

## Stretch Your Heart and Say What You Mean by Tami Simon

Tami Simon: Welcome to Insights at the Edge produced by Sounds True. My name's Tami Simon. I'm the founder of Sounds True. And I'd love to take a moment to introduce you to the Sounds True Foundation. The goal of the Sounds True Foundation is to provide access and eliminate financial barriers to transformational education and resources such as teachings and trainings on mindfulness, emotional awareness, and self-compassion. If you'd like to learn more and join with us in our efforts, please visit [SoundsTrueFoundation.org](http://SoundsTrueFoundation.org).

In this episode of Insights at the Edge, my guest is Oren Jay Sofer. Oren teaches mindfulness meditation and Nonviolent Communication in both secular and Buddhist contexts. And he's the first author to integrate mindfulness and somatics with the tools and principles of Nonviolent Communication. He's the author of the book *Say What You Mean*. And with Sounds True, he's created a new audio learning series. It's called *Speak Your Truth with Love and Listen Deeply: A Training in Mindfulness-Based Nonviolent Communication*.

At a time when we find our society so divided, where useful and productive discourse with people who hold different opinions, it often seems so hard to come by. Enter Oren Jay Sofer offering to teach us the skills of mindful communication, skills that ask us to stretch our heart, to identify our own needs at a very deep level, and also to see and respect the needs of others. His teaching is, I believe, a huge part of the medicine we need right now. Here's my conversation with Oren Jay Sofer.

Oren, to begin, and as a way for you to introduce yourself to our listeners, can you share a little bit about your background? And I noticed that you spent two and a half years as a forest renunciate, and that really got my attention. And how, from that deep place of practice, you came to be a teacher of mindful communication.

Oren Jay Sofer: Sure. Thanks, Tami. Happy to be here with you. So I started studying and practicing Buddhist meditation when I was about 19 in college, both due to ordinary First World suffering and a good dose of curiosity, and came across Marshall Rosenberg's work with Nonviolent Communication about five years later when I was living and working at the Insight Meditation Society as a cook. And having arguments with my colleagues about how to cut the carrots and how long to steam the broccoli, and finding that all of the beauty and peace and compassion of my meditation practice would go out the window whenever I didn't see eye to eye with someone. So that raised a little flag inside.

And then fast-forward about 10 years, and I chose to step out of my "lay life" and spend some time with one of my monastic teachers, Venerable Ajahn Sucitto, training as a

monastic and a forest renunciate, which was a very powerful and deep period for me in my life, both to understand and appreciate the lineage of Buddhist practice that I've been a beneficiary of and also to rediscover in a deeper way my place in the world.

It was a very difficult decision in some ways to disrobe to leave that training, but ultimately one that felt right. As much as I valued the training, as much as I learned from it, I realized that my heart and my character longed to be more connected and engaged in our world. And so it was out of that place that I chose to come back to my lay life and continue, continue teaching—I had been teaching some before—and then later ended up writing my book and sharing my understanding of how these different paths come together, how the internal training of contemplative practice is really an essential ingredient for our conversations and relationships in life—and vice versa, how the more we pay attention to our communications and the healthier our relationships are, the more it actually deepens our spiritual practice.

TS: In your book *Say What You Mean: A Mindful Approach to Nonviolent Communication*, you lay out three foundations for mindful communication. Number one, lead with presence. Number two, come with curiosity and care. And number three, focus on what matters. And I really want to focus on focusing on what matters!

And we're going to do that, but you also describe in the book how these first two foundations really set the stage for mindful communication. So let's begin there and set the stage, and maybe you can briefly take us through each of these foundational steps. Let's start with leading with presence.

OJS: Sure, absolutely. Thanks, Tami. I think we all know how it feels to be in conversation with someone and notice that their attention is split, right? Whether it's on Zoom or on the phone and you see their eyes diverting, or you get the sense that they're multitasking, or just even in real life in conversation and someone's attention is somewhere else.

And if we contrast that with how it feels when someone's really there, we really have the sense that they're giving us their full attention, it's very powerful and I think it sends a very deep message when we give someone our full attention. It says that you and what's happening right now in this conversation is important enough to me that I'm willing to give you one of my most precious resources that I can never get back: my time, my energy and attention.

So leading with presence means that before anything else in a conversation, before what happened, before how I feel, before what I want to say or have happen, can I just show up? Can I just be here fully human with another human being? And it sounds great, but it goes against so much in our world, in our society today in terms of the pace of our life, the level of distractedness, the fragmentation of our attention, the pressure of the economy and technology, which are all taking us away from presence.

So there are a whole host of benefits that come with this. I mentioned one of the most fundamental ones of just opening the door to connection, but it gives us a ton of information when we're actually here about the other person and what's going on for them, about our own internal life. It helps us make wiser choices, because when we're

aware, we're not on automatic. We can actually navigate in a conversation.

