

## INTRODUCTION

Learning is what we do to negotiate this thing we call life. Some ways to learn are better than others. We are all in a learning cycles of some kind from moment to moment, just not necessarily learning in ways that will truly benefits us. All too often we learn how to avoid blame and punishment or we reinforce the learning that we took on as a child when we had much less awareness and fewer resources to draw upon than we do now. In such a cases we are not being drawn forward by what we would like to create in the world. The model offered here helps us reorient towards what will support us to thrive.

This model is based on a learning cycle that incorporates key skills and distinctions of NVC. Using it, we cycle through stages of preparing, doing, learning, and then preparing again. Within each stage there are a number of steps.

Learning takes place each time we negotiate a cycle. At each turn, we make changes as we learn. The movement through the cycle is a spiral, returning at each revolution to a similar—but not the same—point, with additional learning, information, and experience under our belt. The learning stage often segues effortlessly into the preparing stage, as we will see below in going through these stages in detail. Keep in mind as you read through the following that while I present it all in a linear manner, it often does not happen that way; this is a map, it is not the territory.

Though this is presented as a model to be used with a coach, you can use it on your own. When first learning these skills, however, it can be very helpful to have a supportive coach to work with you, someone already versed in the distinctions of NVC and skilled at empathizing. Most of my work with this model has been to help people make changes in the way they communicate with others they are in conflict with, and my examples below will reflect that bias. Nonetheless, this is a model that, with only slight modifications, can be used to shift any behavior that you find unsatisfactory.

Since it is sometimes difficult to envision how a strategy outlined in writing might play out in real life, at the end of this you will find a number of excerpts from a series of real coaching calls with a client. Reading through both the outline of the process below as well as the excerpted conversations may help you get a better sense of the value of the process and the role of a supportive coach.

## PREPARING STAGE

### Intention Setting Step

The critical first step to learning something is to decide you want to learn it. Thus essential to preparing is clarifying your intention, being as specific as possible about what you want to be able to do differently, and then enlisting the support of those around you. Once you are clear about what you would like to change, I encourage you to write down your intention and share it with the people closest to you, those whom you trust. You can even make specific agreements with them about how best to support and help you.

As an example of making an agreement to support you in your intention, a number of years ago I was seeking to learn how to step out of my pattern of asserting my rightness on issues at the expense of my personal connection with people. At that time I would become so caught up in my reactions to people not agreeing with me that I would tend to go into an automatic mode of insisting my view was correct. I would do so in ways that would lose track of the issue under discussion and instead act out of the unexamined belief that I needed to convince the other person of my view in order to be OK in the world. Understandably this created consequences in my life

that I did not enjoy.

I would get so caught up in my reactions that I would not realize I was once again playing out this pattern until much later. To help me develop awareness that I was in the midst of one of these reactions, I made an agreement with my then 15 year old daughter. She agreed, at my request, to point out when she believed I was in one of these reaction patterns by asking me the question, "Dad, is this what you want to create in your life?"

Not too long after making this agreement I became embroiled in an altercation at the dinner table with my then 17 year old son. I can't even remember what it was about. But I was definitely in reaction, going full bore. My daughter interrupted me, asking, "Dad, is this what you want to create in your life." Of course I remembered our agreement. Even so, I grumbled something unintelligible to her, and went right back to heated engagement with my son—making every effort to submit his views to my will.

A second time she interrupted and asked the agreed upon question. A second time I grumped at her and returned to attempting to bend my son to my will. With the third interruption and question from my daughter, I finally woke up enough to say to my son, "No, this is not what I want to create and I don't know how to do that right now. So I am going to leave right now. I will return when I can be with you the way I want to."

This agreement with my daughter and her trust and fortitude in following through on her part of the agreement was a turning point for me in my learning an important life lesson.

### **Self-Empathy Step**

In dealing with conflict with others, there are three steps I see to the preparation stage—self-empathy, empathy for the other(s), and the step of learning, planning and practice. These three steps I refer to as the Enemy Image Process, a term I've borrowed from Marshall Rosenberg. These three steps can be done all at once or over a series of sessions.

The first step is to meet your own need for empathy. Typically, this step consists of you saying whatever judgments, or "enemy images," you hold about yourself, the situation, or the other(s) involved, and then empathically connecting with the feelings and needs behind those judgments. Perhaps you are preparing for a difficult conversation with an extended family member. Since you have history with this person, you are likely to have expectations and analyses of them, and perhaps concerns about your own ability to interact in a way you would like. As you talk about the situation, the coach reflects back to you what they hear or guess are the observations, feelings, needs, and perhaps requests. They might say something like "when you say that, are you feeling frustrated because you have a need for understanding?" you then have the opportunity to check and see if these words connect with your feelings and needs. If they don't, you can adjust them to what is true for you, and if they do, you will likely automatically move on to expressing another judgment.

This step may take some time, particularly if the situation is long-standing. When you are complete, that is, when your need for empathy has been sufficiently met for that moment, you will feel it as a physical sensation, an internal shift in your physiology. Accurately identifying the needs not being met in the situation, and that you are therefore longing to have met, connects you with your own deepest yearnings, and you will feel this connection as a bodily sensation.

### **Empathy for the Other(s) Step**

When your need for empathy is sufficiently met, the second step is for you or the coach to ask you if you feel willing to imagine what needs the other person or people involved might have been trying to meet when they did what they did. Once you have received enough empathy you may even find yourself spontaneously wondering, why have the others involved acted the way they have? Once you are in contact with your own needs, a space opens up to begin to consider theirs. What needs have they been seeking to meet by their actions relative to this situation? As in the first step, you will probably have a story (or two) to tell about how they have been acting, and the coach again can help you tease out the basic distinctions of NVC, this time from the perspective of the other person. In other words, in our hypothetical example of your conversation with your family member, you might begin by telling the story of the last time you attempted to have a discussion with him, and he told you he was tired of listening to your complaints and slammed down the phone. I'll note here that in beginning to discuss the actions of the other person, you may well be triggered again yourself, and need to return to the previous step of self-empathy before continuing. If you are not triggered, you or your coach can begin to guess what your relative might have been feeling and needing at the time. Your coach might say, "I wonder if he felt some anxiety because he interpreted your intentions as you 'dumping on him' and needed some care and concern for his own situation." Based on your own knowledge of the person and their history, you can then begin to recalibrate the guesses coming from either you or your coach. Typically, there will come a point in this process when you will experience an "ah-ha!" Your guesses may not be "correct," but in that ah-ha you can imagine that the needs named are the ones operating in the other person, and you are connected then with your shared humanity. Again, you will likely experience a physiological shift as a result of doing this process. Generally this results in feeling more open-hearted; a space tends to be created in which the feeling of compassion is more likely to arise, compassion for yourself and for the other person or persons.

### **Planning/Practicing Step**

When you feel connected in this way with the needs the other person may be acting from, you are ready to begin thinking about what you want to do about the situation and practice through very specific role-plays that you can develop with your coach. So, if you decide that you are going to have a conversation with your family member, you would develop the preliminary script of what you would like to say and how you are going to say it. Your coach can help you be clear about what your request would be of the person in that conversation. You can practice this script until you can imagine engaging in that conversation in a way that is in alignment with your values and that you feel good about. You might still feel some trepidation regarding the conversation itself, which is another opportunity for self-empathy.

