

Contemplations on Communication and Conflict

A compendium of newsletter articles from the Communication and Conflict website –
a free downloadable e-book for visitors to the site.

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Communication and Conflict
Promoting Mindful Communication, Growth Through Conflict

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1. Conflict Resolution in the Bird World

(or how to find a win/win solution with someone who seems to be a bully.)

I usually spend some of the Christmas period at my parental home in Surrey, South East England. Outside the kitchen window there is a bird feeder suspended from an apple tree. One year I was watching a Greenfinch perched on the ledge at the bottom of the feeder happily pecking away at the peanuts and seeds contained in it.

As time passed there were a range of other birds such as Blue Tits, Sparrows and other Finches that hovered close by hoping for a look-in but he refused to budge. At one time, 2 Chaffinches sat atop the feeder waiting for him to move but after one failed attempt to hustle him away, they left.

I watched, amazed at how assertive he was, and even started to have thoughts that he was a bit of a greedy bully.

But then a little Coal Tit flew in to the other side of the feeder and instead of trying to muscle the Greenfinch out of the way, he grabbed on to the wire that held in the seeds and nuts and began to happily feed away on them.

The Greenfinch was entirely unperturbed by this and within another minute or so he flew on his happy way, filled to contentment.

This struck me as quite a lesson in what we sometimes describe as 'getting our needs met'. In the human world, someone acting like the Greenfinch might be [demonised](#) as a bit of a bully or of being greedy and selfish or of wanting more than his fair share.

But the little Coal Tit taught me that by finding another way of approaching the situation, both he and the Greenfinch were both able to meet their needs without upsetting one another.

He found a win/win solution to the situation while all the other birds that approached the Greenfinch were trying for a win/lose outcome - and they kept losing. They only tried one approach and it was one that had to mean there was a winner and a loser.

The Coal tit didn't enter into a competition about it. He just found another angle of approach that didn't even need to involve the Greenfinch, and yet both ended up having their needs met. Better still, the Greenfinch didn't have to fight off any pesky interruptions to his mealtime.

I was left wondering who, in fact, was doing the bullying. The happy Greenfinch was just

eating until he was full enough to meet his needs - albeit assertively. The other birds were, on afterthought, the ones who tried to use the power play and the [conflict as competition](#) approach.

Perhaps they were the bullies after all.

Can you remember a time when someone you know seemed to be hogging the goodies? Did other people try to 'win' the goodies away from them by the use of force, or by shaming them for being greedy or chastising them for being a bully or some other competitive approach where the person with the goodies was expected to give them up rather than share them? And as a result they didn't, and a struggle ensued, in whatever way that showed itself.

Was there anyone who had the insight to find a different angle of approach to the situation, just like the Coal Tit did?

2. Tolerance Can Be Overrated

(...or why conflict avoidance, under the guise of tolerance, can be a dangerous thing.)

I was once asked to support a man who had been sent to prison for carrying out a violent attack on his neighbour. He was referred to me to see if I could help him with what was considered to be some remaining anger towards his neighbour, and the officer who referred him did not want another violent attack to occur.

When I met with him, he used to tell me about the various things his neighbour and her children had done to him - insults, throwing small stones over the fence at him, rudeness from the other side of the fence while he was in his garden etc.

Often his main response to any of these activities was to do back to them what he saw them as doing to him. So if they abused him, he abused them back. If they threw stones over his fence, he would throw some back etc. And so it went on.

However, he considered himself very tolerant for putting up with this over a number of years and felt that it was justified, as a reaction to putting up with it, for him to carry out the violent act towards his neighbour which eventually led to him going to prison.

Many of his friends and family felt the same and were very sympathetic towards him.

'Wouldn't you do the same?' he would challenge me when I explored his reactions to the events of his dispute with his neighbour. He frequently sought my agreement that his actions were 'understandable after all he'd put up with'. I couldn't give him what he wanted as I don't feel my agreement or even my view is relevant to what he did. I'm not him and so how I would have reacted is of no real consequence.

