

## Speak Your Heart

*Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings - always darker, emptier and simpler.*

*Friedrich Nietzsche*

When we say we're going to give someone a piece of our mind, we mean that we are going to tell them off, detailing the ways in which they are wrong and we are right. When I suggested to the participants at a recent workshop I led on Constructive Criticism that speaking their hearts — by openly stating their feelings — might lead to a more constructive outcome, the overwhelming “Oh-no!-we-can't-do-that!” response implied that I was proposing a method of professional suicide. I realized that the f-word “feeling” is probably viewed as more taboo than the other f-word, at least in the professional world. What makes us so afraid of expressing our feelings?

I think that part of the problem comes from our inability to name our feelings, and from a tendency to ignore, if not deny, them. Somehow we have come to believe Descartes' “I think, therefore I am” pronouncement to such a degree that we are convinced that our feelings have no place in our lives or we should evolve beyond them. We seem to feel ashamed to admit that we are feeling creatures. Some feelings, such as happiness, surprise and anticipation seem more socially acceptable, while “negative” feelings such as anger, fear and hurt clearly are not. Perhaps we hope that if we deny that our emotions are there, then maybe we can avoid being overwhelmed by them.

Ironically, the more we try to control our emotions by covering them up, the more they control us and are likely to manifest themselves in a destructive way. Repressed feelings become toxic and, like the poisons in a toxic waste dump, will eventually seep or even explode. Facial expressions and vocal tone at odds with our words betray our real feelings. Disproportionate rage, overreaction to slight provocations and cynicism are all signs of suppressed emotions.

Most of our feelings are connected to our relationships, and voicing them carries risk: we are afraid of hurting someone else's feelings, afraid of being rejected, no longer loved. Above all, I think we fear vulnerability — ours and our counterpart's. When we speak our hearts we open a window on our soul. That's scary. So to avoid getting hurt we build up fortresses of cynicism and judgments from which we send out barbs of accusations and blame. This actually creates a state of pain, but we control it because we are administering it. At least we can't be caught off guard. As long as we tell ourselves that we know our counterpart will react negatively and that it is therefore not worth confronting him or her with what bothers us, we maintain a painful but predictable stasis. Through body language, oblique remarks or sarcasm we drop hints, hoping s/he will get the message that we feel annoyed, offended or hurt. In both our professional and personal relationships we frequently expect our counterparts to read our minds. When they don't, we feel frustrated and resentful. Somehow we believe that this strategy carries less risk of damaging the relationship because we can't be held accountable for what we didn't say.

When we don't examine our feelings they may disguise themselves in the form of verbal attack. Instead of "I feel hurt," we say "How can you be so thoughtless?" Instead of "I feel sad," we say "If it weren't for you, I'd be happy." Instead of "I feel frustrated," we say "That was incredibly stupid." The resentment we have built up from holding back our feelings thus gets dumped on the other in the form of labels or blame. When we don't stand up for what matters to us, our self-esteem suffers and we grow hostile. Not speaking up for ourselves turns us into the victim and our counterpart into the villain. Both lose — even if I let the other have his way and therefore win — because the relationship suffers. As long as we stay in this adversarial mode of me vs. you, right vs. wrong, either/or instead of both/and, we block growth and understanding. By ascribing the problem to the person, we make change impossible.

When we confront someone with behavior that's bothering us, we cannot prevent him or her from feeling hurt, at least initially. If my intention is to partner with the other to clarify the relationship and achieve greater mutual understanding of each of our needs and ways of seeing the world, then any hurts are the pains of growth and development and they will quickly fade. If I am out to change the other and express my disapproval of his being by saying "You are..." the pain I inflict will linger. When we speak our minds we often start with "you." When we speak our hearts we begin with "I." "I need" is a world away from "You should." "I feel angry" evokes a completely different response from "You make me furious." No one can disagree with your feelings if you declare them directly, but people will defend themselves when you blame your feelings on them.

Every human being has feelings. Feelings *are*. In that sense there are no right or wrong feelings. Paradoxically, if we voice our feelings, we are not ruled by them. The procedure for doing this is simple: think about the situation that is bothering you and separate facts, assumptions, judgments and feelings. Find the word that best fits your feeling and say "I feel ..." Beware that "I feel that..." (often followed by "you are") introduces a thought or a hidden attack and not a feeling. Openly stating feelings is not a sign of weakness but of strength, a way of taking responsibility for myself and sharing my truth. Pain in human interaction is inevitable, but there are different types of pain. We need to ask ourselves what brings us forward. When we speak our hearts we are then open to hear the hearts of others.