Of course, no matter how much you prepare or how carefully you work to cast what you're going to say and do, you can't control how the other person or persons are going to react. At most you have some control over what you say and do and what your intention is. Part of this third step is practicing how you are going to respond to whatever the other person does; one way of doing this is to imagine the response that would be most troublesome for you. In a role-play with your coach, she can offer that reaction to you so you can practice responding to it. Again, the goal in this practice is to learn to respond in a way that brings satisfaction and trust that your response is in alignment with your values. Various role-playing scenarios may help with this goal; you might play yourself, or you can role-play the other person to hear how your coach responds, or you could observe as two people role-play the situation of your most feared reaction without your active involvement (see chart at end). If you are not working with a coach, you can still role-play in your own head or on paper how you would respond to the reactions you anticipate from the other person.

Again, the process will probably not be linear. As you go through various role-play scenarios, you may well get stimulated again and need some empathy yourself and go back to steps 1 and 2, and then return to the role-play when you have connected with your needs.

## DOING STAGE

### **Self-Care and Reconnecting with Preparation Step**

The preparation stage is likely to take place some time prior to the actual conversation itself, however, close to the time of the conversation, there are additional things to do that help you remember your intentions and enter into the conversation in a focused manner. Though I won't treat these in any depth, I do want to mention the many strategies that can support you in being able to be present with another person in a situation where you're trying to behave differently: adequate sleep, nutrition, exercise, social support, centering practices such as meditation and prayer, and so on. You may want to consider which of these you want to focus on in order to be as present as you would like to be in entering the conversation.

I have found it helpful, close to the time of the conversation, to revisit self-empathy and empathically imagining the other(s) needs. Again, these can be done on your own or with another person. Focusing your attention here can help you deal with whatever nervousness, anxiety, or concern you may find arising in anticipation of approaching the situation in a new way. Get in touch with the needs behind your feelings, and if it makes sense to do so, again re-connect with the needs you guess the other person may act out of. Self-empathy and empathy for the other right before the encounter can help you be present in the conversation.

### **Remembering Intentions during the Conversation Step**

As you go into the conversation, you can try to remember as much as you can about your script, but I suggest instead that you focus on your intention. Even if you remember your script, you cannot script all of the conversation because you won't know what you will be called upon to respond to in the moment. Having your intention in mind, however, will allow you to find the responses and the conduct in the moment that will be satisfying. You may want to develop strategies to keep your intention for that particular interaction foremost in your mind. Strategies I've used in the past when I'm on a telephone call include writing my intention on a 3X5 card and holding it in my hands to remind me throughout the call. If the interaction is in person, I've also used a 3X5 card or written my intention on my hand, and I've sometimes announced my intention to the person and asked them to help me stay true to it. I'm sure there are other ways you can find to stay in alignment with your intention.

Basically, once you are in the conversation, it's like a toboggan ride—you shove off from the top of the mountain and just have to be in it with as much presence as you can muster. If you can remember and have the skill to do so, it can help to do self and silent-empathy on the fly during the conversation, or at least aim to stay connected to needs, your own and the other person's.

## LEARNING

### **"Celebration and Mourning" of Needs Met and Unmet Step**

After the conversation is over, you will probably have some thoughts and reactions about it—either it went as you wanted, or it did not. In order to continue toward your goal of changing, you now try to learn from the interaction. As we will see, this learning stage also flows nicely back into the preparation stage.

The learning stage has the same basic steps as the preparation stage. First, on your own or with the help of your coach, you connect with yourself, looking for the needs that were and were not met in the conversation. The language we use here is a little different, however; in thinking about something that has already happened, we are in effect celebrating or mourning what took place. That is, you are celebrating the needs that were met, and mourning the needs not met by your conduct and the conduct of the others involved.

When working with a coach, the process would look much the same as the preparation stage. Your coach could help you identify and articulate clearly the need or needs that are or are not met in the current moment as you remember what happened. It is not an investigation into the past -- the needs met or not met at the time of the conversation. I find it helpful to think of these as "fine-tuned" needs, that is, the basic, one-word need might be for respect, but in the particular context of the situation, you might refine it to a need for respect for your well-being. Thus, a fine-tuned need is articulated in a more fulsome way than simply the core word, with the purpose of helping you connect deeply with that need.

When some of your needs are met in reflecting on the situation, you are celebrating those needs being met, which leads to thinking about how you might have those needs met more often, through encouraging the conduct that you interpret as meeting your needs (conduct that might have been your own or other people's). The learning that is taking place here is how to meet needs that you have just experienced getting met.

On the other hand, often we are in touch with needs that are not met from an interaction, in which case we mourn that those needs were not met. The process is the same, naming and articulating with a certain richness the needs not met. Mourning leads us into longing to have those needs met.

I've witnessed and experienced over and over how this celebration and mourning process works, and how it is different from what we normally do. I used to find that if I had an interaction that was unsatisfactory, I would focus on what happened that I didn't like. This is a dead end for the mind—it begins to dwell on or even obsess over what happened, what should have happened, or what I wish I or someone else had said and done. From my work with others, I know I am not alone in experiencing this. When we are preoccupied in this way, there is nowhere to go, no learning takes place, and the mind circles in an endless loop that we have trouble getting out of. In mourning and celebration, however, the mind shifts out of focusing on what it can't solve. When you translate the obsessive thoughts into observation, feelings, needs, and requests, particularly focusing on the needs, then the mind is liberated to do what it does well at the edges of consciousness, which is to look for strategies that could meet those needs. So if you've identified a need for respect for your well-being, you'll begin to see over the ensuing time ways that you might meet your need for respect for your well-being. These "solutions" tend to just pop into mind. So mourning has the benefit of moving you out of a dead end preoccupation and into a natural problem solving process.

### **Empathy for The Other(s) Step**

When you are complete with mourning and celebration, which is within the self-empathy part of this stage, you again move into empathy for the other(s), imagining what needs were met or not met by the other people in the interaction. If we are happy with the way the interaction went, we often don't even think of doing this step; it is more often seen as a way to connect with and humanize someone with whom we have been in a troublesome interaction. Nonetheless, I encourage you (and myself) not to skip it, particularly when learning the process. The more practice we get in guessing other people's needs, the more facility we have to be able to do so and stay connected with them in the moment.

### **Generation of Further Strategies and Practice Step**

If you recall from the preparation stage, the third step after self- and other empathy is the practice step. In the learning stage, a number of things can happen. You can practice with your coach how you might have done it differently. You now have the "script" of how the person responded to what you said, as well as your own reactions. From self-empathy you are clear on what needs were not met so you can practice responses that might have better met those needs. You might also consider what further strategies you want

to employ to meet the needs you have uncovered. Perhaps one strategy is another conversation with the person, and you can go into role-playing how you imagine that interaction. Thus, you can see how the final learning stage dovetails with the preparation stage, and can basically become the preparation stage for further action.

Though the way I've talked about the Learning Stage has been in terms of responding to a conversation you have prepared for using the previous stages, you can also start the cycle here, in a situation where you experienced an unsatisfactory conversation that you are reacting to. Going through these same steps to understand what happened, you can then choose whether you want to prepare for a new interaction with that same person that deals with what happened.

## FINAL THOUGHTS AND CONCLUSION

As a model for behavioral change, this process has a number of components that I think make it particularly effective. First, it gives a person a lot of practice in the basic distinctions of NVC in the preparation and learning stages. The more practice we have in distinguishing observations from judgments, feelings from faux feelings, needs from strategies, and requests from demands, the more facility we have in making these distinctions in the moment.

