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Preface

LOVE, THE GREAT ENABLER

I have undertaken to rewrite *Achieving Emotional Literacy*,¹ five years after its publication in 1997 and fully in the twenty-first century. The book is longer and more elaborate, and it incorporates feedback originated by the original book. It integrates information from readers and clients, what I have gleaned from other books on emotional intelligence, from evolutionary psychology and neuroscience, and from what I have learned in my personal life over the last years; this work is, as most such work in psychology, the product of both science and personal predilection.

Since the publication of *Achieving Emotional Literacy* in 1997, emotional intelligence has passed from being a welcome, fresh way of thinking to becoming a number of widely disparate movements. The largest of these movements was a consultant's "growth business" with scores of companies offering to evaluate and improve people's EQs in the workplace. Regrettably, in that environment emotional intelligence became synonymous with "mature", "stable." and "hard-working." These are fine qualities, but they are vague and indistinguishable from all else that is desirable. No systematic methods of teaching emotional intelligence have been developed and no dramatic progress has been made in measuring EQ. Some questionnaires were developed which arguably have something to do with emotional intelligence and may actually help select better workers, but none can claim to yield any convincing measurements of EQ.

Twenty-five years ago, I conceived emotional literacy as a tool of human emancipation from stifling rationality and power. But the field of emotional intelligence, especially in the workplace has lost its edge; instead of liberating people's emotions, it is being used to help companies spot

bright-eyed, self controlled, hard-working employees.

Emotional skills are a great deal more than positive attitudes and impulse control; they can humanize and improve any enterprise beyond anything that has been experienced so far and their potential is being squandered on diluted, half measures. I fear that emotional intelligence is morphing into yet another corporate, human engineering lubricant with little specific relationship to emotional literacy.

On the other hand, EQ has also become a subject matter in schools, where thousands of devoted teachers are applying one or more of the scores of EQ teaching aids developed by as many companies. Here the results seem more promising, because what is being taught is unquestionably beneficial. Children are being educated about their different feelings, how to speak about them and how to express and control them. They are being trained with a kind-hearted attitude and a focus on developing friendly, cooperative relationships. Evidence suggests that these efforts are having beneficial results, at least in terms of the decreasing amounts of aggression being seen in the schools that teach the subject.² Still, none of these programs focus on the heart centered techniques that are at the core of this book, techniques which in my opinion would greatly amplify the beneficial effects of emotional literacy training for children and adolescents.

EMOTIONAL LITERACY

The point of this book goes beyond workplace maturity or schoolyard aggression. Emotional literacy is a source of personal power indispensable for success in today's world.³ The following five essential, thoroughly time-tested assertions must be understood to appreciate this work's scope:

☒ Emotional literacy is love-centered emotional intelligence.

- ☒ Loving (oneself and others) and being loved (by oneself and others) are the essential conditions of emotional literacy.
- ☒ The high skill of loving and accepting love, lost to most people, can be recovered and taught with five simple, precise, transactional exercises.
- ☒ In addition to improving loving skills, emotional literacy training involves three further skills of increasing difficulty; each one is supported by a further set of transactional exercises.

These skills are:

- a. Speaking about our emotions and what causes them,
- b. Developing our empathic, intuitive capacity, and
- c. Apologizing for the damage caused by our emotional mistakes.

Practice of these specific transactional exercises in personal relationships at home with friends and at work with others, will, over time, produce increased emotional literacy.

With these exercises you can become a more loving person, a person who feels love toward people and is able to love passionately in a sustained way; a person who is able to be affectionate and friendly. You will be better able to recognize, express, and control your emotions; you will realize when you are angry or joyful, ashamed or hopeful, and you will understand how to make your feelings known in a productive manner. You will become more empathic and will recognize the emotional states of others and respond to them compassionately. You will be able to take responsibility for the emotional damage caused by your

mistakes and apologize for them effectively. Instead of undermining and defeating you, your emotions will empower you and enrich your life and the lives of those around you.

IN SUMMARY

Emotional literacy—intelligence with a heart—can be learned through the practice of specific transactional exercises that target the awareness of emotion in ourselves and others, the capacities to love others and ourselves while developing honesty and the ability to take responsibility for our actions.

Introduction

Before getting to the substance of this book, I want to tell you what qualifies me to write on the subject.

This book is based on both on my professional and scientific training, enhanced by my experience as I struggle to understand my own emotional life. I believe that my combined professional, scientific, and personal experiences have translated into an understandable and productive text.

I was raised in a state of utter emotional illiteracy, as was expected and usual of the white, middle class boys destined to become professional men of my generation. I ignored my own emotions, believing that it was shameful, weak, and frightening to dwell on them. Equally, I disdained and ignored the emotions of others. All the while my emotions, especially my unacknowledged need for love, dictated and distorted most of my behavior. When I think back, sad to say, many of the things I did as I clumsily grasped for love were emotionally painful to the people in my life. I am told that people tolerated my hurtful ways because I made up with a naïve, narcissistic charm what I lacked in sensitivity.