He felt very strongly that the time he had waited before finally 'cracking' meant it was justified to do what he did. Instead of seeing that the very reason he 'cracked' and reacted as strongly as he did was because *his* response was to suppress his anger and his other feelings for all those years. He avoided the conflict and did not seek to resolve it. Instead he 'tolerated' it, until he could no more. Then his anger burst open and he carried out a violent attack on his neighbour.

We sometimes read in the papers of apparently quiet, polite people who kill their neighbour over a hedge dispute, or some similar situation. Often these people will have 'tolerated' the situation for years until they finally burst in an act of extreme violence.

Tolerance, when it is basically a suppression of anger can be extremely damaging. Our health can be affected, our relationships, our comfort in our homes or workplace can be

reduced when we suppress our anger. And if we suppress it for a long period and suddenly it bursts out because we can't keep the lid on any longer..... the outcome can be devastating - to us, as well as to the victims of our outburst.

In terms of the way in which we approach conflict it is the [conflict as a problem](#) approach to conflict.

Where are you suppressing some anger? Is it festering within you? Is there a risk that one day you will 'explode' from trying to keep it in? Would the damage you might do be much less if you expressed it now in some way?

Do you have lots of people agreeing with you about how terrible your situation is? That agreement can help you to feel justified in doing something explosive if it goes that far. Be careful of that agreement. Those people may sympathise, and that can sometimes feel comforting....but it rarely actually resolves anything. It usually just entrenches us in our 'victimhood'.

Are you one of the people who has sympathised? Most of us have at some point in our lives. We might have been trying to be supportive, but ultimately [it doesn't help a lot](#).

This is not to say that people have not suffered great distress and discomfort and pain as a result of others' actions. I am not talking about what has happened to them, whatever it may be. I am talking about [how they respond to it](#). Is it a constructive response or a destructive one?

The man above did suffer great discomfort and pain and I would not want to belittle or ignore that in any way. But it was his, possibly unconscious, decision to suppress his anger and 'tolerate' the events rather than deal with them sooner.

Dealing with it can mean many possible things including trying to communicate with the person we are having difficulties with, or if that is not considered to be possible, then finding someone who will not simply agree with us that our situation is terrible and possibly 'hopeless', but who will allow us to review how we have responded in order to find better ways. A mediator is trained to do this.

Alternatively, counsellors, books, other information sources such as the internet etc. all enable us to stand back and review our situation. This helps us to stop **reacting** (for example by just 'doing back to them' what we see them as 'doing to us') and to start **choosing** our actions. We understand that we ultimately [have the ability to choose our response](#) - our response-ability.

Tolerating a distressing situation is as much an action as any other. However, if by 'toleration' we mean suppression of our anger, it is a destructive response to our conflict. When we 'explode' it is as if we have moved from a [conflict as problem](#) approach to a [conflict as competition](#) approach. The explosion is intended to finally put a stop to it all and 'win' the battle.

Neither approach is ever effective at resolving conflict.

Earlier recognition that we are suppressing our anger or frustration or distress etc. allows us to choose to find ways of responding constructively. These responses may not resolve the dispute, but ultimately it resolves our own difficulties with the situation.

And then there is no longer a dispute to resolve.

It doesn't take two people to end a war, only one, and you're the one. What a perfect set up. [Byron Katie](#) from 'Your Inner Awakening' - *The Work, Live, A man deals with his son's disrespect for him.*

3. My body language, my tone of voice, the colours I'm wearing.... They don't mean a thing.

(...or why, when we treat 'non-verbal communication' such as 'body language' as if it is a science, it leads to disconnection between us.)

I was in a conversation the other day and noticed - some people call it my 'body language' - how I was standing.

I had my arms folded and my legs were also crossed as I stood leaning against the photocopier at work. I was talking to one of the mediators and I was fascinated by a discussion we were having about a course she is doing in Mediation and Conflict Resolution.

But hang on - my arms were folded and my legs were crossed. Doesn't that mean I was being defensive or insular or negative in my response to what was being said? Surely that's what all the body language bibles and gurus say.

So how could it be possible that I was fascinated by this positive, interesting discussion, with this positive, interesting person?

But I was.

Fortunately, Caroline, the mediator I was talking to, is someone who clearly does not assume she knows how I feel and what I am thinking from my 'body language' as she was happy to continue the discussion.

