

The Evolutionary Power of Mindful Communication by Tami Simon

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Diane Musho Hamilton is a spiritual teacher, mediator, and group facilitator who has been studying mindfulness for more than 30 years. She is a featured presenter for A Year of Mindfulness, Sounds True's yearlong online meditation program. In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Tami Simon and Diane discuss how her experience with mindfulness has helped her to become an effective group mediator. Diane speaks on how mindfulness skills transfer to interpersonal communication and skillful relationship—especially when it comes to being able to take on someone else's perspective. Finally, Tami and Diane talk about the importance of relating to others with different views than us and how we can foster a better, more open engagement with the entirety of the world. (69 minutes)

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Transcript:

Tami Simon: You're listening to Insights at the Edge. Today, my guest is Diane Musho Hamilton. Diane is an exceptionally gifted mediator, group facilitator, and a contemporary spiritual teacher. She's been a practitioner of meditation for almost 30 years. Diane began her studies at Naropa University in 1983 with Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and then became a Zen student of Genpo Roshi in 1997. Diane facilitates Big Mind, Big Heart—a process developed by Genpo Roshi to help elicit the insights of Zen in Western audiences. She has also worked with Ken Wilber and the Integral Institute since 2004.

With Sounds True, Diane Musho Hamilton is a featured presenter in our Year of Mindfulness series, a digital membership program that brings participants together online from all over the world to receive guidance from the diverse group of leading mindfulness teachers including Jon Kabat-Zinn, Jack Kornfield, Tara Brach, Kristin Neff, Sharon Salzberg, and yes, Diane Musho Hamilton. Each month, participants are introduced to a new technique and approach that helps them bring mindfulness into each and every area of their life. For more information about A Year of Mindfulness, please visit us at SoundsTrue.com.

In this episode of Insights at the Edge, Diane and I spoke about how the skills of sitting meditation transfer into mindful communication and also how they're not sufficient—[as well as] what other skills we need to learn to listen and speak with mindfulness. We also talked about how Diane became a professional mediator, what makes mediation work when it does, and why it is sometimes not effective. Finally, we talked about the importance of taking different perspectives and how to communicate with people who have different views and opinions—even and especially when it comes to political issues—and how we can always privilege the relationship in any communication, [as well as] how this creates change in the world. Here's my conversation with Diane Musho Hamilton.

Diane, you're a presenter in Sounds True's digital subscription program, A Year of Mindfulness and you'll be presenting on mindful communication—and that's what I'd love to talk with you about today. How does that sound?

Diane Musho Hamilton: That sounds wonderful.

TS: I notice I'm going to be very careful with my communication. I want to be extra mindful. Just kidding.

DMH: That's right. You're going to be paying extra attention now because that's our topic.

TS: How do you define mindful communication?

DMH: Most of us are creatures of habit in so many domains in our life and one of the places we're creatures of habit is in the domain of communication because our communication skills began—I mean, when language comes online in the really, really early part of our life, the structures of language—including the language we speak, including the quality of emotion that we include with language, including kind of our use of the idioms and whether we use humor and all those patterns—get laid down really, really early. Language is such a powerful pattern in both the mind and in the body that basically we communicate in the way that we learned. Our families, of course, have a lot of influence as well as our culture.

One of the things that also happens is we absorb a lot of negative patterns in communication and those might be patterns of thought—that we tend towards negative thinking. It could be that there's like a layer of self-reprimand a lot in our speech. It could be that we use mixed messages a lot. We're a little bit maybe anxious to say something really straightforward like for fear of how the other person's going to respond.

And you might say just the negative patterning is also something that gets laid down really early. It has enormous impacts on our well-being later on in life. It affects our relationships. It affects how we see ourselves in the world.

And so, in order to change our communication style, we actually have to become aware of those patterns. When we talk about mindful communication, what we're really saying is that we have the capacity to become aware [of], to witness, or to watch our communication style and its impacts. It's true that ability to actually step back and see the way we're communicating—that we can make a change and improve our pattern. The mindfulness part is really our capacity to step back and to observe and to witness our communication in action rather than just being absorbed by it or

being—there's no separation or ability to watch it.

TS: That's very helpful. Now, one of the things that I'm really curious about is how the skills of meditation translate into mindful communication, and also how they might not be sufficient to help us be mindful communicators. I'm wondering what you think about that.

DMH: You and I have both been meditators for—I hate to admit—a lot of years now because I know I started in my early 20s and I'm now approaching 60. I've been practicing meditation and mindfulness awareness practice for over 35 years. What we learn in meditation is really, really helpful as a basis for starting to work on our communication skills. When we start to sit still, we stabilize the body, we use the breath to harmonize body and mind, [and] we develop this really powerful ability to be present in the here and now, to observe what's happening both in our interior and in the environment, and we also learn how to cultivate a non-judging mind.

So, it's a little bit like a scientist in a sense that a scientist is neither for or against an outcome in an experiment but rather is just really interested in what is true. Meditation practice allows us to develop this incredible stability, this witnessing awareness, this atmosphere of non-judgment, and a tremendous amount of precision in terms of watching what it is that's occurring. When I teach communication skills, there's always—for me—some part of that why I'm teaching meditation because the ability to observe and the ability not to judge what's happening is essential in terms of learning how to change our patterns.

Now, the reason that meditation isn't sufficient and while it may increase our stability of mind, our ability to witness, and then also our compassion. We learn how to become more compassionate, more merciful, [and] to some degree more empathic with ourselves and with others. What happens is that the patterning itself isn't going to change unless we actually practice it.