You might think that I decided to study psychology because I was interested in people's feelings. In fact, my interest in psychology had to do with the belief that it would give me power over people: to be in a position to help, but also to dominate and control. As a student of psychology, emotions were the furthest thing from my mind. Actually, since the early 1900s, the emotions had been excluded from scientific psychology. Why? Because introspection, the method that was used to study emotions, was deemed to be hopelessly biased and subject to distortion.

Science is a discipline that encourages detachment and rationality uncluttered by emotion. A watershed event in my life happened when, as part of my training doing physiology experiments with animal muscles, I had to run a wire down the backbone of live frogs to destroy their

spinal cords. As I performed this grisly task, I told myself that if I wanted to be a real scientist, it was important to suppress my horror. The decision to do so, added to the earlier cultural and personal training of my childhood and adolescence, affected my life from then on. To my everlasting embarrassment, I later participated in experiments in which rats were starved to learn about their responses to severe hunger.

As a result of my decision to suppress my emotions during this critical stage of my professional training, I became even less interested in my own feelings and the feelings of others. I had infatuations but no real attachments and little respect, regret, or guilt when it came to the way I treated the people in my life. I never felt sustained joy and I never cried. I lost friends and was prone to depression and despair. Although I have a respectable IQ, when I look back at myself I see an emotionally illiterate young man with a very low emotional intelligence or EQ (emotional quotient).

When I finally stumbled upon my emotions (which I will discuss shortly), I was like an explorer discovering an exotic land, amazed, frightened, and captivated by the emotional landscape within and around me. Eventually, I decided to make emotions the subject of ongoing inquiry in my psychological practice, a pursuit that absorbs me to this day. Though at times arduous, I find this quest rewarding and empowering in my personal and working relationships.

EMOTIONS & PERSONAL POWER

Power is generally thought of as control, mainly the ability to control people and money. When we think of a powerful person, for example, we picture a man, a captain of industry, a major politician, or a superstar athlete who commands millions in salary: a masculine person with nerves of steel and the capacity to be emotionally detached

and cool. We have trouble picturing a woman even though women are increasingly acquiring that sort of power.

We have come to expect certain attributes in powerful people, and even though most of us will never attain that kind of power we imitate powerful people in the belief that in the real world, emotions are best kept under tight rein.

But the sort of personal power derived from the security of satisfying relationships and fruitful work is ultimately incompatible with a tight rein on our emotions. On the contrary, personal power depends on having a comfortable relationship with emotions—ours and other people's. Emotional literacy requires that our emotions be listened to and expressed in a productive way.

Not everyone who suffers from emotional illiteracy is emotionally deaf and dumb, as I was. Another form of emotional powerlessness occurs when we are excessively emotional and out of control with our feelings. Instead of being out of touch with the world of emotions, we're all too aware and responsive to them as they hound and terrorize us.

Either extreme spells trouble. Whether tightly controlled or too loosely expressed, our emotions can reduce our power rather than empower us. Unfortunately, in today's world, the interpersonal experience is all too often laced with emotional pain. Emotional literacy training facilitates cooperative, harmonious relationships at home and at work and gives us the tools to avoid an increasingly dark, cynical view of life. Emotional literacy makes it possible for every conversation, every human contact, and every partnership—however brief or long-term—to yield the largest possible rewards for all involved. Even though it doesn't guarantee unlimited access to cash and things, emotional literacy is a key to personal power because emotions *are* powerful if you can make them work for you rather than against you.

FINDING MY TEACHERS

What was it that put me in touch with the positive power of my emotions? My encounters and subsequent relationships with two different people, seven years apart: a rogue psychiatrist and a feminist partner.

The first person who significantly changed my life was Eric Berne, a 45-year-old psychiatrist at the time I met him in 1956. Berne's psychoanalytic training had recently ended because of differences with his training analyst. Since the early 1950s, he had been investigating and developing some radical departures from psychoanalysis that would later be known as Transactional Analysis.

In 1955, he started holding weekly meetings with a small group of professionals at his apartment a few blocks from San Francisco's Chinatown. I was taken to one of these meetings by Ben Handelman, a friend and coworker at the Berkeley Jewish Community Center. I found what Berne had to say very interesting and joined in the lively discussion. After the meeting, Berne asked me to return the following week, and I did. From then on, except for the years I was at the University of Michigan studying for a doctorate in clinical psychology, I rarely missed a meeting. I became Berne's disciple and learned everything he had to teach about his evolving theory of transactional analysis. Berne died in 1971 at the early age of sixty.

Transactional analysis (TA) is a technique that investigates human relationships by focusing on the precise content of people's interactions. TA is a powerful way of analyzing how people deal with each other and how they can change their lives by correcting their behavioral mistakes.

TA was a sharp departure from traditional psychoanalysis, which focuses on what goes on *inside* of people, while TA attends to what happens *between* them. But the most radical idea of Berne's was that you could actually

cure people of their emotional problems by showing them how to act differently with each other in their social transactions rather than by focusing on understanding why they were emotionally disturbed. The idea was that while understanding may be helpful, changing one's behavior is what would actually cure emotional troubles. A radical view in those highly psychoanalytically influenced times, this is now an accepted and commonplace understanding which is the basis for the cognitive-behavioral psychotherapies. Yet it remains controversial in some circles.

