

INTRODUCTION

It's Just Human Nature— or Is It?

By the time I was six, I realized something was curiously wrong about the way people talked to each other. When called ugly names, kids would taunt back, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me." I didn't believe them. I could tell that they were really upset. I also I remember my friend Patty saying, "I would never let that stupid Sarah know she made me feel bad!" I squinted at her, as if to say, "How will you get over it if you don't talk to her about it?"

I watched adults act the same way. When I heard my mother's friend Clara say, "I'm not going to let him hurt me," I could tell that she was already hurt. Behind her tough words, she struggled not to cry. What puzzled me was why people so often tried to act like they didn't care when someone hurt their feelings. Why would people hide their feelings instead of showing them?

While people often hid their feelings, I was also jarred by how accepting they were of violence. It sometimes came in mixed messages. Parents would chastise boys when breaking up a neighborhood fight, only to make sidebar comments such as "Boys will be boys," "They were just feeling their oats," or "Johnny got a few good licks in, didn't he!?"

I wasn't a passive child myself, although I had my own host of insecurities. I was inclined to jump into the fray, and could argue with the best of them. In fact, my mother used to joke that I was behind the door when God passed out the sensor between the brain and the mouth. Today, I might well have been labeled hyperactive. But there

was always a quiet place inside of me where I was pensive, wondering, thinking.

The idea that violence is just a part of human nature seemed to float through the airways of my childhood. I remember responding with wide-eyed horror when I heard people actually say, "It's just human nature to be violent." Violence didn't seem normal to me; it seemed like an illness. The fact that people could say those words so casually made a lasting impression on me.

I was always appalled by the amount of needless conflict and pain in people's lives. From childhood on, I carried the thought, "It doesn't have to be this way." Despite all evidence to the contrary, I felt certain of this.

When I was in college, a friend gave me a puzzle test as part of a psychology experiment. The puzzle had no exterior frame, merely pieces with soft, rounded sides like those of a child's puzzle. How the pieces might fit together wasn't obvious. I played with them, moved them around, and gradually arranged them next to each other in a still-unidentifiable form. The last piece was long, narrow, and curved, not as round as the others. I found a spot where the curves fit, placed it, and suddenly realized that I was looking at an elephant, now lying upside down in front of me. "Ah," I said, "I get it! It's an elephant!"

"You can't do that," my friend retorted.

"What do you mean?"

"You can't put it together without first figuring out what it is. It can't be done. They told us in class. No one would be able to put it together without first figuring out that it's an elephant."

"But I just did."

Likewise, without being fully conscious of what I was doing, I have put together a new way for people to talk to each other. Putting the elephant together took about five minutes. Putting together the approach to communication outlined in this book has taken me most of my life. My thirty-two-year-old daughter, Ami, calls this book her sister.

After studying psychology in college, I worked as a juvenile court counselor, play therapist, and parent trainer. I came to understand that people were often reluctant to tell the truth about how they felt because they were afraid such honesty might give someone power over them, or conversely, might be hurtful to the other person. I saw

therapists nod in agreement when people said they wouldn't feel "safe" opening up to someone with whom they were in conflict.

No one ever asked, "Why are you safer if you don't speak than if you do?" Or, "How does saying what you feel and think give someone else more power over you rather than less?" I still didn't quite understand why people felt safer being closed. What I observed, in frustration, was that all this hiding and maneuvering caused much of the misunderstanding, conflict, and ongoing power struggles in people's lives.

In my late twenties, I began to train other professionals, many of whom were teachers and therapists. Participants in my workshops would often say to me, using almost identical words, "This is so revolutionary and disarming!"

I didn't have the trunk on my own elephant yet, so I didn't know what they meant. I just mused about it. Finally, one day, I sat down in my living room and asked myself, "If I were going to disarm, what would I do? . . . Well, I guess in the most literal sense, it would be like taking a rifle off my shoulder and laying it down." Dis-arm. I went through the physical motions.

Over and over, I took an imaginary rifle off my shoulder and laid it on the carpet, asking myself each time, "What am I teaching about communication that is disarming?" Finally, the light bulb clicked on: "Oh! To put down the rifle means I don't have to defend myself anymore."

I suddenly had a vivid picture of how people use defensiveness as their way of protecting themselves when they talk to each other. Of course. Being defensive would require putting up a shield of armor. What I was teaching was a method of communication in which people would not have to resort to defensiveness to protect themselves.

