

Gender Through the Lens of IPNB plus Empathy

With Sarah Peyton

“Women are dangerous,” my client said with conviction.

“What’s happening in your body?” I asked.

Eleanor shifted in her chair. “My hands are shaking, and there is so much heat pouring out of my belly that I’m sweating.” she said.

“Is that terror?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Is your whole being longing for safety and ease?”

“Yes,” she said. “And that’s nowhere – the world is half female.”

“Do you sometimes feel hopeless that you will ever find any safety?”

She nodded again.

The empathy tradition of Nonviolent Communication, listening for the feelings and needs that live within our words, can sound oddly formal. As you imagine this conversation, I invite you to imagine the resonant understanding that can live in the words. Eleanor, at age 47, was tired of writing off half the human race, and so she came to me to see if body-based empathy might shift her conviction that women were hostile and terrifying, and that she was at their mercy.

“Thank you,” I said. “Can I hear those words again?”

“Women are dangerous,” she repeated.

“What’s happening this time?”

As we worked with the body sensations, feelings and needs that arose for her in response to the repetition of this simple phrase, (in a process called the somatic-based core belief transformation), the heat in her stomach increased. “There’s a crying inside me,” she said, “a crying infant, and no one is coming. There is so much shame.” As we held the baby in our imaginations, there was even more heat, and Eleanor said, “And there is a toddler, who hates the baby. She wants the baby to be dead, so it will stop crying. She’s angry at it for needing help, and for feeling shame. The shame of no one coming is so great that she is shutting the door on the baby and killing it. And she has given up on her mother caring for the infant, or understanding her. Something about this has left this toddler with the conviction that all women are dangerous.” Finally, as we were able to hold both the little ones with compassion and empathy, fully understanding the needs and helplessness of a crying infant, and fully embracing the needs of an angry, disappointed and hopeless toddler, the redness and high skin temperature on Eleanor’s abdomen decreased, and her body began to relax.

“What happens when we check back in with that original belief?” I asked.

“Women are dangerous,” she said, trying it out. “Nope, most women are okay – I can take them one by one, and find out whether I enjoy being around them. I don’t have to keep myself safe from them.”

We all make predictions, every day, about how best to survive in the world. We all create invariant representations, patterns about groups of people or entire genders: women are dangerous; men are thoughtless; people with white hair are not emotionally resilient; children are incapable of empathy; teachers won’t listen, etc., none of which are actually true.

And even in what seems like the American monoculture, everyone is different. Growing up in Fairbanks, Alaska in the 1960’s and 1970’s, I didn’t see much that only men did. The aspens and evergreens in the woods around our house fell as easily to chainsaws and axes in the hands of women as they did to tools held by men. Houses were built, animals cared for, and gardens were planted, weeded and harvested, by whoever was around to help, no matter the gender. There were general tendencies: men hunted more than women, but my mom was out caribou hunting with my dad when she was 6 months pregnant with me. Women cooked more than men, but my dad made a mean waffle. The running of large machinery was male business, but Mary Butcher and Libby Riddles claimed the running of dogs for all women with their Iditarod wins.

So in that somewhat gender-neutral world, did I escape without invariant representation about men and women? None of us do. Our brains would not be functional if they were not in a continual process of pattern-making. And even more than using our embedded cultural experiences, we make predictions based on who our mothers are, and who our fathers are, and on how they perceive our gender, including the way our mothers and fathers treat girls and boys differently.

In my case, I have the core belief that men are unmoved by me, that I am essentially unimportant. (Writing this, I feel delight at having something to work on in my own somatic-based core transformation belief process, and I look forward to feeling deeply loved and that I matter to men, rather than only knowing it intellectually.) These core beliefs often do not reflect our parents at their best – my father loved me and was able to express warmth – but his own wounds prevented an immediate responsiveness to his children.

It is rare that we acknowledge that our stories about groups or gender are untrue. We usually live our daily lives taking these ideas about “all men” or “all women” as our guiding lights. What I love about Nonviolent Communication is the invitation it offers us to step into the present moment and to strip away the stories and predictions that prevent us from meeting soul to soul.