

*Chapter One* | **In Love: Conflict Is Not Abuse**

A possible life is one that wills the impossible.

— MAHMOUD DARWISH

OF COURSE IT IS NOT ONLY the police, wealthy football players, or colonial occupiers who can feel abused in the absence of actual threat. It is not only the dominant who feel endangered when faced with normative conflict or when their own unjust actions are responded to with resistance. In fact these distorted reactions occur in both the powerful and the weak, the supremacist and the traumatized, in society and in intimacy. In arenas in which real abuse could conceivably take place, there are those who feel persecuted and threatened even though they are not in danger, and they often lack help from those around them to differentiate between the possible and the actual. Bullies often conceptualize themselves as being under attack when they are the ones originating the pain. Everywhere we look, there is confusion between Conflict and Abuse.

If a person cannot solve a conflict with a friend, how can they possibly contribute to larger efforts for peace? If we refuse to speak to a friend because we project our anxieties onto an email

they wrote, how are we going to welcome refugees, immigrants, and the homeless into our communities? The values required for social repair are the same values required for personal repair. And so this discussion must begin in the most micro experience. Confusing being mortal with being threatened can occur in any realm. The fact that something *could* go wrong does not mean that we are in danger. It means that we are alive. Mortality is the sign of life. In the most intimate and personal of arenas, many of us have loved and trusted someone who violated that trust. So when someone else comes along who intrigues us, whose interests we share, who we enjoy being with, with whom there could be some mutual enrichment and understanding, that does not mean that we are going to be violated again. And experiencing confusion, disagreement, frustration, and difference does not mean that we are being violated again. Experiencing anxiety does not mean that anyone is doing anything to us that is unjust.

Now, recognition and consciousness about these differences brings us the opportunity to truly face and deal with the problems of intimacy that we couldn't resolve before. Awareness of these distinctions gives us the chance to appreciate and enjoy the gifts of intimacy and difference, that perhaps we took for granted before, or of which we were once over-critical. Of course, some people just give up. They internalize a story about themselves that they are unlovable or incapable of loving an equal, or that they are perpetual victims, or that they "can't do" long-term relationships, but thinking these things doesn't make them true. In order to "protect" ourselves by keeping our lives small and shutting out intimacies, we could actually be hurting ourselves, missing out on a transformative experience of the heart, and sabotaging our small but crucial contribution to making peace. And the withholding also mis-trains those around us to not see us and others like us as sexual, loving adults who have the right to be in intimacy with equals. Relationships of all kinds, after all, are the centerpiece of healing.

Some of the fear is based in earlier experience. If we were in a car accident, we can become afraid of cars. If someone close to us died, we could become terrified of normative loss. If we experience sexually alienating encounters, we could construct ourselves as not sexual. If we are physically violated, we could imagine that

every person who reminds us of the assailant is going to assault and violate us. If we are socially oppressed or marginalized or punished, we could mistrust everyone from the category of the oppressor. But this fear of potential threat is not always based in actual experience. It can also be a political construction, one that is fabricated and then advertised through popular culture and entertainment, or enforced through systems of power, like Islamaphobia, or generalized rhetorics of “terror.” We are often made to believe through repetitive official and sub-cultural messaging that certain kinds of people are dangerous, that certain kinds of social interactions are threatening, even though the only thing they might actually threaten is an established power structure. Or when it is we who wield the unjust upper-hand, we are reinforced in falsely conceptualizing the other party’s resistance as the originating threat.

Why do some of us need to feel and act as though we are being assaulted when we’re not? It’s a big question, and one at the core of so much hostility, fear, projection, and punishment. The more I look at this inflationary process, the more I see how central it is to unnecessary separation and pain. Confusions between projection, discomfort, and threat appear in every realm from the most intimate to the global: from the first ping of desire, to the bombardment of civilians. Seeing danger that isn’t there leads to escalation and overreaction, which can destroy people’s lives spiritually and literally, individually and collectively. So because the question is so big, I start in the smallest place. With the flirt.

### **The Dangerous Flirt**

I’m at a table with relative strangers. I notice the woman in the opposite chair; she is attractive and smart. Her imagination is surprising. She has insights that are attention-grabbing. And she displays herself in a way that may be aimed at the larger group but is having an effect on me. We are all talking business, but she is a bit naughty. This is a professional gathering inside an institutional building. Yet the woman across the way uses the word “G-spot.” Now, queer people have a sexualized vocabulary in professional spaces that many straight people might find inappropriate, so

this stands out as a bit showy, but it's not that unusual. Later, though, she insists on it. She wants attention for this word and we all give it to her. She smiles, she is bold, she commands but she is also soft in her command. Now I am thinking about her sexually. I am thinking about the word *G-spot*, its mythologies and implications. The more she insists that we think about this, the more I begin to think about penetrating her and I am also thinking about her penetrating me. Is she flirting with me? I am the stranger here; the others are her workmates. I don't know if she is always like this, if she is flirting with someone else at the table, or if this is for my benefit. Is this "inadvertent" or is it "intentional." Is she *innocent* of being sexually suggestive or is she *guilty*?

A different person, perhaps one with a history of a specific kind of sexual abuse, processed in a specific way, especially if it pertained to suggestible language, could find her speech inappropriate and upsetting. They could find it harassing. It could be a "trigger." However, I find it inviting. I am enjoying her and I am appreciating her. If I attempt to follow up in order to discover if this was actually aimed at me, I too could be seen as a harasser; after all, this is a professional relationship. Human Resources could be called in to hurt me. Or, just as easily, my interest could be reciprocated. I have to be very, very careful. One false move and I could be the sad object of an outraged story on the dreaded grapevine: "Sarah Schulman came on to me. It was so inappropriate." The story would never be "I liked her, I flirted with her, she understood me, and then I was scared I would be hurt like I have been before." Depending on her character, self-concept, history, and logic, depending on how she chooses to act, or if she is conscious enough to have choice, I could be accused of desire. And so could she. Given the institutional setting, I could even have charges brought against me. Or, things could go very well.

Being accused of desire is as old as history itself, and is central to the queer experience. It has been very, very dangerous. Both seeing and imagining queer desire in another has and can cost us our lives, our homes, our families, and employment. We have been excluded, shunned, imprisoned, and murdered for knowing or believing that desire is reciprocated. Sex workers, especially trans women, often lose their lives expressly because they were desired. And certainly "homosexual panic defense" has been used

successfully in courts to justify the murders of gay men, perhaps gay men who had absolutely zero sexual interest in their assailant; or cis women, trans women, or gay men who responded to another man's wanting. And of course many of us have been violated by the person we most loved and desired, and who loved and desired us. We are accused of desire when it never manifested, and we are accused of desire when it is full and free. Being desired is not the same as being harassed, and we do not have to punish or shun the person who sees what is special about us. Just because you want me, doesn't mean I have to hurt you. Especially if I also feel attractions that I don't pursue for reasons of projections from my past. I don't have to avoid you, ignore your call, refuse to return your email, or block you. We can actually talk to each other, and find the other ways and realms in which to connect. We can be people. We can deal with it. We can build friendships, collaborate, and just be nice to one another. Uneven desire is not a crime, it is not rude, it is not an assault or grounds for shunning or being hurtful. It's just life and we can still be friends. For real. Even forever. But we have to talk.

Being falsely accused of desire also has its own more extended history, one more deeply rooted in race. There is already a long, known tradition of white people repeatedly concocting accusations of desire to justify specifically racial violence. Black men, as we all know, have been lynched, tortured, castrated, incarcerated, and murdered by the white state since they were brought to the continent as slaves, and one of the chief channels has been through the false accusation that they desired white women. Of course intrinsic to white Supremacy is the internal fantasy and external projection that Black people want what white people have. So while Black people are the ones who are endangered, they have been falsely positioned as dangerous and threatening to whites in order to justify white cruelty. White people can't face our need to subjugate and diminish others, so we create a claim that they have done something wrong which justifies this punishment. We take our anxieties about our own negative impulses and unjust deeds and mask them with untrue stories about Black people's characters, actions, and intent, including in the realm of desire.

I think of the complexity expressed by actress Sarah Paulson's deep and multi-dimensional performance in the movie *12 Years*

*a Slave.* As the white wife of a pathologically cruel slave owner, Paulson's character cannot understand that her real problem is the frame of white and male Supremacy in which she lives. So she projects her uncomprehending pain into the substitute arena of jealousy over her husband's sexual abuse of a Black slave, played by Lupita Nyong'o (who won an Oscar). The white woman is not a slave owner herself as she cannot own property, human or otherwise, but her husband owns this Black woman whom he openly sexually abuses. This white woman excuses her husband, overlooks white Supremacy and slavery, and instead aims all her pain and rage at the Black woman, causing her to be brutally whipped. In this way Paulson's character finds the wrong solution for the wrong problem. Nyong'o's character is, of course, shunned. She is not allowed to communicate, to speak or to express her experience, point of view, and/or understanding. Her position as a specter is a unilateral creation of the jealous white woman who does not imagine or consider that the Black woman does not want to be understood or treated this way. Political problems become diverted and expressed as intimate problems and anxieties get aimed at the wrong person.

