In the previous two newsletters I wrote about Martha Nussbaum’s vision on anger. This time I want to write more about what angers means for myself, and how I talk about anger in the Gentle Teaching trainings.

I have never been very agitated and anxious, and generally I was seen as a person who is hard to get angry. With my mind I was always able to put aside feelings of displeasure about what others were doing, from the assumption that expressing anger wasn’t seen as a good quality, and also that being angry doesn’t solve the problems. A rational way thus of dealing with my anger.

The result of this posture was that others didn’t always understand my reactions, and actually they didn’t fully trust me. They expected me to be angry, but in my behaviour I seemed to be calm, while from inside I probably gave a signal that I didn’t feel calm at all; I suppressed my anger. The result for myself was that more and more I tried not to feel, or even deny, my anger.

What could make me very angry was when I thought that others were doing injustice towards persons I sympathise with. I remember that I could be very angry with my manager because I thought that he wanted things that were not good for the persons with special needs and the caregivers in the unit I was responsible for. My care – compassion – for them turned into anger towards my manager as soon as he came with his ideas. At one side I sometimes felt fulfilled because I fought for the persons in my unit, but at the other side I felt a looser and I knew that finally I wouldn’t achieve what I believed the persons needed. The continuous struggle with my manager was actually very counterproductive.
It took me a lot of training and self-reflection to discover what was going on and to develop a better way of dealing with my anger.

First I learned that I never wanted to admit that I felt anger, because of the negative opinion about anger. Also with the word ‘anger’ we often think of a very strong emotion with a lot of energy. Actually anger is an emotion with many varying degrees on intensity and with different names. It starts with disappointment about what a person is doing, and it grows towards irritation, real anger or even rage. I learned to see these nuances in my emotions, and by letting go the negative opinion about my emotions I learned to recognize and to accept them. You can allow your anger; there is nothing wrong with anger. It only becomes a problem if you can’t control yourself and express your anger in harmful actions.

Second I learned that my anger seemed to be caused by what others were doing, but actually the emotion was caused by my own opinion and judgments about the actions of others. I see what happens only from my own perspective, and I lose sight of the perspective of the other. My perspective is that I think that the other harms me, or people I sympathize with: material harm, emotional harm, physical harm or even ego-harm. And every time I express my anger into actions, I reinforce my thoughts and emotions, and I have less openness to see the perspective of the other and to see what he wants and needs.
Third I learned that my anger often comes from the feeling of helplessness and is also confused with this feeling. This confusion is caused by the role of compassion. Compassion is a very strong emotion/energy, based on the desire to make others happy. Not being able to achieve that can give rise to the feeling of helplessness. And if you see or assume a causal agent for the fact that you can’t realize your goal, helplessness turns into anger towards this person.

This is what happened between me and my manager. My compassion for the persons in my unit turned into anger towards my manager because I saw him as the cause of all problems. This became such a pattern in our relationship that I wasn’t able to look at things from his perspective; a dialogue wasn’t possible anymore. But what made it even worse was that, in my struggle with my manager, my mind and energy was only focused on him, and I lost the persons I was fighting for out of sight, and with that also my compassion for them. I was busy with an ego-fight that had nothing to do with compassion anymore, and that could never come to a good end.

Through reflection I learned that there is nothing wrong with feeling anger in whatever gradation. It is what it is. Anger is neither good nor bad, positive nor negative. It’s a signal that something is ‘wrong’ and that we have to find a solution. This solution is not expressing the anger into angry actions, but in connection this feeling with compassion:

- what threatens the wellbeing of others, including the person who is assumed to have caused the situation, and
- how can you, taking account to the different perspectives, achieve wellbeing for all who are involved?

I don’t need to turn away for my own anger anymore. I dare to feel and face it. And it becomes easier for me to transform my anger into compassion by connecting with the needs and perspectives of others, and especially those who I think caused the anger. My calm reaction now where others might expect anger is more authentic than in the past, and others feel that my expression is consistent: I don’t give contradictory signals by smiling outside and stress from inside.
These experiences I try to include in the Gentle Teaching training, and I give the participants usable practices for their voyage of discovery.