And if we get reactive or defensive, we notice that, and we can start to adjust so that we're not ending up saying something that later is going to take a lot of time and energy to clean up. So that's a little bit about leading with presence, and there's a whole really versatile and creative array of tools we can use to learn how to do this. Everything from keeping a little bit of attention in our body, as we do in mindfulness practice, feeling your hands or your feet, to slowing down the pace of our speech just a little bit or pausing, to more advanced practices that have to do with balancing our awareness between our sense of self and the other person or the world around us.

So that's a little about leading with presence, and I'll just pause there and see how that lands for you or if you want to follow up.

TS: Of course because you're a mindful communicator, you're going to pause and see how that's landing for me. That's skillful. And what I notice in listening to you, even just in these first few minutes of our conversation as you're talking about leading with presence, I notice coming into my heart more, coming into being fully here more. So I just want to start by acknowledging that and being grateful to you.

And I also notice all the times I'm reflecting in my mind's eye that I get bored during meetings or conversations. And I reach out for my iPhone, because I'm looking for greater stimulation, and I can think of my wife saying to me like, "I can't believe you just picked up your iPhone while we were talking." And I'm thinking like, "Yes, but we live together, and you're going to go—." And she's like, "No, you have to make an announcement. 'Excuse me.'"

And so I'm wondering just in terms of, because you mentioned technology and I just think it's a thing, especially in our home or when we're out with people, what's your suggestion for relating to our iPhones or whatever our digital device might be?

OJS: Yes. It's a thing. That's a good way of putting it. Wow. I mean, that's a big question to me, because it's so addictive and there are so many habits around it. I'll just respond to the specific part of what you said, because I think it's such a broad question and there's so much we could explore about just how to relate to our devices. But I tend to agree with your wife, not to—

TS: Of course. Yes, it's fine.

OJS: [LAUGHTER] Not to put us in conflict.

TS: I agree with her too. I agree with her too and so, but it's all right.

OJS: Yes, we're in conversation with someone, and I certainly find myself doing it too. My wife says to me sometimes—it's definitely happened where it's like, "Hey," both of us like, "Why are you looking at your phone? We were just talking, and you just picked up your phone." And I think that a lot of the time, it's not actually a conscious choice. It's really coming from habit, where we feel a little anxious or impatient, or you mentioned feeling bored, and that we just reach for that comfort, for that distraction, for that release of something to stimulate us in a half-conscious way. Before we even know it, we're no longer listening to the person in front of us, and it might take them to point it out and be like, "Wait, what just happened?"

So yes, when we can, when we're conscious, I think one of the things—I'll finish that sentence first. When we're conscious, we can do what you just said, to say like, "Hey, I need to check something. Do you mind?" But I think one of the things that's lovely about the Nonviolent Communication practice that's at the heart of the communication training aspect of what I teach is it helps us to be more aware of what's happening inside and to make clearer and more empowered choices.

So for example, if you and I are having a conversation and I notice that I'm starting to feel bored or have a sense that, "Oh God, this is a waste of time," rather than doing something unconscious and habitual or awkwardly trying to change the subject, I can be aware—not only of how I feel but of what's important to me, what we call in Nonviolent Communication "what my needs are." And we can unpack that a little bit later. But you know what? What actually matters to me now? And it's like, "Well, I value my time and I want to feel engaged. I want to feel alive." And then I can make a different choice about how do I actually want to respond and relate in a way that's going to help me move in that direction, whether it means asking a question that can bring the conversation back to life, checking in with you about, "Hey, it feels like our conversation just got a little bit, I don't know, stale or routine. Is that just me? Or how are you feeling?" We can actually do something different other than reaching for the phone.

TS: Now, one more question here about leading with presence. I thought it was quite brilliant how you teach people that if you notice yourself becoming dysregulated or not really able to have the conversation, not being there, you can say something like, "I'd really like to continue our conversation, but I'm not in the best frame of mind to do that right now. Can we take a break and come back to this?"

And once again, just confessing here and sharing with my partner. She said, "Why don't you write that down and use that as—." So I think that's just so important, this idea that you could pause a conversation. So maybe you could say a bit about that and when it's good to use that.

OJS: Yes, absolutely. Well, I'll just riff off what you're saying first, Tami, just for a sec, which is, I think—I love having short one-liners that we memorize. Communication's hard, and relationships are complicated. So the more we can know ahead of time, "Hey, if I get stuck, if I'm in this situation, here's something I can say." And I don't have to reach for the right words and struggle to deal with my anxiety or feeling frozen inside, because I've practiced and memorized something clear and simple that actually reflects my values.

So I love that, just about the example you're giving. And pausing is one of those instances where for any reason, whether it's that we feel tired or don't have the energy, we're in a rush, or we're getting reactive, or any number of reasons where we've assessed inside, "This is not going to be helpful. Essentially, the conditions are not present for us to have the kind of conversation I want."

And one of the things that's so powerful about the way I encourage people to do this is it's taking responsibility for our part in it instead of putting it on the other person, which means that there's less to argue with. If I say to the other person, "I'm not sure if anything else I say now is going to be helpful. And in fact it might actually make things worse. I'm committed to figuring this out. Would you mind if we just put this down for now and come back to it tomorrow?"

