



THE BEFRIENDER

NEWSLETTER OF THE BEFRIENDER MINISTRY NATIONAL OFFICE

THE SAINT PAUL SEMINARY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
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An Interview with Peg Wangenstein and Don Gault Creating Communities of Peace: Responding to Family Violence

BeFrienders are one of the “core building blocks of what the church can do” about family violence according to Peg Wangenstein and Don Gault of the Inter-Faith Action Team (IFAT) in St. Paul, Minn. Peg and Don were the presenters at the Fall 2000 BeFriender Day in St. Paul, where they talked about the role of faith communities in responding to and stopping family violence.

So how did BeFrienders come to have this awesome responsibility? And what does it mean to us as individuals and as members of faith communities?

A Strategy for Change

Faith communities are not alone in addressing the issue of violence, but are a part of a broad strategy, borrowed from advertising and public health, to change attitudes and behaviors. That strategy is: multiple messages from multiple messengers over time. Gault challenged the BeFriender Day audience to think about how the attitudes and behaviors regarding smoking have changed in the past two decades. The groundswell started within the medical community as a health issue. Businesses became aware of the related insurance and productivity costs and became another messenger. Movie theaters, restaurants and airlines banned smoking and added their messages about the comfort and enjoyment of others. Children began to hear in the classroom about the risks of using tobacco ... and carried those messages home to their parents. Twenty years later, public consciousness and behaviors have been drastically altered.

Each sector of society also has a role to play in changing attitudes and behaviors related to violence. Government works to get better at responding to family violence by improving its internal systems so that they can provide seamless services to victims. Physicians are beginning to routinely ask women if they are in physical danger at home. Schools provide information to children about appropriate and inappropriate touch. A pivotal role, maybe the pivotal role, belongs to communities of faith.

The Role of Faith Communities

Faith communities have a unique role in addressing family violence, say Wangenstein and Gault, in that they focus on something that no one else does – the soul. The work of Dr. James Garbarino, author of *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*, raises important questions for Gault that speak directly to the role of spiritual communities. Do we believe that the souls of

perpetrators of violence have died, that their souls never existed or that their souls have gone dormant? If we examine the heart of our beliefs as people of God, Gault firmly agrees with Garbarino that our answer can only be that their souls are dormant. If we believe that God lives in each person, even if that person's soul is dormant, then part of our charge is to find their soul and reawaken it. If we believe in spiritual conversion, we can also believe that perpetrators of violence can be converted to nonviolence.

Faith communities' special call to do this work means claiming the role intentionally and actively. We can't just assume, says Wangensteen, that as houses of God we are promoting peace; we need to take action to ensure that we are living out that call. Action often begins with acknowledging that family violence is a problem, even within our churches. A particular location, race, or economic status is not a protection from violence; it can happen to anyone. During the BeFriender Day presentation, Wangensteen told the story of a Methodist minister who was due to take some continuing education. Although he was comfortable that family violence was an inner city problem and not an issue in his own congregation, he found a class on that topic. It was the right price, right timing, right number of credits, and he decided to sign up. Three weeks into the class, he mentioned to the congregation during announcements on Sunday morning that he was taking the class, learning a great deal and finding it interesting. That's all he said. The next week he received phone calls from three women in the congregation who revealed that they were in abusive relationships. That simple announcement opened the door to three women who were experiencing pain, and the minister's acknowledgement that he was "learning something" was all they needed to hear to know that their stories would be listened to without blame.

Wangensteen and Gault say that on the issue of family violence, the response from churches is often silence. The silence is borne out of more than disbelief that violence can happen among church members. It also comes from not knowing what to do. Our faith communities haven't established their role and haven't built bridges and connections to others in the community to address violence. It becomes easier to focus on helping others outside the congregation than to do the hard work of examining ourselves, because we fear what we might find and that we won't know what to do when we find violence in our midst.

Defining the Problem

Wangensteen suggests that the initial question to be asked in our personal and congregational ministries is: How are we part of the problem?

To answer that question for ourselves and our congregations, we need a common understanding of the word "violence." The Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities in Ramsey County uses three definitions to guide the development and implementation of violence-prevention strategies. According to these definitions, violence is:

1. **Words and actions that hurt people.** Violence is not limited to physical abuse; in fact, verbal harassment and bullying are the most common form of violence in the American workplace.
2. **Misuse of power and authority.** Violence that arises out of misuse of power and authority becomes especially dangerous when we aren't aware of the power and authority that we have.

3. **Any action or words where the intention or impact is to cause pain, fear or harm.** Humor is one area in which our intention and our impact often don't match. We might not intend to cause pain with a joke or humorous remark, but if that is the impact, we have perpetrated violence on another person.