It might be an analogy like—let's say sitting still and meditating might really increase our yoga practice, right? It might support our yoga practice in a sense that there's a certain amount of embodiment, clear intention, ability to concentrate at a greater level, how to sustain energy and the way that we sustain energy in meditation. But, if we actually don't do the posture, there's no way that the yoga is going to improve and the same is precisely true of communication patterns. The intent can be there and the witnessing capacity, but unless we actually practice, all those patterns are going to interrupt and continue—and particularly the negative ones.

One of the things that's really important in the literature right now—and I'm sure with the mindfulness series that you're doing that people are starting to address it—is just the neuroscience involved in the old part of our nervous system in fight-or-flight. What happens a lot of times in our communication is that we start to experience something that feels threatening in what someone else might say to us or the way they describe who we are, whatever it is. Then, there's this kind of—our nervous system just does this thing where it basically turns the on-button onto the amygdala. The amygdala stimulates adrenaline and stimulates cortisol and everything in us moves into a defense mode. That's really what one of the biggest challenges [is] —is that we can witness that, but we have to actually practice changing our response to our own fight-or-flight. Those are all dimensions of the practice.

TS: When you talk about that we need to practice mindful communication for some of

these old patterns to change, what do you think are the most important skills that we need to practice in order for that old patterning of just habitual response to actually start shifting?

DMH: We can sort of break it down into two or three really important skillsets that will help us. Generally, when we're socializing and we're having conversation the way that you and I are right now, there's kind of a back and forth. In a way, we play a game of tennis. We're doing an interview, so actually you're asking questions and then you drop into a very poignant state of listening as an interviewer. I think that listening is probably the most primary skill that we can develop in communication because listening—there's a lot of actual commonality between meditation and listening in the sense that if I'm just going to be conversational and hit the ball back and forth, I don't take a lot of time to experience what it's like to receive a communication because I'm probably more identified with what it is I'm going to say.

But when I decide to become a listener, all those little skills that are involved in meditation—just that willingness to quiet the mind, our willingness to be present in the here and now, and then that little moment of dropping into some receptivity. When we open up and start to listen, we drop our "I" reference point. So, when you pose a question to me and then you become the listener, you stop your rebutting mind or the mind that's coming up with an answer, and you simply open up the territory and you receive my message.

Believe it or not, most of us think of ourselves as good listeners but when we actually track how carefully we're listening, we find that we hold onto the "I" as a way of creating security. In the same way, we do that in sitting meditation.

So, learning how to experience the freefall of letting go and listening is a really, really important skill. It opens up a tremendous amount of space in conversation and it gives other people the experience that what they're saying actually matters. It has tremendous impact. We say in negotiation training and some of the work I do in the mediation world that listening has impact. It's not a passive communication skill at all. That's why we call it "active listening" because it has an impact on the people that you're working with.

So, listening would be the first one. Let me just take a pause right there in case there's something you want to say about that or I can go—

TS: I think we'll keep going with the other side of the tennis game, if you will—the other side of listening, speaking, mindful speaking.

DMH: Speaking, expressing, yes. Receptivity in listening actually creates—will often soothe a communication. So, if you and I are experiencing tension in speaking to each other and I make a decision to listen and to actually take in what you're saying, that almost always will have a calming effect on you. Any time a conversation is tense, if we decide we want to listen, we usually can generate a little bit more fluidity in the conversation. Expression—speaking—is the activating side of the communication. It's what stimulates and catalyzes experience.

The other side is to learn how—sometimes, some of us have studied what we call "assertiveness skills," but I like to think of them more as just simple expressing skills. When I teach it, the one I like to talk about is Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream"

speech because it's such a massively good example of how activating it can be and how when someone's really connected to their message, how—and our body, our speech, our mind is consistent and congruent, and we deliver a really clear message without apology—just how enlivening that can really be.

One of the things that he does in that speech that's really powerful is when he begins the speech, he starts adding third person and he's talking about America and about the debt America has to African-Americans. Then, he moves from talking about "it" to talking about "we" in the Civil Rights Movement, and what our obligation within the Civil Rights Movement is. Really, in the history of that speech, when it gets really, really interesting, is that Mahalia Jackson who was a very good friend of his and a gospel singer was on the front row and she kept shouting to him to, "Tell them about your dream, Martin. Tell them about your dream."

At a certain point, he put his notes down and he started to speak about this dream. He moved from third person to second person to first person, and he started to speak about what was true for him. As I understand the story, that was when the dream—or when the speech itself—became really magnetic and became historical because he started to speak from his heart. There was energy. There was passion. There was truth. Whenever we speak from our own first person in that kind of way, we don't need agreement. We don't need other people necessarily to verify what we're saying, but there's just a sovereignty in using the first person and it is very exciting in conversation.

Those are all the skills of expression. If you're interested in watching that speech—I'm speaking to the listeners—I would really recommend it in terms of how powerful our ability to express can be.

So, that's the sort of lovemaking, you might say—or the giving and receiving—of communication, is in the activation and in the receptivity and in the listening and in speaking back and forth.

TS: Beautiful. I do have some questions about whether we want to call it mindful or very present listening, and also activating speech. In your book *The Zen of You and Me*, you write that "listening needs to be an intentional decision." I thought that was so interesting because here, you said, "Tami, you listen with a certain kind of precision." In this conversation, that's true. I'm very intentional about it. But, in my life as a whole, unfortunately I'm not as intentional about listening all the time. I've gotten feedback from people I work with that I interrupt in a meeting and things like that. Here, this person who is such a great listener when I set my mind to it, in certain situations I'm clearly not.

