

Self-empathy to Transform Anger

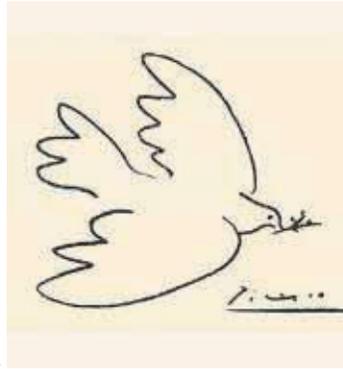
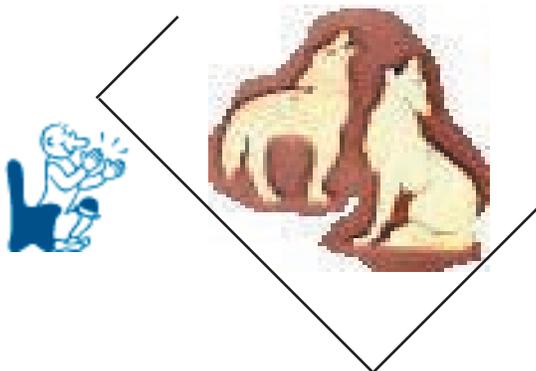
by Rick Longinotti

That feeling happened again tonight. No matter that the kids are now 22 and 18. Something Aviva said brought me back to that resentful feeling that I'd get when it seemed Aviva was pressuring me to do something for the kids, in spite of the fact that I made it evident I didn't want to do it. So I responded by raising my voice in anger. According to the approach we've been studying, Marshall Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication*, when we get angry we need some self-empathy. Self-empathy consists in looking at what we are feeling, what the thoughts and judgments are that are producing those feelings, and then looking deeper than the thoughts to what we are really needing.

After a flurry of angry and defensive responses, Aviva and I took a break. We returned to the subject after I immersed myself in self-empathy.

Step 1 of Self-Empathy: Watching the Jackal Show

The steps in self-empathy are 1. Noticing the upsetting feelings and the thoughts that produce them 2. Looking for the needs beneath



When I looked closer at why I became angry, I discovered the panicky feeling that she wouldn't notice my needs. It seemed like a good idea at the time to raise my voice in order to be heard. I thought maybe, if I get louder, she'll listen. Of course, it generally doesn't work that way.

My anger also had to do with the way I perceived a demand in what she said. When I perceive that I'm being *expected* to give up my own desires in order to serve the desires of my children, I resist. When it comes to giving, everyone wants to act out of their own volition, not out of the threat of disapproval. This is the need for autonomy, and it is one of the most powerful needs we have.

I compounded my own distress because I have a voice that says *I should* give up my own needs for my kids. That it's the *right thing for a father to do*. So, not only do I have an outside threat of disapproval, but an inner one too. Small wonder that I got heated.

When I am confronted with an outer judgement that is seconded by my inner judgement (that I am not living up to some standard of goodness) my reaction is instantly defensive. I've got to disprove the allegation, or my self-respect is diminished. "She's being unreasonable," I think. "She's acting like a doormat, letting the kids step on her. And she wants me to be one too. Well, no way! I refuse to humiliate myself". And then I feel contemptuous of her for letting herself be "humiliated". Rosenberg calls this stream of invective, "The Jackal Show", and he advises us to sit back and enjoy the show. Rosenberg's advice is refreshing to someone like me who has learned to be ashamed of his "ugly" thoughts. According to Rosenberg, we don't

want to repress these highly charged emotions. We'll never transform those thoughts into something more useful to us if shame causes us to bury them away from our consciousness. When we remember to enjoy the show we've already got a bit of detachment from the hold those thoughts have over us.

When I watch the show I get a clue about another feeling that is driving me---shame. I'm perceiving a threat to my good opinion of myself. I'm wanting to avoid humiliation. The way my thinking works is this: if I act "like a doormat", that tells me that I'm weak. If I give in, I'm letting my kids treat me with disrespect. According to this logic, if I don't *command* respect, that means there is something about me that is unworthy of respect. It's too painful to think about myself in this way, so I'll *demand* respect. (I'm indebted to men I have counseled for domestic violence for clarifying this way of thinking)

So far, I've uncovered several feelings along with the thinking that produced them: anger at a perceived demand, fear of not getting heard, and fear of feeling shame. But there is one more feeling---hurt. "The kids matter more to you than I do," is an old thought that would arise when I perceive my partner arguing in their behalf and not acknowledging my needs. The thought is based on an illusion---that her efforts on behalf of the kids reflect a choice of them over me. But our habits of thinking often make us out to be a victim, when there is another way we can look at the situation.

The feelings of anger, shame and hurt all have illusory thinking at their root. We can come to see the illusions on which they are based, but first we need to focus on what we are really needing.

Step 2: Finding my needs

The next step in the self-empathy process is looking at what my needs are beneath all those feelings and thinking. Under the fear of not being heard is the need to communicate my needs. When I locate this need, I can relax. Because I know that I can fulfill this need sooner or later. With a little patience, I can wait for my need to be heard until after I hear my partner's need. My experience tells me that if I empathize with her first, I stand a much better chance of being heard.

When I look at the need beneath my anger over the perceived demand that I do something for the kids, I can relax too. My need for autonomy is one that I can meet for myself, simply by reminding myself that I am truly free to choose my course of action. No one is forcing me. Now, I might find the consequences for my choice to be unpleasant--my partner might get angry at me. And I have a need for harmony with her and so I want to work things out. But experience tells me that a short-run bid for harmony at the expense of my need for autonomy won't bring me harmony in the long run. If I do things that I don't want to do just "to keep the peace", our relationship is weakened.

Avoiding my partner's anger has to do with that other disapproval that I mentioned above, that of my inner critic. When she is angry with me, my automatic response is to feel bad about myself. The need here is for self-acceptance. In order to satisfy this need, I tell myself, "I'm OK. All that shame about being 'wrong' is something I can let go. Perhaps I did something with consequences I regret, or perhaps not, but I know this guilt won't help me see it. In any case, I was doing the

best I could". When I am feeling full of self-acceptance, it is amazing how I can hear past my partner's anger to what it is she is really needing.

There is an important need behind not wanting to "be a doormat". The need is for integrity. I want to be true to my own needs and not relinquish them to satisfy an inner or outer critic. The permissive parent thinks he "should" give up his needs for his kids, and so travels the road to resentment. Any time there is "should" thinking, there is shame involved. For we learned all our *shoulds* on pain of disapproval. So once again I need a dose of self-acceptance in order to overcome my shame over the so-called "humiliation" of "being a doormat". I translate this victim-thinking terminology, telling myself, "I no longer want to give up my needs for my children out of a sense of duty or obligation. I will seek to meet both their needs and my own. If I defer certain needs of mine, it will be because I mindfully and freely choose to do so in order to meet other needs, recognizing that my children's welfare is a very strong need of mine. I also recognize that I can never "be humiliated", because nothing I do reduces my inherent beauty as a person."

It helps me forgive myself for relinquishing my needs to my inner taskmaster if I empathize with why I chose that strategy. "I gave up my needs because I was operating under the illusion that that was how to express my love for my children. I appreciate the dedication it took to travel this painfully mistaken path." Now that I am at peace with myself over past choices I don't have to take it out on the kids that my "sacrifice" went "unappreciated".

Bathing myself in self-empathy, I was ready

to talk to Aviva again, and this time empathize with her first. I let her know what I understood of her needs. As I did so, she showed signs of feeling moved. Then, she was eager to tell me what she understood of my needs.