Then the larger light bulb went on. Wow. We have been using the rules of war as the basis for human conversation. War creates and accelerates conflict, so using those rules in conversation would get the same results. We might not notice it when we are on the "same side" with someone, have just fallen in love, are proud of our child's accomplishments, or gossiping with a co-worker. But as soon as conflict arises, that's when people can shift instantly to defensive reactions. Our use of language prescribes being defensive as our primary means

of self-protection and thus leads us directly into power struggle. That's what I saw in that moment.

The trunk was finally on my elephant. The revelations I had that day explained both quandaries I had puzzled over since childhood—why people shut down instead of opening up when they feel hurt or threatened, and why power struggles and even violence seem normal. Like the air we breathe, the paradigm for war has enveloped how we talk to each other for so long that it's hard to see outside it and realize there is an alternative.

Excited by this new awareness, I began to consciously develop systematic descriptions of the traditional War Model for communication and of my own alternative model, Powerful Non-Defensive Communication (PNDC). While my descriptions are based on my own Euro-American experience, people from many racial and cultural backgrounds confirm that this traditional model, with some variations, is used in their families and communities as well.

Although this alternative way of communicating is new for most of us, to varying degrees, I don't see myself as having actually "created" it. Rather, I think I have been given the gift of articulating how we have misused our basic communication tools within a war-like system and how instead we can use them more constructively, according to their natural functions.

In this book, you have an opportunity to compare these two systems for yourself. In the first quarter of the book, I describe the War Model. You will learn exactly how we have translated the rules of war into conversation; how power struggle has the characteristics of an addiction; how the three passive and the three aggressive defensive modes equate to common personality types; and how we misuse each of our three basic forms of communication—questions, statements and predictions.

The remainder of the book walks you through the steps in learning the Powerful Non-Defensive Communication model. You will find two chapters are devoted to each of the three forms of communication. For example, the first chapter on questions explains how to ask questions in a fully non-defensive way. The second contains more than a dozen types of non-defensive questions and demonstrates how to use them in different situations at home, at work, and in the community.

Next, you will find a chapter on developing the non-defensive attitude crucial to these skills. This is followed by a chapter on how to practice them. I use in-depth examples, some of which I carry throughout the book, so readers can gain a deeper understanding of how to use the skills. You can use the numerous summary charts and the Index of Examples as a resource for dealing with current issues in your life.

We no longer have to be bound by the old rules for communication. We can choose new rules that empower us to be more open, spontaneous, vulnerable, and honest. They can help us protect ourselves while being more compassionate. They can guide us toward immediate solutions to conflicts that previously would have seemed irresolvable. The stories in this book demonstrate the power of listening and speaking non-defensively in ways that have gone beyond even my own expectations.

When I teach this process to third graders, they learn it rather quickly! For adults, the hard part is unlearning the old ways. Just like learning any new skill, it takes awareness, patience, and gradual development. On a personal level, I think of PNDC as a meditation practice in the sense that I know I will need to continue working on my own non-defensive skills for the rest of my life. At the same time, becoming increasingly non-defensive has already transformed me. Others who have learned this method consistently describe it as "freeing," "disarming," "contagious," and "revolutionary."

Human beings can interact in a limited number of ways. We can use our senses—sight, sound, taste, touch and smell. We can talk, listen and even interact on a telepathic level. In each case, we exchange and create certain types of energy. The energy created by the traditional dynamics of verbal communication causes people to suffer pain and violence. I still feel certain it doesn't have to be this way. I'm increasingly convinced that our communication methods determine our individual and global reality.

One hundred years ago we were traveling in horse-drawn buggies; today we travel in space and possess nuclear technology. This quantum leap demonstrates our capacity for phenomenal change. But unless we rid ourselves of defensiveness and power struggle, which lead to conflict and alienation, it is unlikely that we will have the wisdom to contain the destructive potential of our technology. Beyond the

issue of finding intimacy and meaning in our own lives, I believe learning to communicate non-defensively is our next evolutionary step, an essential key to our survival.

Despite the level of strife on earth, I am inspired by the human capacity for transformation and compassion. I believe we can learn to speak in new ways that honor each person's full humanity. This book provides the fundamentals for those new ways. We can take the war out of our words.