If you accept these definitions, says Gault, every one of us is capable of violence; in fact, each of us has probably committed some act of violence in the past few days, whether we are aware of it or not. By taking ownership of our individual capacity for violence, we can transform violence prevention into an issue of "us" rather than an issue of "them" and close the gap that allows us to think, "This is not a problem for people of faith." Whether or not we act on our capacity for violence depends on our awareness of our power and authority, our skills with words and actions and our ability to maintain the balance of intention vs. impact.

Why do people speak and act in violent ways? According to Rollo May, American psychologist and author (1909-1994), "Acts of violence in our society are performed largely by those trying to establish their self-esteem, to defend their self-image, and to demonstrate that they, too, are significant ... violence arises not out of power, but out of powerlessness." Gault does not see May's words as a contradiction to the second definition of violence (misuse of power and authority), however. Instead, he recognizes how they weave together. If someone feels powerless (e.g., "I can't control this situation"), they use the conventions of power that are available to them (physical strength, verbal dexterity, position of authority such as a parent or boss, etc.) to restore the feeling of power they believe they are missing. They lack the awareness and the skills to make different choices in the face of feeling powerless.

Becoming Part of the Solution

Once we have answered the question of how we are part of the problem, Wangenstein says the next question is: How are we part of the solution? We must examine how we manifest the belief that we are communities of peace, and we must be intentional in our work of promoting, teaching and expecting nonviolence.

IFAT, in collaboration with BeFriender Ministry, the University of St. Thomas and the College of St. Catherine (all based in St. Paul, Minn.), developed a three-stage model for creating communities of peace (see the model at the end of this article). Assessment and understanding of self, the congregation and the community is the first stage of becoming part of the solution. This includes a careful review of how we are intentionally and actively making our churches a place where it is okay – and encouraged – to talk about issues of violence. As you look and listen within your church, what do you see and hear?

- Have you heard a sermon recently on the issue of family violence?
- Are there books in the church library that educate about violence?
- Are there materials available to pick up for people who need resources?
- Are there phone numbers prominently displayed for shelters or help lines?
- Is discussion of family violence a part of Bible study?
- Are prayers offered for victims and perpetrators of violence?

Assessment includes looking at the assets within your congregation. What are

the potential resources for identifying and developing intentional strategies for prevention and intervention? In addition to trained clergy and lay ministers, are there psychologists or therapists within your congregation? Social services professionals? School counselors? What are the skills and areas of expertise that you can draw together to be deliberate about creating a community of peace within your own congregation? It's also important to look at the surrounding community to identify resources.

Strategies for intervention include developing and communicating policies and procedures for your congregation. During BeFriender Day, Wangenstein posed the question, "What if a Sunday school teacher hears the prayer of a child asking God to make his daddy stop hitting him and his mommy? Will she know what to do?" After encouraging audience members to have policies and procedures in their churches to deal with just such situations, Wangenstein erased any doubt that she had asked a rhetorical question. In a church where a Sunday school teacher had heard that very prayer, the teacher took the child aside after class and told him that that was private family business and he shouldn't pray about it out loud. In faith communities where people are not accustomed to speaking of violence out loud, Wangenstein and Gault often use the video "Nobody Home," produced by Dick Wilson and based on his play "What's the Matter With the World Today?" as a catalyst to help people overcome the silence and start discussing violence.

The Role of BeFrienders

As "core building blocks of what the church can do," BeFrienders have the opportunity to create change in awareness, attitudes and behaviors one-on-one. Gault believes that creating communities of peace is less an issue of facing the totality and enormity of violence in the world and more an issue of creating peaceful relationships one relationship at a time. He sees clearly that the role of BeFrienders is crucial in building trusting relationships and establishing churches as places of trust and acceptance.

Wangenstein notes that BeFrienders have been trained to be non-judgmental listeners, which implies that all of us – BeFrienders or not – probably been previously "trained" to be judgmental listeners. Modeling the skills of non-judgmental listening underscores for others that BeFrienders, and the churches of which they are a part, are a safe place for people to tell their stories and feel heard and accepted. Demonstrating a willingness to stretch and expand our assumptive worlds about violence gives others permission to be aware and accept that, yes, violence happens among people of faith. Ultimately, as we live out our skills, beliefs and values as BeFrienders in our everyday lives, we also model to the community beyond our church doors a more peaceful way of being in relationship.

For people who have experienced, witnessed or perpetrated violence, BeFrienders can help them deal with their anger, pain and humiliation as they confront their experience. BeFrienders can offer the support and affirmation in the value of their being that allows them to continue the journey, find the strength to create their own path and find the resources they need for change. Both the abused and the abuser are victims who need healing, help, support and opportunities to change. Wangenstein says that "even to say to them, 'I will hold you in prayer,' is a huge thing."