There's very little to argue with there because I am taking responsibility for my own lack of capacity or interest or resilience in the moment rather than putting it on the other person.

TS: I think the challenge here is that often when, I'll just once again just speak for myself as the every-person straw person in this, when I'm not in the place to have the conversation, the horse has already left the barn. I mean, if I had the kind of presence of mind to say, "I'm not in a good—," I wouldn't need to say it often.

Now, I know that you have training in Somatic Experiencing in Peter Levine's work and training people how to work with trauma and trauma activation. So when we notice, "Oh my, I don't even have the presence of mind to ask to have this conversation later because I'm too upset at this point."

OJS: Yes.

TS: "I'm off the rails really."

OJS: Yes.

TS: Help me, Oren.

OJS: Help me, help me. Well, life's hard, isn't it? I think one of the things about this training is having compassion for ourselves and recognizing we're all doing the best we can. And I certainly can offer a few tips and tools, but ultimately it's going to be imperfect and that's the nature of being human. And instead of holding ourselves to some unrealistic standard and beating ourselves up because I didn't do what Oren said to do in the

book or something, just, “OK, I’m trying.”

And for me, these skills and, really, our contemplative practice as a whole, it’s not about getting it right or living up to some ideal. It’s really about being human together. And when we don’t live up to our expectations or values, as so often happens, it’s being able to take responsibility for that and repair and find each other again.

So if we miss the moment and we say something hurtful, as I know I’ve certainly done many times in my life and suspect I will do again in spite of all my training, what I’ve gotten better and better at and what I would wish for all of us is, number one, not beating myself up over it. Just acknowledging, “Yes, I was in pain. That was hard. I was doing the best I can.” And learning, learning from the situation.” Right? And then being able to take responsibility and come to the other person to be accountable and to repair, to actually find each other again. And one of the things that I so value that I’ve learned through my own training in Nonviolent Communication is that having solid and secure relationships is not about never making a mistake or breaking trust. It’s about being able to rebuild trust when we have erred.

And that’s when we actually deepen the strength of our bonds, because we recognize, “Oh wow, we can actually disconnect from each other and find each other again.” That’s actual, that’s real connection. And anyone who’s married or in a long-term relationship knows that’s what it’s about. It’s about how do we find each other again and again.

TS: You teach this practice that we can have a do-over. We can ask, “Are you willing?” And, “I’d love to have a do-over.” And I thought, it takes a lot of humility to do that and a lot of generosity just to even really be like, “I want—.” You really have to be in your heart to say, “I’d like to have a do-over. Is that OK with you?” I think it’s a beautiful idea.

OJS: Yes. Yes. So, thank you. Just to go back to what you said, though, about if I had the presence of mind to pause, I wouldn’t need to pause.

TS: Right.

OJS: Right? So I think this is really where the training of leading with presence hits the road, where the rubber hits the road with it, because it’s that training that, one, helps us to notice when we are getting activated, when we are starting to lose the sense of being grounded, oriented, and balanced. We get those signs earlier. And then number two, we learn how to regulate better, how to not let it get to the point where we’re so far over threshold that we no longer have choice in how we’re relating, where we can actually start to work with the activation we’re feeling by taking a deep breath, by feeling the weight of our body, by looking around the room, using these very basic orienting techniques that Peter Levine teaches and these deactivation techniques so that we can begin to steer the conversation in another direction.

And that takes training, which is why I really relate to communication, as it’s a learnable

skill. It's something that we can actually train ourselves in, which means that it takes time, it takes effort, and that we need to have a method. We can't just think about it and get better at communication. We actually need to do exercises to learn and relearn these habits. That's the aim of a lot of what I teach is to give people those methods.

TS: All right. Let's move on to the second foundation.

OJS: Number two.

TS: Because as I said, I really want to get to number three. All right, "come with curiosity and care." Speak a little about that.

OJS: Sure, sure. Yes, because I'm a language nerd, I use a different preposition. I say, "Come from curiosity and care." Both are beautiful, because "coming with" is that sense of offering and "coming from" is that, for me, it's like, where is this arising from inside me? So this is about our intention, and what I mean by that is the motivation or quality behind our words and actions rather than the outcome of the conversation we're hoping for, which can be relevant, but when we're fixated on a particular outcome, it tends to put us in an adversarial relationship with the other person. And then we miss all kinds of cues and opportunities to actually be creative and work together.

So intention is powerful in conversation. I often say it's one of the most powerful and transformative factors in a conversation, for two reasons. Number one, it's what's steering the conversation. It's the unseen force that is driving us in a certain direction. Number two, it plays a huge role in our nonverbal communication. It is animating and shaping our facial expressions, our tone of voice, our body language, subtle micro expressions that we don't even control and are often not conscious of but which we pick up on nonetheless and interpret from the other person.

So our habitual conditioning, particularly if there is a difference of opinion or conflict, is to default to less helpful intentions such as blaming one another, trying to be right, trying to get our way, trying to control or manipulate the situation. And all of those strategies can produce results—otherwise, none of us would use them, ever—but they come at a cost. They can damage the relationship. They limit the creativity of what happens. They reduce intrinsic motivation.