As stark as the racial example is, we certainly don't need the historic cataclysm of slavery to find projections of social evils catapulted onto intimate personal relationships. They are everywhere. There is a pervasive inability to see the big picture, to look at psychological make-up, to imagine economic consequences, or to ask about other people's real motives and objectives. This lack of information, communication, and understanding produces unnecessary fear and then cruelty, while refusing contexts and explanatory histories and avoiding scapegoating. The refusal to actually ask someone *what they think is happening* and to instead insist on unilateral interpretations compounds misunderstanding and then injustice.

The use of accusations of desire as an overstatement of harm is a prototype with powerful trickle-down application. After all, many of us are never supposed to express erotic feeling or its discrete and different counterpart: erotic interest. Women, of course, risk all kinds of slander and are tagged as predators for revealing erotic feeling. Mothers are not supposed to have desires that could disrupt their sacrifice to their children. Queers have

been taught all our lives that erotic feeling is wrong and that it will subject us to ridicule, exclusion, and punishment. People who feel erotically towards forbidden objects—like those other than partners to whom they have pledged monogamy, or those who are the wrong age, who work in the same sexually prohibitive workplace, who are transgender, or sex workers, who are generally desexualized by the dominant culture, or who are “off-type” (as in not as butch as one’s femme identity demands in a partner)—can motivate them to hide feelings, even to themselves. Telling the truth of interest means taking the risk of being accused.

There have been times in my life when I was attracted to someone and didn’t want to admit it, or that I was attracted to or even in love with her, or at least loved her, and had no awareness of this. It is not that I was lying, but that I was *defended*. I blocked access to my own real feelings. I did this to *defend* a story about myself that I felt safe maintaining, even if it wasn’t true. But sometimes the other person saw the truth that I was unable to access or be accountable for. Part of peace-making is acknowledging that we can’t know everything about ourselves, and sometimes we reveal things to others that we are not ready to accept.

Sexism has exploited this truth into the lie that men always know more about women than we know about ourselves. But refuting male Supremacy does not mean pretending that we all understand ourselves completely. What if she reciprocated or expressed what I was not developed enough to express? What if I became angry, or denied the reality? Blamed her as a substitute for examining myself? What if she tried to help me recognize or be accountable to that reality? Certainly this dynamic of defended refusal is a normative part of many people’s coming to terms with their sexual imaginations and can in fact continue after sexual identity is well in place. Is the act of honest pushback a kind of “harassment,” or is it a gift?

Of course, people come to themselves in their own time, but what if the denial manifests in something harmful to the other person? What if I was flirting but didn’t realize what I was feeling and doing? What if she responded? What if I became angry or withdrawn at her recognition of a truth I could not recognize? What if I blamed her and asked her to carry the burden of my

own dishonesty? What do we call that? Of course, I should not feel expected to kiss someone I don't want to kiss. But what if I don't want to want to kiss her but still want to? Then is the other's forward response an invasion? I don't think so.

### **Email, Texts, and Negative Escalation**

This central role of anxiety in escalating Conflict is one of the reasons why, in our contemporary time, email and texts are so often the source for tragic separations of potentially enriching relationships. First of all, email and text are both unidirectional and don't allow for return information to enhance or transform comprehension. We must speak to each other, especially when events or feelings are fraught. I wish that all the people of the industrial world would sign a pledge that any negative exchange that is created on email or text must be followed by a live, in-person conversation. And clearly we have a responsibility to encourage our friends and colleagues to not make negative judgments based on email or texts. So many relationships are ruined by the artificial nature of these obstructive walls, especially when one party makes a negative power-play by refusing to speak to the other in person. They then create the false problem of whether or not the two conflicted parties will speak at all, which makes addressing and progressing to the real source of anxiety impossible. Refusing to communicate has always been one of the main causes of false accusation as it guarantees negative fantasy about the other, especially in arenas that are particularly loaded like sexuality, love, community, family, materiality, group identification, gender, power, access, and violence. Email and texts don't allow us to go through the human phases of feeling that occur when we actually communicate face to face.

Refusing to speak to someone without terms for repair is a strange, childish act of destruction in which nothing can be won. Like all withholding, it comes from a state of rage, and states of rage are products of the past. As some say, "If it's hysterical, it's historical." By refusing to talk without terms, a person is refusing to learn about themselves and thereby refusing to have a better life. It hurts everyone around them by dividing communities



and inhibiting learning. When we have terms (e.g., “You stole my money to buy drugs so I will talk to you about this when you have three years sober”), they may not ever be met. But at least there is always a possibility of repair. Withholding this possibility makes normative conflict or resistance the primary source of injustice between us. It is designed to hurt, and it does hurt, with nothing gained but pain.

Without conversation, it is the person with the most limitations who is in control. The desirable goal for all of us is not to restrict those who can, but to bring more communication skills to those who can't. Refusal through email, texting, and other technologies keeps the person who doesn't know how to problem-solve from learning how. It keeps them imprisoned in their own imagined negative fears about the other, and their fantasies of their own potential humiliation or demise if they were to talk to the other person and thereby understand what the other person is thinking and feeling. Often these blocks are instigated over Nothing, Normative Conflict, or Simple Difference. It gets elevated in importance in the blocker's mind because they are too anxious to negotiate, or are paralyzed by negative fantasy about actually speaking to the dehumanized other. But because they also deny these internal conditions, negotiation becomes impossible. They cannot advance, and anyone who is controlled by their refusal cannot advance. If we can recognize that relationships are necessary to human peace and society, then friends or family would say, “What is the worst thing that could happen if you talk?” or “How can I help the two of you communicate?” Unfortunately, it is the distorted social norm to see the wish to repair as an assault, and the projection of negative fantasy to be a right.

A banal illustration from my own daily life: You live in another city and we have a long-standing date for lunch when I come to town. But we made the date by email, so there was no discussion and I had no idea that you were squeezing me in between really high-pressure events. If we had spoken on the phone, even for ten minutes, we could have talked this through and I would have realized where you were at, and rearranged things so you could be better accommodated. But I don't know anything about it. And your secret makes you feel as though you are being pressured ... by

me. Even though that is not what is happening, the actual source of the pressure is that we didn't speak. So, the mere fact that we planned our get-together by email has set us up for failure.

I am excited to see you. I have invited you for lunch and have been thinking about what I will make for you. I know you are a busy single parent and assume that few people make meals for you so I want it to be a nice change. But the day before you cancel by email. This is approximately what you write:

So sorry but the evening after our lunch is the party for my son's graduation and my family is in for the festivities from out of town and they are staying with me. Then in two days I am taking him out of town, and I have a lot of projects to finish I am sorry Sarah.

Now if we had spoken, even for a few minutes, we could have cycled through the normal reactions. 1. I am disappointed. 2. I only realize now how kind it was of you to try when you had so much going on and I want you to know that I now recognize this so you can feel appreciated. 3. I brought you a little gift. What is your address? I will mail it to you before I leave. 4. Now that the business is taken care of, we can cycle into connecting. How are you? Are you excited to be taking him on a trip? And finally, Appreciation. 5. I am so glad I had the chance to hear your voice. Grand total of time expended to connect, communicate, and respect: five to ten minutes.

But with email, none of this is possible. Only one feeling can be conveyed, in place of the natural progression of feeling that conversation allows. So if I respond to your email with one of my own: "I am sad, but let's talk on the phone before you leave"—that could cause the cataclysmic catastrophic end of all ends. Instead of just calling me, you can decide that I am abusing you. That I am pressuring you, guilt-tripping you, you are too busy to phone, you can't text, you're too mad, hectic, You have too many things to think about. We simply will not be allowed to evolve. All your anger about your family and who will and won't be at your party for your son, your conflicts about your life, all of that converges on me and the horrible transgressing demand I have made on you by asking for us to talk. I am actually your friend, but you turn me into your foe. You therefore don't answer me, and now we're fucked up.

Email creates repression and anxiety. No one is seen and no one is affirmed. The only way to recreate the normal human cycle of response is to send even more short emails or texts in a row, each with an evolved position. The next one assures you that I understand, as I am afraid that you are misconstruing me. And the final one wishes you a good trip. And, sadly, I have only made it all worse by now being in the arena of what I know is going to be simplistically called “too much” when in reality it is frankly and literally not enough. Five texts are culturally stigmatized as excessive, but they only cover a minute or two of conversation. And people need interactive conversations, even short ones, in order to understand each other.

Most Americans have cell phones now. They can return phone calls on the walk from the subway station to their apartment buildings, from the car to the mall. There is no reason why people do not return phone calls except for the power-play of not answering. It certainly does not save time. It is tragic that we have evolved a social custom that people need to email in order to ask for permission to make a phone call. Just call! Emailing to ask for permission to speak privileges the rage, Supremacy, and Trauma of withholding over the human responsibility to communicate and understand. I say, let's get back to the first one hundred years of telephone culture, where people looked up each other's numbers and called. The now “forbidden” ten-to-twenty-minute phone conversation could save the subsequent months or years of misplaced bad feeling. All this terrible loss, for nothing.

