

One in a series of articles by

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## Connecting With Others: EFFECTING CHANGE THROUGH OUR WORDS

What would you like to be experiencing in your life that you're not currently experiencing? Wherever I ask this question of others, I receive the following responses:

"I want to experience greater honesty in my relationships."

"I want to be able to live with all that's terrible in the world without losing myself in it."

"I want to be able to deal with my anger."

"I want to be able to deal with other people's anger."

"I want to have greater access to my feelings."

"I want to experience a more compassionate relationship with myself."

"I want to be more compassionate with those I love."

"I want to be able to heal the relationships in my family (community or organization)."

"I want to be able to identify to my needs."

"I want to be able to communicate effectively with my kids."

"I want to let go of my judgments."

"I don't want to be so afraid of conflict."

"I want to stop taking things personally."

"I want to heal old wounds."

One of the most effective ways I know of to help people bring about the changes and transformation they'd like is through words and language. We humans live in language. Without being truly consciously aware of it, our language shapes our experience moment by moment.

To illustrate the nature of our relationship with language, just try for just a moment to imagine a day without language. I don't mean a day of not speaking but rather a day where you do not know or understand language - more like the way you were before you learned to speak. While you're at it, try also to experience thought without language.

To describe a situation or arrive at a conclusion, which are both aspects of thought, requires language. Without language, I experience pure awareness - a more direct experience untouched by the shaping of words. Without words or thoughts, a sunset simply is. With language, the sunset becomes 'beautiful' and takes on a level of abstraction. I can describe it to others as a bright golden ball draped in lovely hues of pink and orange. Others don't even need to be there to formulate their own image of my experience once they've heard my words.

Our words can carry our unique perspective to others thereby giving them the chance to experience life through our eyes and vice versa. To this end, language helps us make sense of our world, ascribe meaning to it and share it with others. It



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becomes a powerful weaver of connection in all our exchanges through which we share our sameness and our differences. And while we can connect with each other without language, the use of language gives our connections new dimensions, added breadth, depth and beauty.

The down side however is that language can also remove us from the 'aliveness' of our unique and collective experiences and wreak havoc in our relationships. In just a few moments, our words can create painful misunderstandings that can take years and decades to heal. The various responses elicited from my initial question are an illustration of the trouble our words can get us into.

Imagine someone saying, "My ex-spouse is totally irresponsible." The words are used to describe another person in a static and dehumanizing way leaving little chance for anything but increased alienation. If we suspend our judging habit however, there is only the bodily experience of frustration when a need goes unmet. Using our awareness to get in touch only with the feelings and needs, we can learn to use language to describe our lived experience instead of the diagnostic thoughts we have. We

can say instead, "When my ex-spouse doesn't provide child support payments as agreed, I feel scared and frustrated because I need consistency in order to be able to provide for our children." Instead of providing an analysis of the ex-spouse, language is used here to convey the person's 'aliveness'. We can now devote attention to exploring ways to meet our needs and also explore the needs of the ex-spouse, trusting fully that through attention to needs, we will be able to resolve the situation.

Let's say you're feeling very angry (a state that often prevents carefully thought out responses), instead of becoming possessed by the anger, you can say (or even yell), "I'm really angry right now. In fact I'm so angry that I can't think clearly and so I'd like to take a time-out so I can collect myself before I say something I might regret. Would you be willing to give me an hour to do this?"

My experience is that people on the receiving end of these words will be more than willing to accommodate such a request and will in fact become much more open to hearing what you have to say after the hour is up. In addition, by merely saying the words, the speaker's attention is redirected to an exploration of their needs and how best to meet them without creating pain for themselves or others. When we change our language, we change our thinking and invariably change the outcome. Our thinking is suddenly opened up for exploration as soon as the words that express our 'aliveness' are uttered.

If we truly want to shift into a new way of being, we need to learn to see and experience the world differently. We need to learn how to interact with others in ways that

create space for different outcomes.

When we say we want a different world, what we often mean is that we want others to change so we can enjoy the comfort of staying as we are. 'Becoming the change' ourselves is a tremendous challenge because the more aware we become, the more vulnerable we become and the more we encounter things about ourselves that we don't like.

It is in this very state of raw and connected 'aliveness' however that we are most capable of effecting changes that will truly serve life.

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