DMH: Yes, that's right. Again, there are very different contexts for communicating, very different purposes for listening and so therefore, a very different kind of exchange goes on. Particularly in a work environment, I think a lot of us are very—we're focused on outcomes and we're focused on efficiency. We're focused on getting things done. So, lots of times, we'll minimize the amount of listening that we do precisely because we just have things happening that are more important to us than what actually happens in the exchange. It's not that we need to listen with tremendous intention all the time. It's simply that we need to be clear when listening is actually going to serve us.

You can have your listening set on kind of "low efficiency," but if you have an upset

employee, maybe you want to turn the volume up because that listening is going to have an impact on that employee given the experience that you really care about what their struggle is. It might be that you turn it back to the sort of low efficiency setting and you're going through your day, and then suddenly there's an important meeting around what's happening with—let's say—profitability—or let's just say a strategy for a new initiative. Maybe there need to be more ideas put on the table so you could invite everybody in the room to do more listening and even put a structure into the room where each person takes a turn saying what they think the best strategy is and even maybe structure somebody else reflecting what they heard them say.

A creative process or a strategic process might be a moment when we decide to do more listening. It might be that in the evening when we get home after a long day of work that that transition into kind of personal relationship is rocky. It's hard to shift out of being productive all day long into a more relational mode—a mode of kind of comfort and winding down. Taking turns listening to each other for five or ten minutes is a way of doing that. Intentionality is really important—and then keeping in mind that if you're a doctor, you're going to be listening for diagnosing; if you're a mediator, you're going to be listening for agreement; if you're an accountant, you're going to be listening for whatever it is accountants listen for—but that we have lots of different reasons for listening. Our reason for listening is going to change the way we listen. Intentionality is really, really important.

TS: Now, you mentioned that in mediation work, listening is known to be impactful—impactful listening. I think probably all of us have had the experience of being with a good listener. In my experience, it feels like medicine. It's like medicine. "Oh, my God, you are applying medicine the way you're listening to me." I wonder—since we're putting listening under a magnifying glass here for our listeners—what does listening accomplish? What's actually happening?

DMH: What happens with listening in a mediation session, for instance, is that people come into a mediation session—usually they're distressed. They're definitely experiencing separation or conflict or heightened sense of difference. Usually, there's a lot of activation in the nervous system, so they might come in with more adrenaline in their system or cortisol. They're feeling stressed and, to some degree, threatened or afflicted.

What listening does is it gives people the experience that whatever their perspective is is valid. If I as a mediator start reflecting what it is I hear someone else say and I'm not judging it and I'm simply hearing it and I'm giving them the experience I understand, it has immediate impact on the nervous system.

It's soothing right away. They feel joined with. In other words, people become kind of the same as you rather than different as you. There's a way that—until people have that experience, it's very difficult for them to begin to think about negotiating or to begin to come up with creative ideas for how to problem-solve because there's a kind of fundamental sense of threat and unsafety.

A good mediator is somebody that knows how to give them the experience [that] they've been heard, help their nervous system calm down, create a sense of safety. In that sense of safety, creativity can start to open up. Until that happens, pretty much all—everything that's going on is going on in a way to protect people's wants and needs, or protect their interests. As long as there's protection, there's no

ability for creativity to come forward.

It's really, really a sense of—in a context like that, to do really good listening. I think in all kind of facilitated meetings, one of the things that makes a really good facilitator is somebody who can give an experience that they both understand and can validate a certain perspective very quickly. That's generally how listening is working. If you don't do that well, people just simply can't relax.

TS: Now, this may seem like a strange question, but when I scan my life, I can think of two people who are extraordinary listeners—extraordinary. I think as I mentioned, it's so healing to be around them and to spill my guts out. But, my question is: why aren't more of us like that? I mean here's this thing that we all could do. It's free in a certain sense. I mean, I don't need to spend money to do it in this minute just to listen. Why is it so hard?

DMH: Before I respond to that, Tami, I'm just curious—when you think about these couple of people in your life that are really exceptional listeners, what is it you experience from them?

TS: When I said that thing about medicine, I feel incredibly soothed. I feel a sense of what you said about the nervous system completely calming down. I almost feel like somebody's petting my face or something like that. It's just so—yes, I feel validated. And I think we all know this experience when we're with people like this.

DMH: Yes. They have a really well-developed capacity to be present. They're able to reflect what you're saying in a way that you really have the experience that you're being heard. One of the things that I work with my students a lot is to really make a distinction that to be a good listener doesn't really mean that you listen well. It means that you give the speaker the experience they've been heard. Sometimes, that's one of the things that keeps us from doing it better is, "Oh, yes. I'm hearing everything you're saying. I got it. I got it. I got it," but I'm not really in touch with how you're experiencing my listening. As soon as I shift that up and I start to pay attention to, "Am I giving you an experience you've been heard?" that's a little bit of a game changer.

The other thing is that to be a good listener, you have to really suspend your judgments. I talked about this with meditation. We have to create an atmosphere of a kind of unbiased mind because listening doesn't mean agreement, and we have this kind of funny unchecked idea that if I really listen to you, that somehow I'm also agreeing with you. Those really have to be distinct from each other—that listening and agreement are not the same and that I can listen to you really, really fully without necessarily agreeing with what you're saying. That's a very distinctive skillset—is to be able to listen and not necessarily agree.

I would say the reason we don't do it better is we're just simply not taught. Unless you're a psychotherapist or unless you're a trained mediator, you're really not taught listening skills. When I used to teach negotiation to law school in Salt Lake City at the University of Utah, people were lawyers but they weren't trained how to listen to their clients. It was only when they got to the mediation class that we actually worked on their listening skills, and then those listening skills actually improved the way that they lawyer because they give their clients a very different experience. I think a lot of it just has to do with actually being taught, then being [intentional] and discovering the pleasure in being a good listener—that there's a

real pleasure to letting go and becoming that receptive.

