

Mediate Your Life

A Guide to Removing Barriers to Communication, Vol. 1

Choosing Peace

New Ways to Communicate to
Reduce Stress, Create Connection,
and Resolve Conflict



Ike Lasater & John Kinyon
with Julie Stiles and Mary Sitze

Choosing Peace: New Ways to Communicate to Reduce Stress, Create Connection, and Resolve Conflict (Mediate Your Life: A Guide to Removing Barriers to Communication, Vol. 1)

by Ike Lasater & John Kinyon, with Julie Stiles and Mary Sitze

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This book contains stories about fictional characters. Names, characters, places, events and incidents are either the products of the authors' imaginations or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is coincidental.

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Introduction

by Ike Lasater

Many years ago, I was walking with two female companions in downtown San Francisco when a man abruptly veered toward us and came right up into our faces. This man was about my height, but was about twenty years younger than I. He didn't touch anyone, but his posture and demeanor seemed to signal aggression.

I immediately went into fight mode. This guy was invading our space and was leaning in to me. His left hand was balled into a fist by his side. I felt very defensive, because I thought he was going to hit me. I presumed that the man might be drunk or high on something. He had debris in his hair as if he had slept outside the night before.

Seeing how much the man had frightened my companions, I felt certain I was justified in putting him on the ground and hurting him. In my jacked-up state, I remember thinking, "I've done all this Aikido practice. Now I'm going to take this guy down, and I'm going to take him down hard!"

I came within a flick of an eyelash of doing just that.

Then I had a glimmer of awareness. Before taking action, I said to the guy, "When you're this close I'm feeling afraid. Would you back up a couple of feet?"

The man's eyes widened a bit. He stood up straighter and stepped back.

I asked him what he wanted. "I want money," he said. He unclenched the fingers of his left hand to reveal the loose roll of quarters in his fist.

I felt a mixture of relief, annoyance, and confusion. I wasn't about to give this guy any money. I still felt closed—still in

fight mode—on account of the way he had appeared to threaten me and my friends.

Somehow, recognizing how closed off I was feeling had allowed me to be curious. I asked the man, “Do you want this money because you want some support?”

His face softened, and he knocked off this spontaneous lyric:

*“Yeah, man.
I want support, I want care,
I want tenderness, I want love.”*

I heard myself exhale and felt my heart open. Reaching into my pocket, I drew out a bill, folded it up, and extended it to the man. He glanced down at the offering, and back up at me. Then he pressed his head against my chest, and started to cry. “Thank you,” he said, before stumbling off.

I stood there, stunned at all that had just gone down. The man and I had said so little to each other. So what had changed him? What had changed me? How did two strangers shift so rapidly away from violence and into a state of connection?

I cringe to think about what could have happened if I had gone with my initial reaction. Suppose I had gotten violent with this guy? Imagine how much damage he and I could have done to each other, and how the gulf between us could have grown.

Somehow, I’d been able to summon the awareness that *I didn’t have to give in to my adrenaline-fueled fight response*. For a crucial fraction of a second, I had recognized the fact that I could make another choice. That awareness had made all the difference in the outcome of our meeting on the street.

I’ve returned to the memory of that encounter many times. For me, it is a reminder that we can respond to any challenge in our lives from a space of clear-headedness and compassion. With sufficient awareness, we can skip the panicked “fight-flight-or-freeze” instinct in favor of a response that leaves far

less damage in its wake. In this way, we can have the sorts of meaningful interactions that we all want and so rarely get.

Few of us will regularly find ourselves face-to-face with a threatening stranger—at least I hope so. Yet all of us daily experience some version of a stress-based reaction, usually many times each day. And all of us have to deal with the fallout from our knee-jerk reactions.

Maybe you find yourself set off by how your child speaks to you (or doesn't) in the mornings. Maybe you are driven to distraction by the questions your mother asks you on the phone. Maybe you find yourself silently fuming over the way a co-worker tosses another file on your desk.

Your reaction to these personal “triggers” might be to yell or to withdraw. You may unconsciously seek ways to punish the other person. You may endlessly replay the injustice in your mind and complain about it to someone else. Or you may find the tension you're feeling is so uncomfortable that you try to blot it out through some means of escape.

In short, you may react instead of really choosing how you want to respond. You may adopt any number of socially sanctioned and ostensibly logical tactics, but at the cost of your own and others' greater peace.

Think of this book in your hands as a much-needed “operating manual” for our common relationship with conflict. If there's anything difficult, scary, or unpleasant that you grapple with in your life—and we all do!—then let this book be your ticket to greater clarity and fewer regrets. Learn how to respond with heart and eyes wide open to the friction and setbacks you meet with each day. Experiment with the awareness techniques that can help you listen and communicate in a way that helps you make better decisions—and build stronger relationships—in everything that you do.

This book is a distillation of over ten years of teaching and learning with my Mediate Your Life training partner, John Kinyon. It's because these insights have made such a difference

in our own lives that we are compelled to share them with you. We can't predict exactly what you'll do with the life-changing information in this book, but we can promise that you will never regret "Choosing Peace."