But if she was someone who believed the books and trainings that discuss 'non-verbal communication' she could easily have 'read my body language' and decided that I was bored, or defensive, or negative and didn't want to continue our discussion and so might have brought it to a close by making some excuse and ending it.

And what a pity that would have been.

An interesting connection and sharing of communication would have been terminated and lost, perhaps never to have been recreated, because of one person's assumption based on perceived 'body language' saying that I wasn't interested.



But how often are people swayed by these 'non-verbal' messages. There

is a sizeable industry of 'trainers' and 'experts' who claim that body posture, tone of voice, even the colour of the jumper someone is wearing 'tells you something about the person'.

And as a result, many people who believe what they are told about such things, cease to actually communicate and engage with others because they have 'read their body language' and it was 'aggressive' or 'bored' or 'defensive' and so they either don't start to connect with them or they cut the connection.

Aggressive?

I was once told by another mediator how he had rushed his daughter into hospital when she had suddenly been taken seriously ill. He was beside himself with worry, but when he asked the receptionist for news of how she was and other information he was told to 'stop being aggressive' and that he would be asked to leave if he didn't stop.

He was being anything but aggressive, he was worried and nervous and frightened. But he was 'interpreted' as being aggressive.

How difficult that must have been - to not even be able to express your fear and anxiety about a loved one because someone misinterprets your tone of voice and body language.

These are common examples of [speaking for others](#) which lead to a breakdown in communication because we feel we don't need to engage with another person and ask them what their thoughts and feelings are because we presume we know already. And sometimes because we've even been *trained* to think we know.

It is a common feature of neighbour disputes and other disputes that people ascribe emotions, thoughts and characteristics to others without having had a conversation with them.

They are jealous of our home and can't stand to see us happy in it, that's why they keep playing loud music, trying to force us out.

Charles in Accounts is definitely interested in the new Manager position so he's sucking up to the boss, pretending he likes football.

I don't believe that someone who doesn't wear a tie to work can be relied upon to do a good job.

OF COURSE, it is possible that in some circumstances, some of these beliefs actually prove to be true.

But almost always, they don't.

They arise out of speculation, projection and a need to make sense of something, but without taking the risk of actually engaging with the person about whom the assumption is made.

Science?

And this is reinforced by the portrayal of communication as a 'science', in which we believe we can generalise about people's feelings and thoughts when they stand in a certain way or speak with a certain tone, or wear a certain coloured jumper etc.

How vast is the wasted opportunity for [learning, connection and insight](#) between people that occurs because of these 'facts' that are not facts about 'non-verbal communication', that many have started to believe and incorporate into their every day interactions with others?

How many of our [Helping Professionals](#) are misinterpreting and alienating their 'difficult' clients each day through what they have been trained to believe about them from their body language, tone of voice and attire?

*"But you've missed the point" **some of the body language teachers will say.**"the reason to learn about body language is to create rapport with the people you work with. So if your client is standing leaning against the door, you move to stand and lean against the wall in the same position. (Adjust your tone of voice etc.) Then you will be in tune with each other.".... (or something similar).*

Unfortunately, it does not necessarily follow that this achieves what it claims. When two people are standing in the same posture, it doesn't follow that there will be a connection or rapport between them.

It is also not the case that if two people are standing in notably different postures that they will not have rapport or connection with each other.

It is a seductive idea to think that we can 'know what people are thinking and feeling' without having to actually speak to them and ask them. Sometimes connecting with people by speaking to them can be very threatening and intimidating. It may be someone we have a strong dislike of, or even that we have a strong attraction to.

In the latter example we can fantasise, based on our 'interpretation of their body language' that they feel the same, but it will only count for anything if we actually speak

with them.

And the same would be true for those we dislike, though the fantasies will be of a different kind. And we may say that it matters less to us that we have not spoken with them.

Nevertheless, our fantasies about what they think and feel will still remain unverifiable fantasies. In many such circumstances our interpretations will cause us far more distress than the reality.