TS: Now, at one point when we were talking about listening and then expression, you referred to this almost as a type of "lovemaking" that we do. It was kind of an aside, but I thought it was a very beautiful aside.

DMH: Yes. We can think about just the basic experience of give and take, even if we're not thinking or if we're thinking just the way we give and receive affection, the way we give and receive compliments. I have a good friend who's a very good listener and he's also a good friend that I've had for a very long time. One of the things I notice about him is that he's really good at offering praise. He's good at listening and then he also—when he's speaking—he tends to offer a certain kind of—he gives you an experience that he's really appreciating being with you and he kind of sprinkles the give and take of communication with that. It's that giving and receiving quality of communication that makes it a creative and a loving process.

TS: OK. Now, I want to ask a question about the expression part of the give and take, which is I think a lot of people hold back in one way or another what they really want to say. When it comes to mindful communication, what would you suggest to someone who has a habit of holding back in some way?

DMH: The reason we tend to hold back—when I survey my students and when I teach conflict resolution, there are usually three types of response to conflict. Interestingly enough, Tami, the three kinds of responses to conflict also correspond to—in the Buddhist tradition—what we call the three poisons.

So, you have a person who's avoidant—like if a conflict arises, they basically want to avoid it. It creates a tremendous amount of tension and they're very good at kind of disappearing or dulling out. That corresponds to what we call "ignorance" in the Buddhist tradition.

We also have—those of us who are in a conflict—their impulse is to become more aggressive or to fight. In the conflict resolution literature, those are more competitive types.

Then, we have these very accommodating types. Accommodating types in the Buddhist tradition, we would call those—it's more like clinging or grasping or holding on. If something happens that creates anxiety or distress with a friend, and we just basically want to preserve the relationship so much that we won't say anything.

When I used to talk to my students about which of these three categories they felt like they fell into, inevitably about two-thirds of the people in the class felt that they were overly accommodating. They felt like they were afraid to say what they wanted to say. When we explored it, [it was] legitimately so in the sense that they did not want to injure the relationship. They didn't want to be misunderstood. They didn't want to create hard feelings on the part of someone else. So lots of times, they just simply wouldn't say anything.

What we practiced that would be really helpful with that is what I was mentioning a little bit earlier, which is: let's imagine for a moment that—let's say for a moment that you and I are having some kind of conflict at work. Let's imagine I work for you at Sounds True.

TS: This is all getting terrifying, Diane. I'm terrified of you.

DMH: Exactly. Completely terrifying.

Let's say you gave me a deadline and somehow I wasn't able to meet the deadline so there's a bit of a conflict between us. One of the things I might do is I might talk about how the deadline was the problem and it would be about it; or, I might talk about how you should have given me more time to get that done, and then that would be about you. One of the things I really encourage my students to do is see to what extent they can actually place their communications in the first person. It might be something like, "I need more time and I didn't ask for it," or, "I would have liked to let you know sooner I wasn't going to make the deadline," or, "I'm usually on time with my deadlines and in this case, I wasn't able to make it. Is there an accommodation?"

There's a way that the more self-responsible we become in communication, the freer we are to actually talk about what's going on because we can take responsibility. And as my son, who you've met before, who has Down Syndrome, he always says to me, "Diane, let's not play the blame game." It's one of his—I'll say, "Willy, why did you do this?" He'll say, "Let's not play the blame game."

So, if I'm just much more self-responsible on my communications, I kind of automatically become more free because I've freed the other person up of kind of the blame and I'm willing to take much more of the responsibility on.

Then, the second thing that I often—when I'm doing facilitation training and working with people—is that I have a really, really strong ground rule. It's the number one ground rule in the trainings that I do and that is—and I could actually credit Lloyd Fickett, who's a friend of mine [and] a consultant—but the number one ground rule is to be for each other.

I find that if we can kind of stay in touch with our goodwill towards others even when we're upset or even when we have a difficult issue to talk about—if I can stay in touch with the goodwill, inevitably I'm going to find a way to communicate that is respectful and honoring and inclusive of both of us.

What happens is that if I'm experiencing the fight-or-flight reflex—and particularly if you're a fighter a little bit like I am or you have the more competitive style—the sensations in the body start to feel—aggression itself doesn't feel like you like somebody. As soon as you feel aggression in the body, it's very hard to remember that you're actually for that person. It's almost like we have to do this complex task of kind of experiencing the aggression as a threat and still reminding ourselves that we're for the other. When we do that, we actually create new neural pathways where the old part of the brain and the new part of the brain are actually in relationship to each other. I can feel aggressive and mad or angry or whatever, and still be aware that I'm on your side. That's going to change the way I communicate. Those are just a couple things I'm thinking about.

TS: Now, Diane, let's talk about you for a moment. How did you become a mediator and how did this whole area of skillful and mindful communication become so central to who you are and how you teach?

DMH: In my introduction in *Everything Is Workable*, I take a few minutes just to talk about my background. I'm one of those people that comes from a very dynamic and robust and exciting and somewhat crazy family. We had an abundance of feeling and an abundance of communication, but we also had an abundance of fighting because everything mattered to us and everything was explicit. While I experienced a lot of love and a lot of life force and a lot of life generally in my growing up, I also experienced a lot of disruption. I think when I left home, I just had a very clear idea that I wanted to hold onto the intimacy and to the love and to the engagement, but I really wanted to learn how to do it in a way that wasn't alienating. I certainly didn't want the same level of—I didn't want to be expressing distress at the same level as the household I grew up in. It was like a major thing for me.

