

what I was doing, I said, “I feel so embarrassed hearing you say that—I guess I was wanting to share my excitement.” My son looked up at me in shock, and said, “Oh, no, I wasn’t saying what you did was stupid. I can’t get this lid open. It’s made really badly.” Relief rushed through me, as well as a curiosity about how many times in my life I have interpreted other people’s words as a reproof, and tried to learn from them, when in fact the lesson was merely that they weren’t talking to me.

At a class at Coffee Creek Penitentiary, a women’s prison south of Portland, Oregon, Leonie told how she brought empathy to a long-standing feud between her mother and her aunt. “Thanksgiving is coming up,” she said, “and my aunt and my mother haven’t eaten together in 10 years. So my Mom was visiting, and we were talking about my aunt, and I said to her, ‘Mom, I bet that you really needed a sense of acceptance and understanding when you put Grandma in the home,’ and she said yes, she did, and then when my aunt came to see me, I said, ‘Auntie, I bet you would have liked some support and a sense that your sister really understood what was going on for you when your oldest daughter went to prison,’ and she said yes, she would have liked that, and the next thing I

knew they were planning Thanksgiving dinner together.”

Leonie’s success, after only 6 weeks of Nonviolent Communication classes, reveals how powerful it is to connect with other people’s needs. Despite Leonie making it look simple, empathy is often easiest with people we don’t know, or if the situation doesn’t concern us. Often, the better acquainted we are, the more likely there is to be implicit experience within the relationship that can bump us into a limbic reaction, and disconnect us from our prefrontal cortex, disrupting our mindsight. So what do we do to make those intimate relationships easier? Just as with any mindfulness approach, the more we embrace a daily practice, the more we strengthen the new neural pathways that permit us to first calm ourselves, and then use our mirror neurons and resonance circuits, in their fullest expression of mindsight, to connect with and offer the experience of being seen to others. As we bring the focus of our conscious awareness to how we use language with one another, we become aware of the power of resonance to calm and connect on a minute-by-minute basis as we move through the world.

Sarah Peyton is deeply interested in the synthesis of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) and how language reinvents the brain, particularly in the practice of Nonviolent Communication. She sees the capacity of focused language use to provide tools for the integration that IPNB describes, and enjoys the way in which this process strengthens and broadens the compassionate inner observer. She has been teaching NVC and IPNB classes and doing integrative process work in Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, and Canada for the last three years. She teaches regular session classes in the Portland, Oregon, area, is available for phone sessions, and will travel to provide day-long or longer offerings to small groups. You can contact Sarah at peytwood@isomedia.com.

We only feel dehumanized when we get trapped in the derogatory images of other people or thoughts of wrongness about ourselves. As author and mythologist Joseph Campbell suggested, “What will they think of me?” must be put aside for bliss.” We begin to feel this bliss when messages previously experienced as critical or blaming begin to be seen for the gifts they are: opportunities to give to people who are in pain.

Marshall B. Rosenberg
Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life