So instead we can, when we're mindful, when we're actually aware, we can check where we're coming from, be really honest about our motivations if they are mixed, and incline more toward the ones that are going to be helpful, that are actually going to open the floor for more collaboration, mutual understanding, and exploration.

And the default—there are many helpful intentions we can have in a conversation, but the one that I encourage people to learn as a baseline, just to come back to—is this core combination of curiosity on the one hand, the humility to really seek, to understand in a genuine way, what matters to both of us, and care, being connected to our heart, to our

values for kindness and our shared vulnerability as human beings. And these are, really, the two core intentions that drive mindfulness practice: of genuine interest, curiosity, and lovingkindness, a quality of gentleness and tenderness in the heart. And we translate those into our relationships.

And again, with this too, people can feel it. When we're coming from the genuine intention to understand, it can be disarming, because when somebody else really feels and trusts that we are not just interested in steamrolling them to get what we want but would like to work together to find something that is as workable as possible for both of us, they can stop putting so much energy into defending themselves and resisting us and actually work together.

TS: Well, first of all, I just want to say the fact that you're a language nerd is something I really respect. And I do believe subtle is significant. And by saying "come from curiosity and care" in addition to "with," it's powerful. And what that brought up for me is a question, which is, if we find ourselves in a state of anger and blame, let's say, how do I transform so that I come from curiosity and care to the conversation, when the truth is, I'm feeling angry and I'm blaming this person for this terrible thing, that they did, incidentally.

OJS: Yes. Well, I think the first step is being honest with ourselves. A lot of the time, either we're not aware, or if we are aware we're not willing to take responsibility for the fact that, "Yes, I'm pissed, and, yes, I am blaming you," particularly if we have a spiritual practice, because we have all these ideas about how I should be and what my values are. And so it was like, "I'm not blaming you. No." But inside we really do think, "You should have and you shouldn't have." And so I think being honest with oneself is the first step.

And then interestingly enough, the shift is to get curious about what's going on for oneself. That's where it starts. And Marshall Rosenberg, one of the very insightful and quotable things he was fond of saying—and I know you knew Marshall, so you probably heard him say this directly—is that all blame and judgments are tragic expressions of our own unmet needs.

So when I'm blaming you, that's really valuable information. There's nothing wrong with it. It's just not so helpful of an approach if we want to work together, figure this out. But it's information, and it's information about something that matters to me. So the place to get curious and to come from care is with myself, to recognize like, "Oh wow, I'm really upset and in pain here. Ouch. Can I just for a moment bring some care to my own heart and recognize I'm suffering in this situation?"

And then get curious, "OK, I am blaming this person with all of my being. There must be something really important to me. What matters? What do I care about so deeply that I am this upset?" And then I can start to identify number three, focus on what matters. What's important to me here? Is this about respect? Is this about dignity? Is this about keeping agreements? Is this about balance, fairness, injustice? What is the value that is so core to me that I feel so tied up in knots and am so filled with blame?

When I can identify that, I start to take some of my power back, because my energy is no longer getting thrust out at you and trying to control you but is actually seated deeply in

myself, centered in my own values. And now I can move from that place of deep clarity and centeredness into our relationship, into our world, and speak my truth with clarity and care without the blame, which tends to be much more powerful.

TS: Very helpful. We worked for many years with an organizational consultant at Sounds True. And I was fortunate that I could call him whenever I felt upset about something. And he would talk me through it and help me see a good path through. And I noticed a pattern. I would call and he would let me complain for however long I needed to get it all out. And then he'd say, "Tami, what do you need?"

And I was like, "OK, I'm not going to keep calling you when you just—" I'm just going to write this down and do that, and I'll get to the same place like, "What do you need?" So help me understand when it comes to this third part of mindful communication, what really matters, how this question, answering this question seems to be at the heart of it. Help me understand that.

OJS: Sure. Yes. There are a few different facets to it. And as you probably recall from my book, just that instruction to focus on what matters has many different layers of meaning within it. So on the surface level, what I'm referring to there and why it's so powerful and the key to this is, most of us have been conditioned by our society, our education system, perhaps our culture, our religious background. When something doesn't work for us, when we don't enjoy something, when we disagree with it, we tend to experience that by projecting it outward onto others through the lens of blame.

So if I don't like what someone is doing, they are fill in the blank. You're an imbecile, you're controlling, you are this. Now what that does is it puts me in a position, one, where anything I want to say to this other person, we're immediately in a conflict because I'm judging and blaming them. And most people don't enjoy that and will defend themselves. Number two, if you are the problem, the only way I have to address this is to change you or control you. And how's that work? Hopefully, we all reach a point in our lives where we begin to recognize that that's futile, that we can't control others. We might be able to influence them some, but trying to control other people as a way of finding peace of mind or well-being in life is a waste of our energy and time.