Some forms of practice use made up examples, but another thing I like about this process is we use it around a situation that is current and has meaning, and sometimes one that is painful and distressing. The result of practicing with this kind of relevant and meaningful situation is that we are often highly motivated to do the best we can. It isn't "just practice," it's a real life situation with real consequences for our relationships and, we may perceive, our happiness. If we are willing to dive into the process and cycle through the model multiple times using situations that are important to us, our learning can progress very quickly. Our willingness depends on having some hope that this process will improve our lives in some way, and as we begin to use it, on that hope being nourished by feedback that confirms it. If you continue on to read the excerpts from a series of real coaching calls that follow, you may get a sense of the urgency and motivation that arise when we practice with those situations most important to us.

Furthermore, the experiential nature of this process creates the conditions for our learning to become embodied. This model is not simply a cognitive exercise. In sessions with the coach, we are actively practicing the skills of self-empathy and empathy for another person, and these are skills that can be used multiple times a day in all kinds of contexts. The role-playing provides experience that is a critical piece of the learning. In role-playing an interaction, we are not just thinking about what we might say, we actually have the struggle of coming up with the words or taking the action in the moment that we feel congruent and in integrity with. We also have the practice of facing another person who we have no control over and responding to the unexpected things that they say.

Finally, we can discern a common structure underlying the stages above. Basically, in the first and third stages, we are getting in touch with our needs, guessing the needs of the other, and finding strategies to meet the combined set of needs. This is also the basic structure of NVC mediation. As we go through these stages over and over again, we are working towards being able to do the same thing in the doing stage; that is, in the midst of any difficult conversation being able to surface our own and the other person's needs, then find strategies to meet all of these needs.

Repetition of the process I have outlined above has helped me to embody new behaviors with regard to seemingly fixed patterns of behavior that I was feeling hopeless about being able to alter. Learning as an adult to shift our entrenched patterns is not always easy

and requires commitment and a strong intention; however, with appropriate strategies geared towards encouraging the learning process combined with support from others, we can succeed and find more satisfaction and pleasure in our relationships.

## NVC Coaching Conversation Transcript

Situation:

Phyllis is an older woman with two grown sons, one of whom—Jim— is married to his second wife, Dee. They have two young children. Since their marriage six years ago, the relationship between Phyllis and the couple has steadily deteriorated. Phyllis’ other son, Tom, lives with her, and has been struggling with physical and mental problems. Phyllis has started learning NVC in an attempt to learn to communicate more effectively with Jim and Dee, so as to reestablish contact with her grandchildren. She contacted me to help her to obtain agreement from her son and daughter-in-law to allow her to visit with her grandchildren. Her son has not agreed to her requests to have a mediator (me) facilitate a conversation between them. Phyllis and I decided to proceed with coaching instead of arranging a face to face mediation or having me communicate directly with Jim and Dee, because those strategies were broached with Jim and he did not agree to either of them. This is an instance when the person who is being coached does not currently have access to the people she is in conflict with. Our sessions take place over the phone. In the following transcript, we see how coaching might proceed in the preparation stage. The transcript contains various segments, pulled out from coaching conversations that took place over the course of a year. For brevity’s sake, these excerpts have been shortened and edited, while still attempting to maintain the flow of conversation and the important content. I include various types of comments to the transcript, some of which indicate what we are doing or note shifts from one step to another. In reading the transcript now, I also notice things I, as a coach, would like to have done differently, and I have noted these as well.

### Excerpt 1

Phyllis: One of the things that happened, when I told Dee that Tom had diabetes, she said “so what! Lots of people have that disease.”

Ike: OK, so I’m her, and I’ve just said to you “so what! Lots of people have that disease.” Tell me what’s going on inside of you when you hear that.

Phyllis: I feel like she doesn’t want to be bothered.

Ike: What I’m hearing is your analysis of what’s going on inside of her; tell me what you are feeling. Are you feeling hurt?

Phyllis: A little. I’m feeling dismissed.

Ike: OK. Dismissed is actually about what the other person is doing. “I’m feeling dismissed” is really saying “she is dismissing me” but what is your feeling? Are you sad? Disappointed?

Phyllis: I feel resentful, I’m unimportant to her, she couldn’t care less about what’s going on for me.

Ike: Let’s stay with resentful, the rest is your story about it, let’s just stay with the feelings, so you’ve named that you feel resentful, maybe there’s some other feelings as well, are you feeling that because you are needing support? Or consideration?

Phyllis: Compassion.

Ike: So you feel resentful because you need maybe some caring and compassion?

Phyllis: I guess it’s just more support and understanding, I’d like some understanding

Stimulus

Distinction: Analysis versus feeling

Distinction: Feeling versus an evaluation masquerading as a feeling

Distinction: story from feeling

Empathy: guessing what other feelings Phyllis may be experiencing

Giving empathy, linking the feeling with a possible need

that this is a challenge I'm facing, and it's real, I just want her to be aware that it is going on in my life, is that understanding?

Ike: Maybe it's understanding, maybe awareness, this is your nuance, so we want to find what feels right for you. Maybe it's compassion, you just want someone to be aware that it's going on and have some concern.

Phyllis: Yeah, it's concern.

Ike: So you just want there to be some care and concern. So it's for you to try to manifest this in your life,

Phyllis: So I need to give it to myself?

Ike: Well I'm hearing that you want it from those around you, your family and from Dee.

Phyllis: Yes!

Ike: So maybe out of this process you have a request of Dee that if she were to fulfill it, you hope it would meet your need for care and concern. You don't know that it would, because none of us know what an action in the future will mean to us, but we can predict based on knowledge about our past responses whether something will meet our needs. If it turns out that it doesn't, we learn from it.

Phyllis: If it doesn't meet our needs, does that mean we really didn't understand what we needed?

Ike: Maybe, we didn't understand what we needed or maybe our prediction was wrong. You know, lots of us find out that getting a shiny new car doesn't meet that need for meaning quite the way we thought it was going to, but then we learn from that.

Phyllis: I guess it would help if I just stay with the feeling and not go so into the story.

Ike: She said what she said in this situation. And you heard it the way you heard it. Now that you've gotten some of your need for empathy met, my guess is that if we turn to Dee a little bit right now, there's some space to think about what might have been going on for her. Just from what you've said, my guess would be that maybe she was wanting to protect herself.

Phyllis: I think so, her first husband died of cancer when he was 30.

Ike: Yeah, so she's been through a painful process.

Phyllis: I admired her so much when I first met her because she stuck with him, she took care of him and was with him to the very end.

Ike: And if that's been her life experience, maybe she had all of that in mind when you said Tom had diabetes.

Phyllis: And was thinking "I don't need any more of this."

Ike: Maybe "I don't need any more of this" or maybe she was thinking, "diabetes, that's not so bad, it's not like cancer." People live long productive lives with diabetes, it doesn't have to interfere, compared with what she's been through.

Fine-tuning her need through guessing other needs

Distinction: needs versus strategies

Switch from empathy for Phyllis to empathy for Dee

In empathizing with Dee, thinking about what some of the possible meanings might have been for what she said, other options from the automatic interpretation Phyllis had when she heard it.

This is an important realization on Phyllis' part. In retrospect, I would like to have taken a moment to celebrate it with her before moving on, as a way to help anchor it.

Phyllis: Oh, yeah! That's true; she could have meant that!

Ike: Yes, she could have meant any number of things by what she said.

Phyllis: You know, that's funny, it's exactly what I've been accusing her of and what I'm mad at her about. Oh my goodness! I'm thinking she keeps misinterpreting my intentions, and puts negative explanations on the things I do, and that's what I just did with her!

Ike: The NVC process is about checking with people, what did they mean when they said that, instead of just going with our immediate reaction and interpretation.