Emotions were not, at the time, our focus. In fact, we saw them as being largely irrelevant to our work, which was simply studying interpersonal transactions from a rational perspective. Yet Berne's concepts had everything to do with the eventual development of emotional literacy training. Two of his concepts were key: the ego states, especially the inner "Natural Child," which is the source of our emotional lives, and the concept of strokes.

Berne discovered in each normal person three parts or distinct modes of behavior, which he called the Child, the Parent, and the Adult. He called these three parts of the normal personality "ego states," and he believed that we act as one of them at any given time. You can learn about the ego states in one of the many books written about TA.^{4,5,6} Suffice it to say for now that the Child is the creative and emotional part of the self, the Adult is a rational "human computer," and the Parent is composed of a set of protective attitudes about people. Berne taught us to pay close attention to the "social transactions" between people, because you can learn everything you need to know about a person by closely watching the interactions of their ego states.

The other very important concept developed by Berne he called "strokes." Strokes can be positive or negative because any transaction that acknowledges another person is a stroke no matter how it feels. A "stroke," in

the way that we will use the term in this book, refers to a positive stroke, a show of affection. When you say to someone, “I like the way you look today,” you are giving that person a positive stroke: a stroke, for short. By the same token, when you lovingly pat your child on the back or listen carefully to what your partner is saying, you are giving him or her a stroke, as well. Strokes can be physical or verbal and are defined as the basic unit of human recognition.

The kinds of strokes that people give and take are especially informative. Some people exchange mostly negative, even hateful strokes, and their lives are very different from those who manage to attain a dependable diet of positive, loving strokes. When people love themselves and others, their transactions will be governed by their loving hearts and they will neither give nor accept negative strokes.

These two concept—ego states and strokes—formed the theoretical foundation of the transactional analytic study of emotions.

ENTER FEMINISM & THE EMOTIONS

I never would have made the connection between TA and emotional literacy were it not for another life-changing relationship that plunged me into the world of feelings. Recently divorced and almost overnight, I became deeply involved with a feminist—Hogie Wyckoff—who for the next seven years taught me the essentials of emotionality. Basically, she demanded that I “come out” emotionally; that I be honest about my feelings, that I ask for what I want, and above all, that I learn to say “I love you” from the heart. None of these demands was easy for me to meet. In fact, they were excruciatingly difficult. Under Hogie’s loving, watchful tutelage, however, I made great emotional strides. It was exhausting work for her and in the end she could endure the struggle no longer, but she left me a changed man.

I met Hogie in 1969 while teaching a course in Radical Psychiatry at the Free University in Berkeley. Eventually the two of us (and others I mention in the acknowledgments) established a RAP Center at the Berkeley Free Clinic. RAP stood for “Radical Approach to Psychiatry”⁷ and was essentially a protest movement against the abuses of psychiatry as practiced in those days. We started a number of “contact” groups, in which participants were taught the principles of Transactional Analysis as it applied to cooperative relationships. The most popular contact group to evolve from this work was called “Stroke City.” In this group we began to develop the techniques for learning emotional literacy.

FOUR DISCOVERIES THAT MADE A DIFFERENCE

I. STROKES & LOVE

Three times a week “Stroke City” gathered in a large room at the RAP Center. For two hours in the afternoon in this room, about 20 people could give strokes, accept strokes, ask for strokes, and even give themselves strokes in a safe, protected environment.

The leader of the group scrutinized every transaction. It was his or her job to make sure that people gave each other clean, positive strokes, unclouded by hidden or overt criticism. When needed, the leader helped the participants correct their transactions so that the strokes were heard and accepted when wanted.

We created these early meetings to teach people to get along in a competitive and harsh world. However, we soon observed an unexpected side effect. Participants would often look around after some time and declare that they “loved everyone in the room.” They would speak of pervasive feelings of love as they placed their hand over their hearts and they left these meetings with a light step and a happy, loving glow on their faces.

We assumed that people were just cheered up by these activities in a manner similar to what happens at a good ball game. But upon closer examination it became clear that these exercises had a profound effect on the participants' loving emotions. They spoke of loving feelings, of having an open heart, of a transcendent experience of affection, or of an "oceanic" feeling. What had started as an exercise to practice how to be cooperative and positive turned out to be much more. It affected the participants' loving capacities in a powerful and heart-expanding way. It was then that we began to see the connection between strokes and love, and that learning how to exchange positive strokes might have an effect on people's overall capacity to love. Eventually it became clear that strokes and loving feelings are intimately related to each other.