Pouwel van de Siepkamp

Methodological aspects of Gentle Teaching
Gentle Teaching is more than just a basic attitude in caregiving. It also has a number of important methodological aspects which can be applied in a more person-centered approach. In a series of articles we will explain these aspects. A complete overview you can already find on the website.

Sharing
The fourth method or technique we use in Gentle Teaching is Sharing. Being able to share with others is an essential condition for living in a social environment, because when we are with others, we have to be able to

- share the space with others;
- share objects with others;
- share activities with others;
- share attention with others.

Learning to share begins with developing the trust that you won’t be short of what you need yourself. Teaching to share normally for children begins with when they are still babies; when mothers and fathers play the game of taking and giving back the pacifier or stuffed animal. When the child experiences that he can trust his parents that he will get it back, he starts giving it by himself, waiting for the parent to give it back again. A few years later a more complex sharing starts, when the child begins to play with other children. Now he has to share his toys. In the beginning the parents may have to ‘force’ the child to share the toy, and make sure that he gets it back after a while. The parents represents the security for the child that
he will not have short of what he wants for himself.

When the child becomes older and develops empathic qualities, selfless sharing can develop; giving something to others without wanting it back, and just because you want to please the other.

For ‘normal’ children this learning to share is a normal process in the socialisation the child. For people with special needs who, due to the special vulnerabilities were more stuck in an egocentric position, learning to share is more challenging. That’s why in Gentle Teaching, teaching to share is an intentional element in the methodology. The principles are the same as with little children:

- First teach the person that when you are with him, he doesn’t have to be afraid of getting what he needs
- Then teach him to share with you, and that you will give it back. You become the representation of the security he needs.
- After he can share with you, try to involve others in this process. Start with objects that are not too important for him and make sure he gets it back after a while.

D’Boerenkiel (in English The farmers-smok) is a care-farm in the Netherlands where Gentle Teaching is implemented for many years already. The people who work at the farm are persons with a mental illness or an intellectual disability. They are supported by a small team of professional caregivers. Recently the farm was visited by a local councilwoman who wanted to see how Gentle Teaching is practiced.

During the visit the focus was on Loena, a girl with an intellectual disability who visits the farm for 4 years now. In the beginning Loena was very vulnerable. The caregivers didn’t understand her because she isn’t able to explain her feelings and emotions or what she needs verbally. She would hide her face behind her arm or a big ball she held with her all day.
In the beginning she would express her emotions with screaming, cursing, kicking, slamming doors etcetera. We ignored these behaviours, and tried to make gentle contact and stimulate her positive qualities and talents. She was never punished for what she did. This is a clear line in the way we use Gentle Teaching. Punishment may lead to socially acceptable behaviours, but not to trust in us and trust in herself.

We made a lot of physical contact with Loena by gently petting her back, walking hand in hand or holding our hand in front of her, inviting her to put her hand into ours. This way she started to feel safe and connected with us. It took Loena about 3 years to feel unconditional safe and loved with us. Now she doesn’t hide her face behind her arm of the ball anymore.

We try to change her language by saying other words, for instance when she is cursing. We do this together in the group and Loena takes this very well. Still it’s difficult for her to express herself verbally, but the caregivers have learned to understand her and feel when she needs extra support and attention. They give this by petting her gentle on her leg or back, or by holding her hands. Also Loena likes to sit on the lap of the caregivers on her own initiative. These are important moments for Loena to ‘recharge’ her energy and which fit very well in the way we have implemented Gentle Teaching. She needs these moments to get more self-confidence.

Slamming doors or kicking hardly ever happens anymore, and when it does, there usually is a reason for it. For instance if she doesn’t feel safe or when

*From left to right: the mother of Loena, Corinne, Loena, the councilwoman*
the caregivers can’t give her what she wants or needs. These moments are very short and she soon comes back to the caregivers.

All together a very good development for Loena as a direct result of the use of the principles of Gentle Teaching.

Corinne (owner of the care-farm)

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**On-line training gentle teaching**

At this moment we are doing a pilot for the on-line gentle teaching training. This training is for parents, teachers and caregivers of children and adults with special needs who are not able to attend to regular in-service gentle teaching training.

The on-line training takes eight 2-hour sessions and there is a direct interaction with the trainer and other participants.

A new training will be planned as soon as we have enough candidates. (6)

For more information and registration visit the website: [klick here](#)