One of the struggles when befriending someone in an abusive relationship is

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resisting the urge to tell them what to do. Perhaps even more so than in other befriending situations, the answer may seem obvious to you as you hear their story: “Get out.” Gault confesses that he himself finds it difficult not to cross that line, yet he is reminded time and again that people need to map out their own journeys and that telling them what to do can be a hindrance rather than a help. A member of the BeFriender Day audience observed that, as BeFrienders, we are in a position of power ourselves and that dispensing advice can be our misguided need to restore our own feeling of power in a situation in which we feel powerless. Hearing that, Gault echoed the lesson of the “empty cup,” saying that our need to give advice is an opportunity for us to examine our own experiences and feelings that are being raised up as we listen to another’s story and to identify what is causing us to feel powerless.

What we can do as we hear the stories of those in abusive relationships is practice Level II Mutuality. Gault also suggests that it is appropriate to have one question always ready to ask: “Do you think you are in immediate physical danger?” The question is not a judging one and is an important one to ask. If the answer is “yes,” you can then call upon the intervention strategies that your church has identified.

Hope for Change

Far from being overwhelmed by the scope of violence, Wangenstein and Gault are confident that we will reach the point of transformation. Gault says, “This is hopeful work – the possibilities are incredible!” Just as the medical and science communities were at the center of changing attitudes and behaviors about smoking, he believes that the center of the work to create communities of peace is spiritual and that the spiritual void in the community is at the root of much of the problem. Where the secular world labels perpetrators as evil, the message from faith communities is that we all make mistakes and that God gives us all the capacity to choose to change. Faith communities are unequivocal in their message that violence is wrong and can be equally unequivocal in their message that they will support people on their journey to change.

Wangenstein and Gault assert that in every moment of our lives we are either teaching violence or teaching peace. The basic precept of all faith communities is to love one another. BeFriender Ministry is an active way to live out that love and teach peace in every moment. ■

- Joanne Hansen

Resources mentioned in this article

Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them, James Garbarino, Ph.D., Anchor Books (2000), ISBN: 0385499329.

Nobody Home (video), call Darleen Simmons of the Saint Paul-Ramsey County Department of Public Health, (651) 266-2597. As the result of a grant, this video is available free of charge to faith communities in Ramsey County, Minn.; for those outside Ramsey County, the video is available for a small fee. A discussion guide is included.

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Don Gault is the co-manager of the Healthy Communities Section with the Saint Paul-Ramsey County Department of Public Health. He has worked in the Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities since 1990. He is a member of the Initiative's Inter-Faith Action Team.

Peg Wangenstein is on staff at the St. Paul Area Council of Churches, where she is director of Congregations Concerned for Children. Peg has facilitated the Inter-Faith Action Team for several years.

The **Inter-Faith Action Team (IFAT)** was one of the original eight teams formed in 1991 as part of the Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities of Ramsey County, Minn. Clergy and lay leaders of many faiths and denominations comprise IFAT's membership. The goal of IFAT is to bring awareness of the issues surrounding family violence to faith communities, inviting them to create sustained activities and dialogues that lead to deeper awareness and action, creating communities of peace through the teachings of their faith.

The **Initiative for Violence-Free Families and Communities** is a comprehensive, grassroots effort to end family and community violence in Ramsey County and beyond. Community members participate in Action Teams of their choice to work on reducing violence within specific focus areas, such as the workplace, the media, religious institutions and schools.

3-Stage Model for Creating Communities of Peace

1. Assess and understand your self, your congregation and your community.
 - Identify strengths and concerns.
 - Identify issues and problems.
 - Identify assets.
 - Identify sources of power, both formal and informal.
2. Identify prevention and intervention strategies. Determine what can be done and built upon, and anticipate potential for resistance and lack of understanding.
 - Education and formation. Identify spiritual values, awareness levels, skill levels, and whole family support systems.
 - Environment. Develop a "master narrative" of peace and love. Address physical space issues to create a welcoming and respectful environment.
 - Intervention. Look for signs of early stress or lack of communication skills; identify and develop early intervention and support, identify and develop problem screening, assistance and referral systems.
3. Take action:
 - Change in awareness ... leads to more awareness of respectful relations
 - Change in attitudes ... leads to clear, healthy communication and lived spiritual values
 - Change in behaviors ... leads to less violence in families and communities

(Model developed by faculty and staff from the Inter-Faith Action Team, BeFriender Ministry, the University of St. Thomas, the College of St. Catherine for The Saint Paul Seminary School of Divinity curriculum.)