2. THE POWER OF THE CRITICAL PARENT

During these Stroke City sessions, as we discovered the connection between strokes and love, we also discovered the pervasive activity of the Critical Parent. The Critical Parent (the "Pig Parent" as we called it in those days) is the internal oppressor, that inner voice that keeps us from thinking good thoughts about ourselves and others. For instance, when some of the participants tried to give or accept strokes, they would "hear voices in their heads" that told them why the strokes should not be given or taken. These inner voices told the participants, in subtle or overt ways, that they were stupid, bad, or crazy for getting involved in this strange exercise and that if they persisted they would be shunned and isolated from the group. We came to discover that virtually everyone has some kind of internal bully making him feel bad about himself. This phenomenon has been observed by many, who have given it different names: Freud called it the "harsh superego"; AA calls it "stinking thinking." It has

been called low self-esteem, catastrophic expectations, negative ideation, the inert spirit, the dark side, the inner critic, and on and on. The fact remains that it is a pervasive, well-recognized presence, the cause of great distress in our lives and a common target of treatment in psychotherapy.

Eric Berne called this internal adversary the Critical Parent ego state. The Critical Parent does not necessarily have anything to do with our mothers or fathers, though it often does. It is, rather, a composite of all the put-downs that we received in childhood when people—parents, relatives, siblings, friends, teachers—tried to protect, control, and manipulate us. It is important to remember that the Critical Parent has an external source; it is like a tape recording of other people's thoughts and opinions. The Critical Parent is an external influence that is allowed to run (and sometimes ruin) our lives. It invaded our minds when we were young; fortunately, it is possible to turn it down or off, and effectively neutralize it when we grow up.

The Critical Parent is especially interested in preventing people from getting strokes. Why? Because when we get loving strokes in our lives we are much more likely to disregard the Critical Parent and its efforts to “protect” and control us.

Even though people need positive strokes to thrive, it became clear in Stroke City that when they tried to give, ask for, or accept strokes, they often experienced extreme, sometimes paralyzing anxiety, embarrassment, and even self-loathing. Some people hear a voice saying, “You're selfish. You don't deserve strokes,” or “This is stupid, you'll make a fool of yourself; shut up”; others just feel anxious or self-conscious every time they give or ask for a stroke. In the face of such opposition, very few find it easy to exchange strokes.

Almost everyone has an internal bully who slanders him or her from time to time, especially when he or she

is emotionally vulnerable. Part of the work of Stroke City—and emotional literacy training—is to recognize and neutralize the Critical Parent that not only attacks our self-esteem but also the self-esteem of the people around us. It became clear that defusing the Critical Parent was a priority when teaching people about strokes and love.

3. THE SAFETY OF THE COOPERATIVE CONTRACT

Even though most people enjoyed Stroke City and wound up feeling good, there were always a few who felt bad, left out, afraid, or hurt. It became clear that they had succumbed to the attacks of the Critical Parent. To protect the participants from anything that triggered or supported the Critical Parent's activity, I decided to start each meeting with an agreement called a "cooperative (non-coercive) contract," which promised that the participants and the leader would never engage in any attempts to manipulate or power play anyone. It also specifically required that participants would never do anything they did not honestly want to do. The contract further promised that the leader would take responsibility to oversee these safety agreements and would not permit any transactions that came from the Critical Parent.

A contract of confidentiality was added to the cooperative contract in order to facilitate emotional safety and protection from the Critical Parent (see worksheets at the end of the book). These two agreements, cooperation and confidentiality, dramatically reduced the number of people who felt badly at the end of our Stroke City meetings. Consequently, more participants were able to enjoy the love-enhancing effects of the exercise.

These calming, trust-enhancing agreements are a very important aspect of emotional literacy training today. They keep the Critical Parent "out of the room" and establish a feeling of safety and trust. They are essential for the difficult and sometimes even frightening work that needs

to be done to fully incorporate love and all the other feelings into our lives.

4. PARANOIA & AWARENESS

The RAP center eventually dissolved, but the essence of “Stroke City” continued in emotional literacy training workshops in the form of “Opening the Heart” exercises.

In these exercises, people often developed suspicions and fears about the motives and opinions of others in the group, sometimes to the point of paranoia. The standard psychiatric approach to paranoia was to disprove it point by point and to blame it on “projection.” So, for example, if David thinks that Maria hates him, the traditional psychiatric wisdom presumes that it is David who hates Maria. Because he can’t face his angry feelings in himself—so it is thought—he is “projecting” his hatred onto her.

This approach, in my opinion, made people more—rather than less—paranoid. I found in my work that paranoia generally builds itself around a grain of truth just as a pearl builds itself around a grain of sand. Our approach, in David’s case, would be to search for some measure of validation for David’s paranoid feelings. We found that once a grain of truth in the paranoid fantasy was acknowledged, the person was usually able to let go of his paranoid ideas.

So, if Maria admits that she is, in fact, angry at David’s sloppiness, then David can let go of the idea that she hates him. That feeling, he can now see, is a paranoid exaggeration of her actual feelings of annoyance he sensed. David had simply picked up—intuitively—some hidden negative feelings from Maria and blown them up, out of proportion. When that happens, the Critical Parent usually gets involved and fans the fires of suspicion with its own negative messages. Once David sensed that Maria was angry at him, the Critical Parent could easily add: “Sure, she is mad at you, you are a slob.”