So if I can start to identify, if I can start to translate those perceptions of you are so, and why are you, and you should, and you shouldn't into, "Oh, I really value. I really want. I really long for. This is what's important to me." Now I have taken all of my power back. I'm clear about what matters to me. And I can be creative about how to go about acknowledging, attending to, and perhaps even fulfilling those underlying values.

So this one shift from the projected lens of blame onto others to identifying our own needs, or often it also goes inward. If I have some pattern or habit that I don't enjoy about myself, what do I do? I blame myself. "Why are you so lazy? Why are you so self-centered? Why are you so this?" Where does that leave me? There's nothing I can do about that. I'm in conflict with myself now rather than being able to identify, "OK, well what matters to me here?" Whatever that behavior is.

So the fundamental principle—which Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of Nonviolent Communication, didn't invent; he learned it from his teachers, from people like Carl

Rogers and Abraham Maslow—this underlying perspective that comes out of humanistic psychology, as you're well aware of, is that part of what makes us human is that we are motivated in life to fulfill or satisfy certain fundamental underlying needs.

I'll say more about what's meant by that word "need" in a moment, but what this does is, one, it empowers us in our own life to identify what's actually driving us. What's really important to me? If I don't know that, I am bound to habitually and perhaps even compulsively repeat the same behaviors, not actually knowing why I'm even doing it.

On a relational level, it allows me to see something more fundamental to another person's humanity than their actions or views. This is at the heart of compassion and nonviolence. This is what enables us to actually fulfill the vision that Dr. King had, based on the teachings of Jesus, of how do you love your enemies? How do you love your neighbor when they're doing things that are actively harming your family or community?

We have to learn to see one another in a different way. So focusing on what matters means, one, I am able to identify what I need, what I value, what's important to me and my community. And two, to see beyond the surface of another human being to something deeper in their heart, what actually matters to them that I can get behind, that I can support, because it's so deep that it's shared. It reveals the common ground.

So what's meant by a "need" is not the usual cultural associations we might have with that word. I'm being needy, self-centered, demanding—or the opposite, in our individualistic culture, if I have needs, I'm somehow weak and dependent. What we mean by that are these fundamental, underlying motivating factors, these qualities in our heart that we care about.

So I like to talk about three different layers of needs that we all have as human beings, and the first—and please feel free to jump in here and interrupt me at any point, if I'm going on too long here. The first is what we all recognize as our basic human needs, physiological needs for food, air, water, shelter, clothing, medicine, et cetera. And no one would argue that we as human beings need those to survive.

But the reality is that we are more than our bodies. And part of what makes us human is that we don't just stop there. We have what we might call "relational" needs. We have a whole limbic part of our brain that is about relationship and connection. So we need love. We need understanding. We need connection, community, belonging, touch, play, all of these things that we experience in relationship.

And we know that babies and infants will actually not—their neurology will not develop properly without empathy and love and touch. And the same holds true for us as adults that there's only so long we can go as an adult without love and acknowledgment and understanding before there's some real damage, before we start to lose it and do something hurtful and crazy as we so sadly see all around us in the world.

So we have relational needs, and then we also have what we might call "spiritual" needs or "higher" needs, which, again, is this understanding that there is a part of human consciousness, the human psyche, that is beyond the material plane. We have needs that we cannot fulfill or satisfy just through the physical world. We have needs for meaning, for purpose, for peace, for a sense of transcendence or communion.

And so the more we are aware of and in touch with these qualities and aspects of our life as human beings, the more vitality we experience, the more choice and agency we have,

and the more creative we can be about how to transform our world and work together to craft a different future for our children.

TS: So let's say, Oren, someone's listening and they're like, "I can pretty much articulate what my basic human needs are. I know what those are. And I'm even somewhat in touch with what my relational needs are, but I'm not sure I understand or know and can easily articulate what these spiritual or higher needs are in myself and also how I can see them in someone else." How I can say, "Oh, I get it. I get where this person's coming from. I get what their need is." How can you help us? I mean, you talk about how this is a training, it's learnable. How do I really learn about how to identify my own needs at all three levels and see what someone else is needing?

OJS: Sure. Yes. Thanks. Great question. So yes, it is a training and it's a graduated training. So it starts by just developing our vocabulary. There's all kinds of fascinating research about how you can't experience something if you don't have a word for it, kind of like how language mediates our experience of reality and all that.

So if we don't have a concept or a word to describe our needs, it's very difficult to be aware of them. So that's why in Nonviolent Communication, we provide these, really, I think, powerful and radical lists called a "needs list" where you can actually look at this list of words and reflect on it and be like, "Oh, wow. Yes, I need encouragement. I could use some reassurance. Wow, I really value belonging and community and peace."

So just familiarizing ourself with the concepts is a starting point. That's the foundation. And then beginning to actually practice during the day, asking ourself, as often as we like or can remember, like, "What matters to me here? What do I need?" And this could be when we're actually doing something. So we're here working, working, and get up. Next thing you know, you're standing in front of the refrigerator or the snack cupboard and reaching for something. You just pause, "Wait, oh, what do I need? Am I hungry? Or do I need some pleasure? Do I need some relaxation? Do I need a break? What deeper need am I trying to fulfill?"