Thanks for joining us on the journey.

Ike Lasater
New Haven, Connecticut
May 2014

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Choosing Peace

Creating Connection to Reduce Conflict

"In all situations, it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a person humanized or de-humanized."
—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Sally hadn't known it was possible to slam a door so hard. She half-ran, half-stumbled down the driveway, her eyes blurred with angry tears. This was supposed to be the start of a special week. It had been almost five years since she and her siblings had been together in the same place. Sally was determined to make it a great visit for all of them—and especially for Mom, who would soon be released from the hospital.

Gerry had made the overseas flight because Sally had begged him to come see why their mother could no longer live alone. Peg might not be willing to admit it yet, but Peg didn't stop by Mom's place everyday like Sally did. Sally had been counting on Gerry to back her up on the difficult decisions to be made about their mother's care. Instead, the siblings' first meeting at their mother's house felt tense. In short order, all three had said things they would later regret, and the conversation had devolved into shouting and accusations. That's when Sally had fled the scene and slammed the door.

Normally, Sally might have called her husband, but she had quarreled with him that very morning about which of them was going to take off work for an emergency parent-teacher conference. Sally dialed her friend Alicia instead. "Why is this happening to my family?" Sally wept. "We're falling apart."

* * * * *

Conflicts are a fact of life. Everywhere that there are human relationships, there will also be conflicts. Rare is the person who relishes being in the midst of conflict. Many people prefer to avoid conflicts, or to pretend that conflicts don't exist. Some even try to avoid the word "conflict," instead substituting words such as "friction" or "disagreement." However you name it, the experience of challenge, difficulty, and stress is universal and nearly omnipresent in our lives.

Broadly defined, conflict is any sort of tension, opposition, or difference that creates feelings of pain and separation. In the traditional sense, conflict exists any time two or more individuals are in dispute. Most days, you will find yourself a witness to this kind of conflict. Maybe you see a fellow commuter argue with the bus driver, or you observe two children fighting over a toy. Most days, you will also find yourself directly embroiled in one or more conflicts. Perhaps you find yourself at odds with a co-worker, or you clash with a family member over scheduling or household chores.

Conflicts also occur between different aspects of your own mind, as happens when you are torn over a difficult decision. A huge factor in how you respond to external conflicts is how you deal with what happens to you internally. As a human being, you will inevitably experience a physiological response to anything that you perceive as a conflict. In that moment of reaction, your thinking may literally become impaired—so much so, that it can be difficult to choose a response that you will feel good about later.

Sally found herself in conflict with her siblings, but also with herself. Like her brother and sister, she found herself saying hurtful things that she now wished she could take back. She ended up slamming the door and cutting off communication rather than continuing a conversation that was making her upset. Was there anything Sally could have done to make the sibling meeting go more smoothly? And how could she repair the damage caused by their communication breakdown?

A NEW APPROACH TO CONFLICT AND MEDIATION

The Mediate Your Life program begins with three premises:

1. Conflict is inherent in all relationships, including the one you have with yourself.
2. We are all of us vulnerable to the brain's "fight-flight-freeze" survival response, a now mostly unhelpful pattern of reaction in our modern world (we will refer to this response interchangeably as fight or flight, fight-flight-freeze, or stress response).
3. Through our choice of language and awareness, we can overcome the fight or flight pattern and turn our daily conflicts into opportunities for connection.

Let's explore what follows from each of those three premises.

Conflict is inevitable. Sometimes just the simple decision to accept this fact can help us become more comfortable in the face of conflict.

Conflicts are bound to happen because we are pattern-recognition creatures. If you've ever found yourself rehashing the same old ground with a partner, you know something about patterns and how difficult it can be to break out of them.

Each of us has tender spots or “trigger points” that developed as a result of our individual histories and these can activate a fight-flight-freeze reaction.

Conflicts happen because we humans are together, but separate. The clearer we are on this point, the more likely we'll remember how to make the connections we want.

Because we can't ever truly get inside someone else's experience, it's all too easy to misunderstand each other. How often do we misinterpret or over-interpret another person's actions as hostile to our own interests? How often do we miss someone else's signal because it was unintelligible to us? Until we have the ability to “mind-meld,” opportunities for miscommunication and conflict will abound.

For now, the mind-meld is the stuff of science fiction. The “lizard brain” is not. Brain science has shown us how parts of the human brain may conspire against us in conflict situations. The amygdala (sometimes jokingly referred to as the “lizard brain”) is where our fight-flight-freeze and emotional responses originate. Its role is quite different from that of the neo-cortex, which is responsible for self-direction or “executive functioning.” The neural pathways between these two parts of the brain are relatively weak, which means that our most base emotions (fear, fury) can easily get the best of us.

The weak connection between lizard brain and neo-cortex is good news if you're being chased by a bear. In that context, you definitely want your body putting all its energies into moving your legs as quickly as possible without any conscious thought. But it's not great news when a family member makes an off-hand comment that triggers you into a high-adrenaline state.

If you've never practiced how to respond to conflict, a triggering comment can take you places you didn't intend to go. If your stress response tends toward **fight**, you may say or shout something that is more cutting than it is helpful. You may physically express yourself in a way that is intimidating or dangerous to those around you.