This is important because in our emotional lives we often pick up hidden negative feelings from other people, which can be very disturbing. This validating method was inspired by the work of R. D. Laing, the Scottish psychiatrist who pointed out that when we invalidate or deny people's experiences, or how they see things, we make mental invalids of them. Ronald Laing⁸ found that when our intuition is denied, we can be made to feel crazy even if we are perfectly mentally healthy.

For instance: A woman's husband is attracted to a neighbor and the woman picks up subtle clues about his hidden infatuation. If she confronts her husband with her suspicions and he denies them over and over while continuing his infatuated behavior, her nagging intuitive fears might build undaunted—with the help of the Critical Parent—to the point of paranoia.

Based on this information, we learned to search for the grain of truth when people developed intuitive, even paranoid, ideas rather than accusing them of being irrational or discounting their way of seeing things. By finding this truth, no matter how small, we could move a relationship away from suspicion, paranoia, and denial, back toward communication, feedback, and honesty. At the same time, by testing the validity of people's emotional intuitions and hunches, we trained their empathic capacities—which are essential to emotionally literate relationships. This approach is a basic aspect of emotional literacy training. We encourage people to express their hunches, intuitive perceptions, and paranoid fantasies and instead of discounting them, seek their validation, even if only with a small grain of truth.

These four ideas are the cornerstones of emotional literacy training:

- 1) the connection between strokes and love,
- 2) the importance of fighting the Critical Parent,
- 3) the usefulness of safety contracts when learning emotional literacy,

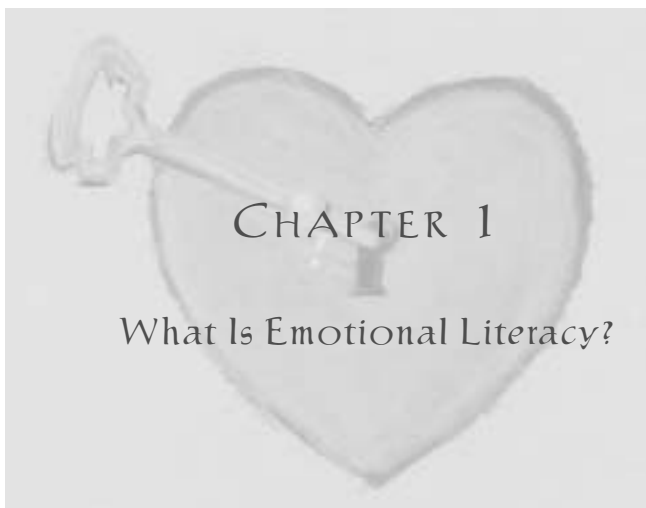
4) the validation of intuitive, “paranoid” hunches as a way of training intuition and cleansing relationships of fear, suspicion, and Critical Parent influences.

EMOTIONAL LITERACY IN EVERYDAY LIFE

As I developed these techniques over the years, I have adopted them myself and invited my family members, friends, coworkers, and intimates to use them, as well. I wrote books, delivered lectures, and held workshops. All along, according to people around me, my emotional attitudes improved. I began to give and take love and affection more freely; I got in touch with my feelings, the feelings of others, and the reasons for their existence; I learned to be honest about how I felt and decreased my tendencies to be defensive when confronted. I was able to love and enjoy life more fully. Finally, I learned to acknowledge and sincerely apologize for my mistakes. Most important, however, is the realization that I am still a “work in progress,” that I am still making improvements to my own emotional literacy.

One frequent super-stroke I get from friends and trainees is that I practice what I teach and that my behavior is congruent with my theories. That is not to say that I have achieved perfect emotional literacy, only that I continue to learn day by day.

The chapters you are about to read contain a training program that is a proven method of developing emotional intelligence. I have seen it work for me and people around me, so I know it can work for you.



CHAPTER 1

What Is Emotional Literacy?

To be emotionally literate is to be able to handle emotions in a way that improves your personal power and the quality of your life and—equally importantly—the quality of life of the people around you.

Emotional literacy helps your emotions work *for you* instead of against you. It improves relationships, creates loving possibilities between people, makes cooperative work possible, and facilitates the feeling of community.

We can all learn about our emotions; few are as smart in the area of emotions as they could be. As a long-time teacher of emotional literacy, I have seen the extreme discomfort some people, especially men, initially show at the mere mention of the word *emotions*. Men often fear that deep and painful secrets will be unleashed if they reveal their feelings. Most often, people think that emotional literacy training will lead to a loss of control and power in their personal and business lives.

There is some validity to the fear that a loosening of our emotional restraints could get us into trouble. But emotional literacy is not a mere unleashing of the emotions; it is also learning to understand, manage, and control them.

Emotions exist as an essential part of human nature. When we are cut away from them, we lose a fundamental aspect of our human capacities. By acknowledging and managing our feelings and by listening and responding to the emotions of others, we enhance our personal power. Being emotionally literate means that you know what emotions you and others have, how strong they are, and what causes them; it means that you know how to manage your emotions, because you understand them. With emotional literacy training, you will learn how to express your feelings, when and where to express them, and how they affect others. You will also develop empathy and will learn to take responsibility for the way your emotions affect others. Through this training, you will become aware of the texture, flavor, and aftertaste of your emotions. You will learn how to let your rational skills work hand-in-hand with your emotional skills, adding to your ability to relate to other people. Hence, you will become better at everything you do with others: parenting, partnering, working, playing, teaching, and loving.