'Movie Mindset'

My further concern about the deliberate and conscious use of 'body language interpretation' is that, sadly, rather than striving to **be present** with someone we are communicating with, open to hearing their difficulties and concerns, or even their joys and aspirations, in order to offer them a space in which to talk, a sanctuary in which to be listened to, we can become more concerned with standing in the right place, in the right way, adjusting our tone of voice etc.

How can we be genuinely present and listening when we are preoccupied with these things?

Rebecca Z. Shafir describes true listening as being in a 'movie mindset' in her book [The Zen of Listening: Mindful Communication in the Age of Distraction](#):

*The movie mindset is opposite to the act-like-you-are-listening approach, in which you mimic a listening posture, nod often, say "Mm-hmm," and maintain eye contact. How can you possibly make all these adjustments and still concentrate on the speaker? It is not that these actions are contrary to what you do when you really listen. But to focus on this list of body language to-dos risks appearing artificial to the speaker. Just like at the movies, when you forget yourself and get into the shoes of the speaker, your body **naturally** relaxes into listening posture. When you truly listen, you don't need to think about your posture or what you should be doing with your hands. Your gestures and expressions effortlessly reflect your interest. All you have to do is enjoy the adventure!*

Not playing the game?

Ultimately, the main use of body language interpretation, seems to be to identify when people are not in tune with **us** - rather than that we are not engaging with them.

When we haven't been able to achieve rapport, the problem is *their* body language.

We've done it correctly, they haven't.

Body language interpretation becomes a game that may be understood by all those 'in the know', but has little if any relevance to what we actually think or feel when we play it.

And so it is more commonly used to demonise those that have been 'difficult', that don't 'play the game'.

Having been trained in it, anyone who doesn't fit the rules is excluded from genuine attention. By which I mean attention that comes from a place of continued commitment to trying not to judge or preconceive, that is rooted in a disciplined commitment to self-awareness regarding our own prejudices.

This is denied those that we work with when we apply such generalisations and presume we know what they are feeling and thinking from their 'body language', or their 'tone of voice' or even, what they are wearing.

When we spend our energies trying to play this game we are taught is meant to be in place, we are not genuinely trying to engage with the other. And as a result, we both lose connection with each other.

How often do you hear a professional say. *"I had a really good interaction with a client today, their body language was so open and we got on really well"*?

More often, and in my experience to date, always, body language is used as an additional negative aspect of the description of a 'difficult' other, be they client, partner, colleague, etc.

"I couldn't work with Fred Smith today. He was surly and stubborn and his body language was always defensive. There was no getting through to him."

I wonder how Fred felt and what he was thinking? I wonder if he was asked?

I am not for one second suggesting that we are not affected by our interpretation of the way others appear to us. What I am saying is that we can never **know** if we are correct or not. And so **to seek to let go of our prejudgements** rather than formalise them into a set of generalisations and portray it as a 'science', is a more effective way of promoting communication and connection between us.

We stop speaking for others and allow them to speak for themselves.

We can only find out what someone thinks and feels by engaging with them and asking them what *they say* they are thinking or feeling. Everything else can only be our speculation.



And if we find out how one person was feeling when they stood a certain way, or had a particular tone of voice, that has no relevance whatsoever to how another person might be feeling when they seem to be standing or speaking in a similar way.

In acknowledging this we remain open to accepting the uniqueness of each individual's thoughts, feelings and other responses.

By ignoring this and even actively promoting these generalisations we treat each other as 'concepts' and labels and become disconnected from each other.

4. Trouble on the Tube

(or why standing up for someone and 'taking sides' can be one of the main causes of the escalation of conflict)

Consider this situation which I observed on a busy tube train in London recently:

A young woman sitting across and to the left of me was listening to her personal stereo. A man standing in front of her asked her to turn the music down – I'd not been able to hear it but he clearly could. I missed much of the initial conversation but it developed into a discussion between them with the man pointing out how inconsiderate she was to play her personal stereo so loudly.

Eventually a young man sitting next to me said that he didn't think she had done anything wrong and so the discussion became a 3-way debate across the tube carriage. Then another man, standing next to the original objector joined the debate, this time agreeing with him and so the debate became more complex, and the number of people involved increased.

A simple request by the man disturbed by the girl's music for her to turn her music down may have been enough, but the man who objected was saying things to suggest it is 'wrong' to play her personal stereo on the tube and said 'What about other people who use the train, they have to hear it too?'