If your fight-flight-freeze response tends toward **flight or freeze**, you may run away to avoid the confrontation, or else find yourself tongue-tied and stuck in place.

Some people find themselves experiencing multiple stress responses, as Sally did when she first fought with her siblings and then felt compelled to escape.

Could it ever be otherwise? Reacting in these ways to conflict situations wastes so much energy. How wonderful it would be if we could live our lives without the constant tumult—without bouncing off each other and reacting to stimuli like the little metal balls in a pinball machine.

The Mediate Your Life approach offers an entirely different way of being in conflict. Its focus is on *responding* to conflict rather than just reacting to it.

Our approach is not invested in figuring out who's right or wrong in the midst of conflict, whose strategy is best, or what you have to do to "win." When you "mediate your life," you cultivate an entirely new set of go-to habits for the moments when you are confronted with a difficult situation. With practice, you can grow accustomed to adopting a bird's-eye view of the conflict and can select your words and body language to ensure that everyone involved in the conflict has the opportunity to try to hear each other fully.

"To hear each other fully" isn't as simple as it may sound. In fact, it can be one of the hardest things you ever learn to do. There's nothing touchy-feely about that skill. For most people, developing the ability to respond to others with compassionate, open ears requires a lot of practice and "re-wiring" of old conflict habits.

When you can manage the discomfort of conflict and stay focused in your disagreements long enough to hear not only the words, but also the motivations behind the words, something incredible happens. When you can "mediate" your internal reactions by sorting them out in tandem with the needs of everyone else present, you may find that the outcome exceeds your wildest expectations.

* * * * *

Sally hadn't expected that sorting out Mom's crisis was going to be easy. But she had assumed that her brother and sister would listen to her and would do what they could to help. Instead, it seemed to Sally that both siblings had been skeptical and resistant. Peg thought it was "rude and disrespectful" to try to coax their mother to do anything she didn't want to do. Gerry expressed doubt that their mother's living situation was as dire as Sally had made it out to be. He grew defensive and angry when Sally told him that he lived too far away and so he couldn't possibly know what was going on.

Sally gripped the steering wheel more tightly as she remembered the words that she and Gerry had spoken to each other next.

"Don't you think you're overstepping here?" Gerry had asked Sally. "Just because you never moved away doesn't mean that you're in charge. Mom's still Mom. And she has other children besides just you."

Sally had felt her cheeks grow hot with fury and humiliation. "Mom's not still Mom. If you cared enough to come home more often, you would know that. And I might as well be Mom's only child, because I'm the only one who gives a damn about her well-being!"

Sally had seen the flashes of anguish and outrage on her siblings' faces. Overwhelmed by her own feelings of hurt and frustration and scared that she was about to break down, she had no idea what she could do next. That's when her instinct for self-protection took over and she ran away.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO “MEDIATE YOUR LIFE”?

The word “mediate” comes from a Latin root that means “in the middle” or “in-between.” To mediate is to facilitate communication between two or more individuals or groups.

Whether or not you’re a professional mediator, the odds are good that you do some mediating every day. Sometimes it may be over a dispute that is external to you, as happens when two children both want the same toy and you help them to work out a solution. Or maybe you’ve played informal mediator between yourself and another person, when you tried to listen deeply to the neighbor with whom you’re always butting heads. Perhaps you often find yourself mediating an internal struggle, between different parts of yourself, as happens when a part of you clings to the security of a boring, but stable job, while another part of you craves a more interesting, but less secure type of work.

Mediation from our approach tries to bring about empathic understanding and connection between opposing sides. Note that getting two individuals to understand each other’s perspectives is not the same as getting them to agree. In a successful mediation, the people who were formerly estranged end up feeling connected to each other because they recognize their mutually held human motivations. Skillful mediation uses connection to guide everyone toward a formal resolution to the dispute.

Implicitly, we’re always *trying* to mediate the conflicts we encounter in various contexts. However, relatively few people are able to mediate effectively. That’s because certain essential skills are very rarely taught—even in formal mediator trainings.

The Mediate Your Life trainings and practice sessions are designed to give you those crucial skills while also sharpening your awareness of different types of conflict situations. By showing you how to more consistently access the most calm, clear-eyed and empathetic version of yourself, they allow you

to use and strengthen the mediator instincts you may already possess.

The Mediate Your Life approach can also help you to cut through the conflicts within yourself. It helps you to navigate the big questions, including:

- How do I build a satisfying life?
- How can I figure out “what is” right now?
- How do I create meaning in all I do?
- How do I get clear about what I want to create in my life?
- How do I live my life in a way that is true to myself, and not to others’ expectations?
- How can I figure out who and what is most important to me?
- How will I spend my time?
- How do I find the courage to express myself authentically?
- How can I interact with others so all of us are more likely to get what we want and need?
- How do I put any of the above into action once I know it? (And how do I keep knowing it?)

This is serious stuff! It’s nothing less than choosing how you want to live and act in every part of your life. It’s figuring out how to *be*, moment to moment, such that you can act in accordance with your deepest values.