In another example from other people's lives, sometimes angry, supremacist, or traumatized people send emails commanding, “Do not contact me.” I want to state here, for the record, that no one is obligated to obey a unidirectional order that has not been discussed. Negotiation is a human responsibility. Little children order their parents around: “Mommy, sit there!” When adults give orders while hiding behind technology, they are behaving illegitimately. These unilateral orders do not have to be obeyed. They need to be discussed. Two people in a situation means two experiences, two points of view, two sources of information, two voices. And talking through conflict saves time, because having email/text-produced enmity with someone with whom one's life could be enriched, wastes years if not lifetimes. So sending a

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person an email that says, “I don’t want to talk to you” and then refusing to discuss the problem at hand, or even to interact at all, resolves nothing. In fact, it creates anxieties, fears, antagonisms, and pain that can be long-lasting.

The performative conceit at the root of this kind of assaultive action is the melodrama that email orders are a “last resort” in response to some horrible transgression. But the opposite is more likely true. Often a real conversation would illuminate nuances and correct misunderstandings. The real question is: Why would a person rather have an enemy than a conversation? Why would they rather see themselves as harassed and transgressed instead of have a conversation that could reveal them as an equal participant in creating conflict? There should be a relief in discovering that one is not being persecuted, but actually, in the way we have misconstrued these responsibilities, sadly the relief is in confirming that one has been “victimized.” It comes with the relieving abdication of responsibility. There is something in the person who hides behind email that *wants* these offenses to be true. They want to feel victimized. Then they don’t have to look at themselves critically or think about the other person with complexity. There is no guilt or responsibility if one is an email victim.

Similarly, email “apologies” can also be uni-directional, and create even more complication because of lack of affect. An apology that doesn’t allow the other person to talk is not an apology. People need to speak, look, smell, touch, experience vocal tone, facial expression, make jokes, sit back, shift gears, and evolve their ideas and feelings in front of each other in order to produce meaning. They need to eat together. As the old Jewish joke goes, “Comrade Stalin, you are the true leader of Russia” could also be, “Comrade Stalin. *You* are the true leader of Russia???”

**Reductive Modes of Illogic**

We have developed these reductive modes like email and texts to accompany reductive ideas that are supposed to serve large social functions but are not based in human complexity. They seem to be time savers, but avoiding real communication produces long-lasting problems that can endure forever. Shortcuts and

speed-ups define our moment, and yet they simply do not address human reality. For example, there are common slogans in general use which are essentially shortcuts with high aims, something like the advertising slogans of old. *Blondes Have More Fun* is a message about white Supremacy. *Things Go Better With Coke* is a false claim on loneliness that contributes to malnutrition and obesity. Only now, the reductive quality of advertising slogans is applied to extremely serious social messages about human rights and safety. They are not there to sell us dishwashing liquid, but are rather designed, for example, to help women protect themselves from male violence. But because of the resonant lack of subtlety, they also can become reinforcers of denial. The contradiction is a difficult terrain of nuance that we must embrace if we are to be functional, decent, and sincere.

One of these is "Believe women!" We have this slogan in circulation because so many women are not believed when they tell the truth. But what about when they are not telling the truth? Are we still supposed to believe them? The histories of racism and colonialism remind us regularly that white women lying have been used to justify all kinds of cruelty against people of color, especially Black and Brown men in the United States. When we insist that we must "believe women" no matter what, we do help people who are telling the truth about violations they have experienced. But there are all kinds of truth. Sometimes "telling the truth" means representing one's self as flawed or mistaken, and there is often punishment for this productive and generous act. So insisting that women are telling "the truth" that we are in fact not allowed to tell can deny them the possibility of more nuanced, complex stories about themselves, which may be the only thing that can help them get closer to leading integrated lives. What about when women say things that aren't true because they don't understand themselves, ourselves? Being defended, of course, is rarely deliberate when we are not self-aware, self-critical, accountable, or psychologically sophisticated. Are others still required to obey?

There is a contemporary, quite visible, collectively agreed-upon, almost traditional social model of "abuse" where a man invites a woman to respond to his desires when she does not return those desires, nor has she suggested or advertised that

she does. He is supposed to recognize that she never felt nor suggested those feelings. If at this point in the narrative he physically or, more interpretively, psychologically forces her in some way, we all agree that this is Abuse. It is "power over." Usually the alternative ending offered is that instead of force we expect him to have recognition, to apologize for the misunderstanding. Then she can leave and tell everyone that he "hit" on her, but she turned him down. That is the "happy ending" version of this scenario. Given constraints on women's behavior, she retains her purity, her appropriate female lack of erotic feeling. She gets to announce that she is attractive, as women are supposed to be, but she is not attracted, as women are not supposed to be. But what if she was attracted to him and did show it, and won't acknowledge that? And he doesn't want to live with the "he hit on me" narrative. As a writer, I know that there is, after all, the right to be described accurately. What he wants is the "I was attracted to him but I wouldn't acknowledge it, so I got confused" version. We don't have language or methodology for that option, because it immediately becomes her "fault." In a world based on blame, women have to be clear to be clean, unfortunately, so avoiding blame means avoiding complexity, contradictions, and ambivalences.

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There are some women, often in the bourgeois class, who now perform that public event commonly recognized as "abused," with ease: that the other person, male or female, wanted something from me that I did not want and so "I was abused." It is a shortcut. They may select some details and omit others; they may rearrange the order of events so that consequences are reconstructed as causes; they may refuse to engage sequence, objective. I recite those few words: "I was abused" or "she was abusive" or "it was an abusive relationship" and it is immediately understood that I am right, and I am violated, and I am in danger and therefore deserving of group acclaim. While the other s/he is wrong, a harasser, s/he had desire and I didn't, so I am clean and s/he is abusive. And if they wanted to straighten this out, or discuss it until more complexities are revealed, then s/he is a stalker, while I am clean. I am not sullied by desire or sexual curiosity, I have done nothing wrong, and therefore I am a victim. I am an ethical virgin.

I acknowledge this from my own experience on both sides of the coin. I have been attracted to someone and then pretended I wasn't, or denied that I was. I remember one person saying to me, "You shouldn't say you aren't attracted when you are." She was right and it has stayed with me. Now when I hear "When a woman says *no*, she means *no*," I know that that is too simple, because I have said *no* when I didn't mean it. And I am a woman. When I have said "no" there were times when I did not know that I actually felt "yes" and there are times that I *did* know that I actually "felt" yes. People do not always know what they feel, nor do they acknowledge what they really know. Sometimes we say what we think we are supposed to say, or what we are used to saying; we don't give the actual moment a chance. Sometimes we just try out saying certain things. Consequently, making an accusation does not make us right, being angry does not make us right, refusing to communicate does not make us right. In fact, all those things could make us very, very wrong.

There is a range of persuasion narratives to the experience of "romance." Sometimes there is a seduction involved, which is a winning over. Sometimes there is a reassurance process. Sometimes a person starts out resistant but then opens up, or realizes that they are confusing their past with their present, or that they are simply afraid of change. Sometimes one party can see clearly into the future while the other's vision is obscured by unresolved but ancient experiences. Sometimes someone needs to be courted. Sometimes one party has the wrong impression of the other person, cannot see their gifts.

In the movies we watch the story of the single mother, fiftyish, who was grotesquely hurt by her spouse. She never wants to be hurt again. She conceptualizes herself as a romantic failure. She devotes herself to her children, her aging parents, her work. She develops a protective notion about herself. She comes to believe that she will never again have a relationship with an equal party, a lover, someone with whom to think, share, enjoy the last conversation (in person or by phone) of the day. She cannot even imagine constructing an equal relationship with an adult that could actually make sense in her life. So when she finally meets someone she enjoys talking to, and who enjoys her, she cuts it dead. Or once there is real potential, she sabotages it. Or she

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begins the relationship and when she finally acknowledges that she loves, she concocts a false reason to destroy it. In the movie version, of course, the other person can see more clearly than she can. They understand what is happening; they are not insulted. They see the potential for relationship and persevere, gently but with commitment. Life is not forever, after all, and how often do we actually meet people we want to talk to? And at some point, the woman too comes to understand that she can let go of her self-punishment. She can be taken care of too. She can have intimacy. She can care. She can reciprocate. She can have a real life. Cut to credits.

Yet our contemporary bourgeois discourse of “threat” now prohibits this trajectory. In the movie, the potential lover goes, knocks on the door, says “Wait,” and the reluctant party waits.

“Listen,” she tells her. “I know that someone, your ex or your father or someone, told you a story about yourself. That you don’t know how to love. But I am here to tell you that it’s not true.”