Emotional Mistakes We Make

Emotional mistakes are very common and often very destructive. If you don't believe that is true, consider the following examples of emotional illiteracy I have gathered from the newspapers over the past years:

- ☒ When presented with a second-place award at a statewide high school competition, the bandleader threw the award into a garbage can. The school's

director got into a verbal fight and insulted the judges, saying his band deserved first place.

- ❖ Following a football game in an upper-middle-class community, an irate mother shouted obscenities at one of the referees and then grabbed him from behind as he tried to walk away. Three men then joined in the attack, punching him in the face and breaking his jaw, which had to be wired shut for several weeks.
- ❖ Another parent actually killed the father of his grade school son's martial arts competitor and was sent to jail for many years as a consequence.
- ❖ In England, a wealthy magistrate and his wife lied under oath, saying the wife had been driving their Range Rover when it ran into a wall. The couple, who had been drinking, were worried the magistrate might lose his driver's license. The husband and wife were jailed for fifteen and nine months, respectively, when witnesses denied their story. And their marriage was wrecked by the stigma of being branded liars in their community.
- ❖ Top presidential adviser Dick Morris had to leave President Bill Clinton's campaign when it was reported that he shared state secrets with a prostitute in order to impress her.
- ❖ And let's not forget the historic mistake that President Bill Clinton committed when he allowed his need for sexual strokes to dominate his good judgment and involved himself in an intimate relationship with a 21-year-old White House aide. To the bitter disappointment of millions of his supporters, he gave his enemies an opportunity to nearly wreck his Presidency.

Daily newspapers are filled with stories such as these, accounts of successful and otherwise intelligent people making grave emotional mistakes. These are stories in which emotions like anger, fear, or shame make smart people behave stupidly, diminishing them and rendering them powerless.⁹

The truth is, we all make emotional mistakes, though perhaps not such extreme ones. Though our errors may not find their way into the newspapers, almost all of us would have to admit that at one time or another we have been inordinately moved by anger, fear, insecurity, sexual need, or jealousy, or have failed to take responsibility for an improper action. In the end, these mistakes weaken us and our loved ones.

An Intimate Dinner

Emotional literacy increases our personal power. I will make that point again and again throughout this book, but let me illustrate it here with a story.

Nancy and Jonathan, who'd been married for some time, had invited Robert for dinner. Nancy and Robert were old friends, going back to high school, when they had dated briefly. Nancy had prepared a lovely meal and had even brought out candles for the event. When they sat down to eat, however, Robert did not seem to care about the decor or the food in front of him. As he pushed his food around on the plate, Robert talked about his break up with his wife. She had come home from work one evening and announced that she was leaving the relationship. She assured Robert that there was no other man, but refused to give further explanations for her departure; she just did not want to be married any longer.

He was despondent and didn't know what would become of him. "Face it, she just doesn't want me anymore," Robert blurted out miserably, after two glasses of wine.

“Now how am I going to meet someone else? I’m not as good-looking as I used to be, and I don’t look forward to cruising the bars and answering personal ads.” Nancy understood perfectly what her old friend was talking about. The last year, she had spent more and more time in the mirror scrutinizing her face, worrying that she looked old beyond her years. Aging had made her feel a new sense of insecurity. She had a little more wine.

Jonathan’s day had been a long and hard one so he excused himself and went to bed. Nancy and Robert found themselves alone. The two old friends talked more about Robert’s failed marriage. Conversation then turned to the romantic beginning and long duration of their wonderful friendship. Then Robert made a remark about his fading attractiveness. Nancy, touched by his vulnerability, assured him that he was very handsome and should have no trouble finding another relationship. On the verge of tears, he squeezed Nancy’s hand. She moved over on the couch and gave him a hug.

Then their cheeks and lips brushed, and they suddenly found themselves kissing each other passionately. After a few seconds Nancy sat up.

“Stop,” she said. “We shouldn’t do this.”

Robert stood up, shaken. “I’d better leave,” he said, too embarrassed to look at Nancy as he walked to the door. “I’m sorry.” With one final glance at Nancy, he said good night and fled out the door.

Nancy slept fitfully. The next morning, after lying awake and thinking for a long time, she told her husband what had happened. She explained that they had both been tipsy and depressed, and that Robert seemed so needy that she had lost her common sense for a moment.

Jonathan’s response was not as strong as she feared. He was upset at first, but then he remembered that they had a vow to be truthful with each other. He realized Nancy could have said nothing about the kiss and he might

never have known. Yet he also imagined finding out in the worst possible way, a year from now, perhaps, when a guilty Robert confessed to Jonathan over a beer, or Nancy made a slip of the tongue.