RESPONDING, NOT REACTING

By the time you finish reading this book, we hope you’ll feel excited enough to embrace an entirely new way to be in conflict. Remember, conflicts are a fact of life. The radical idea at the core of the Mediate Your Life program is that you can actually get comfortable with conflict. When you learn to

“mediate” your internal reactions along with other people’s needs, amazing things will happen. That’s because you will be *responding* to conflict, rather than just *reacting* to it. Yes, you’ve heard us say that before. But now, let’s unpack that idea.

To explain the difference between “responding” and “reacting,” it’s worth returning to the quotation that opened this chapter—a quote that is widely attributed to the 19th century German philosopher, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

**“In all situations,
it is my response that decides
whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated,
and a person humanized or de-humanized.”**

Let’s examine that quote more closely, line by line, and let’s consider it through the lens of some hypothetical examples.

“In ALL situations...”

At every moment of our lives, we must choose what to do next.

Example A: When you’re running late and someone cuts you off in traffic.

Example B: When someone else’s success causes you to doubt yourself.

Example C: When a family member’s words remind you of a past hurt.

Each of these examples represents a situation or a sudden rush of feeling, that can knock you off balance. What happens next?

“... it is my response that decides...”

If you can stop yourself from reacting out of the irritation or pain caused by a stressful situation, then

you can have a lot of power over what happens next. That's because your response will determine...

"... if a crisis is escalated or de-escalated ..."

The "crisis" here can refer to any sort of difficulty or tension. Your response will have clear consequences. Things are going to get easier or more complicated as a result.

"... and a person or humanized or de-humanized."

If you can respond (out of choice), rather than react (out of the fight or flight pattern), whatever you do next will rely heavily on your *perception* of the person or persons involved.

To "de-humanize" someone may sound extreme. But think about the last time you were in the midst of an adrenaline-spiking disagreement with someone else. Or think about the last time somebody did or said something to you that left you feeling crushed. Wasn't it quite easy, in that moment, to peg the other person as the embodiment of everything you hated and feared?

And isn't that reaction kind of normal? Well, yes.

What isn't "normal," or at least not normally modeled for us, is how to humanize, or empathize, with someone else in the midst of a frustrating exchange. We're more likely to want to thump the other person on the head than to try to imagine him or her as a fellow human with needs much like our own.

This is why we began the Mediate Your Life program: to share a nearly foolproof formula for how you can respond, rather than react, to difficult situations. Once you become aware of your brain's particular fight-flight-freeze pattern, you can learn how to overcome it. Then you are free to respond in a way that can turn your daily conflicts into opportunities for connection.

Let's run through our hypothetical examples to see what that would look like.

Example A:

When you're running late and someone cuts you off in traffic.

When that jackass cuts you off in traffic on a day that you're already running late, you slam on the horn and signal your irritation with your middle finger.

—OR—

You breathe deeply in response to the feeling of clench in your gut. After taking a moment to work through your exasperation, you try to imagine what might be going on for the distracted driver in that other car. Feeling a flicker of empathy for the other driver, you start to feel calmer about how to handle your own time-crunch.

The second response might feel a whole lot less satisfying in the heat of the moment. But ask yourself: In which scenario did you de-escalate the crisis? In which were you and all the other people around you safer? And in which did you enjoy more control?

Example B:

When someone else's success causes you to doubt yourself.

When your co-worker is singled out for praise at a public work function, you feel happiness for your co-worker (whom you admire) along with a flood of self-doubt; you mentally berate yourself for not being good enough or worthy enough to rise to the top.

—OR—

You notice your feelings of agitation and sadness and realize how much you value knowing that you are contributing at work. From this realization flows another: how important it is to you to care about the people you work with and to celebrate their successes. So you focus on feeling and

expressing gratitude for your co-worker. Later, you reflect on how some of your own contributions have been positively received by your workmates and also how you might seek constructive feedback to continue to improve your at-work performance.

Again, the second scenario is the more challenging one. True, there was no resentment toward the co-worker, but there was a reflexive self-criticism, and this de-humanized you! We de-humanize ourselves—and limit what we can contribute to the world—each time we slip into the all-too-easy spiral of shame and self-recrimination.

Example C:

When a family member's words remind you of a past hurt.

When you confide to your cousin that you've decided to become a teacher, she expresses surprise, because, in her words, "You weren't exactly an A-student." You cover up your anger and embarrassment by blurting: "Why do you always try to make me feel lousy about myself?"

—OR—

After taking the necessary steps to take in your cousin's observation without having a bad reaction to it, you offer an honest reply: "It's true I didn't have a perfect grade point average. But remember how supportive my teachers were the year my folks got divorced and I was in a really bad space? And remember how Mr. Vigiano convinced me to try out for the debate team? I want to help other kids the way my teachers helped me."