Unfortunately, in our contemporary confusion, at the point where the other knocks on our protagonist’s door, they are a “stalker.” We are no longer allowed to drop by unannounced when things are fraught. She can’t call on the phone to deliver the monologue of persuasion with an open heart, because our heroine hides behind voice mail. She can’t send it by email, because it will either be deleted, or forwarded to thousands. If she has knocked, called, and emailed, she is now officially, in the era of overstating harm, a “harasser.” The person who fights for honest conversation that can heal, such a well-known and beloved character of yore, is, alas, no more. And so Ms. Reluctant never gets the affective reality, the skin, the voice, the tone, the eyes, the smile, the jokes, and especially the back and forth, the interactivity that reminds her of what it feels like to let someone in, the interactivity that produces a revelation that her future is not impossible. Instead, past pain dominates over possibility. To suggest otherwise is forbidden.

If the movies replicated these restrictive values, movies would be even worse than they are already. No surprises. First impulse, only impulse. But in reality, romance doesn’t always start off on the right foot, two people don’t always see the potential in one another at the same time, and thankfully, other people can change



us with their hope, forgiveness, and optimism. We can make each other's lives better, despite all our fears. Sometimes one of us knows that before the other. There are positive surprises in life too. And just because our heroine decided that she would never be able to construct a relationship with someone that would make sense, she doesn't have to stick to that belief. While unrecovered trauma is so often a prison of inflexibility, some people do have choices about how to respond. And someone else might make that shift possible by daring to imagine what to us may feel unimaginable. Which can be love. As a novelist, I simply cannot abandon the possibility of reversal.

When I think about it deeply, I can see multiple moments in each day when I have the option to act hurt, to act put-upon, to be offended, to make accusations. Anyone can point to any little thing and turn it into a moment of outrage simply by calling it so. There is an arbitrary element to rejection. I remember I once said to a friend, "You know, I was thinking about going to San Francisco for a week." "What do you mean, *You know?*" she said, incredulous, offended. "How am I supposed to know?" Of course I meant *you know* like *uh, um*. But she needed to construct me as someone doing something bad to her. Assuming. And of course this made any fun conversation about San Francisco impossible, because now I was wrong. At any conflicted moment that is available to interpret one's self as somehow transgressed, there is often the option of not seeing it that way. Or of asking the other person what they mean. There are all different kinds of choices. Many, many times a day we could say *yes* instead of saying *no*, or find something interesting or revelatory or enlightening instead of offensive. To talk instead of shun. Of course, to *always* respond this way is problematic because then we never stand for anything on our own. But while recognizing that for socially marginalized or demeaned people, exclusion and silencing are everywhere and must be addressed, we still have choices about how to understand each other.

And, of course, there are all different kinds of desires. I spend my life talking to a lot of people, and yet I am always looking for those very few with whom I really want to be in conversation. Such occasions are rare, but when it happens, it is a special kind of love. Once, after a stunningly comfortable and enriching

lunch with someone where there was no potential for a romantic relationship, I asked the woman, in a follow-up message, if she would like to continue to talk on the phone. "Please feel comfortable to say no," I wrote. She answered that yes, she would like to, that she'd "enjoyed our conversation too." So then I texted her to see if she wanted to talk on Saturday. "I have plans," she answered. "But let's talk soon, okay?" In my mind, I now had two yesses evidenced by the phrases "I enjoyed" and the words "talk soon, okay?" So I wrote back, "How about when I get home tomorrow?" She never answered. Now what? She'd said yes twice. I waited and then offered her a way out. "If your life is too full, just let me know. Otherwise what about the 25th?" She didn't answer. If I make contact again, am I a harasser? From my point of view, I believed what she said. I'd asked her and she said yes. We both acknowledged to each other that there was an understanding, a pleasure. Then she disappeared. Yet, I still gave her a graceful way out.

Don't people have some responsibility to be accountable? Or does the new victimology require me to interpret yes as no, and silence as "I changed my mind"? No answer is not an answer. It is unreasonable to expect other people to interpret our silences. That, I think, is an unfair burden. I think she should have told me, "I said yes, but I realize now I am afraid, not as interested as I thought I was, shy, intimidated, afraid of being hurt again, don't want the responsibility, *whatever*." And I could have said, "Thank you for letting me know." Or, even better, we could have talked through the anxiety. You know, helped each other. But there was no answer. So what is the dynamic we have here? Is asking for some kind of response being "stalker-ish"? Not responding puts all the responsibility on the other party.

I have long felt that withholding produces anxiety, and accountability creates relief. But some anxiety is a consequence and other anxiety is a cause. Why not have a common value of resolution? Let's imagine that this person did become accountable and in the end chose mutual kindness/accountability over accusation. She realized that she was mad at me for no reason caused by me, that this was old stuff acting itself out in new places, and so she did the right thing and picked up the phone. We talked. We saw each other, and the friendship was allowed to

become important. So, happy ending. Out of a single phone call.

The problem is that silence is not accountable. Feeling confused, feeling the anxiety of attraction to a body or a mind, feeling that someone has come along who I was not prepared for, these are not signs that someone is doing something bad to me. The woman who told me, "Don't say you aren't attracted when you are," was not harassing me. She was not taking agency away from me, overpowering me, or being controlling. Instead, she gave me a gift. She offered me a code of decency.

*Chapter Two* | **Abandoning the Personal:**  
The State and the Production of Abuse

Criticism must think of itself as life enhancing.  
— EDWARD SAID

SOMETIMES INVOKING the language of abuse is an avoidance of responsibility, just like speaking in metaphors. Like when people say, “I feel like I’ve been raped,” to mean they are upset. In reality, what they feel is nothing like what they would feel if they’d been raped. It’s a turn of phrase that means they don’t like what is happening and don’t know how to make it better. It’s an overstatement of harm using Abuse tropes. And sometimes we are so insistent on our right to overstate that we do things that are not merited by the actual dimensions of the conflict. Sometimes, when we are upset, we pretend or convince ourselves that Conflict is actually not only Abuse, but a crime. Sometimes, we really do not want to face ourselves, our own participation, our own painful pasts, the facts of our own projections, distorted thinking, mental illness. When we have nowhere to go but inside ourselves, and when that self that we inhabit is convinced that it cannot bear to be seen, we call the police. And then we are in the arms of The State. And there we are.

On a freezing, snowy day in 2014, I was invited to a workshop run by social worker Catherine Hodes. A native New Yorker in her fifties, Hodes is an experienced professional with over twenty years of development and leadership in what was once known as “The Battered Women’s Movement” back when she was called an “activist.” The field has since transformed, first into “Domestic Violence” and then “Intimate Relationship Abuse Advocacy” where she is now known as “a service provider.” Intimate abuse is a real crisis for many New Yorkers. *The New York Times* reported in November, 2014 that the police receive 284,660 intimate abuse calls a year, which is about 800 a day, and make 46,000 intimate abuse arrests every year. Citywide, almost half of all felony assaults and one-third of all rapes in New York City are related to intimate abuse, the overwhelming majority conducted by men against women and children. According to Jane Stoever, writing in the *Vanderbilt Law Review*:

While an overreliance on gender as the explanation for domestic violence undermines efforts to address same-sex domestic violence, most abuse is committed by men against women, with approximately eighty-five percent of victims being female and ninety percent of perpetrators being male.

Stoever concludes that, in the United States, every year 1.3 million women are physically assaulted by a male partner at a rate that is higher than “automobile accidents, muggings and stranger rape” combined. Given these complex quantitative and emotional realities, in order to be able to serve clients maximally, social workers need a sophisticated understanding of what constitutes intimate abuse, what causes it, how to respond to it, and how to prevent it.

This training was held in a pristine classroom with stained glass windows at a classic Gilded Age Protestant church on Fifth Avenue in Greenwich Village, far away from the normal daily routines of both Hodes and her young students. Becoming a social worker is often a first step by new immigrants into the professional class, and these young men and women in their twenties came from Sri Lankan, West Indian, West African, Cambodian, Russian, Chinese, Albanian, and Dominican backgrounds. They were sincere, committed, and working in community-based services, often within their own neighborhoods and ethnicities.

It was a fantastic class, offering wisdom and provoking a lot of re-thinking. In an environment like New York City that is filled with violence, Hodes had boldly started to notice that clients were increasingly confused about what the word "Abuse" actually means. That it was overused. The paradox is, of course, that many women are unable to recognize that they are being abused, or cannot get acknowledgment of this reality from others. But at the very same time, Hodes found that some women were applying the term Abuse to situations that were really something else. Increasingly, she noticed that women who did not know how to resolve a problem sometimes described that feeling with the word Abuse. So this session had been convened to address that trend directly with service providers.

Hodes' focus was to help social workers differentiate between Abuse and Conflict so that they could be effective, and directed in helping clients in ways that would speak to their real experiences. While identifying Abuse is essential to saving lives and providing services, differentiating Conflict from Abuse is also essential to meeting clients' real need to learn how to face and deal with obstacles, and to develop truthful assessments of themselves and others. Hodes offered many insights rooted in decades of work on the issues of violence and nonviolence in New York, many of which shook the foundational assumptions that the young social workers and I shared despite a thirty-year age difference. The centerpiece of her presentation emerged early and with simple clarity. She started by making us look at common misuses of the word "Abuse." For example, Hodes told us:

"There is no such thing as mutually abusive relationships."