He [spoke for the rest of us](#) when he said this and yet was not mandated by any of us to do so – as clearly evidenced by the man next to me who spoke up in support of the woman. The objector also [challenged the person and not the behaviour](#) by calling her 'inconsiderate'.

It all ended when the objector and his supporter got off the tube a couple of stops along. However, in the brief period in which the incident occurred there was far more disturbance caused than the personal stereo had caused, mainly because of the ineffective way in which the original objector had communicated his concerns to the young woman.

This was then escalated by the [rescuing actions](#) of the others who chose to become involved, increasing the debate to a full argument and 'stand off', ultimately affecting not only those originally involved but also the rest of us in the carriage.

I think the situation provides a very good analogy for what happens in many disputes

when they are responded to destructively and rescuers also believe they need to become involved in a partial way, to 'take sides' (back to the [competitive approach](#) to conflict again).

The sequence of events, the actions of the main protagonists, the intervention of the rescuers and the ultimate impact on those who witness the situation are all very similar to what happens in families, in workplaces, in international disputes, in schools, between neighbours and in pretty much any escalating conflict situation you could identify.

Unfortunately, in many of them the destructive responses don't end after a few tube stops but continue to escalate to relationship breakdown, stress, and even violence and destruction.

The [Principles of Effective Communication](#) and [Underlying Philosophies of Mediation](#) can assist in finding better ways of responding to conflict situations.

The objector did not have to 'put up' with the situation, but to bring in his judgement of the lady as 'wrong' set up the start of the 'competition' - and as stated [elsewhere](#), the competitive approach to conflict is never an effective means of resolving it. To simply ask her to turn the music down is the start of a request for co-operation, a much more effective response. She may not have responded, but she is more likely when what she is doing is 'challenged' rather than to challenge what she 'is' in his view ('wrong?').

The involvement of the 'rescuers' was not an [impartial](#) involvement and so the competition approach was further developed as more and more people become involved to 'even the score'. In some situations there can develop such a strong perception that the 'competition' is being 'lost' that people resort to violence to even the score.

And of course we all lose when this approach is taken. Even those who have remained uninvolved.

This is such an ingrained approach to conflict, that few question whether there could even be any other way.

Once a conflict has started to escalate, it seems that our available choices in how to respond have been reduced and so we resort to reactive, competitive or avoidance behaviours.

Does this have to be the way?

The answer is simply NO. When what we are doing is not working, why would we continue to do it?

There are always alternative responses that can be created and the Principles of Effective Communication and Conflict Resolution can support us in creating these.

5. Would you rather be right or happy?

(or why responding to a personal conflict as if it is a competition can be a challenge but it won't bring us happiness)

*The perfect way is without difficulty
Save that it avoids picking and choosing.
Only when you stop liking and disliking
Will all be clearly understood.
A split hair's difference,
And Heaven and Earth are set apart!
If you want to get the plain truth,
Be not concerned with right and wrong.
The conflict between right and wrong
Is the sickness of the mind.*

**From Hsin-hsin Ming by Seng-ts'an quoted in
[The Way of Zen](#) by [Alan Watts](#).**

To this day I can still remember over 25 years ago first pulling down 'The Way of Zen' by Alan Watts in a W.H.Smith bookshop in Godalming, Surrey, UK where I went to Sixth Form College, before catching my bus home. One of the first things that struck me was in the opening lines of Chapter One 'The Philosophy of The Tao':

Zen Buddhism is not religion or philosophy; it is not a psychology or a type of science. It is an example of what is known in India and China as a 'way of liberation'.

That appealed to me immensely. At the age of 18 I couldn't understand what the point was of so much dogma in all of the fields he listed. All it led to was competition between them. And I still don't understand it though of course I recognise it in myself at times and in other situations that I am involved in through my work.

We're right!

No, We're right!

No, you're both wrong, we're right!

Why couldn't they see that in their own way, from a particular perspective they were all right? But unfortunately they were wrong in their assertion of being the only ones who were right.

In so many disputes we see clearly why both parties would consider themselves 'right', and we can understand their perspective when we are not caught up in it.