So we can just ask ourself that question throughout the day as a way of learning how to shift the focus of our attention, from what we call in Nonviolent Communication "our strategies," which are the specific behaviors and actions we undertake as human beings, to the underlying need. "What's driving this? What am I really reaching for in my heart here?" The more we do that, the more familiar we get with some of these factors.

Now, the tricky part is that, by the time we're probably eight or nine years old and then from there on, we've all internalized a whole bunch of messages about whether or not we're even allowed to have needs and which needs are OK for us to have based on the gender we've been socialized into, our class, our education background, our culture or religious background.

So for me, being identified as a man, it was OK for me to feel angry and to have certain needs, but it wasn't OK for me to feel scared or vulnerable or to want reassurance or connection. Those were things that our culture and society shamed me for as a young boy. As we learn to identify our needs, we encounter barriers that are about how we've been socialized, which often come with very painful emotions and past experiences that

take time and energy and effort to heal, to recognize the pain and the loss and the sadness of being told that you don't matter. "You're not entitled to this. You're being selfish. What about other people?"

And to actually start to reexamine and reclaim what it means to be fully human and that to have needs doesn't mean that other people's needs don't matter or become invisible. In fact, the more we are able to identify and acknowledge our own needs, the more aware and sensitive we become of others' needs. It's when we don't allow ourselves to have our own needs that we tend to shame and blame and guilt others for asking for things.

Because if I don't allow myself, say for example, to ask for support, to get help when I need it, and then you come to me and ask for help, there's a part of my heart that's going to be like, "Well, why do you get to have it? I don't get to have that. Suck it up." Or we start to believe the opposite, that my sense of self-worth is determined by how much I can help others.

So we internalize all these messages, and all of this comes to the surface as we start to explore what our needs actually are and can be very challenging. So that's also a very important part of the journey.

And then finally, where some of the real transformation happens is about the energy of contraction, or what we would say in Buddhism, we would call grasping or attachment around our needs. We start to learn the difference between feeling completely defined by or oppressed by a certain need that "I have to have this. And if I don't have it, it's not going to be OK." Or the reverse, "I've never had this, and I never will." For some of that contraction in the heart to start to loosen and to begin to have a different relationship with our needs, one that's based on awareness and compassion, where we can start to recognize, "This is part of what it is to be human. I value this. I long for it. It feels vulnerable, and it's OK. It's OK if it's not totally fulfilled the way I want it to be, because I have a relationship with it, because I am honoring its presence and existence in my heart as a beautiful aspect of being human and being alive."

When we can start to develop that kind of mature and wise relationship with our needs, we have a lot more space and flexibility in our life, in our relationships. Because I can come to somebody else and say, "Hey, I really value this connection, spending time together, and it would be so lovely for me to share that with you." And the pressure, the anxiety, the demanding nature of "I have to have this from you, or else" can start to quiet because we have our own inner foundation of understanding and well-being around those needs, recognizing that if this person can't fulfill or satisfy this for me, number one, there are a lot of other people in the world and I have other strategies and ways of fulfilling it. And number two, ultimately if life can't provide this for me, it's not going to break me. It doesn't mean there's something wrong with me, that I can still have a relationship with it and appreciate it and live from a place that honors those needs and qualities, regardless of whether or not life offers the circumstances to fulfill them in the way I would like.

TS: Beautifully said. And in a way you answered the question that was coming up for me, but I'll state it just to make sure, which is, if I'm in a mindful communication with someone and we both identify really what our genuine needs are and they're in opposition, we're still going to be OK. Is that true?

OJS: Right. Yes. Well, it depends on a lot of conditions, of course, but, yes. So there's some interesting things that can happen there. And I like to use this classic dynamic that happens in most romantic or intimate relationships that many of us can relate to of one person wanting more space and the other person wanting more connection. This classic pursuer and pursued dynamic.

There are a few things that can happen when we're able to really talk about what it is that's driving us and what matters to us. And we discover, as you so clearly put, like, "Wow, our needs seem to be in opposition with each other." So what we find with this practice is the deeper we go, the less needs are actually in conflict.

What we usually say is that most conflicts happen at the level of our strategies, our ideas about how to meet our needs, and the deeper we go, the less conflict there is at the level of needs. So one thing that can happen is we start to get more curious and go even deeper and say, "Well, tell me more about what it means to you to have space, about why that's so important for you," because even a need like space ultimately can be a strategy to meet some deeper need, like is it about feeling connected to yourself? Is it about having choice and agency? Is it about loving yourself? What is it about for you?

So I can inquire in that way and really try to understand what it is at the heart for you, and vice versa. I can dig deeper in myself and say, "Well, what is it about having that connection that's so important to me? Why do I value that and long for it so much? What does it do for me? Does it give me a sense of belonging? Is it reassurance and I feel safe inside? Is it love? I know that I'm loved?"

So what happens there is the deeper we go, something miraculous can occur. And Marshall used to talk about this in a very spiritual way—he would call it divine energy, was how he experienced it. In Buddhism, we talk about compassion—is that when we get to this very core fundamental level of one another's heart and really understand what's going on, compassion tends to arise and move toward the place of pain.