Of course this was startling, because the concept of "mutual abuse" is so commonplace in our culture that its construction is never questioned. Don't we all often get into fraught situations with other people where we both have a role to play? In fact, in our contemporary world, it is a sign of maturity and decency to acknowledge that often all parties participate in making mistakes that can produce discord. In our time, recognizing this fact is part of being an honest person of depth. It helps us understand that trouble between people gets transformed when everyone takes responsibility for their part. Negotiation is a process, first of acknowledgment, and then adjustment to the new information

produced by that acknowledgment. Recognizing mutuality of cause is a principle that allows progressive change without scapegoating. Scapegoating, after all, is often rooted in the false accusation that one person or group is unilaterally responsible for mistakes that are actually contributed to by multiple parties. So what did she mean by undoing an insight that so many of us have spent years learning how to apply?

What's wrong with this concept, Hodes quickly clarified, is not the recognition of mutual *responsibility*, but rather the use of the word Abuse, because once the dynamic is mutual, it is not Abuse, which inherently implies one person's domination.

"Differentiating between *Power Struggle* and *Power Over*," Hodes explained, "is the difference between Conflict and Abuse." Abuse is Power Over and Conflict is Power Struggle.

As we students discussed and grappled with this insight over the course of the day, my understanding consistently deepened. While obviously significant abuse does take place in life, where one person is being controlled by another or by a group in a manner that the recipient has not contributed to and can't change, the word "Abuse" has become overused:

- People may feel angry, frustrated, upset. But this does not mean they are being abused. They could, instead, be in Conflict. Instead of identifying as a victim, they might be, as Matt Brim suggested, Conflicted. Therefore the fact that one person is suffering does not inherently mean that the other party is to blame. The expectation that we will never feel badly or anxious or confused is an unreasonable expectation and doesn't automatically mean that someone else is abusing us. These emotions are part of the human experience.
- People may not know how to make things better, how to look at their own participation, how to deal with feeling badly about themselves. They may not know how to understand their own actions, and are afraid of the implications of their actions on the meaning of their lives. And this may be devastating, tormenting, and painful. But this is not being Abused. It doesn't get resolved by organizing punishment of another person. And someone who feels conflicted in this way does not

have the right to take punitive actions against another person because they feel bad.

- People may be part of negative friendships, families, or communities who attack outsiders instead of being self-critical. They may be receiving encouragement to blame and scapegoat others. They may live within groups, relationships or families that do not tolerate the admission of mistakes, and that reinforce Supremacy ideologies about each other in order to maintain illusions of righteousness. This pressure, resulting in the action of collectively deflecting blame, does not mean that the person being blamed is abusive. In fact, it says nothing at all about that person, except that they are in turn being caused great pain for no reason. And in my mind, they have the right to resist that unilateral blame. In this way, group bullying is multiplicative of injustice, even though it is done in the name of nation, family, friendship, or distorted renditions of “loyalty.”
- Being in a negative moment with another person can be destabilizing, hurtful, and stressful, especially if a person’s self-concept requires them to think of themselves as perfect. But it is not, by definition, Abuse. It could be Abuse, if one has power over another, but if not, it’s a Conflict. And being in a Conflict is a position that is filled with responsibility and opportunity.

“All human relationships have power dynamics and that is neither good nor bad. Power is not the problem,” Hodes said. “It’s how it is wielded.” There is a “difference between volatility and abuse,” she added. “But not enough understanding of that difference.” The discussion went on to carefully examine the consequences of over-simplifying and obscuring these definitions. Hodes made clear that “as a victim advocate, my *first* concern is always for those being abused.” But that part of this responsibility is to find out *if* anyone is actually being abused, or if instead the person is mired in Conflict that they have some role in escalating and consequently some power to resolve. And Hodes’ job is to assist these young service providers “in being able to do better and deeper differential assessments.”



Her insights produced new knowledge in me, and I saw clearly that this confusion between Abuse and Conflict exists in our historic moment in all structured relationships: from the most intimate partnerships to the government's relationship to its own people, and to the geopolitical dynamics between nations. Her primary concern that afternoon, of course, was specifically between the State of New York and its individual residents. After all, social workers are licensed by the government, often employed by the government, and certainly have influence on the government's findings and conclusive actions regarding very crucial issues in people's lives. Social workers can influence immigration, incarceration, custody, benefits, health care, housing, food, education, and other services. Their misapplications of the word "Abuse" can have profound consequences on how individuals are treated by the state and are viewed by their communities, and thus also on their lives and the lives of the people around them.

In order for people who work with the state and for providers, friends, and community members to actually *help* others, they must have crucial information about specific events and a deeper understanding of power dynamics. In this way they can identify "Power Over" situations and intervene before calamity strikes. Or they can identify "Power Struggle" situations of Conflict and not only avoid the unjustified punishment and stigma of those falsely accused of Abuse, but they can also help people who simply can't problem-solve because they lock themselves into a victimized self-perception. Lacking the support and encouragement to successfully negotiate does not mean that someone is being victimized. True, we have to recognize that the frustration of not knowing how to solve problems and only knowing how to escalate can feel like a response to an outside force, but it is, in fact, internal. Differentiating requires awareness, and we may be dependent on our surrounding communities, including social workers, to achieve this.

### **Understanding Is More Important than Producing a Victim**

“When a provider is trained, they are told what domestic violence is,” Hodes said in her presentation. “But I was never told what it is not. And based on what I was taught, I could have looked at every relationship I know and called it *abusive*.”

She suggested that social workers change their methodology, and instead of simply asking, “Are you abused?” ask clients questions that would elicit more information. She encouraged the workshop’s new professionals to create interactive conversation with clients, rather than narrow experience down into easy categories. This strategic evolution reveals a newly articulated goal to stop organizing the conversation in a way designed to automatically produce the pre-determined revelation that the person is being abused. Instead, the conversation should be redirected to elicit a deeper and more multifaceted factual understanding of what is *actually happening*, in order to reveal more nuance and dimension that could lead to real solutions. Knowing what really happened is more important than deciding who to punish. One suggestion was to ask the client: “Are you unsafe, or are you instead uncomfortable, angry, or hurt?”

People who describe themselves as “Abused” when they are actually in Conflict are not lying; they usually don’t know the difference. We’re not talking here about the tired false cliché of the vindictive woman who “cries rape” or diabolically constructs the other as an abuser while knowing full well that the charge is false. What we have instead is a devolved definition of personal responsibility, which constructs avoidance as a right regardless of the harm it does to others. This negative standard persuades some people to feel that being uncomfortable signals that they are being Abused, because they don’t have the option of describing themselves as Conflicted. So asking a distressed person if they are unsafe, or rather, uncomfortable, angry, or hurt provides them with an alternative idea that might fit better with their actual experience. It not only elicits helpful information, but encourages the individual to start to think about themselves in a more adult, complex, and responsible manner. What I learned at this point was that if we stop asking people, “Are you being Abused?” and start asking key questions about *what actually occurred*, we

can move forward from a fixed expression of victimology, and determine the true nature of events, which could be Abuse, or it could be Conflict. If the person is part of a negative clique, community, family, or group, this maturation is an implicating and therefore forbidden endeavor and will require overt support from the social worker.

The question "Are you unsafe or uncomfortable?" was very inspiring. Does the person feel unsafe when they are not actually unsafe, but rather because the other party, with whom they are in Conflict, is bringing up issues about their life that are troublesome and therefore initially feel overwhelming and difficult to face. Accusations of Abuse, when it is in fact Conflict, can be a smokescreen, obscuring the real problems at hand and making effective response difficult. Are they being asked to confront the consequences of childhood sexual abuse on how they handle conflict as an adult? That is not an instance of Power Over. Are they being asked to recognize that they or a family member have addiction or mental health issues? That too is not Power Over. Or, on the other hand, is the person physically unsafe because the other party beats them, possesses a gun, or makes real and credible threats, as many have actually experienced? Does the other have so much psychological power and control over them that they are unable to exercise separation or independent action? Is the person being confronted with emotionally terrifying threats such as kidnapping their children, exposing their undocumented status, withholding medication, calling the police for no reason, interfering with their banking, credit, or benefits, or organizing others to shun them? Which kind of *safety* are we endorsing here? Is it the safety from psychological "power over" and actual harm? Or is it the safety from being made uncomfortable by accurate information that challenges one's self-perception?

If it is the latter, it is an assertion of this book that we owe it to each other to help one another tolerate the temporary discomfort that is necessary for the personal and social change produced by positive, interactive problem-solving. In fact, helping each other negotiate is the bedrock of a healthy and active community, clique, family, country. Instead of shunning, shutting down information and scapegoating from a place of non-responsibility, the Conflicted must express, focus, listen, and transform. It is

my claim that in situations of Conflict, accusations that attribute sole responsibility to one party and then construct them as deserving of punishment or shunning are unjust.