Checking in is built into the process. Maybe you don't realize it right away, maybe you just have your reaction, but then later, you realize it and you can go back to her and say, "Dee, when you said what you said, I'm a little confused because the way I hear it, it doesn't meet my needs for concern and care, and I'm wondering what you meant by it. Would you be willing to say more about what you meant when you said 'so what! Lots of people have that disease?'" Then, you get an opportunity to hear what she meant. Or you could say something like, "when I heard your response when you heard about him having diabetes, I'm wondering if you were thinking about your first husband, and feeling a little overwhelmed by the prospect of an illness in your second husband's family."

Phyllis: I don't know that I would be able to say that to her without stirring up a lot of stuff.

Ike: Maybe. In any case, whatever she says to you, if you are going to use the NVC model, remember you have four choices, two silent options—self-empathy or silent empathy for her — and two out loud options — empathy or expression.

## Excerpt 2

Phyllis: She needs reassurance that she is loved and she doesn't need to take care of them in order to be valued.

Ike: Loved for who she is without having to be a special way.

Phyllis: Right.

Ike: She just wants to be cared for, trust that she is cared for, without having to please somebody.

Phyllis: Because if she doesn't please, [her] Mom is going to get madder than the dickens.

Ike: So she's lived in that experience, so she's just needing to be loved and cared for, for who she is without having to be any different.

Phyllis: Right.

Ike: And you're wanting respect for your autonomy and a kind of consideration in the way you're communicated with and the way you're treated, is that also true?

Phyllis: Yeah, that I'm not her mother, I'm a separate, different person.

Ike: And you want that to be seen—that you're your own person and you want some respect for your choices, the life you've created, the experiences you've had, but also in the moment with her. You want to have the respect for your autonomy in that moment.

Phyllis: Yeah, with other people, like my niece and I get along just fine and if we have problems we just talk things out but I don't seem to be able to do that with Dee, she just gets so intensely angry that it shuts me down. I just collapse when somebody yells at me.

Ike: So you're baffled and wanting to understand how this happens and wanting to have some clarity about how you can interact with her in a way like you do with other people.

...

Ike: So I've heard you express needs for respect for your autonomy, for your life experience and a longing for a quality of connection and intimacy with the people you love, your son and grandchildren. But each time you talk, if you tell the story and keep telling yourself that she is impossible, then she'll be impossible. Whether she is or not, you'll create her as impossible. The way you can change that thought is by empathizing with yourself and then when you feel full

Empathy for Dee

Empathy for Phyllis

Distinguishing story from feelings/needs

Method to get out of being stuck in the story

Explanation of mourning

I would rather not have used the term "doormat." Instead, I would have just liked to have said, "And when you can connect with her in a way that makes it clear you want both your needs to get met and hers also... ." This is because I prefer not to reinforce or introduce enemy images. To do so tends to take me and the person I am with out of connection with our needs.

enough you will be able to empathize with her; you open up that space to be able to see, "oh, there's something going on with her, her needs are not getting met. And when you're able to mourn, mourning your needs not having been met. The same needs you're longing to get met are the ones that haven't been met, respect for your autonomy, consideration, respect for your life experience, connection with those that you love. There's a mourning there of all the lost opportunities and the sadness and pain that comes up when you think about all of that. So you mourn that, there is a sweet sadness to it, it fills your heart. There's a sadness but it's a kind of filling of possibility of life, and then you long to connect with your daughter-in-law. Then when you ask the question, not in an analytical way, but just " what needs of hers is she not getting met?" And you look at her situation, not about the story of it, but you know she's been in this relationship with her own mother that stimulates pain in her and now she's having difficulties with her husband and he's pulling away instead of hearing it as a cry for help. She's in lots of pain. And when you can connect with her in a way that makes it clear you are not a doormat, but that you want both your needs to get met and you care also about her needs, it will shift the whole relationship.

Phyllis: I don't see how to do that yet.

Ike: At this point there is no way to do it with her.

Phyllis: Why?

Ike: Because your need for empathy is not met. You can't jump over that stage, until your needs for empathy are met, there's no space in your heart to reach out to her.

Phyllis: How do I get there?

Ike: We can work together on the phone, but also, as often as you can, do this process yourself. Have a daily practice if you can of just getting connected, take the most recent thing she or your son said, and just sit quietly, like a meditation, think about that piece of the story, about how they've mistreated you or whatever, then stop the story and get connected with, now that I'm thinking about this, how am I feeling? And get your list of feeling words out, and find a word or two that really fit and write them down, and the same with the needs. It's not an endless process, it won't go on for ever, but if you don't do it, it's not going to happen.

Phyllis: I tried doing that the other day but I couldn't bring myself out of it.

I also regret having used this language of "You can't" and "there's no space" because it says what is true for her. And I believe I cannot know another's truth. I would have preferred to have used language like I did two entries below that starts with, "My guess is..."

Daily practice

Ike: My guess is that you're thinking about the situation rather than connecting with the need. When you connect with the need, it will give you energy to do something about it, at least that's my prediction.

Phyllis: But I can't meet the need.

Ike : No, this is very important, what you just said, this part of the process is not about meeting the need, it's about mourning that the need is not getting met. It's only later you begin to figure out how you want to get your need met. For now, savor the pain, stay with it as long as you can. 15 seconds, 30 seconds, I long to have this kind of connection with my grandchildren, I want to contribute to their lives and their well-being. Just stay with that, feel in your heart and your gut how sad it is that that need is not being met. Notice when your mind goes off, that's just your mind going off, trying to come up with a strategy to protect yourself. Say "mind, thank you very much, but what need are you seeking to meet by withdrawing? Are you wanting to protect me, to take care of me?" Dialogue with yourself and see that your mind is just trying to protect you. Before you act, connect to the need, then the feeling will shift and the action you'll take will be more in alignment with what you want. It will meet more of your needs. If you just act out of the uncomfortable feelings, I hear that you tend to create things that you don't like. They meet some needs, like withdrawal meets the need for protection, but it doesn't meet the need for connection and for contributing to your grandchildren, so I'm asking you to take a different route—feeling to need instead of feeling to action.

### Excerpt 3

Ike (as Dee): It's painful for you when you hear words that put you in a kind of box, label who you are, it doesn't let you be who you are, let you be seen the way you want to be seen?

Phyllis: I moved here for you but I also need my own life.

Ike: You're wanting to have the freedom to be yourself and you're wanting to be able to contribute to being there to support and contribute to your grandchildren?

Phyllis: I don't force myself into your events, I wait until I'm invited.

Ike: You'd like acknowledgement for how you're trying to honor space and autonomy in other people.

Phyllis: Yes, but I'd also like to be included, I want to share my traditions with the family and pass them along to my grandchildren.

Ike: So you want your legacy to have an impact, to continue on in your grandchildren?

Phyllis: Sure, you liked the way I interacted with the kids, we made things, crafts, played games, puzzles, explored, you liked the things we did, why can't you be open to some of the other things I offer?

Ike: You enjoyed the interaction with the kids and would like to explore more of that.

Phyllis: And you won't come see me, I've been here two years and you've come over once.

Ike: Feeling regret about how you haven't been able to be with the girls as much as you'd like, feeling sad about that.

...

Ike: You like your family and you want to be able to be with them and enjoy the kids and adults and spend time with them in a meaningful way?

Phyllis: Especially, if you ask me to come along and be willing to accept your way of doing things and join in, OK, that's fine, I'll give it a try and do what I can, but how about turn about is fair play? So that when I invite you and your family, how about you giving it a try to see how I do things? I think it's unfair that you ask me to learn your ways but you're not willing to learn mine.

