

# The Courage to Speak Up

## Preface

As much as I believe that **conversation can change the world**, both personally and politically, I have to admit I have always grappled with it myself. How do you say things you would rather not? But when you don't speak up there are consequences - separation, conflict, addictions, violence, paranoia, sore throats, constipation, "word of mouth" back stabbing, etc. These are just a few the results if we don't speak up.

My cat knew how to get out his hairballs better than me .Maybe that's why I named him Einstein. By watching him I learned to get out what was stuck inside me and regained my health. I lost one hundred pounds, my depression lifted and I started journal writing which became a column in a local newspaper and then became this book.

I have discovered in my own life and in talking to people and clients about their difficulties with talking – that communication is difficult because it takes courage. The divorce rate is high, wars rage and people do not create big enough solutions to the world problems through dialogue.

Intellectual discussion is a bit easier, but even then, we hesitate to state our convictions. If we are deeply real, we're often afraid we can't withstand criticism without collapsing or blaming ourselves. We're scared of rejection, punishment, shaming, conflict and self-doubt. The flight or fright instinct can be stronger than dealing with uncomfortable feelings. It's simply scary to be seen, heard or vulnerable. I've had friends disappear after ten years of closeness and not even want to talk about why.

Even having a conversation within myself can be confrontational. I might learn something I'm afraid to know. When I stopped eating compulsively and listened to the parts inside me, it was sheer anguish to listen to the small child inside who was desperate for love. It wasn't easy to let my angry self-wail about years of self-hatred and allowing abuse. Yes, I wanted to stuff down those hairballs.

If I sense boredom from others across the table, I'm flooded with self-doubt. "What do I really have to say? Do I sound stupid, just like my mom used to say? Are my words intrusive? Am I self-absorbed or wrong?" When someone strongly disagrees with me I pull back. My throat closes up. Sometimes I want to argue back but the other person is so good at reciting facts that I'm intimidated.

In *Silencing the Self*, Dana Jack said, "To take one's feelings seriously, to acknowledge and consider them, pulls one beyond the confines of ordinary thought. Authentic feelings can also require action by making a person too aware, too unhappy to remain within the status quo." So, what's the problem? Why not have freedom of speech and let conversations go on

in community, family, coupling, at work, between countries ?**The real issue is fear. To speak up, we need to reveal our own deepest longings and experiences; we need to drop walls.**

In *Silencing the Self*, Dana Jack says: “Depressed women are afraid that if they try to be themselves they will lose their marriages.” She describes one woman as saying: “If I do tell him how I’m feeling about something I’m shot down.” Notice the wording *shot*, like a gun.

For men the issue is also fear. Terence Real describes in *I Don’t Want to Talk about It*:

...” to the degree to which a man learns to ‘be strong’ and to devalue weakness, his compassion towards frailty not just in himself but also in those around him may be limited or condescending. In this and many other ways, the loss of expressivity and the loss of vulnerability inevitably lead to diminished connection with others....

Disclosure of emotions or wishes is not considered powerful. Yet opening up is a binding force in marriages and any kind of group in which values are heartfelt, not just empty words. Why can’t we bridge gaps, work through differences, or even talk to ourselves effectively? Wouldn’t resolutions to the world’s problems emerge from such dialogues?

Conversation is also difficult because blaming is our strongest impulse. It causes more fighting. (It comes from the limbic brain – the protective instinct to strike out.) It’s the messy hairball running rampant in the world. I am not without fault here either. It’s simply easier to judge others than to take responsibility for my life. Sometimes, there is evil or unfairness and it’s necessary and valid to blame, to get mad. And sometimes we imagine that too many problems are all our fault, which is another popular way to make ourselves feel bad and shut down. Yet anger is most useful when directed towards solutions.

We speak readily about powers over us, betraying us, or taking our freedom but what is at the murky bottom of this? Besides huge systems bullying us or pushing us down, there is also the dark place we don’t admit. We don’t ask for what we want because we’re ashamed, despairing, defending ourselves with thoughts like “why bother ?” or “ It won’t do any good anyway .“

Brenne Brown says in *The Gift of Imperfection*, “Shame loses power when it is spoken...it is human nature to want to feel worthy of love and belonging. When we experience shame we feel disconnected and desperate for worthiness, full of shame or fear of shame, we are more likely to engage in self destructive behaviors or to attack or shame others.”

Shame lurks close by when I speak up. It waits in the darkness of my psyche to pounce on me, “Aha, see, you are too emotional, not well read enough, too outspoken, not articulate, not enough or too much. Will I lose my job? A friend? I guess I’ll let it go. “But, where does “it” go? Loss connections, eating more cookies, failing health, fewer alliances.

So getting out hairballs takes courage. I have a friend who can’t speak to her daughter. They shut down, slam doors and get stomach aches instead of talking. They long to be close but who is going to start?

It's not easy for me either. Sometimes I feel as if I have to breathe into my chest and tell myself I deserve to have my say. I used to feel frightened to talk to my boss. I almost always felt criticized in our meetings. Would I find the courage to tell her I felt hurt? Would I be able to identify my intention and needs? Would I find the courage to say "I'd like to enjoy coming to work and show more respect for each other?" Who wants to be naked in front of the world?

How do we heal despair? We share it ... then another kind of fire emerges, the kind that cares. Though anger can re-fuel the problem it is often needed to move us out of helplessness. Our inner rage at allowing ourselves to be put down may need to be felt.

If emotions and needs stay buried and aren't heard how can they be healed? Three simple tools, using "I" statements, saying your deepest needs and stating your positive intention, are miraculous. If all else fails, don't forget the triangle, three little words: *intention, "I", and needs.*

People are lonely now with the constant use of machines. We long for connection, intimacy, comfort and aliveness. I run to my computer but it doesn't replace connection. There is no way a machine can feel or understand. Technology is full of black and white thinking.

John Backman said, in *The Dialogue Venture*: "The challenges we face as human beings, this pursuit of dialogue is important. The future of our marriages, of our churches, even of the planet may depend on it. If we cannot talk openly and civilly about family conflict or matters of faith, let alone climate change or nuclear armament, how can we ever overcome the problems that threaten us all?"

Finally, as a prelude to my many hairballs to come in this book, I have to add that the political arena is a swirling of argument, power struggles and put downs. We, the people, can participate in global change. We don't have to feel helpless or at a loss for what to do.

People need the courage to speak up at every opportunity or forum. That might mean dropping anxiety, embarrassment, or the fear of imperfection. **In particular, if we could tell our personal stories as well as retracing statistics and offering solutions, we might have a basis for reform.**

The most successful movements in our history have come from people who cried out for a new vision, from deep personal truth and conviction. **At the roots of change are real people needing to be heard. The personal is political.**

At this pivotal point in history, can we sit at the table and talk? Can we connect in conversations for the sake of the children, the earth and the animals, share our grief, our triumphs and create solutions for a world in trouble?

Respectful dialogue builds bridges. Some people may think the problems are too big or argue that talking isn't going anywhere; we do have to "do" something, but just doing is not enough. What we have not done is come together and put our cards on the table. It is only out of brainstorming, sharing and choosing new ways to live that we unify and become pro-active in

large numbers, large enough to empower us. With so much ingenuity, brilliance, creativity, life force, and community, we could be creating a world that is fair for all.

“In the beginning was the word.”