What happened in the meantime is that I lost about seven friends in one year when I was about 18. So, I kind of switched from my relative concern with relationship to my absolute concern about life and death, which led me to meditation. What I tell people is that meditation and mediation have the same root. They're both about bringing that which is two into one. On the cushion, we're bringing body, speech, and mind into one with our environment and in mediation or in conflict resolution, we're bringing disputing parties or ourselves with other parties into one. It's always that process of taking what's disrupted and divisive and separate, and bringing wholeness to it. I think it was just like a lot of us—I was just interested in kind of figuring out how to kind of cure that thing that had caused me suffering as a young person.

TS: I want to talk a little bit more about what happens during a mediation session. I've gone through two mediation sessions in my life and they were both so effective and powerful—especially the first one, where I was determined not to come to a meeting ground (or so I thought) at the beginning. And lo and behold, a few hours later . . .

I'd love to understand more the "secret sauce," if you will, of a mediator and then, how people can apply that secret sauce in their own life even without going to a mediator.

DMH: Yes. Nice. Nice. I was hired as the director of dispute resolution in about 1994, and I was hired by the state of Utah—by the judicial branch. Just at that point, mediation programs were kind of all the rage within the court system and we were starting to use mediated process. Really, in the beginning, it kind of started as a way to move caseloads out of the courts because the courts were starting to be inundated with too much work and, to the extent that they could siphon off particular cases and provide a neutral [party], and the parties would work out the agreements themselves and actually relieve the bench and all the pressure on court clerks. It was really a way to affect caseloads.

Basically, a mediator involves a neutral third party. That neutral third party's job in a certain way is to kind of take the polarity that is the conflict. In a certain way, you could think of it as providing the kind of unifying possibility. Every polarity is connected. If you think about a stick, right—and I think Alan Watts talked about this in his book *The Way of Zen*—he talks about if you take a stick, you have two ends of the stick that are distinctly different from one another. And yet, they're absolutely continuous. They actually create each other. Without one stick, there isn't the other. The same is true in a conflict. Whoever those other people were that were in your mediation session, you were actually involved—you were unified—in a certain way by the conflict.

A mediator's job is not as hard as it might appear because there's already a

tremendous amount of commonality between people when they come into a mediation session. Usually, there are only one or two issues that are creating the division. If you can help people relax, if you can help people have the experience that their perspective is legitimate and that the session isn't going to be threatening to them, then as I said earlier, they can kind of relax in relationship to being heard and being empathized with. Then a good mediator knows how to isolate what the issues are, find out what the kind of creative potential there is, and then help the parties move towards that.

The mediator is just like an acupuncturist. [When] an acupuncturist is treating you, you're already a whole, unified system but the acupuncturist is soothing certain circuitry that is too excited and it's exciting the circuitry that's too complacent. That's just precisely what a mediator does. A mediator listens when things need to be soothed. A mediator challenges to create excitement or change in the system. And then it's sort of a skillset that really is already working precisely because there's so much unity and commonality that's already available. It's just a few tweaks and turns and, voila, by the end we have an agreement.

Most people who are in mediation either have long-term relationships or businesses they've been doing together. They've entered into a contract. So, they have a tremendous amount going for them but something's gone awry and it's really up to the mediator just to help find the unity on the other side of that division.

TS: In listening to you, Diane, you make it sound a bit magical—the mediation process. But, as you were talking, I was thinking of something like a painful divorce mediation where maybe there's a significant amount of money at stake and people are really on opposite sides and they don't come out of the mediation with a beautiful resolution where they recognize connection and wholeness, but they're still polarized even at the end of a mediation. What's happening in those situations when mediation doesn't work?

DMH: I'm happy that you brought that up, Tami, just because lots of times—one of the phrases that has become popularized since the '80s when Roger Fisher and Bill Ury wrote this book called *Getting to Yes* is we talk about a "win-win." Certainly, when a mediation goes well and when the parties find their commonalities and when they're able to bring value to the table, creating new creative options and coming up with ideas that they didn't even have before they entered the session—they may come out feeling like it was a win-win.

But, sometimes people leave the mediation feeling like it was a lose-lose. I think, generally speaking, whenever someone's getting divorced or breaking up the business or otherwise undoing something that they were invested in, there's often just an experience of loss. I think sometimes that no matter how well the settlement goes, that experience of having your dreams dashed or feeling betrayed by the other, or somehow the way you imagined your life for the next 20 years isn't how it's going to be. And so, there's like a really deep emotional texture.

What I will say is that the work that I've done in developmental psychology since meeting Ken Wilber and working for Ken—what I'll say is that lots of times, people who are able to manage complexity, who can take more perspectives, who have a sense of their identity beyond the kind of local immediate moment—that even when they come away with a less than satisfactory agreement, they still are able to sometimes feel the freedom that comes from the settlement and the possibility.

I'm often amazed that people will sometimes give away value in a mediation session and still feel good about it. You see people all across the spectrum—from those who the experience is just a negative experience through and through both emotionally and substantively, all the way to those people who think it was a really great experience even if they didn't come away doing substantively as well as you might think. I really see a range of people's responses to the kinds of agreements they get.

TS: I want to talk more about this idea of taking other people's perspectives and what you've learned from your work as a mediator—and, I would say, as a Zen meditation teacher and a student of Ken Wilber's, as you mentioned—a student of Integral Theory. What helps people take other people's perspectives and how can we get everybody to start doing that ASAP?

DMH: Yes, precisely. That's one of the—in developmental work—that's one of the great questions because one of the markers of human development is an ability to take other perspectives and also to privilege perspectives. One of the ways that we think about it is that it's not so much—it's like building up of complexity in the same way that life builds up in complexity. So we move from quarks to atoms to molecules to cells to organisms. Our ability to take perspective is a kind of building up a complexity.