Ike: So you are wanting more reciprocity, to be seen for your way of doing things, get to have your part and be able to do some things your way?

Role-play in which Ike is playing the role of Dee, as if she knew NVC and was able to empathize with Phyllis (see Role-Playing Option 1 below). Phyllis speaks her mind with no attempt to translate into feelings/needs herself. The purpose of this role-play is for Phyllis to get her need for empathy met. In giving empathy, each time the guess is at least somewhat accurate, Phyllis moves on to another feeling/need

Note that this form of empathy, which looks like declarative statements instead of questions, may not be well received by a person unfamiliar with the guessing process. On the surface, these sentences appear to be telling Phyllis what she is feeling and needing as opposed to offering guesses that help her clarify these for herself. In this conversation, Phyllis is familiar with the process and hopefully heard these statements as guesses. When working with someone who is newer to the process, I would be more careful, through phrasing and intonation, to make sure these guesses come across as questions or possibilities.

Phyllis: Yeah, cause they're fun, you saw that when you came over but you seem to have forgotten it.

Ike: You want a kind of sharing, the freedom to contribute in your way, to be heard, you want to care and have that caring accepted and honored, is that true?

Phyllis: I don't want to be the punching bag any more. I had that from my sister all those years and where she seemed to need to be angry and I was the object. And now you seem to need to be angry and somehow I become a punching bag too and I want to learn how to get out of that role.

Ike: So there's something familiar with you about it, a kind of pattern in your relationship with your sister and with me, and you want to learn how to be in a different relationship that honors our humanity and where you can be seen for who you are and you want to see me for who I am and have some real caring going both ways. Is that a fair summary?

Phyllis: Right. It seems your way of getting things is to get very angry at people and smash them. I guess then that we're supposed to be sorry and come running to you and do for you what it is you want. I won't do that, I won't have you tell me off and then expect me to come running to you apologetic and begging for your attention and your love.

Ike: So you really want me to get that you're your own person and you want to be seen for that. You want to be seen for your own integrity, and you want respect for your autonomy.

Phyllis: And that if you want something you need to ask for it instead of blasting the heck out of me thinking that I'm going to understand what it is you want. I'll respond but not if you're demanding.

Ike: You have needs for respect and consideration and you really want that to get heard and just how hard it is for you to be able to stay present and be able to respond the way you would like when your needs for respect and consideration are not met. Is that accurate?

Phyllis: Yeah, it's more that I want to try to change you, I want you to learn how to just tell me what's going on in you and tell me what you need and want so I can respond to that, I don't understand what you want when you hurt me, when you do the equivalent of kicking me in the stomach.

Ike: I heard two things in there; one was the realization on your

part that you were trying to get me to change, and the second was that you are not clear, not understanding how to respond when I do some of the things that I do, and you're wanting to be able to respond in a way that would be in alignment with your needs for compassion and caring.

Phyllis: Yeah, that's it, that's the whole bottom line exactly. That's exactly what I need!

Ike: So you'd love it if I were to change, but whether or not I change you'd really like to be able to respond in alignment with your own values for care and compassion.

Phyllis: Yes, and I was able to for awhile, like that time at Christmas when I was talking to my daughter and you didn't like what I said so you told me to leave, and I came over to you and got down on my knees and said, "Dee, this is the time of year for forgiveness and opening up and forgetting and moving on." And you said "well I'm not ready yet" but it seemed to break the spell. But you know I just don't think I can do that every time, sometimes I'm not able to handle your anger.

Ike: So there's just some times when you're not able to respond the way you would like with the kind of caring or consideration...

Phyllis: Especially when I'm working on my own stuff.

Ike (as Ike): So let's step out of role for a second, how are you right now? How are you feeling?

Phyllis: I got rid of a lot of stuff. I feel better. Wow, I've never had that much stuff with anybody, well maybe with my sister but I didn't care about that as much, I do really care with Dee. I hope I don't take any of it back again.

Ike: We can revisit this again later and see if there's more you want to say to her, or we can flip around the other way and I can model being you. Later, when you're more comfortable and feeling more confident, I'll play Dee again but saying the things that are more difficult for you to hear and you can practice responding in ways you like. So we can go step by step here, not do it all at once.

Phyllis: That all sounds very helpful.

## Excerpt 4

Phyllis: I definitely remember this one because it hurt so much. Jim and I had coffee and at the end he said, "you know this is all your fault." And I said "you're blaming it all on me, Jim?" He said "Yeah." And I was trying at the time struggling to remember NVC so I was trying not to react, but it didn't come to my head what to say, so I said, "You mean you have no responsibility at all for what's going on between us?" He said, "Yes, that's right." And then I got panicked and mad and I said, "That's it, I'm selling the house and moving away." Oh dear!

Ike: Well, let's work on that one. Let me be Jim and I'll make the statement. "Yeah, I'm blaming this all on you. This is all your fault." What's your response? Remember, you can do self-empathy, silent empathy, or express or empathize.

Phyllis: Ah, Let's see. I could try...so you're feeling pretty helpless...

Ike: (As Jim) Yeah, I need you to understand that you're the problem here.

Phyllis: You're really frustrated because you need to have support from me...

Ike (as Ike): Not from you.

Phyllis: Oh, that's right, you need to have support.

Ike: Because you're needing support.

Phyllis: Because you're needing support, and loyalty. You need loyalty.

Ike (as Jim): Yeah, I'm needing some loyalty, I don't know that I'd use those words but it is something about loyalty. You and Tom get together and talk behind my back and you're always talking down my wife and stirring her up and getting everybody all pissed off and it's always your fault.

Phyllis: Oh boy...

Ike (as Ike): You don't have to be right. Just the act of thinking of the guesses will help you stay present.

Phyllis: Ah, so you feel disappointed because you really wanted support for yourself.

Ike (as Jim): Yeah, You're getting it, Mom, you're catching on. (as Ike): So how did that feel? You stayed right there for three rounds.

Phyllis: I had all these notes in front of me, if I had all of them in front of me maybe...and with your encouragement, I still need a crutch.

Ike: Yeah, but there was a fair amount of energy in my voice.

Phyllis: Yeah and I appreciate that, it helps a lot because when we do practice it isn't real as far as tone of voice and that's a big thing for me, tone of voice.

...

Phyllis: This one comes from Jim, it's really tough for me, his experience apparently has been that when you try to resolve a conflict, it's just a bunch of "he said/she said," I guess nobody really ever hears each other. So he just recently said to his oldest son, who he hasn't spoken to for three years, let's just forget the past and start all over again, and

Stimulus

Role-play with Ike as Jim saying things that are difficult for Phyllis to hear. Ike steps in and out of role throughout role-play to coach Phyllis through it.

Distinction: Needs and strategies

I'm not willing to do that, that doesn't work for me.

Ike: What I imagine he has experienced is how most people try to deal with the past, I would agree with him.