In my book *The Gentrification of the Mind: Witness to a Lost Imagination* (2012), I discussed the phenomena of mixed, interactive, dynamic neighborhoods being characterized as “dangerous.” I address how homogenizing those neighborhoods through displacement and cultural flattening was falsely characterized as “getting better.” The gentrification mentality, which I showed to be a product of suburbanization (gated communities, privatized living, gendered and racially segregated social strata) involves understanding difference as discomfort, and being uncomfortable is equated with being abused or in “danger.” Those who avoid change view this discomfort as a threat. Certainly no good can come from us continuing to treat the discomfort of social and personal insight as Abuse.

Asking, “What exactly are you afraid of?” can produce answers that reveal either Conflict or Abuse. Avoiding a complete shut-down and instead encouraging a client or friend’s thorough exploration of anxiety is beneficial to the accuser and essential to their object of punishment. A woman stating that she is “afraid” of her partner may produce a knee-jerk superficial reaction confirming her as a *victim* and her partner as a perpetrator because she used *fear* terminology. This resonates with the government’s use of the vocabulary of “terror” to keep citizens from looking at the consequences of our national policy on other people’s lives, or causing us to racially profile people of color, Muslims, and others. But if instead, enough of a conversation of depth ensues to produce concrete articulation of what exactly she fears, or that citizens fear discovering about ourselves, more layers may emerge.

For example, “I am afraid that she wants me to confront my son’s depression, exploitative behavior, or supremacy” might actually be at the core of the Conflict. “And I live inside a community which would make me feel responsible for his anxiety, if I acknowledge it, which is more guilt than I can face.” If deep and nuanced support produced this insight, the situation would be revealed as Conflicted. On the other hand, if the same person says, “I am afraid that she will run me over with her car,” it could

be Abuse. What makes the difference is if the latter is a substitute for the former, that is, if she suggests a scenario of victimization *because* she doesn't have the support to face the actual issue. Real conversation will reveal quickly if the partner has threatened this action, implied or suggested it, or has any history of running people over with cars. But real conversation can also reveal that the partner has never owned a car and the fear is overwhelmingly a deflective projection, which requires yet another path of response. Shallow engagement by a social worker, service provider, or bad friend with the accuser produces outcomes that are detrimental to her, to the person she is blaming, and also to her son, whose stasis remains ignored by the smokescreen of misdirected blame.

#### **Authentic Relationships of Depth vs. Bonding by Bullying**

Hodes' illuminations brought many complexities to light about how we, as a community, respond to accusation. Sometimes a person in our lives—a friend, a student, a neighbor or relative—makes negative insinuations about a third party (“He’s a stalker” or “She’s abusive”) and they want us to shun, be cold to, exclude, or in other ways punish this person. Our first responsibility is to determine if they are in physical danger from real violence. If not, then we ask to think with them about the *order of events* so that the complexities of the situation and how it unfolded can be revealed. It is unethical to hurt someone because we have been told to do so. We are required by decency to ask both the complainant and the accused how they understand the situation. And this, I truly believe, requires an in-person discussion. Asking hard questions and creating an environment in which complexities can be faced is, after all, what a real friend does. The possibility that the person is not in physical danger but is experiencing their reasonable needs being over-powered and controlled by others will be revealed by this process. Similarly, discussion will also reveal if they are blaming, scapegoating, or punishing the other and imposing unjustified conditions of harm. What if we cared enough and took the time to have the full conversation, focusing on details? Not only could we get away from the buzz words and

their implied helplessness or innocence, but we could finally do what friends, teachers, caseworkers, family, and community members are supposed to do: help the person to understand what is actually happening in their life, their role in it, and the impact of their past experiences on their present perceptions so that they can produce real choices about how to create peace and resolution. In other words, we could have honest relationships of depth. We could be truly “supportive.”

“The question *Are you being abused?*, at this point, can be a meaningless question,” Hodes said. Instead, she advised her students to take an entirely different path and suggested alternative questions:

- “What was happening when the behavior occurred? What happened before? What was the outcome? What is the context?”
- “How would you describe your partner?”
- “Who makes the decisions? What usually leads up to a fight and how do they usually end?”

This real engagement will reveal whether the person is being Abused or is Conflicted. It will not obscure Abuse, but it also will not assume it. These questions not only elicit information for the advocate, but more importantly, they help the person in distress look at their own participation and acquire a different level of understanding and inquiry.

Again, I was inspired. Instead of encouraging people to label themselves either as *victim* or as *abuser* when that may or may not be the case, the role of the friend, caseworker, family member, or witness here was not to reinforce distorted thinking or justifications of punishment and victimology, but rather to elicit a truthful and complex telling, at the base of which is something that novelists, like myself, know very well: Truths can be multiple and are revealed by *the order of events*. As I teach in my creative writing classes, each moment is a consequence of the previous moment. So truths can be complex, and complexity is articulated by its details. Anyone who refuses to hear the details is making a deliberate decision not to understand.

“She yelled at me; she’s abusive.”

Is that an originating action? Or is that a response? Were you

sitting innocently eating your breakfast and she yelled at you because there was no milk, and you are responsible for serving her at every turn, which would be Abuse? Or did she yell at you because you stole her milk money in order to buy drugs? Which would mean that *you* created the originating action and the yelling was a consequence of that action. So there is Conflict about *your* addiction, and the Abuse accusation is a smokescreen to avoid facing it. Or were you so traumatized from being demeaned constantly as a child that as an adult you can't tolerate difference, and any normative challenge is perceived of as an assault or threat? Is it that, in fact, nothing really happened, and yet you feel terrible? And maybe, rather than face the betrayal of your parents, it's a lot easier to put the whole thing on your partner?

Only by examining the details, asking interactive questions in person (and not by email), and understanding the order of events can we differentiate between these three possible interpretations of the same complaint. The most destructive answer, of course, is "She yelled at you? I will hurt her," which is a shallow relationship manifested as bullying. The best answer is, "If you two can't communicate right now, let me talk to her in person and see how she understands what is happening." Or, "How can I help you sit down and talk this through with her?"

Of course, conflicted people can mutually agree that limiting contact between them is best. Or someone in Conflict (not Abuse) may not have the skills or sense of self to be able to communicate productively for some period of time, and can responsibly and kindly request a limit with terms. For example, "I'm not able to act responsibly; let's have a separation and meet in three weeks and ask our friend Joe to help us communicate." Even in an Abuse situation, terms should be responsible and reasonable. For example, "You stole my money to buy drugs, therefore when you have three years sober, we can get together and talk." But if shunning in the context of Conflict is detrimental to the other person and has no terms, it is purely employed as an act of cruelty/punishment or avoidance/denial of responsibility, and is not justified. At all times, Hodes says, there needs to be articulation of "context, objective, impact."

Just because one conflicted person wants to hurt the other through shunning does not make it a right. For example, if Al

wanted to organize a group shunning of Bob overtly because Bob was Black, very few people would theorize that as a right. Nor if it was because Al owed Bob a thousand dollars that he didn't want to pay and so created a diversionary smokescreen. If Al wants to shun Bob because "Bob has three legs," that is not a right. After all, Bob does not have three legs, but even if he did, it would not be legitimate grounds for punishment. If Bob finds the shunning profoundly detrimental and unjustified, he has the right to resist and oppose this form of bullying. Refusing to be shunned for unjust, nonexistent, or absurd reasons is not "stalking." Resisting unjustified punishment is not Abuse. And people who are being asked to stand by and passively allow shunning to take place certainly should know exactly what the accuser is claiming and exactly what the shunned party is experiencing. Without that information, the decision to be a complicit bystander is an unjustified one.

Simply *wanting* to exclude, silence, or dehumanize someone through forced absence is not an inherent right. In the case of Conflict, saying "I refuse to speak to her" can be a behavior that performs the role of "righteous victim of abuse" without the actor actually being in that situation. As always, the people who determine whether or not unjust shunning take place are the surrounding community—they can refuse to participate, or they can blindly endorse it. In my book *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences* (2009), I go into this in detail, using the example of the shunning or exclusion of the queer family member by the homophobic family. There, the family members falsely claim that homosexuality is the Abuse, when in fact the homophobia of the family is the real pathology. This is the perfect example of a process that can only be disrupted by third-party intervention.

At the root of these questions is the responsibility of the caring listener. A shallow relationship with a friend, relative, co-worker, or advocate means that they will not take the time to ask the meaningful questions and to help the person involved overcome shame, anger, and disappointment so they can get to a complex truth about their own participation and how to achieve repair. Who the person talks to is an essential factor in whether they understand or claim their Conflict as Abuse, and establishing the



moral standard within the group. *Are we a family who scapegoats outsiders to avoid facing our own long-standing problems? Do we join in on cruel practices of shunning and punishment as a bond of false loyalty? Or, Are we a family whose standard is to support each other in taking responsibility for dysfunctions and developmental problems and not project them onto other people who see them clearly?* It is up to each family member to decide what kind of group their family will be. The same is true for a group of friends, a workplace, a legal apparatus, a government, or a national or ethnic or religious identity, as well as for those constituted by their HIV status or citizenship. Members have to actively take responsibility for the ethics and moral values that their small or large group claims to represent and actually enact this responsibility. And nothing reveals this more clearly than how difference is treated. Is difference a welcomed perspective to keep the relationships honest, or is it a threat to shared myths of Supremacy or vulnerability? How questions are asked fundamentally reveals the value systems at play, particularly whether or not there is a real desire to know what's true.