If you think about it, if you and I are talking something over and we have a really different perspective on it—let's imagine for a moment, I'm working for Sounds True. You're my boss. You and I are trying to think about how to get a project done and we have really different ideas. When there is one truth, the body kind of coalesces around that one perspective and solidifies around that. As soon as a second truth or a second perspective enters, there's a tension that gets created in the body.

You can almost think of it as like a yogic practice. If I take for a moment to decide to kind of set my perspective aside, to really listen and receive yours—not even to agree with it, but just even to share it that I have to be able to tolerate a certain kind of tension in my body and in my mind because now, I've got kind of colliding truths. One of the simple things that I would recommend for people is when you're in a conversation at work, you're in a conversation at home, with people that you're working with, and you have a disagreement arise, to really separate out listening to the other perspective from agreement.

I think that's a very important first step because we often conflate the two. When we conflate them, it becomes much harder to hear a second point of view. So, take those two apart.

Then, very deliberately, as a practice, experience what the impact on your body is when you actually allow another point of view into your system—like what kind of tension do you see arise? Do you notice where you contract? When do you become most reactive and find yourself pushing it away? See if you can kind of relax the body, go with the exhale, allow just the open space of another perspective to exist, again, apart from your agreement. Keep in mind that those of us who are meditators—we've discovered over time that the open space of awareness is quite infinite.

There's tremendous room for multiple points of view when you discover awareness itself but what I identified as Diane, Diane has very clear preferences. That self-identity literally will prevent me from being able to let other points of view come in. When I can't let them in, I can't even begin to ascertain whether there's some commonality or some points of agreement. That practice of separating agreement

and then also just using your listening skills, feeling tension arise in the body, and simply doing a very straightforward practice of listening—that would be the practice I would recommend to people.

TS: Interestingly, I've heard from people just in the past year or so—I'm capable of taking different perspectives unless it comes to our current political situation. That's where I just lose it. I can't. I can't see from the other side of the aisle, if you will. I wonder if you could very specifically apply what you're saying when it comes to political discourse.

DMH: Yes. I think that's such a relevant question. It's certainly relevant in my own mind because I'm also one of these people that I have strong ideas about healthcare and access to education and opportunities for marginalized people and culture and Medicaid for old people. I have a lot of disagreements with the current administration. I particularly don't like Trump. I just don't like him as a being. To my sensibility, he feels like a caricature of what I don't like about America—kind of inflated and a little bit obviously narcissistic and instinctive, wielding raw power as opposed to thinking systematically and considering the whole. I have a massively negative reaction.

Given those two options, where I just find myself simply too politically opposed, I know for me, what I like to do is get really clear about the ways in which—on just a very simple substantive level—that I disagree with his policies and his administration and that there are certain kinds of political stances that I'm going to take in relationship to the environment or in relationship to women's rights or whatever it is. I'm going to act out of that.

I'm also going to go one step further which is—maybe even a couple steps. One is to try to see the validity of some of those points of view—not that they should prevail, but what is it that people feel like they need to create a wall and is there any validity to wanting to preserve something of culture? Can I find a way to get at the truth of that? [In Integral Theory] we talk about [how] every perspective is true and partial. What is the partial truth in wanting to create a wall? What is the partial truth in wanting to somehow allow businesses more freedom to go about their business without having to fulfill tons and tons of regulations?

Just trying to find just the tiniest bit of truth that can open up my ability to see the other side because I know when I'm actively working with people who have varying disagreements, particularly politically, collaboration is the way. It simply is. We have to work with that.

Then, I guess the final thing I would do is to try to think, "OK, what in this situation is causing me to have to be more creative?" In other words, what can I see about it is going to have to help me expand myself so that maybe I can be fundamentally progressive politically? I can act for that. I can also attempt to see the truth in the Trump voters and what they were doing. Then, how could I creatively respond? What are the ways in which I can creatively respond?

I'll give you a quick example. After the election, I was actually in Boulder with some friends and being very smug, thinking that Hillary Clinton had won the election. I have brothers in the military who voted for Trump. I remember thinking the day before that what I would like from them when Clinton was about to win is that they would call me and congratulate me.

The next morning, when Clinton actually lost, I was mortified and I felt like I've been attacked or that I was dying. It was really very embodied for me. That memory came back of what it was I wanted them to do. I texted all three of my brothers and congratulated them on winning the election. It completely changed the way we related ever since. That moment of creativity—and it was like putting the shoe on the other foot—it doesn't change my political posture, but it changes my way of engaging. I think that's really important.

TS: I want to go a little bit more into this because I've heard lots of stories actually—I can count them on more than one hand—of people whose relationships within their families have reached new levels of terribleness post the election. "I'm not talking to my brother anymore." What would you say to people who want to cross that divide in some way but aren't quite clear what the steps are to doing that?

DMH: One of the things that I say to my students who study communication skills and negotiation is, one, that the upside of learning these skills is you become much more free and much more adept. The downside of using these skills is you actually have to use them. Lots of times what that means is listening even when you don't feel like you're being listened to very well or questioning a little more deeply even when you feel like no one is really asking you a question.

My experience has been that—and really to some degree, I think the work with developmental theory helps with this a lot because it's changed my expectations of how people should respond to me. Lots of times, we enter these conversations with a certain kind of conditionality. I'm going to congratulate you, but I also want you to recognize me. What I found is that as I've kind of been willing to privilege the relationship, privilege the communication, ascribe some level of truth to my brothers' perspective, that they can feel—I guess they feel the respect and the curiosity from me.