Phyllis: Oh! (surprised)

Ike: Most people I imagine try to figure out who was right and who was wrong. The kind of process I've learned is entirely different, it's not about who was right and who was wrong. It's a process of the present, reconnecting in the present. I tell people all the time that I'm happy to leave the past in the past, but people's memories are in the present, and to the extent that the memories keep coming up I find that they get in the way of reaching agreements and people being able to be together in the way they would like to be with each other. So I'm all for leaving the past in the past if it will stay there, but memories tend not to stay in the past. I recently did a mediation between a father and son supposedly regarding their businesses, having to do with intellectual property. They had already worked with two mediators and had not resolved the issues, and they had spent all this time and money with lawyers, and people from both companies were about to get involved in this thing. They came to me and we had three sessions, at the beginning they said we're not going to deal with the past, we're only dealing with the future," and finally in the third session I said, "look, I don't know what happened in the past but we'd better deal with the past." And we dealt with it. The dad had called the cops on the son and had him thrown in jail when he was a teenager for having marijuana in the house. The son had been feeling a lot of pain about that, loss of trust, etc. and it had gone on and on. When we got that resolved, when they heard each other, it was easy to resolve the business deals between them. Now they spend holidays together, where as they did not previously.

Phyllis: Wow, that's fabulous. I do keep trying to envision that something like that will be possible here.

Telling a story of a situation that bears some similarities to Phyllis's, that was resolved successfully, meeting Phyllis's need for hope that hers, too, may be resolvable.

## Excerpt 5

Phyllis: Our last meeting was so disastrous. It was two months ago and that was when Jim told me, "we don't want contact with you because of the things that you say and I'll call you when I feel ready to relate to you. We don't need you in our lives because we don't need the things you say to us and when we're ready to relate to you again we'll call you." He also said things were all my fault, that they had no responsibility for any of it, that I was to blame for the problems between us and I got up and walked out.

Ike: There's all sorts of ways we can do this, just to lay out the possibilities. You can ask them if they would accept a call from me, I could just call them out of the blue, or, the one I think you would enjoy the most would be you asking.

And we can practice and role-play to prepare yourself.

Phyllis: I don't know if he would have a meeting with me. If I call his cell he'll probably screen his calls, and if I call the house Dee will get it and decide whether or not to even tell him, I suspect, that I called. So I don't know, I'm guessing, maybe it won't be that way at all!

Ike: How about just calling his cell, either talking to him or leaving a message, that asks would he be willing to get together, meet him for coffee for no more than 10 minutes, you have something you'd like to ask him.

Phyllis: OK

Ike: Make it time delimited, tell him it's not urgent or an emergency, just that there's something you'd like to talk to him about. If he asks what it's about you can say, well, I have some ideas about how we can get along better and I'd like to propose something to you.

Phyllis: He might say tell me now.

Ike: And be ready to do that. "Well, I've been talking with this guy on the phone and I'd like to propose an idea of you and I or maybe you and I and Dee talking on the phone with this guy. Are you willing to do that?" And if he doesn't say yes right away, you can say, "if you have any concerns about this at all would you just be willing to talk to him by yourself first? Are you willing to accept a call from him? You can talk and decide whether you're comfortable with the two or three of us talking with him."

Phyllis: Oh that's a good idea. It would be great to put it that way cause I am concerned that he will think since I've been talking to you that you're on my side.

Ike: Absolutely. So tell him that. And if he accepts my call that's one of the first things I would say as well, I would say, "Jim, this won't work if there's any sense that I'm on her side. In a sense, I'm on both sides, or on neither side.

After previous sessions in which Phyllis has gotten her need for empathy met and empathized with Dee and Jim, Phyllis has decided to ask Jim if he would be willing to have a joint phone conversation with Ike as a way to re-connect with Jim and Dee.

Phyllis is realizing that her automatic reactions, her "story" about how others will be, may not be true for the others.

What I mean by that is I'm here to help both of you be heard the way you want to get heard. I know Phyllis wants to get heard and I'm trusting that you also want to be heard. I see my role here is for both of you to get heard the way you'd like."

Phyllis: Oh I just feel so much relief hearing you talk that way, it's comforting.

Ike: So you're having some hope in hearing that?

Phyllis: Oh no kidding, yes, It's more than hope, I'm looking for the words and not finding them, I'm touched, and feel appreciation and grateful.

Ike: Savor that, those reflect your needs for hope and healing and the kind of connection you want with your family. Also, part of what we're wanting for this call is for you to have the trust that you can respond in the way you want to respond. Because you have a history, and he's going to interpret and hear things that are not what you intend for him to hear.

Phyllis: Yeah, well, that's what's brought us to this point!

Ike: Yes, that's what happens and it will happen and you will likely be disappointed and maybe feel hurt when your heart opens and then your intention for connection isn't seen the way you want it to be seen.

...

Ike: So let's just do a role-play, I'll be Jim and you are calling to set up this brief meeting.

Phyllis: OK.

Ike: So I'm Jim and I'm going to answer my cell phone. "Hi, Mom, why are you calling?"

Phyllis: Oh Hi, Jim. How ya doing?

Ike (as Jim): I'm fine, I'm fine, but why ya calling?

Phyllis: Well I wonder if you'd be willing to meet for coffee for just 10 minutes, there's not an emergency, everything's OK, but I have something that I'd like to ask you and I wonder if you'd be willing to take just 10 minutes to meet with me so I can ask you about this.

Ike: Uh, just 10 minutes?

Phyllis: Yeah, we can meet in that same place near your office, at a convenient time. How about tomorrow or later this week?

Ike: What's this about? This is kinda weird.

Phyllis: Well, you know I've been working on this form of communication where I'm trying to learn how to hear you better and so I can tell you what I want in a way that isn't hurtful. I've been talking to this guy on the telephone and meeting with a group. I've told you about it so I think you have an idea what it is. It's really gentle, not a "he said/she said" like we've both encountered before. It's very peaceful, you don't have to compromise.

Ike: So, what does this have to do with 10 minutes and coffee?

Role-play of Phyllis asking Jim to meet.

Feedback on role play

Review at end of call agreement regarding next steps.

Phyllis: Well, I'd like to arrange for us to talk with this fellow on the phone. I've been working with him but he's not on my side, in fact if you are concerned about that, would you be willing to talk to him yourself first alone?

Ike: Uh, I don't know, maybe. I might. I'll think about it. OK, so 10 minutes, I'll meet you for 10 minutes on Friday.

Phyllis: Great, thanks, Jim. It's really good to hear you.

Ike (as Ike): OK, I like that. One thing I would suggest is that you might have empathized with him one round, like "are you a little skeptical here and wondering what's going on?"

Phyllis: Oh right, well he does know a little about this already, because we've talked about it.

....

Ike: OK, so to review you're going to give Jim a call and ask him if you can have a meeting and either at that meeting, or if he asks on the phone, you're going to ask him if he'd be willing to have a call with you and him and me, and if he wants to ahead of time, I'll have a call with him.

Phyllis: OK, I'll do that.

## Excerpt 6

Phyllis: Instead of blaming me he's just saying he needs space from me and he's not blaming either Dee or me, but because I know he has said "it is really painful for me when you and she are fighting" maybe I need to talk to her instead of Jim.

Ike: Let me just see if I'm getting that part of it. Is this your insight — that it's painful for him when there's conflict between the two of you, Dee and you, and in his way he's saying, "I'm choosing to be with the mother of my young children." And, he's not saying this, but he's kind of hoping you'll understand.

Phyllis: Right, I think he expects me to do more understanding than I do.

...

Ike: I also heard what you said about communicating with Dee.

Phyllis: Yes, I really do think that's actually what I need to do because I know that if Jim could see that Dee and I are going to have a way to communicate, I know that would help.

Ike: How do you feel with the thought of opening up communication with her?

Phyllis: I need help because she's a very hard one for me to understand and interact with. She really has the ability to trigger stuff in me; I understand families are good at that, we know how to do that to each other. I'm not sure how I would go about it, any suggestions about how I should approach her?