The second scenario allows for the possibility that your cousin hadn't intended for her words to register a criticism. It also recognizes that she might be feeling uncomfortable at the prospect of you changing your accustomed role in the family. You don't have to ignore the fact that your cousin's surprise and her particular choice of words "hit you in the gut," but

you can take steps that allow you to move through the hurt as you try to figure out where your cousin was coming from. The words you wanted to hurl back at her (“Why do you *always...*?”) hint that you and she may both be feeling constrained by your childhood identities and/or that you carry judgments about each other that are getting in the way of clear communication. To help your cousin understand your career shift, you can choose to share more of your reasons for wanting to be a teacher, even if some of them leave you feeling vulnerable. The conversation that follows will be all the smoother if you and your cousin can approach each other from a space of trust and assumed goodwill. Even if it’s only you who intentionally occupies this space, your interactions with your cousin will likely be marked by greater kindness and honesty.

Whew! Each of the alternate scenarios above shows all that becomes possible when you mediate your internal reactions and choose to be curious about the other person’s perspective, such that you can try and “get” where she is coming from. When you respond rather than react to others’ words and actions, your response really will decide “if a crisis is escalated or de-escalated and if the people around you are humanized or de-humanized.” As you probably noticed, it’s the de-humanizing of others (and of ourselves) that often leads us into trouble.

OUR ROOTS IN NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION (NVC)

The Mediate Your Life approach is steeped in the language of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), a linguistic model created by the world-famous clinical psychologist, Marshall Rosenberg. Dr. Rosenberg created NVC in the 1960s to reduce violence and spread peace-building skills around the world. In the decades since, he has offered NVC trainings and conflict

resolution sessions in over 60 countries, sometimes stepping in to facilitate conflicts in war-torn regions of the globe.

Nonviolent Communication provides a structure, or “how-to,” that aligns with many of humanity’s spiritual traditions. It gives us a way to focus our mental attention on “what is,” stripped of all our prior assumptions and prejudices. In this way, NVC allows us to view the world with fresh eyes and hearts, so we can more often choose to respond with compassion.

We encountered NVC’s transformative worldview in the 1990s, and were so taken with it that we immediately began to integrate it into our lives and soon began teaching it to others. We quickly found, however, that the basic NVC model was not sufficient in stressful situations, when the fight or flight reaction was triggered. In the moments we most needed NVC, it was often difficult to access. In the moments when we were especially defensive or inflamed, NVC could feel like a very elusive tool, indeed.

We noticed a similar pattern in our trainings, in which we sought to teach people to mediate conflicts with NVC. We had assumed mediation simply consisted of a mediator supporting two or more people to resolve their conflicts. We found this to be quite a challenge. In order for mediators to be maximally effective, they needed to be able to mediate their own internal conflicts, especially those that arose in reaction to their clients. They also needed more of a structure to handle the different types of disputes and communication pitfalls that their clients brought their way. In these contexts, NVC on its own terms was not enough.

As a result of this discovery, we began to create our own step-by-step guides, or “maps,” to navigate the territory of different types of conflict situations. We devised a specific map for each situation and incorporated them into our trainings. Over time, we developed nuanced exercises to let our participants practice how to navigate internal and

interpersonal conflicts with the help of what we initially referred to as our “NVC Mediation” method.

Eventually, NVC Mediation became Mediate Your Life, especially once we took on the mission of supporting individuals to mediate their lives and their internal conflicts by developing a keen awareness of their fight or flight patterns. So, while our work started with formal mediation (between two other people), it expanded to include all forms of conflict a person can experience, within oneself, between oneself and others, and between others.

Nonetheless, Nonviolent Communication remains a crucial part of Mediate Your Life’s DNA, not least because we (John and Ike) came together as training partners thanks to our shared respect for NVC and an experience made possible by Marshall Rosenberg.

In late 2001, Dr. Rosenberg had been planning a trip to Pakistan to offer NVC trainings to Afghan refugees. Independently of each other, we both had asked permission to tag along. Dr. Rosenberg graciously said yes. Remember, this was in the wake of 9/11 and the dawn of the U.S. war in Afghanistan, so that region of the world was growing increasingly unpredictable. Dr. Rosenberg eventually decided not to travel to Pakistan, due to very real concerns about safety. We were already there, and we ended up offering three days of training to Afghan elders in Peshawar, which is 50 kilometers (31 miles) from the Pakistan-Afghan border.

It was astonishing to witness how effectively NVC bridged immense cultural and linguistic divides. We felt a deep connection with the elders as we witnessed how powerful it was for them to be heard about what was important to them. Then, on the final day of training, the elders fell out over whether we should be allowed to visit the mosque during prayers. With the help of our translator, we used NVC mediation to sort out everyone’s views on the question and eventually came to an agreement that worked for all. One of

the elders came up to us afterward with tears in his eyes and said the words we will never forget: *"If we could do this [sort out crises with NVC mediation], we would have no need for war."*

Galvanized by that experience, we began offering regular NVC mediation trainings in the San Francisco Bay area, where we both then lived with our respective families. We started with eight-week classes and some weekend workshops. For the next 11 years, in some guise or another, we kept building on what would become the Mediate Your Life approach and devising the practice exercises that would best allow our students to develop entirely new habits in the midst of conflicts.