But for each to understand and accept that the other is also right - in terms of how they see it - is a major obstacle when their focus and determination is on winning.

And we see, from disputes about the position of a garden fence, to disputes about an international boundary the destructiveness of pursuing that goal.

The conflict between right and wrong is the sickness of the mind

I guess this is one of the reasons I love Byron Katie's approach to any difficulty through what she calls '[The Work](#)'. She asks that we question the impact of having a thought or belief that we are sure is 'right'. She doesn't tell us it is 'wrong' and that we should believe otherwise. She just asks us to look at the consequences for us of holding on to that belief, and then to consider what our life would be like if we didn't.

These are the 4 questions that make up The Work:

- 1. Is it true?**
- 2. Can you absolutely know that it's true?**
- 3. How do you react, what happens, when you believe that thought?**
- 4. Who would you be without the thought?**

Then turn it around (the concept you are questioning), and don't forget to find three genuine examples of each turnaround.

The Work helps us to make a choice about whether we would rather be right than be happy, but it does it through helping us to come to an understanding of the consequences for ourselves of believing we are right.

Our dispute with another does not have to come into it. We don't have to make the other wrong, and insist that they 'change', in order for us to be happy.

As Katie often says: 'Cut out the middle man, be happy'.

6. Denial is not a river in Egypt!*

(or why responding to a conflict by trying to avoid it or pretending it doesn't exist doesn't work)

So, to continue the theme of [last month's Newsletter](#) let's continue to look at the different ways we approach or respond to conflict.

There would seem to be just 3 different ways in which we respond to conflict. They are:

- Conflict as a [Competition](#) to be 'won'
- Conflict as a [Problem](#) to be avoided
- Conflict as an [opportunity for learning](#), connection and insight

*This month we will look at **Conflict as a problem**:*

When we see conflict as a problem, we tend to turn away from it and pretend it doesn't exist, or we hope that it will go away if we ignore it. This is sometimes described as 'being in denial'.

Sometimes of course the immediate problem does go away and so it might seem to work. But what we haven't learned from the conflict is how to respond when the same or a similar thing happens again. The next time it might not go away so easily.

So the problem might be:

- A particular type of behaviour that we come across in people we work with, either as clients or as colleagues.
- A task we have to do which we find difficult.
- A family conflict, or,
- A difficulty in a formal meeting that we attend

You can probably think of others.

If we don't learn how to respond to the situation in a way that is constructive and which resolves it, the chances are high that we will experience the same distress, upset, insecurity etc again in the future.

Some relationships (including personal, professional and organisational) repeat the same 'dramas' over and over again throughout their lifetime because a way of resolving the situation has not been found, and I believe this is always because it has been responded to either as a problem to be avoided or as a competition to be 'won'.

Of course we do have the [right to pass](#) on dealing with a conflict. Sometimes we may genuinely feel we don't want to deal with it 'right now'. We may have other, more pressing difficulties to deal with at the time.

And that's fine as long as we are prepared to accept the consequences - that it is likely to return as a problem, even if in some slightly different form. And that it will continue to do so until we find some form of resolution of the difficulty. A more effective way of responding.

I spoke in [Newsletter 2](#) about one of the possible consequences of continually avoiding a problem even though we know it is still there. We can pretend and pretend it's not there until we burst. Until the boiling pot with the lid on it can no longer be ignored.

We put the lid on in the hope that by not seeing what is simmering underneath we won't have to deal with it. But the lid will always start to rattle and the contents will continue to bubble and burst out.

If we don't accept the consequences and complain that "This keeps happening to me!", then we are back to denial again.

If we keep doing what we've always done, we'll keep getting what we always got

In a way we are 'happening' it to ourselves through not seeking a different way of responding, once we recognise that the difficulty continues to occur.

The original conflict or difficulty will be unavoidable. Conflict is always present. What matters is how we respond to it. And if the same conflict arises and we continue to react in the same way..... then the same consequence is likely to occur.

So why do we try to avoid conflict?

Sometimes we do this because we have had a bad experience in dealing with conflicts in the past and when we see something similar happening again, we try to avoid it, as if that is possible. What this means is that we are confusing the conflict, which is inevitable, with the responses made to it, which are not.