So there can be a shift that occurs where when I really understand what it's about for you, the whole constellation of needs in my world begins to shift, where say, my need for connection is now no longer in the foreground and the most important, because I also have a need for, say, compassion or for contributing. And I say, "Wow, I'm really getting what that is for you and why it's important for you. And now that I understand, I want you to have that."

Doesn't mean I don't also want connection, but I want both. So there can be this shift in that way where there's more flexibility and willingness to work together. And sometimes that can happen in both directions, or we can start to be creative. And now that we understand, it's like, "Well, how do we work together to have your needs and my needs met? How do we find some sort of balance where we're both choosing to support each other in this?"

TS: Now, let's move out of the sphere of intimate partnership and talk about family relationships for a moment and how seeing needs could be a doorway to compassion.

OJS: Yes.

TS: During the pandemic and during this time of so much political divisiveness, I've heard more and more from people about how "I just can't be with my family. I just can't do it. I can't do it. I can't be with Uncle Whatever for Thanksgiving. I can't do it anymore. I can't listen to this going on. You know, mindful communication. No, I'm out. I'm out. I'm out." How can we see the needs of someone who has such clearly different views on things that we—are really important to us?

OJS: Yes, absolutely. Well, yes. I mean, there's so much in what you're saying there. Again, I think the first step is to be more clear about our own needs, just to start by translating our views. If we're talking politically, "OK, well, what are your views on immigration? What are your views on abortion? What are your views on taxation?" Or whatever it is—gun control—and say, "OK, well, what needs are you trying to meet? What are the values that you're holding underneath so that we are clear about what it is that matters to us?" That's the first step.

And then to stretch the heart to say, "OK, what if I gave this person the benefit of the doubt and assumed that there's some shred of goodness in their heart," which is essentially the perspective of both nonviolence and Buddhist philosophy and practice is that all beings want to be happy. It's just that we go about that in ways that are often confused based on ignorance and delusion and greed and hate.

So if I were to temporarily entertain the notion that this person has some shred of goodness in their heart and that they're reaching toward something, what could they be reaching toward? And then to really listen and look and say, "Well, if they had that, if they got what they wanted, what would it do for them?" What would it give them? Is it about a sense of safety in their community? Is it about a sense of belonging? Is it about honoring the past and having a sense of tradition?

So we can look for the deeper values underneath it and say, "I can disagree with what you want to have happen and still acknowledge underneath what it is that you would have or experience or get that matters to you if that were to come to pass." And then there's this whole other question. And I'll just say one more thing there. What that does is it can help to free our hearts from some of the animosity and hostility that we feel, which is so painful and tearing our world apart that we demonize one another and reduce each other to our positions. It's so painful and detrimental to our own heart, let alone to public discourse and the sense of the fabric of society. But then the next question of, "Do I have a relationship with you at all? And if so, how?" That's its own question in terms of like, "Do we get together for the holidays? If we do, what kind of agreements do I ask for about the conversation? What's the purpose of our getting together?"

And I've written about this a bunch on my blog. Usually every year at the holidays, I publish something saying, "OK, here are some reminders," when you're getting together with family for how to deal with these situations because it is so common. And if we don't take time to plan and strategize, it often does devolve into useless argument. So it's necessary not just to identify what's important to one another, but to actually be clear ahead of time about what's our purpose, what's the line where we feel like when something gets crossed. It's one thing to say, "Let's not talk about X. I thought we had an

agreement. We're not going to talk about that." And then it's another thing to feel like it's outside of our integrity to not speak up and challenge a certain view that we feel is very harmful to others and to walk that line and, say, make a statement or speak up without opening up a whole discussion. So to speak out against homophobia or racism or transphobia or all these different forces that are prevalent in our world and society.

And those are decisions that we each make for ourselves, but that it's important to take time before getting together with people in our family and reflect on how do I want to show up? What am I going to say if or when? What do I want to ask for?

And sometimes, there are cases where we might choose not to engage in terms of not to be around others. And that doesn't mean that we have to hate them, but we can still have a place in our heart for them and make choices to not get together, if we determine that it's so painful or costly emotionally or energetically, or that we don't have a sense that it will actually be onward leading or forward leading in our lives.

TS: So as I mentioned, the level of polarization that many of us are experiencing at the societal level, it's so painful. Some people are predicting that here in the United States, we could be headed toward something like a civil war, right here in the United States, in our lifetime. How do you envision that people who are trained, they're willing, they're making this commitment to mindfulness training and conscious communication and working with our own activation. What's your vision of how we can be a force for loving unification?

OJS: Thanks, Tami. A beautiful question. I think we need leadership and venues to do that and to have those conversations. It's not so much my vision, but there are those out there doing that work—people like the late Paula Green and the Karuna Center or the organization Braver Angels. And I think one of the insights that any of these groups having dialogue across differences, red-blue conversations, one of the key factors there is the understanding that there are a lot of conditions that need to be in place to have those conversations and that individual personal skill is not enough.