Both of us had our unique strengths as trainers, but we found a particular synergy when we lead trainings together. Eventually, we co-designed our "dream training" and turned it into a reality. That first year of the NVC Mediation "Immersion Program" was a bit rocky. Thanks to the generous feedback from our earliest students, we kept refining the immersion experience until students could absorb the material at an accelerated rate while also remaining in total control of their learning. From the beginning, we urged students to use *real* conflicts from their lives in the training exercises, including any conflict that might arise between students or even between a student and one of us. The authenticity of the exercises demonstrates how reliable the Mediate Your Life maps can be. They also offer the students some instant results. We've never regretted the "real conflicts" model, as it gives our students the confidence to apply the Mediate Your Life approach to any challenge in their lives and communities.

Over the past decade, we have led immersion programs in Australia, Poland, and Korea, as well as in multiple locations across the United States. (See Appendix G for more about our trainings.) Through the years, we have grown along with our students, some of whom now co-facilitate our trainings and have launched Mediate Your Life-based consultancies of their own. We could never have foreseen how a partnership born

out of our mutual enthusiasm for NVC would gradually evolve into a globally recognized method for managing conflict in every possible context, and for “choosing peace” in the before, during and after of conflict resolution. We’ve dedicated our professional lives to this work because it works. We’re also hooked because we’ve seen how the Mediate Your Life approach has transformed our own lives.

WHY THIS WORK IS IMPORTANT TO IKE

Out of everything I’ve tried, from Iyengar Yoga to Soto Zen, from voice dialogue and psychotherapy to Aikido, nothing has been as effective as the approach I use now.

For the positive transformation of my personal life, I have relied on Nonviolent Communication and the Mediate Your Life approach that John Kinyon and I developed out of our shared roots in NVC. I use the skills I teach every day. They help me to align my actions with my values. As I shared in the introduction to this book, if I value treating people with respect, then I’m not being consistent with that value when I contemplate punching a man on the street. Most of the spiritual and therapeutic approaches I’ve studied lay out the ideals to follow, but they don’t provide me with the tools to let me assess *in real time* whether or not my behavior is aligned with those ideals.

The Mediate Your Life approach is the most effective path I’ve found to help me wake up and to stay awake. It helps me to be aware of when I’m doing or saying things that I’m likely to regret, and it give me the means to make a course correction. This allows me to re-establish who I am and who I want to be as expressed by my conduct. I believe I create myself by my conduct, and that’s a tenet of the Mediate Your Life approach. Heartfelt principles and values are fine and good. But, if we can’t manifest them in all we do and say, then they become occasions for self-criticism and self-punishment.

With the Mediate Your Life approach, you become aware of your conduct, and can reflect on how it is and is not consistent with your values, while skipping the de-energizing trap of self-blame. Believe me when I say that this is not about denial or “letting yourself off easy.” It’s a strategy for self-improvement. Because beating yourself up or trying to use shame to motivate yourself into doing something (or *not* doing something) often has the paradoxical effect of reinforcing the behavior that you are distressed about.

The path I’m on with Mediate Your Life has given me tools to engage with people who have vastly different life experiences than my own. By listening to others in the ways that NVC and Mediate Your Life make possible, I’ve gotten as close as I’ve ever been to “walking in another person’s shoes,” and comprehending what motivates and animates that person in a particular situation. Having tapped that understanding, I feel care toward people I don’t know well—and that has been both very humbling and very satisfying to me.

For me, the work of sharing the Mediate Your Life approach is urgent: I’m in my sixties and have children and grandchildren. I care deeply about the world that we’re leaving for them and for all children. That’s why I want the Mediate Your Life program to help you and those you love to live more fulfilling and satisfying lives. If it helps one person, that is a good unto itself. But by altering how each of us respond to even the smallest conflicts, we can—person by person, community by community—build the habits of empathy and collaboration that just may bridge the giant chasms that divide us. The habits laid out in the Mediate Your Life program can change a life. They also may be literally life saving, as we respond to climate change, religious conflicts, wars over resources, and all the other challenges that threaten us as a species.

WHY THIS WORK IS IMPORTANT TO JOHN

I believe that a person can resolve and heal from any conflict. I believe that truly anyone can learn to do this, so long as he or she is willing to put in the time. And I believe that the insights of the Mediate Your Life program will contribute to the positive evolution of humanity. Just as passing on the light of a single candle can eventually illuminate a room to brilliance, so too can a single student of the Mediate Your Life approach eventually help to transform how our human species responds to conflict.

Without NVC and the work of Mediate Your Life, I would be living a very different life. Today I am fortunate to be very happily married, with three happy, healthy, thriving children. Believe me, none of this would have been possible were it not for NVC mediation. I don't believe I would be married today, and I certainly wouldn't know what to do as a parent, without the guidance of the very skills that I'm proud to teach.

Our Mediate Your Life approach uses a "three-chair model" as its basic framework. Transformation happens by exposing two opposing perspectives to an empathetic third presence. To me this triad represents a holy trinity of sorts, a sacred geometry in which opposing forces find synthesis and integration at a higher order of functioning. Using this approach takes some care, but it's well worth it. Ultimately, it harnesses the tremendous energy and power that is latent in all conflict and directs that energy into more positive directions.