Jonathan felt very secure about Nancy's love and he realized that Nancy meant to protect him by telling him about the incident. He could also see that she was very moved about Robert's predicament and also afraid that Jonathan would not forgive her for her loss of control. He realized that Nancy had been feeling insecure about her looks and his love for her and was vulnerable to Robert's attention. Although his first feeling was anger, he realized that making a scene wouldn't make him feel better or resolve the situation they were in. He realized he might turn a minor issue into a deep rift, damaging his marriage.

Rather than exploding with uncontrolled emotion or being overcome by jealousy, he tried to understand Nancy's actions from her point of view. Next he told Nancy of his anger, shame, and jealousy, but that he was able to overcome these feelings. He admitted that he had not been sufficiently attentive to her, wrapped his arms around her and hugged her warmly. Then, after explaining his intentions to Nancy and giving Robert a call, he drove across town to Robert's apartment.

"Nancy told me what happened," he said as he sat down on the couch in Robert's living room. "I don't like it but I understand. I'm not angry. I assume that this was a mistake and won't happen again, right?"

"God, no!" Robert assured him. "I'm so sorry."

"Thanks then," said Jonathan, offering his hand in friendship. "I think things will be okay."

An event that began innocently enough as a simple dinner party of old friends rapidly escalated into a sexual encounter. Emotional mistakes of this sort usually remain a dark secret, undermining all the relationships involved. Sometimes, if the truth comes out, the result is a fight

(verbal or physical) leading to festering emotional wounds that eventually result in divorce and lost friendships. Handled badly, it could have led to the ugly sort of incident that we read about in the newspapers. It is the rare person who, like Jonathan, stops and thinks before deciding how to act on such an emotionally charged event. Yet Jonathan was able to speak about, sort out, and keep his feelings in check until he could express them in a productive manner and prevent his life from being damaged by emotions spinning out of control.

He was able to empathize with Nancy and with Robert's emotional state, realizing he might have done a similar thing in their place. As a result of their emotionally literate exchange, Jonathan and Nancy found a deeper respect for each other. They were able to open a dialogue about some of the rough spots developing in their current relationship, which actually strengthened their marriage. Talking about their emotions—expressing and controlling them—did not leave them feeling unprotected. Rather, it gave them a renewed sense of personal power and confidence about their relationship. It helped them flourish as a couple and enabled them to hold on to their friendship with Robert.

In many ways this story defines all the issues relevant to emotional literacy. Jonathan recognized his emotions; that he was quite angry and jealous. He understood the reasons for those feelings. He also empathized with Nancy's affection for Robert and with her wish to comfort him. Jonathan could understand that she was flattered by Robert's passionate attention especially since he, Jonathan, had been somewhat neglectful of her. In addition, he felt for Robert's sadness and fear of being alone and his attraction for Nancy. At the same time, Jonathan was very clear that he did not want the incident to reoccur.

On her part, Nancy was able to experience and then control her sexual impulses with Robert and later be honest

with Jonathan. She was able to express her regret without being defensive or afraid.

Once he understood his feelings better, Jonathan was able to control his impulse to lash out. He recognized the importance for Nancy of keeping Robert's friendship. Finally, Jonathan realized the importance of keeping the vows of complete honesty with Nancy. All of this took skills that some people develop early in life, but that all of us can learn at any time. To devote time to learning these skills is to pursue emotional literacy.

The Forgotten Heart

Most people would not act the way Jonathan or Nancy did in the above story. Why is that? Why do so many smart people act in emotionally dim-witted ways? The answer is that we have lost touch with our feelings and never learned to deal with them. Why has this happened?

We are emotionally illiterate because we have suffered—and continue to suffer—so many painful emotional experiences. Our emotional systems have shut down. How does this happen? Let me begin with an example of physical injury.

Several years ago, Chuck, a young grape farmer on the ranch next to mine in Mendocino County, absent-mindedly reached into the rear of an operating hay baler. He felt a shock travel up his arm. He pulled his hand back and looked at it. With an odd lack of emotion or alarm, he wondered where his index and middle finger had gone. Rotating his hand, he saw the two fingers hanging by threads of skin.

At first, he felt nothing. Then the pain came thundering in, and at last he realized the two fingers had been cut off. Today, after many operations, Chuck's fingers—reattached to his hand but lifeless—constantly remind him

of his accident. He is able to speak about the accident calmly even though others cringe just thinking about it.

Why did Chuck at first feel nothing and even now feel less than others when thinking about the dreadful accident? Because his nervous system, to keep him from being overwhelmed, temporarily went into shock and blocked the pain. The shock reaction is highly useful. Because Chuck didn't feel the pain, he had a few seconds to absorb what had happened, to think rationally about it.

Numbing is a natural response to trauma. Temporarily sparing us the pain of a wound gives us a chance to escape or to make life-saving decisions we could not make if we were blinded by agony and horror. However, the physical numbness that follows physical hurt is limited. It is short-lived, providing a brief period of anesthesia before the pain comes flooding in.