Ike: Well, it's the same kind of thing we've been talking about with approaching Jim. First, meeting your own needs for empathy and then imagining what needs of hers are not met. Then making a plan and practicing your plan. Those are the basic steps.

Phyllis: You don't think I'm ready to go ahead and try to interact with her?

Ike: Sure, but the three steps that I just outlined are something that you can do in just minutes. Sometimes they take preparation that can be minutes, hours, days, weeks, do them in different time frames, but they can be something you do in just moments as you're preparing to walk into a room. I was starting the empathy for you when I asked you, how do you feel when you think about beginning to talk with Dee.

Phyllis: Well, I feel somewhat afraid.

Ike: Yeah, what needs are giving rise to that fear, need to protect, trust that you'll be able to respond in a way that is in alignment with your values?

Phyllis: Yes, that I will remember.

Ike: That you can trust that you'll remember in the way you want to remember?

Phyllis: Yeah, that one statement is not enough, one go around is not going to do the job, they will come back at me and I'll remember then how I want to respond.

Ike: You get your script down and deliver it and that's not the end of it, they will respond and you'll respond and they respond again and you're into the whole conversation.

Phyllis: Right.

Ike: It's about your intention and the capacity to respond in the moment, how you can stay in

After email interactions with Jim, Phyllis decides to refocus attention on preparing to communicate with Dee.

Empathy for Phyllis

alignment and consistent with your intentions. And trust that you can come up with the words and not be so afraid about the words. You can really trust, it's not about the words, it's about the intention. It's about where your heart is. And then the words will really be there for you. If your heart is really there, caring about Dee and caring about your intention to connect with her, that you care about your grandchildren and you care about their mother, that you want to connect with their mother, Dee, that will come through to her, no matter what your words are. And if she hears words in a way that you don't intend, because she will, because she's human just like you are, that you trust that you can clean up the mess. You can say Dee, that's not my intention, would you please hear it another way? Then you can practice cleaning up messes.

Phyllis: As you're talking now, I feel warm towards her. I haven't felt that way for quite awhile.

Ike: Is it that I'm using language like "she's the mother of your grandchildren"? And that you want to be connected with your grandchildren?

Phyllis: Probably.

Ike: She's another human being that's in pain and she's misconstrued your words, she's going to hear them through the filter of her life's pain. And she's not going to immediately trust what you say the first time or the second time or even the third time. She's going to have to hear it and hear it and hear it and see it demonstrated before she's going to begin to trust.

...

Ike: When you said opening up communication with Dee was a possibility, I like that as a strategy because it opens up all sorts of possibilities, seemed like an "ah ha" to me as soon as you said it.

Phyllis: I've said it before but now I think I'm really ready to pursue it because I do believe that if Jim sees me making an effort to get along with his wife, that would bring him the peace that he so desperately needs. And she likes a good fight, so she might see this as a chance to let me have it between the eyes, so I think there's a chance that she will communicate. Whereas Jim has just shut down, I don't think I'd get anywhere with him right now. I think I need to respect his "leave me alone" as he's asked. And he doesn't say "leave us alone" in his email.

Ike: With Dee it's an opportunity to practice staying with your intention and it's OK to take a deep breath and really not listen to words but try to listen to the pain underneath the words, listen to whether she's saying please or thank you. Whatever she's saying, however the words sound, she's just saying please or thank you.

Phyllis: I usually remember that after the fact. If I could just remember that during, I'd be making some great progress.

Ike: One little trick is that if you're talking to her on the phone, write it on a little piece of paper and put it right on the phone, or whatever your intention is, so you can have it there in front of you. Or if you're going to be in person, write it on the palm of your hand or a piece of paper in your palm, just look at it during the middle of the conversation. Have some things to remind you of what your intention is, some ways of having you come back to the present so you don't get caught up in her words.

Phyllis: I'm thinking maybe a way to start would be by email. That might be safer for both of us

Ike: Might be, but emails don't have that richness, they are also a mixed blessing, some get so

misunderstood so quickly. Are you willing to call her up?

Phyllis: No, not yet, plus with the children I never know when a good time to call is.

Ike: And what is your request? You're calling to say, "I'd like to call to check in and see how you are?" Or "I'd like to call to schedule a time to talk, or schedule a time to drop by and bring a present to the kids?" I don't know, what's your reason for calling?

Phyllis: Oh! (surprised) I don't know. Just to reconnect, to get started with that. What you've suggested kind of scares me, a couple of years ago I sent a gift to the baby and they sent it back, they were so mad at me they just sent it back unopened. So the idea of taking a gift, I don't think I would be received. They're pretty mad at me. Maybe at first I'd like to call her just to check in, or maybe, No I don't think I could even do that. She'd say, "what do you want that for" I think.

Ike: You could just call to say, "I'd like to call to make peace. Is there some time when you, I'd like to call back when you're more available to talk." Or you could invite her to lunch, or to meet for coffee or tea.

Phyllis: Oh, no, I'm not ready for that. Maybe just a phone call, I'll need to have the notes as you suggest, I'd have to have a lot of words written out for myself and I'd need to time it, I'd need to be able to say "I need to bring this to an end now, is there anything more you need to say?" and close it down. Just a short time, because I can already feel myself getting churned up, the idea of even calling her gives me goose bumps. But, to think about why I am calling, I wouldn't have thought of that other than just a vague feeling that I was calling, gosh, I wouldn't have had any design or plan in my mind. I guess it is important for me to know what I want out of this meeting.

Ike: Let's do a little role-play. Why don't I play Dee and you call me up.

Phyllis: OK so you're not going to be very receptive to me.

Ike: Let's start out taking it a little easier at first, then we can up the ante, we can dial me up later.

Phyllis: Oh! OK.

Ike (as Dee): OK. Ring, ring, ring, "Hello."

Phyllis: Hi Dee. This is Phyllis.

Ike: Oh hi. How are you? What do you want?

Phyllis: Well, ah, I'm calling because I'd like to make peace with you. And I would like to, is this a time now that you can talk or would there be a better time when we could have a chance for a visit?

Ike: No, I can talk now. Tell me more.

Phyllis: I don't know what to say now. Well, I've been working with a program and wonderful fellow in San Francisco where I'm learning how to communicate in a better way than I've communicated in the past. And so I'm hoping now that when we talk I can hear you better as to what you want me to understand about you. So are you willing right now to talk about an area that was kind of touchy for us?

Ike: Sure. You didn't hear me before? Did you have trouble understanding me?

Phyllis: Yeah, Dee, sometimes I really don't know what it is you want me to do. It's not clear to me what the message is. For example, that morning that you called me and you said that every time I come over I upset Jim, I make Jim feel bad. First of all I'd say that was kind of a hard one for me

Role-play of Phyllis calling up Dee (played by Ike).

to take. Would you let me know, what it is that happened, what was Jim feeling (no, I don't want to say that) what were you feeling at that time that you said that to me?

Ike: Well, I saw Jim stimulated and I wanted him to have it easier so that I could have my life be easier. I have these young kids and I've got all this stress in my life and I want it to be easier around here and it seemed like when you came over, Jim would get agitated, I just want things to be easier around here so that's what I was trying to tell you.

Phyllis: When you say every time, is it every time? Or was it that one time when I didn't respond to him about his new truck?

Ike: Well, maybe I was overstating it a little. It might not be every time, just seemed like it then and maybe a couple of times in the recent past.

Phyllis: What was it that Jim wanted me to do about the truck?

Ike: I don't really remember all that much about the truck.