I do find that they respond differently. I sometimes would just say to them, "If we start going down a particular road, I'll just—" instead of saying "you're wrong," I'll say, "I really see the truth of that and what do you think about this?" For instance, military budgets—which for my family of course is a big thing. They'll say, "We just need a stronger military." I'll say something along the lines, "I can see how that's true and I noticed from my own life, for instance, that when I fight a lot, I tend to not get such a great result. There's a part of me that thinks there might be a better way to spend that money. What do you think about that?" And just staying in the conversation and continuing to make contact and privileging your relationship over the outcome.

Whoever the President of the United States right now is not worth alienating your family relationships. It's an opportunity to actually work more deeply—and we have to do it across the country. I saw that clip—or I listened to that clip—of the Montana congress person who, I guess, like body-slammed a Guardian reporter yesterday. We actually don't have an option. The more polarized it gets, the more in trouble we're going to get. So, we might as well find these ways to create middle ground and collaborate and extend ourselves and be bigger and stay in the political discourse, and stay in the activity of it.

It's a long haul. Evolution is—what do they say? They say it's beautiful but it's not pretty. We have to understand that we're in an evolutionary process

and that it requires us to stay engaged and apply all the skills that we've learned all these years—even though we don't get an outcome that we always want, we don't get responded to in a way we want. We still know and we've still gained these both spiritual and emotional gifts for a reason. We got to use them. That's my belief anyway. What do you think about that, Tami?

TS: What do I think about it? I think you're right on. I think you're hitting a bull's eye. We have to get out there and put it into practice and I love what you say about privileging the relationship. That's privileging our heart connection with people. That has to come first.

DMH: Absolutely. Yes. We've been given these teachings and these practices and we've—some of us have had years and years to—and now's the time to use them and apply them.

TS: As Robert Thurman says, practicing is one thing. Let's start performing.

DMH: Exactly.

TS: Yes. OK, Diane. I wanted to read a quote from your book, *The Zen of You and Me*—early on in the book—that really got my attention. Here's the quote: "There's a built-in limit to our intimacy and trust because we shy away from acknowledging the true depth of our differences."

As I read that, I was thinking of all kinds of relationships, even our most intimate relationships with friends and our husband or wife—that it can be terrifying for people to really recognize the true depth of ways in which we're different. I wanted to talk some about that. Why is that so terrifying? Why do we feel so threatened just because someone in our circle is different?

DMH: There are different kind of levels we can relate to that or look at that question, Tami. One is from a spiritual point of view—which is in the Zen tradition, for instance; in the Buddhist tradition—separation [and] the experience of division is the experience of suffering. So, when we feel apart, disconnected—when that disconnection leads to conflict, when that conflict leads to alienation, when the alienations lead to injustices or when all of that adds up to an oppression, that is exactly what suffering is. It's exaggerated difference.

Just to note that—that our natural state is one of union, of coherence, of togetherness, and that the human body really relaxes under circumstances in which we feel together. When you look deeply into your partner's eyes and everyone's relaxed, or when you're holding a baby and you make contact with a baby, the oxytocin just flows and feels really, really good. As soon as we experience difference, the adrenaline starts to drip—the cortisol—because where there's difference, there's also threat.

The other thing: we can look at difference from kind of an ethnocentric perspective—and I may have talked about this a little bit earlier—but basically, in the course of our evolution, our survival depended on our togetherness in our small bands of 15 to 60 other hominids, and that we were more likely to be injured or killed by an alien human than we were by another predator most likely. The differences in culture are, in our nervous system, deeply equated with threat. When we're under duress, we collect with those like us. We move deeply into that togetherness and we push away anyone who's different.

Even the differences in our family can feel threatening—differences with the neighbors across the street who are a different color than we are and whose food smells different and whose music sounds different than us. That becomes more threatening because the very thing that's familiar to me and ensures my survival and helps me feel at home is somehow threatened by that difference. That's partly why I wrote the book—is that I think in some ways, we give a lot of attention these days to understanding difference and cultivating diversity, but I think we don't recognize deeply enough both the suffering that's innate in our differences and how threatening particularly on a cultural level our differences can be to us.

The whole notion of being able to tolerate new perspectives or bump up against people who are different than we are—that is the mechanism to which the universe evolves itself. So, we don't grow if we don't encounter difference but differences basically don't feel as good to us. They're exciting in the beginning and then we're very quick to normalize and integrate them. The more that we can tolerate looking at difference and owning our differences and letting them be there, the more that we're expanding to include that disruption to the homeostasis of our body-mind. Bigger awareness allows for more disruption—is the way I'm thinking about it.

I haven't seen anyone else quite right about it in this way. I know that there's some neuroscientists who talk about how the brain evolves in that way—by creating new and different patterns of synapses and networks, and that as those get integrated, that that's actually how the brain evolves. I've heard that. I've heard Ken talk about it with the universe. but I think it's really important that we understand it in the deepest intimacy.

So, I can be more intimate with you if we really cultivate the sameness but if we also create a place for the ways in which our experience is really different. It isn't simply agreeing to disagree. It's actually allowing that separation to inform and be part of our relationship.

TS: I'm thinking of examples—let's say where a child in a family, if their real differences were acknowledged, the mother and father might feel very threatened by that. "Oh my God, our kid doesn't fit this family norm." That's a limit also then to the real authentic depth that might be found because we have to hide how we're different from these other people. I think there are so many examples where we end up being on the surface with people because it's not safe to recognize, "Well, we're just really different and that's OK."