In my 1999 interview with Kate Kendell, founding director of the National Center for Lesbian Rights (reproduced in my book *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences*), she made an observation that has haunted me to this day. We were discussing a subject that was quite prominent at the time, the trend for lesbian biological mothers to use the absence of legal relationship recognition to deny custody to former female partners who had fully participated in raising a child. We were discussing the cruelty to the former partner and to the child, the vindictiveness, the destruction of the community, the endless longing and irresolution that it produces, and I asked Kendell how these women justified these actions.

"It's the cadre of friends," she said.

This insight has stayed with me ever since. There is often a "cadre" of bad friends around a person encouraging them to do things that are morally wrong, unjustified, and unethical, because endorsing each other's negative actions is built into the group relationship. Kendell recognized how crucial the surrounding community is in determining if a person will insist on false claims of harm or, the opposite, face their own participation.

Therefore, to Hodes' list of questions, I would add a trope of my own, something that I think a good friend, family member, or citizen would ask: "What would the other person say happened? What would she say is going on here, and how does she understand it?"

Again, this is my perspective as a novelist, where my job is to convey how each character experiences their own life. If the complainant can't reproduce the other person's understanding, then they don't have enough information to complete their story.

Just last night as I was writing this book, my friend Dirk told me about a friend of his whose female partner, the mother of a young child, was "stalking" him. He described how the woman came to his friend's workplace with her seven-year-old, and "made a scene," jeopardizing the man's job.

"Why did she do that?" I asked.

"I don't know. She was harassing him."

Now, I can think of a lot of reasons that could produce the moment where a woman feels she must bring her child with her to talk to her boyfriend at work, in front of others, about a wide range of concerns: she didn't have childcare, she was locked out of the apartment, she had been evicted, there had been a fire, her child was too distressed or unwell to be separated, she was on her way to the doctor and needed cash. Perhaps she wanted to remind her boyfriend of who their child really was, how vulnerable, how beautiful, how loving, how hurt, the child missed his father, and so on. He had an obligation to fulfill and was avoiding it by refusing to answer the phone or talk. There are many imaginable scenarios where this *Conflicted* couple could have substantive difference, the resolution of which would make the man uncomfortable, so he could imagine or employ the language of Abuse in order to avoid taking responsibilities. No one in the community surrounding this couple can start to understand if this is Abuse or Conflict if they never talk to the woman in question.

According to my logic, Dirk has an ethical responsibility to understand what the woman's motive and objective were when she came to his friend's workplace in order to be able to evaluate the events *before* he reinforces his male friend in the accusation that she was "stalking" him. Once Dirk and I started actually discussing the situation, he revealed that this responsibility was

something that simply never occurred to him. He somehow had gotten the wrong message that “being a good friend” meant *not* asking questions that reveal truths. Instead he was expected to join in, uninformed, on the condemnation of the woman. Instead, Dirk could have tried to understand the motives and objectives of his friend’s girlfriend, who was obviously already in a place of distress and pain, something that his male friend may have helped to create.

In other words, despite the fact that Dirk’s friend *said* that he was being “abused” and “stalked,” and that he may even believe that his girlfriend talking to him about conflicts at work means that he is her victim, many other things could be taking place. They could simply be Conflicted; involved in a disagreement that needs to be faced and dealt with, perhaps with helpful outside parties who can produce meaningful communication. Or, even more importantly, her actions could be *resistance* to his unfair and unjustified behavior. He might be blaming her for something she did not do or blaming her for something that never happened, which is not anyone’s *right*. He could be projecting onto her from traumas caused by other people earlier in his life, which, if harmful to her, is not his right. Or he could be overreacting to normative conflict and, by overstating harm, finding justification for his own excessively punitive or cruel behaviors.

“Lack of understanding,” Hodes underlined for the class, “about the difference between Conflict and Abuse has negative outcomes.”

### **When the Community Encourages Overreaction**

I once had a young male graduate student from a marginalized and oppressed community whose work I very much liked, and whom I liked personally. One day I learned that he had a blog where he wrote that he was in love with me. These were in the early days of the internet, and I didn’t even know what a “blog” was, revealing our generational differences. There he made comments about my appearance, discussed his feelings about me, and shared information about my life. Coincidentally, one of his criticisms of an aspect of my appearance hit exactly a place

where I felt insecure, something he could not know. And I was so embarrassed, I actually made changes in myself in response to his statements. Although I felt bad, I was still clear that if I hadn't already had a pre-conditioned history of sensitivity to this area, his comments would not have affected me in the same way. They could, in fact, have been benign.

All of my colleagues, with one exception, described his actions as "stalking." None of these people suggested that I talk to him in order to understand what he thought he was doing. None of them offered to have that conversation with him themselves. All but one (a woman from the same oppressed group as the student) assumed as a matter of course that I should expose him to the administration, humiliate him, perhaps endanger his career, and most importantly make accusations against him through authoritative channels. At first, I assumed they were correct. His actions, on the surface, fit behaviors that were undesirable and in response I felt uncomfortable. I, too, lived inside the paradigm where being uncomfortable was grounds for accusing someone of abuse. I contemplated following what seemed to be the obvious, convenient, and socially condoned path of accusing him of "stalking" followed by condemnation, cut-off, and punishment. I accepted the group's offer of approval based on the idea that I was an innocent victim of someone who should, therefore, be hurt.

But at the same time, I discovered that I was disturbed by the rapidity with which my colleagues drew conclusions, the viciousness of their suggestions, the unquestioned reliance on punitive authorities, and their own sense of themselves as superior to him at the root of these impulses. I was most disturbed by them drawing these conclusions *without ever speaking to* him. I realized that, in fact, I had two clearly different options of how to respond. I could solidify my relationship to the group by being outraged, violated, damaged, angry, and fearful and elevate them into rescuers, loyal protectors of my womanhood. Or I could find out what he thought he was doing, and perhaps discover that he had made an error in judgment that we had to address. I realized that I actually had a choice about how to respond, even though my professional community was pushing me toward victimology. In this particular case, I was uncomfortable, in part because of him, but also in part because of earlier experiences in which he had

played no part. I thought over my colleagues' advice, and then refused it. I knew that "stalking" was and is a real thing. That ex-husbands and other aggrieved types like fans of movie stars sit outside their homes with guns, and actually do murder people. To use this word, which represents a literal experience of real violence, metaphorically, to describe discomfort or a situation that merits conversation in order to be understood, was absurd.

In fact, I did the opposite. I avoided all third parties, all institutions of power, and took the time to speak to him directly so that we could negotiate a resolution. I told him that I could no longer be his thesis advisor because his comments made me uncomfortable. I made myself available to him for in-person conversation (not through email or third parties) and conveyed that I was transferring him to someone who was appropriate to his project, and that I still supported his work. I told him that I was available to discuss this matter with him until he felt it was resolved. And I kept my word; we had a few conversations. I refused to shun him, or to limit our conversations because my goal was mutual resolution, not punishment, dominance, or assertion of either my victimhood or Supremacy.

A few things surfaced that I could not have known without talking it over, and this new information was enriching. First of all, I became more aware that younger people had a different relationship to the internet than I did. Talking about difficult feelings and sharing information on this level was generationally culturally appropriate for him. That based on our different age positions, we experienced those actions differently. I also learned that I was the first authority figure to take him seriously, from his marginalized position, as an artist and intellectual. And that this had overwhelmed him with feeling, perhaps at a level that maybe should have been contained, but wasn't.

Once he saw that I was establishing a new parameter for the relationship by resigning as his advisor, but that at the same time I was neither punishing him, invoking authority, shunning him, nor withholding, we transitioned positively into the next phase. I was invited into victimology, but I am very glad that I found the strength to resist the image of myself as being more aggressed than I actually was. While my discomfort had multiple sources, he was only one of them. So falsely projecting that my

partner in Conflict had sinister intentions, which my colleagues felt sure they could automatically intuit, would have been an error. Instinctually, I applied what Catherine Hodes would years later articulate as “context, objective, impact.” Now, more than a decade after these events, this man and I are active friends in the same arts community. But for years I have been grappling with my colleagues’ almost prescribed instinct to punish, using the language originated initially by a radical movement but now co-opted to deny complexity, due process, and the kind of in-person, interactive conversation that produces resolution.

