



CHAPTER 2

PRACTICING DANGEROUS LOVE

*Who sees all beings in his own self, and his own self in all beings,
loses all fear.*

—ISA UPANISHAD (HINDU SCRIPTURE)

The question dangerous love asks is, “Are we willing to turn first?” How do we get to the place where our answer is “Yes, I’ll do whatever it takes”? How do we love someone we are afraid of through conflict?

STEP 1: LET GO OF OUR FEAR OF CONFLICT

People have an extraordinary capacity to find lasting solutions to their problems when their humanity is valued and respected.

Consider Miriam’s story. In the beginning, she was sure that Mahmoud wouldn’t change. He was a bad person, and bad people don’t change. She had tried everything to make things work. Everything had failed.

When people believe that their problems are unsolvable, they quit asking questions. They stop being creative. They double down on what hasn't worked in the past. They choose conflict tools such as avoidance, accommodation, or competition to get what they want. And they almost always end up unhappy.

Not until Miriam saw a new, different path forward did she begin to consider that addressing the conflict may not be as terrible as she imagined.

When I do mediations, people often feel the need to recite their grievances toward the other party in front of the mediator. When they do, the people on the other side get predictably defensive and then lay out their own complaints. This goes round and round. The participants start getting frustrated. Soon they aren't listening, just defending.

After a few minutes I typically stop them and ask, "Is this how these conversations typically go between you?"

They nod their heads yes.

"And how does the conversation end?"

They admit they walk away angrier or more frustrated than they were before—convinced, more than ever, that the other party won't change.

"What will happen if we have the same conversation today?"

Here the answers vary. Some people believe mediators are wizards who can magically transform their problems into gold. When I assure them I can't, the answer typically ends with, "Same as before."

"Could we try something different today? Something that might give us a better chance at success than what we've done previously?"

They almost always nod their heads yes. And when they do, the conflict is finally able to move out of the

rut that it has been stuck in for weeks, months, or years. Sometimes within hours, other times within days, they are able to find solutions to problems that they have wrestled with for years.

Conflict doesn't have to be scary. It can actually be the catalyst that helps improve our relationships if we possess the right tools to transform it from destructive to constructive conflict. The next four chapters of the book address our fear of conflict and how to overcome it. They invite us to look at the types of conflict styles we use and offer us a new way to view conflict that makes our struggles feel safer and more collaborative.

STEP 2: LET GO OF OUR FEAR OF THE PEOPLE WE ARE IN CONFLICT WITH

When we change the way we see the people we are in conflict with, we create space that invites new possibilities and solutions to our problems.

Think of what happened next for Miriam. She began cleaning Mahmoud's gym. She started to get to know him and his family. Eventually her group was invited over for dinner. There she acquired even more information, which helped her see why Mahmoud didn't want them to use the gym. The more she understood Mahmoud's "whys" and the reasons they were important to him, the more she was able to understand his needs and how she might be able to help him.

She began seeing his humanity so clearly that his needs and desires mattered as much as her own. She began letting go of self-concern and started embracing us-concern. If Miriam was ever going to be successful at the work she believes in, Mahmoud had to be part of that success.

This shift is so critical, I've dedicated six chapters to helping us understand why we don't see people as people,

what the consequences are, and how to let go of the justifications that keep us holding on to the false belief that “I’m not responsible for how I see others; they are.”

STEP 3: I TURN FIRST

Feeling love toward someone we are in conflict with is hard. Putting that love into action is even harder, in part, because we have to be the first to turn toward the other person—the first to offer an apology, acknowledgment, respect, or a collaborative solution.

Acting first isn’t a sign of weakness. Dangerous love is not passive. It is bold. It requires sacrifice. Your family (or friends or coworkers or neighbors) may not respond by seeing you as a person. But if you don’t act in a way that shows that you see someone as a person, then it won’t take long before you turn away again.

Miriam thought that once she saw Mahmoud as a person, everything would be good. However, solving the conflict took a lot of hard work. Miriam had to respond to Mahmoud’s silent call for help before she’d see any resolution to her conflict. She had to turn first.

Until Miriam cultivated that dangerous love for Mahmoud, the creative and collaborative problem-solving she needed to fix her problem couldn’t occur. Both Miriam and Mahmoud wanted to use the gym. Neither side was willing to budge.

Had Miriam asked Mahmoud earlier about why her group couldn’t use the gym, I suspect she wouldn’t have gotten a straight answer—especially given the fact that Miriam had tried to harm his business. And even if he had told her the truth, given how Miriam felt about her project, it might have made her even more hard line in her belief that he needed to change his ways.

Chapters 13, 14, and 15 give us a path toward finding the love and courage necessary to break the escalation cycle of conflict by taking a journey through what hasn't worked in the past. Once we are clear about what is *not* working, the path to dangerous love gets much clearer.

STEP 4: INVITE THEM TO TURN

Small acts of acknowledgment, recognition, humility, and determination to find mutually beneficial solutions invite others to turn. Dangerous love doesn't require grand gestures. It requires an intentional commitment to loving someone through conflict every day.

Miriam and Mahmoud aren't the only ones who have to change their stories. She is involved in a much bigger project that is meant to solve a pervasive and difficult problem that exists well beyond Mahmoud.

For Miriam and Mahmoud, the fact that they've changed the way they see each other paves the way for them to start changing the patterns of conflict that undergirded their interactions. In Mahmoud's case, it means opening up the gym in his community to women. In Miriam's case, she is more empowered to get participants and partners in her program now that she is showing a fundamental change on the ground.

Of course, they have years and years of work left. But without the change that each of them underwent, the potential for success wouldn't be nearly as high.

Dangerous love gives us the ability to not just coexist with each other, but to thrive with each other—even our enemies. The last seven chapters of the book show us the power dangerous love has on others—at home, at work, and in the community. They are a powerful invitation to change.

The stories you will read are deeply personal. They are the best kind of stories—stories of hope in seemingly hopeless conflict. They are meant to inspire us to choose love over fear.

While *Dangerous Love* seeks to transform our personal relationships by inviting us to change the way we see ourselves and others in the midst of conflict, its ultimate goal is much more audacious. In a time when communities are becoming more divided, the world needs more people who will choose love over fear in the face of conflict, people who give hope in a time of hopefulness, people who will be influences for peace when anger and anxiety reign. After reading this book, I hope you have the desire, the courage, and the tools to be one of those people.