Both Ike and I feel an enormous gratitude to Marshall Rosenberg for the legacy he has passed on to us and to many, many others around the world. We'll continue to honor that legacy through our Mediate Your Life work, because we can't imagine not sharing the skills that we know, first-hand, can repair even the most broken and seemingly hopeless relationships.

This ability to create connection from conflict is now an imperative. The sustainability of our daily lives—and of the planet—depend upon it.

THE GOALS OF THIS BOOK

Think for a moment about your own experience and the patterns you notice in your life:

- Do you tend to avoid conflict and the people you have disagreements with?
- Do you find yourself feeling rattled long after a stressful event? Do you endlessly replay the event in your mind and re-live the unpleasant feelings that came with it?
- Do you beat yourself up over things you did or said—or things you failed to do and say? Do you have the voice of the relentless self-critic in your head?
- When you get angry with someone, do you see him or her as “the bad guy”?
- When someone makes suggestions for things you could do differently, do you find yourself becoming defensive and angry?
- Do you sometimes respond to conflict situations by giving someone the “cold shoulder”; i.e., by pointedly pretending that the other person doesn’t exist?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above, then this book is for you.

If you would like to have more satisfying and engaging relationships, this book is for you.

If you would like to get absolutely clear about who you are, who you still want to be, and the next steps to living your best possible life, then this book is definitely for you.

Think of this book as your guide to some of the trickiest, stickiest moments of your life.

Let what you read in these pages be the equivalent of a clear-headed friend at your elbow, the one who helps you remember to breathe and remain calm whenever you are in a situation like Sally's. With enough practice, ultimately *you* will be that clear-headed friend. You will build a better life—for yourself and others—by changing how you respond to conflicts.

What are the recurring conflicts in your life right now? Maybe there is a lot of distrust in your personal relationships or maybe the fight or flight reaction kicks in easily for you and for the people closest to you. Maybe you have habitual ways of responding to conflict that you know are the equivalent of pouring gasoline on a fire, exacerbating the crisis instead of diminishing it.

Which would you rather do? Develop the capacity to catch yourself and choose the words that will make a situation better? Or continue the habits and patterns that intensify the conflicts in your personal life and in the wider world?

This book, and the whole of the *Mediate Your Life* book series, will help you to choose. If you study the Mediate Your Life approach and consistently practice it, we predict that you will:

- Recognize your fight-flight-freeze stress patterns and be able to shift out of them
- More often respond to conflicts in ways that you feel good about later
- Find a softer way to approach difficult situations
- Be able to listen more skillfully, and without judging another person's perspective as "wrong" or "bad"
- Learn to be clearer in your own communications and to help others be clearer
- Be kinder to yourself and to those close to you
- Have a quality of interaction with others that is deeper
- Create more peace and compassion in your life

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

In the past decade, the *Mediate Your Life* workshops and immersion programs have attracted thousands of students from all over the world. Many have urged us to publish our training manual and to write books about our NVC mediation approach so our work could reach an even wider audience. A lot of our students go on to teach the Mediate Your Life approach to others in their communities and workplaces, and they, too, have asked for a resource like the one you hold in your hands.

We're thrilled to share the awareness techniques and practice exercises that we have developed in our Mediate Your Life immersion programs. However, as our students can tell you, this material is not something you can read once and then expect instant results. Seeing real change will require some more effort. To benefit from the tools inside this book, you'll need to try them out for yourself through experiment and play. This book will support you in shedding less productive ways of interacting and replacing them with more effective communication patterns and reflexes.

Just as you can't read a book about swimming and suddenly know how to swim, you also can't read a book about communicating in a different way and be able to do it perfectly on your very first try. Consider this book a first step in the process of acquiring a whole new mindset. To extend the swimming metaphor, you will first dip your toe in the water and then get your feet wet. Eventually, you'll work up to where you are comfortable in the shallows, and then you'll go deeper and deeper until you are able to swim from one beach to the next.

If you're brand new to NVC mediation, then this book will help you get your feet wet. If you already have some experience, it will deepen your understanding of the basics and increase your confidence. If you've been working with NVC mediation for a long time, then you may enjoy this book

for how it enhances your capacity to embody and teach the skills that you use every day.

Wherever you are in your process, we invite you to take what you need from this book and to allow the parts that make the most sense to you to seep into your interactions. Each story in this book serves as a life buoy and lighthouse. Let them prop you up whenever you need a little help and let them guide you to safety.

Unlike other programs for self-improvement, you don't need to invest in a lot of special equipment or set aside enormous blocks of time to make progress toward your goals. All we ask is that you take personally everything that you read in these pages. That is, take it in and make it your own. As you read, do your best to try and live this book, so you can begin to see for yourself all there is to gain from its approach. Stick with it, and you'll get a glimpse of what your life can be like when you are more often at peace with yourself and are able to connect—really connect—with others. Work through the practice suggestions, and you will notice in yourself a decreased level of anxiety and a far greater capacity to handle difficult conversations.