So when we have these kinds of conversations, some of the things that are helpful to support transformation and understanding are things like having structures. So it's not just a free-for-all, but there's actually a process and a structure with certain agreements that we all commit to following that can hold us in the conversation. And these are very, very basic things but that have a huge impact, things like speaking from your experience rather than from ideologies, things like assuming good intent, listening for what matters to others, offering back your understanding is kind of active listening skills.

This is one aspect of it. Another aspect that's central and that we so often forget and overlook, even in our personal relationships, is getting to know each other and building relationship. And I think this is where the media and social media really fails us is because we get reduced to sound bites and we fail to see the whole human being.

And most of the successful projects that I'm aware of that are working with building dialogue across differences, whether we're talking about political differences or repairing relationships after war, include a component of building human relationships, spending time together, working together, getting to know each other's families, cooking together,

eating together.

We need to learn to see and remember that we have more in common as human beings than we do that separates us. The only way I know to do that is to spend time together, to actually be together, laugh together, to play together, and to share intimately from the heart, to share about who we are and where we come from and what we've lived through.

And that's where we really start to see one another as whole and to say, "I disagree with you. I still disagree with you, but I see that you're a human being. I see your goodness. I see your pain, and I have respect for you." And that's what can protect us against the kind of trajectory of devolving into violence that is so precariously present right now.

TS: Beautiful answer. I just have one final question for you, Oren. I notice I feel curious, I can see you there at the Insight Meditation Society, chopping carrots and thinking like, "Could we just chop the carrots the right way, please? What's wrong with these people?" And then being a forest renunciate and realizing that you were called to be in the world.

But my question for you is, what gave you the clarity? What in your own motivation made you want to focus on mindful communication as the centerpiece of your work in the world, what you would write your book about and teach about in the audio series with Sounds True, Speak Your Truth with Love and Listen Deeply. What is the inner motivation for that to be the focus of your teaching work?

OJS: What a beautiful question. Thank you. OK, I'm just going to take a moment to listen inside and see. Well, it's mysterious, isn't it, what calls us in life and where we find ourselves? I'm aware of certain things I can point to. I was very fortunate to grow up in a family where there was a lot of love between my parents and between them and myself and my brother, but my folks also fought a lot and ended up eventually getting divorced when I was in my early 20s. And I think that had a big impact on me.

I think that seeing how much my parents really truly loved each other and how they were unable to find each other again later in life broke my heart. And it wasn't just about communication. There was more there internally for each of them, but I think that was a key condition inside. It was wanting Mommy and Daddy to make it work sort of thing in the heart. And I say that with total lightness and seriousness at the same time, because it's a beautiful thing that children long for, for their parents. So there's that.

And then I talk about this in my book, there was one of the retreats I sat with the late Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh. As I trust you know, in his tradition, the five precepts—or as they call them, the Five Mindfulness Trainings—are a really big deal. And when you commit to them, it's a whole ceremony and you receive a dharma name and a certificate.

And so I was in my 20s, and I did this retreat with Thay in Vermont. So they went through the precepts, and they have in the Order of Interbeing in Thay's community, lay community, they have a very deep and nuanced understanding of each of these trainings. It's not just don't kill, but it's really looking at your relationship with other living beings. It's not just don't steal; it's looking at your relationship with resources and future generations.

And so I went through each training and precept, and I was like, “Yes, that one’s going to be hard. I still eat meat.” Like, “Well, I guess I do have some investments in the stock market, and that’s tricky terrain and resource.” So I felt like there wasn’t any of them I could fully wholly commit myself to with integrity at that point. I was still using drugs a little bit. So the intoxicants one was—but when I heard the training about speech, when I heard his vision for using our communication to bring joy and peace into the world and our relationships, the commitment to healing all conflicts, however small, I felt so inspired.

Something in my heart kind of leaped up, and I said, “That, I want that. That’s something I can commit to. I really want to be able to do that.” And so I took just that one training, and that I think really was a key factor that set me on this path and sparked something inside to devote myself to understanding it more and embodying it and sharing it.

TS: I’m so glad I asked. Wonderful. Beautiful.

OJS: Yes. Yes.

TS: I’ve been speaking with Oren Jay Sofer. He’s the author of the book *Say What You Mean: A Mindful Approach to Nonviolent Communication*. And with Sounds True, he’s created an original audio series, a training program. It’s called *Speak Your Truth with Love and Listen Deeply: A Training in Mindfulness-Based Nonviolent Communication*. Oren, thank you so much for being with us on Insights at the Edge.

OJS: Thanks for having me, Tami.

TS: Thanks for listening to Insights at the Edge. You can read a full transcript of today’s interview at [resources.soundstrue.com/podcast](https://resources.soundstrue.com/podcast). That’s [resources.soundstrue.com/podcast](https://resources.soundstrue.com/podcast). If you’re interested, hit the subscribe button in your podcast app, and if you feel inspired, head to iTunes and leave Insights at the Edge a review. I absolutely love getting your feedback and being connected. Sounds True: waking up the world.