DMH: Yes, that's right. I was asked to teach a little bit about awareness and mindfulness in a grieving class the other day at the social work department at the University of Utah. I asked the group to do a small little exercise. I asked them to share a way in which they'd experienced grief that created sameness among them or there was a more universality. Maybe you'd all lost somebody, or maybe you'd experienced some kind of a divorce, or who knows—but that there was a sameness in it.

Then, I asked them to share an experience of grief that felt entirely private and something that they couldn't even begin to share with another person because the texture of it or the contours of it were so particular to their experience that they couldn't even really begin to express it. What is that part of the experience of grief—both the sameness and it's our humanity and our shared experience, and then also this way in which it's isolating because no one can really feel it.

One of the people in my group said that he had an adopted daughter and that the way in which she struggled is a particular kind of grief, and he feels like that he was part of creating that struggle in raising her. He said it's so embedded in his relationship with her that he doesn't imagine anybody else could really even identify with what it feels like. It's so particular. Those kind of differences really interest me, and I like to be able to kind of explore them and—even if we can't understand them—to kind of open the door so that they're not held quite as privately.

TS: I'm wondering as you're speaking what it might be like for people to articulate more. Let's talk about the ways we're different—just for people to have that kind of conversation, like me and—

DMH: Yes. I think that-

TS: "Hey, me and my friend. Let's talk about how we relate differently to money. Let's talk about how we relate differently to travel. Let's just talk about it. We're close friends and we're really different in these ways."

DMH: Yes. Let's talk about how your love of intimacy is actually different—more, less—than mine. I think the challenge to it, Tami—and as we practice it, we can explore. But usually, where there's a difference, there's an underlying value of good and bad.

One of the things people have to do is as soon as they enter into this—so it might be that I'm more emotional and my partner's more rational. and as soon as we start to describe that difference, we'll notice that we assign positive and negative value. One of the challenges is to really know when that's happening—like, "Oh, you're better because you're more rational and I'm more emotional and therefore, I'm a little bit less stable or something."

We have to kind of start to look at the differences and see if we can find both the strength and the weakness of both sides. What's the upside of being rational? What's the downside? What's the upside of your more emotional nature and what's the downside? Otherwise, the difference conversation can very quickly move into a good and bad conversation.

TS: Now, Diane. I just have one final question for you because in this conversation, we've talked about a lot of different mindful communication skills—listening with mindfulness, speaking with mindfulness, connecting with people who have different views. What I'm curious about is: of all the mindful communication skills, what would you say has been the greatest learning curve for you in terms of really bringing it into application in your life?

DMH: A few years ago, I would have answered that the biggest challenge is to become a genuine listener because just like in meditation practice, when we listen, we have to empty the mind, become present to what's here and now, and somehow surrender self-identity. If I'm holding onto Diane and her perceptions, I'm not able to receive Tami quite as fully.

So, there's a letting go in listening. There's a little bit of a freefall, like Trungpa Rinpoche used to describe. As of late, I would say that really becoming more and more intimate with my own nervous system and my defensive system and how quickly I

genuinely feel threatened. And then I'm communicating—even if I appear to be kind of together and calm about things so often, I'm coming from a place of feeling that I need to defend myself.

This becoming kind of more body aware, I think, as of late is the thing that I've had to really apply myself to. I feel like I'm starting to finally be able to make some progress that I can sit in relationship to feeling attacked or criticized and notice the arousal in my nervous system and the defensiveness in my voice and my posture—and then I can kind of stay with it and allow that to relax. I've been doing this now for over 30 years, and this feels like something that I'm just now really starting to get, how much it's functioning when I'm in relationship. That's how I would answer that question right now.

TS: OK. I'm going to sneak one final question and even though I said that was the final question.

DMH: OK. Awesome.

TS: As we've been talking about mindful communication, the sense I've had is that this is really one of the singular, most important skills of our time really if we're going to create a world where we're able to respect and get along with each other and have peace. I wonder if you see practicing this skill day in and day out—something we can all do—and this huge social implication—if you see it directly causal. Like, "Yes, if we start doing this, we are going to start seeing the kinds of changes we want," or do you think it's more like, "Well, that's a nice thought and we need to do it anyway but there are bigger forces at work."

DMH: I think that I really have come to believe that we're in a very profound and beautiful evolutionary process, and I think that the challenge that we have right now—to learn how to extend and receive and understand one another, and to drop our egoic fixation, and to listen to the dilemmas and the wants and needs of others—I think it's absolutely exciting. It's paramount, and I have full expectations that it's going to make a huge difference for us because that's what I've seen in my own life. When I look at my own life, it's been a long time and it's daily and I'm always challenged, but the freedom and the love that I'm able to feel because of it, I'm absolutely committed to.

So, I'm voting yes. It's going to make a difference for us.

TS: I've been speaking with Diane Musho Hamilton. She is the author of the books *Everything Is Workable: A Zen Approach to Conflict Resolution* and *The Zen of You and Me: A Guide to Getting Along with Just About Anyone*. With Sounds True, Diane Musho Hamilton is a presenter in our Year of Mindfulness digital subscription program, where she'll be teaching on mindful communication [and] joining with other presenters such as Jon Kabat-Zinn, Jack Kornfield, Tara Brach, Kristin Neff, Rick Hanson, Sharon Salzberg, and others. This is a yearlong program that you can join at any time and learn with others how to bring mindfulness into any and every aspect of your life. If you're interested in more information, please just look at A Year of Mindfulness at [SoundsTrue.com](https://www.soundstrue.com).

Diane, thank you so much. You're so articulate and it was such a helpful conversation. Thank you.

DMH: Thank you, Tami. My pleasure.

TS: SoundsTrue.com: Many voices, one journey. Thanks for listening.