Phyllis: He took me out to see the brand new SUV and I was so surprised because he just bought that other one just a little while ago. So I said, "Gee, Jim, did you need a new one already? And how come you got one now?" And he said, "Well, cause I just can!" I didn't know what to say to him. It surprised me. The only thing that came to mind and that I said was "well, Tom would be so envious" and he got very angry with me. I just felt surprise because we didn't have the value in our family where we wanted to show off how much money we had by buying expensive cars.

Ike: Are you asking me to guess what was going on with Jim when he reacted that way?

Phyllis: Yes, this was my experience, what do you think was going on?

Ike: My guess is that he heard what you said as a judgment, as a criticism of him. He heard it as you criticizing him for having done something wrong by pointing out the family value, buying cars to show off income, and he might have been feeling a little guilty about that already and then you pointed it out.

Phyllis: Oh! (laughing) Oh, already feeling guilty, I didn't pick that up at all. Well, he always used to tell the story that my dad got a brand new Thunderbird every year, which isn't true, he only had two in his whole life, but I guess maybe Jim thought it was true and was going to do the same thing then couldn't understand why I wasn't proud of him for being like Grandpa. Anyway, I regret that my statement upset Jim who in turn upset you. It was an innocent statement and it sounds like it brought a lot of pain.

Ike: You're wanting me to understand what your intention was? That it was without any intention to simulate or criticize and you regret that happening and didn't want to upset me?

Phyllis: I know shortly after I tried to make amends but he was hurt and not willing to talk at all. Well, I enjoyed talking to you about that, Dee, and I can see now by the clock that I need to be going and I appreciate your taking the time to talk to me. Would it be OK with you if I give you a call and we have a little chat again soon?

Ike: I would like that. I've enjoyed this call. Yeah, call me anytime, Mom.

Phyllis: Well, I wish it would go that way. That would be beautiful!

Ike (as Ike): Well, maybe it will. Who knows?

...

Phyllis: I offered to bring something for a meal and I guess Jim turned to her and said "Mom would like to bring a salad" and she said, in a sour voice, "Tell her we don't want her to bring anything." Why might she have said something like that? Maybe she wanted to supply the whole meal.

Ike: I don't know. It's hard to say without more information about the context. I would want to ask.

Phyllis: Of course, what would I ask? How would I phrase that?

Ike: Asking sort of depends upon the context. If you're right there in the moment it might be something like "So are you wanting to provide the whole meal?" "Do you have some special plan in mind and you want to provide everything?" It almost doesn't matter. It's just something to get the conversation going.

Phyllis: Yeah, but I don't know how to phrase it.

Ike: "I'm curious, Dee, I've brought food in the past and I'm curious to know what is going on for you that you don't want me to bring food this time. Would you be willing to tell me?"

Phyllis: Sure, OK, that's very helpful. Just these plain statements still don't come to me. I know they're very plain and they sound so easy, but I don't think of them yet.

Ike: Practice them when you're not in a situation, I mean literally you practice them, in role plays, with your practice group, with me and with other people, and then with time the practice will pay off, you'll begin using them in the situation that you want to use them in. They just begin to pop into your head.

## Excerpt 7

Phyllis: One thing that scares me is that I have such a habit of reacting the other way, that is so quick and automatic that I don't trust myself to remember to do this new way and so I undermine my confidence in believing I'm going to be able to do this. It's little things, like I got a phone call from a woman who said "well, when I can't get you through email I know I need to call you." And I said, "Oh, well, I checked my email." And I thought, "whoops, there, I did it again. Instead of saying something like, 'well, it must be frustrating when you can't get me by email and you need to call me.'" I think of it now afterwards, but it doesn't come to me at the time so I'm scared, I don't have much confidence in myself yet.

Ike: I want to stop you for a second, slow down, and celebrate what I just heard.

Phyllis: What was that?

Ike: I heard you just recounting to me a bit of celebration. You weren't saying it as a celebration, but I was hearing it as a celebration. After you got off the phone call with that person, you saw, oh, I could have responded to her with empathy.

Phyllis: Yeah.

Ike: And that is a kind of celebration, a learning moment of how I could have done it. In mourning how you would have liked to have done it, you see that the way it happened didn't meet your needs for a kind of flow, for facility or mastery, and then celebration that you did have the mastery to know that you could have done it differently. And how long after the call was that? 10 minutes, 20 minutes, a day, whatever it is, next time it will be half the time and then half that. Then maybe in the phone call, "say, let me go back just a second here. I'm wondering if you were saying at the beginning of the call that you were a little frustrated that you couldn't reach me by email?" And maybe she'll say, "no, no, I'm not frustrated, I'm happy to call you!" You don't know; you want to check. Then next time maybe you'll catch it right when it happens, but that's the way we learn, a day or few days later we catch it, then a few hours later, then a few minutes later, then at the time it's happening. But if we beat ourselves up about it, we make it harder. So I just want to take this as an opportunity to celebrate that you caught it when you caught it.

Phyllis: Oh, that's very encouraging.

Ike: I see that as part of the learning process, an opportunity for some mourning. The mourning is part of it, you didn't do it the way you would have liked to.

Phyllis: Tell me more about the mourning. I think I skipped that step.

Ike: That's the step out of the beating yourself up. As long as I stay in the beating myself up about something it retards my learning. That's my experience. Because I stay in the loop of beating myself up. I don't learn. So when I step myself out of it, and think about the situation in observation language, I realize, she called me up and I wish

This interaction happened early in the coaching relationship and highlights the difficulty we face when attempting to learn a new behavior and how to work with it as suggested in this article.

Seeing Phyllis' frustration at not doing things the way she wanted as a basis for celebrating and mourning

I had said "Are you feeling frustrated when you aren't able to get me by email?" I wish I had said that. What actually happened doesn't meet my needs for mastery of this new languaging skill I am trying to learn. That's the mourning. That steps me out of "Oh, I'll never learn this. I'm stupid. Why am I trying to learn this new thing." Which is what I tend to do. As long as those words keep coming around somehow or other it creates a prophecy that fulfills itself. Because it takes the energy out of me trying to do it, it depresses me, so why try? Then, if I say, yes, I'm sad that I didn't do it as I wish I had, it doesn't meet my needs for mastery, there's the mourning. A missed opportunity. It's a loss. Not the same as losing a loved one, but it's analogous, it's a loss, so we call it mourning. But then that mourning shifts into learning because now I know what I want to learn. I want to learn mastery. Well, yes, I did realize I could do it, I just realized it six hours later. That's only six hours (or three weeks, or whatever time frame). But now I can run it through my head and I can go, "Oh, I can do that. Yeah, I'm irritated that I'm not doing it in the moment, but let me figure out ways I can do it in the moment. How can I remind myself? Here, I'll put a note by the phone and when it rings..." then the mind starts getting creative, and now you're energized, I can do this, I just need to figure out how to get the six hours shorter. Now the mind and body are all working in alignment together doing something it knows it can do.

Phyllis: Yeah, I go back and forth, back and forth.

Ike: There's nothing insurmountable about six hours. It's just six hours. We go into the learning process, and that's just a series of little things that we cobble together, we learn a little over here and a little here and we bring it all together.

Phyllis: So you need to plan some ways to help yourself remember to shift to this.

Ike: Yeah, and you and I having these conversations, and you doing your self-empathy practices are all part of your building these muscles to where when you're in a situation with your daughter-in-law that you'll be drawing upon them in unconscious ways; you'll have built a lexicon that will be available to you.

Phyllis: OK...I just hope I live that long!

Ike: You're going to live that long! It's just about practice.