I discussed this with my therapist, now deceased, who had treated victims of McCarthyism later on in their lives. He told me that some of his patients had found themselves caught up in the whirlwind smoke of shunning and innuendo, whisper campaigns and exclusions. No one ever sat down and told them what they were being accused of, and they never had a chance to discuss or inform or respond. Instead, group pressures, intimidations, and false loyalties produced a climate of mysterious chill, in which they were denied jobs, kept out of social events, shunned by acquaintances. People were mean to them without ever saying why, and no opportunity for clarification or repair was ever presented. These people found both the material and emotional consequences overwhelming, but even more so they were hurt by the amorphous nature of the problem. Not being able to know exactly what they were charged with, not being able to talk through the accusations, never knowing where they would face these hostile expressions drove many people to extreme suffering. Even later when classic McCarthyism was dismantled and delegitimized, these unnecessarily broken relationships could not be healed. My therapist explained to me that taking extreme bullying actions, like signing a petition against a friend, or denouncing a colleague to others or to the state, as often happened under McCarthyism, was so extreme in its pathology that the participants could never repair. They were so defended against the reality of the injustice of their own action that they couldn’t reconcile it to their false image of themselves as righteous. In listening to him, I came to believe that the same personality type who would ice out or attack someone without talking to them first out of false “loyalty” would be the same person who would later be unable to apolo-

gize. It's a character issue that becomes the building blocks of fascism or any supremacist construction. And for those people, a commonly held expectation or standard of asking targeted people what they feel or how they understand their experience could be a life-enhancing or even life-saving corrective.

### **False Accusations and the State**

The lack of engaged, compassionate conversation of depth by the community surrounding an accusing party and by the authority to which the accuser would turn has terrible consequences. These include, interestingly, as Hodes informed us, "Perpetrators, themselves, [who] often initiate the complaint of abuse." The legal apparatus that has been put in place ostensibly to assist a victim can and often is used to extend the cruelty as well as to keep the perpetrator from facing their own issues. The system by which we help people step out of conflict is so flawed, and the general understanding in the population so over-simplified that, for example, when the police answer a distress call to a private home, "Survivors may be arrested at the scene," Hodes said. "Or cross complaints may be issued."

Perpetrators increasingly are the ones to call the police, threaten legal action, send lawyer letters, or threaten or seek restraining orders as part and parcel of their agenda of blame and unilateral control. It is an agenda designed to avoid by any means necessary having to examine their own behavior, history, or participation in the Conflict. Actively violent and truly abusive people are hard to convict, and innocent people are convicted of crimes every day. At the same time a targeted victim may rarely be convicted and incarcerated based on exclusively harassing uses of the law, but the stigma, the anxiety, the expense and fear caused by cynical manipulation of police, lawyers, and courts can be the punitive, avoidant goal. The state's protective machine becomes an additional tool of harassment.

"Anyone can use the apparatus," Hodes said. "Including abusers, to mete out punishment."

The National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs' 2014 report on LGBTQI Intimate Partner Abuse noted that "in 2013 the police mis-arrested the survivor as the perpetrator of violence" in over half of all queer domestic abuse arrests. There are particular dangers in misidentifying the perpetrator in same-sex relationships. The one who is butch, of color, not a mother, not a citizen, is from another culture, or HIV-positive can be falsely construed as the assailant. In all cases, the perpetrator may get control of the Abuse discourse as a denial, defense, or deflection of their own behavior. And just because someone doesn't call the police certainly does not mean they are guilty. There is often the false assumption that the one calling the police is innocent and the one who doesn't call the police is guilty. The real violated party may refuse to engage with the legal system for ethical reasons, or fear of the police, or they may refuse to grandstand on that level of language, punishment, or intimidation. They may simply recognize that the trouble is a Conflict and therefore inappropriate for punishment. And in cases of Conflict, where Abuse is not present, service providers from the New York LGBT Anti-Violence Project told me that false accusations and illegitimate claims to orders of protection were present among the client base, and that they understood these actions of overstating harm as consequences of "trauma."

"Threats," Hodes points out, "are an effective means of control." So just because someone makes the charge of Abuse, organizes group shunning or even generates lawyer letters or calls the police, it is not in any way proof or evidence that they are being "abused." They could be mischaracterizing the other's attempt to straighten things out, to communicate, to de-escalate because they fear the information that real negotiation would reveal. Or they may be so expectant of obedience and successful control of the other that that person's *resistance* to being scapegoated, shunned, or bullied gets called Abuse. Despite the assertions of Supremacy ideology, projecting onto another person or blaming them for things they have not caused, punishing them for things that never happened, organizing group shunning against them, or any other manifestation of mislabeling Conflict as Abuse are not "rights." "In court," Hodes said, "survivors do poorly in forensics and perpetrators



do well.” Reactions to scapegoating, assault, shunning, the denial of due process, i.e., assertion of what Hannah Arendt called “The right to appear,” can all be spun through the language of victimology.

Since perpetrators may refuse to participate in negotiation, group shunning is often one of their strategies. “A perpetrator can isolate their partner from the community,” Hodes offered. They can organize or instrumentalize that community to punish or shun the partner, thereby restricting further the partner’s ability to provide information, details, ask for help, or engage in negotiation. Hodes advocates for clients to be asked, “What did *you* do? What was the purpose behind your behavior?” Over and over again she recommends an analytical focus on the self: one’s own actions, their chronological order, their intent and outcome.

“Abusers externalize,” she says. “It’s always somebody else’s fault.” So if the parties are able to spell out and honestly discuss their own roles, then they are more able to create solutions, which is what the abuser fears.

In the workshop we discussed a then-recent case in Connecticut where two men married to each other were issued cross-restraining orders. They both had serious crystal meth problems; there was a lot of acting out, and they each, in a grandstanding way, went to the police asking for protective orders, thereby avoiding the actual problem, which was the drug addiction. Of course, being the one to receive a restraining order in no way means that he is the one being “abused.” It may simply mean nothing more than that he wanted to and was able to get a restraining order. Another personality, in the same position, may feel that getting a restraining order would be an escalation and an overstatement. But in this case, both parties decided to overstate harm, with the exaggeration augmented, or perhaps even caused, by addiction. Because the courts were confused by the question of determining who was “the” aggressor when there were two men involved, they were both given restraining orders by the state.

“There should never be cross-restraining orders,” Hodes said. That’s like saying *we agree to not see each other*. Restraining orders should only be issued if one person is deemed to be a perpetrator and the restraining order is necessary to save the other from Power Over. It’s not a tactical strategy designed to prove

a point. If both people are contributing to the problem, then it is *mutual* and therefore Conflict, and the intervention of the court is unreasonable. And asking for that intervention is similarly unreasonable. In this case, both men manipulated the Abuse apparatus as smokescreens to avoid dealing with the real issue, addiction. And the state happily enabled them, by reaffirming Abuse claims without providing an investigative process that would have revealed and focused on their drug use. Of course, in this mangled set of missteps, disaster ensued. When they came together again and had another conflict, the police arrived and ridiculously enforced both restraining orders; absurdly, both men were arrested. Unfortunately one had a heart attack while in jail and died. As we learn over and over again from police violence in the United States, calling the police over Conflict can result in violence and death.

“Mainstream Domestic Violence advocacy,” Hodes said in a correspondence later that year, “is committed to assuming that *the victim is telling the truth*, and any exploration around that trope is met with heavy resistance. Historically, that makes sense for a host of reasons. But *this* analysis is not about disbelieving, it’s about pinpointing where the problem lies.”

One of Hodes’ many valuable suggestions is to lower the bar for what must happen in a person’s life for their suffering to be acknowledged.

“The current paradigm is encouraging all of us to think we are in abusive relationships,” Hodes explained. “And if you are not in an abusive relationship, you don’t deserve help. Being ‘abused’ is what makes you ‘eligible.’ But everyone deserves help when they reach out for it.”

This is a strikingly humane idea: that the collapse of Conflict and Abuse is partly the result of a punitive standard in which people are made desperate, yet ineligible, for compassion. This is a non-cynical reading of a human condition in which people who have suffered in the past, or find themselves implicated in situations in which they are afraid to be accountable, fear that within their group acknowledging some responsibility will mean being denied their need to be heard and cared for. So they fall back on the accusation of Abuse to guarantee that they will not be questioned in a way that confirms these fears. Especially

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vulnerable to this are those who experienced profound disapproval and criticism early on as children, who are later locked into self-righteous families or Supremacy communities with negative bonds. Ultimately, the blurring of Conflict and Abuse, Hodes says, “is epidemic, and leads to everyone identifying as a victim, which is paralyzing the search for solutions.”

I was moved and enlightened by her insight that conflicted people have to prove they are “eligible” for compassion. No one can negotiate without being heard. Shunning, therefore, is designed to maintain a unilateral position of unmovable superiority by asserting one’s status as Abused and the implied consequential right to punish without terms. This concept, of having to earn the right to have pain acknowledged, is predicated on a need to enforce that one party is entirely righteous and without mistake, while the other is the Specter, the residual holder of all evil. If conflicted people were expected and encouraged to produce complex understandings of their relationships, then people could be expected to negotiate, instead of having to justify their pain through inflated charges of victimization. And it is in the best interest of us all to try to consciously move to that place.