The numbness that invades us as the result of emotional hurt is similar. Physical trauma tends to occur as singular-incident events and the numbing it causes tends to be temporary. But in the case of cruelty and emotional trauma, when they persist, the numbing becomes chronic. We survive uncontrollable, ongoing psychological trauma by engaging defense mechanisms—psychological walls that insulate us from our painful emotions and separate us from hurtful people and the pain they cause us. Emotional trauma can be vividly re-experienced when we remember what happened. Emotional numbing keeps us from having tormenting thoughts, flashbacks, or nightmares. This may sound like a good thing, but it's a trade-off that can be very problematic. The psychological walls we erect to separate us from emotional pain can become permanent and also separate us from kind, loving people and feelings of joy, hope, or love. What keeps us from feeling emotional pain can also keep us from feeling emotional pleasure. In addition, the emotional walls we

erect will, on occasion, collapse and we will be flooded by overcome chaotic, sometimes destructively strong emotions.

Some people oscillate between numbness and a disabling hypersensitivity to all emotions. Both these extremes are forms of emotional illiteracy. Whether emotions are absent or all too present, they fail to perform their powerfully helpful functions.

To recover from emotional damage it is important that we be allowed to repeatedly recall the traumas that caused our withdrawal and discuss them with sympathetic listeners. But typically we don't discuss and recover from such traumas. Instead, we just get used to a state of emotional numbness or chaos. Often emotional traumas such as parental abuse or alcoholism are often shrouded in shameful secrecy and don't get "talked out." Emotional traumas recur because we don't learn how to avoid the abusive, greedy, thoughtless, and selfish people who cause them; instead, we continue to relate to them and repeat patterns of emotional abuse. That is why the emotional traumas of a lifetime are likely to accumulate and fester in the dark recesses of the soul, crippling the victim's emotional health.

My years of observation have persuaded me that not only sufferers of severe post-traumatic stress, but the majority of us, live in a state of semi-permanent emotional shock. Continually reinforced by recurring painful experiences, we have lost touch with most of our feelings. We forget traumatic incidents, don't remember how we felt, and don't know anyone who would listen patiently and sympathetically long enough to sort it all out. Consequently, we go through life emotionally anesthetized, with most of our feelings locked up in our hearts, constantly disappointed in a wary and unreceptive world.

Certainly not all of us come from abusive homes or have alcoholic parents. But even the commonplace ups and downs of coming of age and going through our

workaday lives can be quite painful and result in a certain degree of self-protective numbness. Emotional shocks start early in childhood and continue throughout our lives. We are yelled at while playing an exciting game (“Will you shut up for a minute?”), or left alone when we are afraid (“You’ll get over it.”). Our parents may fight or simply ignore each other. We are hit or mocked by other children, sometimes even by those we think are our friends. We are capriciously scapegoated or cruelly snubbed.

Two examples well illustrate these types of silent trauma. One acquaintance of mine recalls how, when she was 12, her two most beloved friends handed her a letter in which they made fun of the way she looked and the way she danced, told her that she was stupid and stuck-up whale, and announced that they were dropping her as a friend. To this day she is flooded by feelings of sadness and anger when she thinks about that awful experience. Another friend relates how an older boy would come up to him every day while he waited in line for lunch in junior high school and make fun of his nose. He “went along” with the joke but was profoundly humiliated. This emotional torment went on for a whole school year.

Childhood can be full of emotional stress and even abuse. Often, the affection we crave is denied us or used to manipulate our behavior, given only if we are “good,” withheld if we are “bad.” While all this is going on, we are silently urged—within our families and at school—to conceal what we feel and long for. To “spill our guts” about our feelings, we are taught, would be rude, humiliating, or indiscreet. We are taught an emotional illiterate life style. To fit in, we must first close off from our emotions.

Often, our parents care only about our most obvious problems; whether a bully is after us or whether we are having trouble making friends. They are not often interested in our subtler agonies—rebuffs, embarrassments, romantic disappointments or feelings of inadequacy. Some

parents are uncomfortable asking their children how they feel and rarely discuss their own emotions.

Hunger for Emotions, Love & Hate

At the center of all of this emotional confusion is love and its opposite, hate. We long to love and be loved. When instead of being loved we are treated hatefully, we are left to walk around with our thwarted needs and wounded feelings locked inside of us; we do not know what to do or who to speak to about them. We can't talk about our feelings, least of all about the love that we need. We don't understand the hatred that we feel and we understand the feelings of others even less. We hide our emotions or we lie about them or pretend not to feel them.

In our intimate relationships, where emotions are supposedly allowed free rein, many of us have been hurt so often that we remain subtly detached even in the throes of passionate love. Long-forgotten heartaches prevent us from fully letting go and giving ourselves to another without maintaining some secret, self-protective distance. We seldom allow ourselves the sweetest of emotional experiences—the vulnerable state of deeply loving someone without reservation. Instead, our resentments build upon our disappointments, sometimes developing to full-fledged hatreds. Once hatred is unleashed, it infects everything and love recedes completely.

Most of us sense that there should be more to life. We hunger for the intimacy of deep feeling. We hunger for a connection to others, to understand someone and be understood by him or her. In short, we long to love and be loved.

But how do we get there? We know in our hearts that being an emotional person, having heart-felt passions—loving, crying, rejoicing, even suffering—is a rich, valu-