Our responses can be very destructive in the form of verbal abuse, aggression, war, the 'silent treatment', disconnection, etc.

At the time, we didn't know any other way of responding, nor did those others who responded in the same way. The focus of next month's newsletter is about how we can use such experiences to learn, connect with others and gain new insights into ourselves.

But the confusion, the belief that the conflict inevitably means those things will happen, is what leads us to try to avoid it, as if the conflict **is the same thing** as our responses to it.

It isn't. The conflict is something that will happen. We can't change that. Our reaction to it is also something that will happen. But we can change that when we recognise that it is not working.

To believe that conflict is the same as our responses renders us powerless. To see that they are separate empowers us to make a difference.

I usually say that it is a 'reaction' when we respond without consciousness of what we are doing. When we don't realise we have a choice.

I think of a 'response' as being one of many choices of action we can make to a difficult situation, once we have learned that we *have* choices. Some responses will resolve it, others will not, and may even escalate it. But when we have a choice we can choose the best one at the time.

Treating conflict as a problem to be avoided blinds us to the choices we have. Creating a different response changes our experience of the conflict to one of acceptance and a feeling that we have the personal power to resolve it.

****My thanks to Sandi Bachom for the inspiration for the title of this Newsletter, a phrase popularised by one of her books. Sandi's book is mainly focused towards understanding and dealing with Alcoholism and Co-dependency.***

7. Three Cheers For Conflict!

(or how, if we can accept conflict as inevitable, we can step back and see it as an opportunity for Learning, Connection and Insight)

Apparently the formatting of the last newsletter didn't work on a few people's computers so my apologies for that. What I've learned from it is that, in future, I will always give a link to the Communication and Conflict webpage on which the newsletter is displayed.

Thank you to those of you who pointed this out to me!

It was actually a useful example of how we can learn from a difficulty or problem and has relevance to the theme of this and the [last 2 Newsletters](#). We learn from difficulties or problems or conflicts on a regular basis. In fact we are very good at it, but instead of acknowledging our ability to learn we often overlook how adept we are at it.

For example, instead of learning from the formatting problem you pointed out to me I could have responded in the following ways:

Conflict as Competition response: (Me - responding to person who points it out to me) 'No, there must be some problem with your pc or browser. Have you looked at your settings?' (I'm right, you are wrong!)

Conflict as a problem to be avoided response: (Me-thinking) 'Oh no, what are they on about, there's no problem with the layout. It worked in the past. I'll leave it, it will probably be ok next time.'

But if I'd responded in either of those ways it would have been a bit silly of me and would certainly not enable learning, connection or insight in relation to the problem.

So what do I mean by Learning, Connection and Insight - the 3 Cheers for Conflict?

Well let's look at it again in the simple situation above, and then we can look at it in a broader sense in relation to the inevitable conflicts we will encounter in our day to day lives.

If I had responded to the problem as a competition, or avoided it:

- I would have **learned** nothing,
- I would quite possibly have lost **connection** with anyone who pointed out the

problem only to be told it was a problem with their pc, or lost **connection** with those who found the same problem repeated in the next Newsletter,

- I would have gained no **insight** into myself and my ineffective way of reacting to the problem.

However, treating the problem or 'conflict' as an opportunity I gained the following:

- **Learning** - as a result of acknowledging and accepting there was a problem, I then learned how to fix it, thereby reducing the likelihood of future problems, as well as set up an alternative option in case future formatting problems arise by giving the link to the Newsletter's webpage.
- **Connection** - I was able to acknowledge your kindness and helpfulness in pointing out the problem to me, making it more likely that you will do so again in the future and, hopefully, seeing that I value your input.
- **Insight** - I was able to gain an understanding of myself in relation to this kind of difficulty or problem. How did I respond? What did it feel like to me to realise I'd overlooked something? Was it due to a tendency in me to rush and not thoroughly check everything? Or is that being too harsh on myself, was there in fact little I could do to prevent that until the problem arose, as until that time I wasn't aware of the gap in my knowledge? Can I forgive myself for it and accept [it's ok to make mistakes](#) - one of the most important Principles in dealing with such situations - in myself, and in others?

