowerment, and choice—and connection with and understanding of others.

### Exercise 7: Like Oil and Water

Go back to the list of words that mix feelings with judgments (see page 36). Choose five of these words and translate what the feeling and judgment might be. Harassed, for example, could be translated as “angry and stressed” with “you’re pressuring me.”

<b>Judgment-Feeling</b>	<b>Feeling</b>	<b>Judgment Word</b>
1.	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____
5.	_____	_____

## EXERCISE 8: Claiming Our Feelings

To gain more awareness of judgments you may have, what can stimulate feelings, and how these feelings are experienced in your body, you may wish to keep a feelings log for one or two days this week. Check in with yourself ten to fifteen times during the day, or every hour or two. Write down what you notice you're feeling. Then check: does a "judgment-feeling" word come to mind for you? If so, what stimulus (thought, judgment, or evaluation) is imbedded in it: who or what are you holding responsible for your experience? You may also wish to note whether you're telling yourself, "This *made* me feel X . . ." and then translate this to "When I see or hear X, I feel . . . (feeling word).

## Moving On

In this chapter, we considered how moving beyond right-wrong thinking can contribute to greater connection with ourselves and others. To overcome this kind of thinking, it helps to connect with what we're feeling emotionally and what our bodies are telling us, since both support awareness—on an intimate level—of our actual, lived experience. In the next chapter, we will examine how feelings can connect us to our needs and how by focusing on needs rather than judgments or evaluations, we can find solutions that are more effective, satisfying, and consistent with our broader beliefs.

## INTEGRATION: Questions and Exercises to Further Explore Chapter 1

Decide for each of the following whether you think it is a feeling (mark "F") or a thought (mark "T"). If you mark "T," write a

statement that you think might express what the speaker *is* feeling. My opinion about each statement follows the exercise.

- A. \_\_\_\_\_ “I feel he doesn’t care about me.”
- B. \_\_\_\_\_ “I’m happy you’re coming with me.”
- C. \_\_\_\_\_ “I feel very nervous when you do that.”
- D. \_\_\_\_\_ “When he leaves without me, I feel forgotten.”
- E. \_\_\_\_\_ “You’re ridiculous.”
- F. \_\_\_\_\_ “I’m satisfied with my grades.”
- G. \_\_\_\_\_ “I feel like kissing you.”
- H. \_\_\_\_\_ “I feel manipulated.”
- I. \_\_\_\_\_ “I feel good about how I played at the game.”
- J. \_\_\_\_\_ “I feel fat.”

## My responses for this exercise:

- A. If you marked “T,” I agree. “He doesn’t care about me,” expresses, in my view, what the speaker *thinks* the other person is feeling rather than how the speaker *is* feeling. Examples of expressing a feeling might be “I’m lonely” or “I’m feeling sad and want your company.”
- B. If you marked “F,” I agree a feeling was expressed.
- C. I agree if you marked “F.”
- D. If you marked “T,” I agree. I consider “forgotten” a judgment-mixed-with-feeling, expressing what the speaker thinks the other person is doing *to* him or her. An expression of a feeling might be “I feel sad.”
- E. If you marked “T,” I agree. I believe “ridiculous” expresses what the speaker is thinking about the other person, rather than how the speaker is feeling. An expression of a feeling might be “I’m annoyed.”
- F. If you marked “F,” I agree that a feeling is being expressed.
- G. If you marked “T,” I agree. I believe “like kissing you” expresses what the speaker imagines doing, rather than how

the speaker is feeling. An expression of a feeling might be “I’m feeling attracted to you.”

- H. If you marked “T,” I agree. “Manipulated” expresses what the speaker thinks the other person has done and a judgment of the other person’s intention. An expression of a feeling might be “I feel suspicious.”
- I. If you marked “T,” I agree. “Good” is often used to talk about feelings; in fact it simply expresses approval—that you’re happy with how you’re feeling. A feeling in this case might be “satisfied, content, excited.”
- J. If you marked “T,” I agree. “Fat” expresses how the speaker thinks about him or herself, rather than how the speaker is feeling. Examples of an expression of a feeling might be “I feel uncomfortable weighing what I do” or “Thinking about my weight, I feel anxious.”