Use the practice exercises to reflect on whatever happens in your daily life so you can learn from it. All of it. There is no failure here, only more fodder for growth. Use each "Practice Pause" when it shows up in the text. If you really want to turbo-charge your learning, find a practice partner so together you can go through the seventeen techniques we share. If you can't find a local partner, then find one in the Mediate Your Life network via our Facebook page.

Notice opportunities to practice as you move through your day. What's terrific about these skills is that you can practice them literally anywhere, at any moment, and with anyone with whom you have interactions. This includes everyone—from your buddies to your boss to the barista in your neighborhood coffee shop. So don't let any excuse get in the way of your commitment to use this book. The sooner you

start, the sooner you can begin creating more meaningful relationships and building the life you want. And the sooner the people who share your life will begin to notice the change in you.

HOW THIS BOOK IS ORGANIZED

This, the first volume in the *Mediate Your Life* series, covers the most foundational content of our method. Later books will walk you through the “maps” in our mediation model. Most of the chapters in this book present the building blocks of NVC as we teach them in our programs. If the entire *Mediate Your Life* series is an operating manual on how to fly an airplane, then this volume is the essential overview of how to read the dials in the cockpit.

Even if you never read any of the other volumes in the *Mediate Your Life* series, as long as you move diligently through the practice exercises in this first book, you will still feel a greater sense of peace and control over your reactions.

Chapters 2-6 offer a crystal clear overview of the NVC model as it is taught in our *Mediate Your Life* programs. NVC, or Nonviolent Communication, sometimes goes by other names, including Compassionate Communication or Collaborative Communication. However it is labeled, the NVC model is built upon four components of communication: Observations, Feelings, Needs, and Requests. Sometimes these four components are referred to by the acronym OFNR. When you have enough experience with it, OFNR can profoundly alter how you perceive the world and your negotiations within it.

Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for understanding how to use the four components of communication. It describes the psychological benefits of being heard and how you can use OFNR plus empathetic listening to produce the all-important “shift,” or temporary lifting of tensions, between people who are at odds with each other.

Chapter 3 draws the distinction between observations and judgments. You may think you know the difference already, but this chapter shows how frequently most of us mix them up, particularly in conflict situations.

Chapter 4 is all about feelings and the perils of trying to access and interpret them when emotions are running high. The way we talk about our feelings can fuel a conflict or can help resolve it. This chapter shows how to talk about feelings in a way that makes the speaker's intentions clearer and reduces agitation in both the listener and the speaker.

Chapter 5 distinguishes between a need and a strategy. After taking care to define a "need" in NVC terms, it shows why finding out what a person needs can be a remarkably clarifying and calming piece of information, particularly in moments of conflict. Chapter 5 also makes plain the difference between needs and strategies and how to find the need when you are only aware of your strategy.

Chapter 6 delivers a simple but astonishing message about making requests. If you're someone who struggles to know what you want, or what the people around you want, then this chapter may blow your mind. After differentiating between requests and demands, it explains how to make requests that are maximally effective.

The **Conclusion** brings back the intention of this book: to support you in learning the skills to create space between a stimulus and your fight or flight response so that you have the chance to choose peace. If you see the possibilities for improving your connection to yourself and others in the pages of this book, then you will also be interested in the glimpse we give of the territory we will cover in the rest of the Mediate Your Life series.

The **Epilogue** by John Kinyon is not so much an ending as it is a gateway to new possibilities. This final chapter offers a preview of a new way to be as John reflects on the legacy of Marshall Rosenberg. Through stories of Marshall's example, John highlights the importance of going beyond language to

embody the awareness that the distinctions and skills in this book point to. This awareness is the key to choosing peace.

* * * * *

Sally had pulled her car over to the side of the road so she could continue her call with Alicia. She could feel the tension in her body start to dissipate as she spoke with her longtime friend.

"It sounds like you're feeling scared and overwhelmed right now," Alicia was saying. "I wonder if you might need some support and rest."

"Yes!" Sally was surprised when the word came out as a sob. It just felt so good to hear someone put words to all the anger and confusion she had just been experiencing.

"I'm guessing that your siblings might be feeling scared and sad about how things are going," Alicia continued. "I wonder if they need to hear that they matter, and that they contribute in some way to your mother and to you."

"Well, they do contribute," Sally replied. "Peg always comes around on the rare weekends that she doesn't have to work. And even Gerry does a good job of keeping Mom's spirits up. She loves the silly little postcards he sends her. But now I really need Gerry and Peg to get serious..."

"Can you tell me what you mean by 'serious?' Do you have a specific request for either of them?"

Ten minutes later, Sally was back at her mother's house, feeling a mixture of relief and trepidation at the sight of her sister's car in the driveway. She took a deep breath as she mentally rehearsed the apology and requests that she had practiced saying out loud to Alicia. Sally knew this wouldn't be easy, but she loved her siblings and was determined that a stress reaction would NOT get the better of her again. Having recognized which of Gerry's words had

made her so angry would help. Remembering OFNR would help, too. Feeling hopeful and calm, Sally strode up the walkway of her childhood home and knocked lightly on the door before letting herself inside.