This is a very simple example, but one that illustrates how we can use this approach in any conflict situation.

The most important thing in any conflict or other difficult situation is to ask ourselves:

- Am I responding to this as if it is a [competition](#)?
- Am I responding to this as if it is [a problem I want to avoid](#)?

If we decide we can say yes to one or both of the above (we can respond in both ways to the same difficulty in relation to different aspects of the difficulty), we can then, instead, consider the following:

- Can I **learn** something from this? For example, how to prevent it happening again in the future?

- Could I gain a '**connection**' with the other person over this? Could I, perhaps, understand why this was a problem for them, to empathise with their perspective on it. It doesn't mean we have to agree with it. We all have different views on things. But at least I can be open to understanding how they could see it that way.
- What **personal insights** can I gain from this? How am I responding to this? What is going on in me? Do I feel defensive? Do I feel offended? Do I feel foolish? Is my response aggressive? Is it to be a 'victim'? Is this situation similar to other situations I've found myself in before? How did I resolve it then? If I didn't, what could I do differently this time that might help me to resolve it?

The most important thing is to be able to acknowledge in the first instance that we are responding to the situation either as a competition, or as a problem to be avoided. Once we have done this we have managed to 'step back' from it.

If we are ready to accept that neither of these approaches ever actually resolves a conflict, they only suppress it and put it off to another day when it may come back more forcefully, **then** we can move on to consider whether we can, instead, treat the situation as an [opportunity for Learning, Connection and Insight](#).

Sometimes it is hard to accept that. We may feel so angry that our competition approach may be more present and it will feel hard to let go of the need to be 'right', or 'not wrong', depending on how the situation is. Or we may feel unable to deal with the problem at the time.

And that is absolutely fine.

The most important thing is to notice it and recognise that there is another way. Even if we are not practicing it at the time. We know that there is a choice. Choices empower us. When we think we have no choice and can only react in one way, that is when we feel powerless. We think we have no control over our responses. We fear what we might do as we think there is only one reaction possible.

When we lose that fear through recognising that we can approach our conflicts in

Quotation Corner:

"Through inquiry, we discover how attachment to a belief or story causes suffering. Before the story there is peace. Then a thought enters, we believe it, and the peace seems to disappear. We notice the feeling of stress in the moment, investigate the story behind it, and realize that it isn't true. The feeling lets us know that we're opposing what is by believing the thought. It tells us that we're at war with reality. When we notice that we're believing a lie and living as if it were true, we become present outside our story. Then the story falls away in the light of awareness, and only the awareness of what really is remains. Peace is who we are without a story, until the next stressful story appears. Eventually inquiry becomes alive in us as the natural, wordless response of awareness to the thoughts and stories that arise."

Byron Katie, from [Question Your Thinking, Change the World](#)

another way, it makes it much more likely that we will do so. Even if, at the time we may not want to, we know we can eventually. That can be a very liberating and reassuring realisation.

Is History repeating itself?.....

Think of any conflict you are involved in, or any difficulty that arises in your life from time to time. How are you responding to it? Are you determined to 'win'? Do you avoid the situation or person at all costs? If either of these, it is almost certain the problem keeps arising for you, in one form or another:

- A repeated 'issue' with your partner
- A continuous uneasiness with your neighbour
- A long term issue over a past relationship that keeps 'cropping up' because things keep reminding you
- A problem at work with a colleague - they 'keep bullying' you, or they 'never acknowledge how hard you work'
- A difficulty with a family member

You may have others.....

The only route to resolution of these difficulties is through approaching the situation as an opportunity for learning, connection and insight.

Note that I am not saying you will gain all of these. You won't have 'failed' if you don't get them all. What matters is that you **respond to the conflict** in this way. For your own sake. And, through that, it becomes for the sake of everyone. The outcomes will look after themselves, whether it is learning, or connection or insight or 2 of them or all 3!

Nothing will change, because nothing *can* change, when we respond to a conflict as if it is a competition or it is to be avoided. And we can believe there is no choice other than to respond in these ways.

But there is.

And when we genuinely acknowledge this - everything can change.