A Note From the Interim Director In Friendship

One of BeFriender Ministry's sustaining gifts to the staff who work in the national office is the stories about this ministry we hear from all over the country. As a newcomer to this ministry, I am hearing these stories fresh. I hear when a coordinator begins to understand ministry reflection in a new way and feels empowered to return home and teach it to others. I hear when a pastor comes to trust that lay ministers will provide precious and consistent care to someone in pain and that lay people are truly colleagues in ministry.

Sometimes I hear about things that don't work so well. This is good. It allows us to answer questions, to share learnings and suggestions from other areas and to refine our workshops and practices so that we can strengthen and grow this ministry.

Sometimes I go in search of stories. Recently, I talked with Mary Gifford, a BeFriender coordinator at St. Louis Catholic Church in Austin, Texas. The St. Louis parish has had a BeFriender Ministry since 1995. Since 1998, Mary has trained about ten people a year as BeFrienders.

Many BeFrienders are still active from the first group that Mary trained. About 90 percent of these BeFrienders are employed fulltime. The original ministry focused on the homebound, and, naturally a good number of these folks were elderly. But as the ministry has grown, the population being served has expanded as well. Now BeFrienders befriend all age groups and people facing all sorts of life transitions. This congregation is also able to befriend folks outside their parish who are referred to them by St. Vincent de Paul, a Catholic social service agency.

I asked Mary to share some stories of BeFriending. She told me about one woman, a very intelligent and independent woman who had physical problems that tended to isolate her in her home. Her BeFriender "walked with her," Mary said, as she considered whether to move to an assisted living facility. The befriending relationship continued after the woman moved to a new home, because she faced several adjustments in her new life. Although the befriending relationship went longer than the average at St. Louis Church, the BeFriender was able to be flexible. The befriended woman, says Mary, has nothing but praise for her BeFriender. Although their befriending relationship has ended, the two stay in touch out of affection for each other.

I asked Mary how ministry reflection worked in her parish. She said she considers ministry reflection to be very important. "It allows BeFrienders to look at issues in their ministry," she said. "It allows them to dialogue about concerns without fixing. It enables their learning without defensiveness."

She went on, "Of course, people feel trepidation about writing up a dialogue the first time. But they come away amazed at what they have learned about themselves and about their ministry. They usually feel very affirmed in their role."

Mary related a story of one BeFriender who was discouraged by the depression and continuing negative comments made by the person she was befriending. In ministry reflection, she heard that many of the other BeFrienders had a similar

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response to the negativity. The experience of this affirmation really took the pressure off this BeFriender, Mary said.

Although Mary is responsible for several programs at her church in addition to BeFriender Ministry, she finds mutuality to be a particularly valuable lesson. “We try to infuse all our care-giving ministries with the concept of mutuality.”

We would love to hear your stories. Write us or e-mail us with a “Story of BeFriending.” (The addresses can be found below.) Tell us about your good ideas and your powerful experiences. Call us or e-mail us at (651) 962-5775 if you have questions or concerns. Share with us the stories that sustain your ministry, and let us share them with your colleagues around the country. ■

- Gail Dekker

Hear Our Prayer

“Hear Our Prayer” is an occasional feature of The BeFriender on prayer. You are invited to share your prayers (original or with attribution), devotions and thoughts on prayer.

The author of Ecclesiastes tells us that there is nothing new under the sun. Perhaps so; even our prayers can become rote recitations of words that we’ve said again and again. Rather than abandon the prayers we cherish, we can instead seek ways to refresh them and allow the words to be reborn in our hearts and mouths for our own ears to hear anew.

Peg Wangenstein, interviewed for our cover story on family violence, shared with a recent BeFriender Day audience a version of the Lord’s Prayer translated directly from Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke, to English (source unknown):

O cosmic birther of all radiance and vibration!

Soften the ground of our being and carve out a space within us where Your Presence can abide.

Fill us with your creativity so that we may be empowered to bear the fruit of your mission.

Let each of our actions bear fruit in accordance with our desire.

Endow us with the wisdom to produce and share what each Being needs to grow and flourish.

Untie the tangled threads of destiny that bind us, as we release others from the entanglement of past mistakes.

Do not let us be seduced by that which would divert us from our true purpose, but illuminate the opportunities of the present moment.

For you are the round and the fruitful vision, the birth-power and fulfillment, as all is gathered and made whole once again.

While it is unlikely to replace the more comfortable words of the prayer that Jesus taught us, and while many will contest the Biblical scholarship of such a translation,¹ hearing it in a new way can serve to do what Jesus so often did when he spoke – disquiet and challenge us in the places where we may have become complacent or inattentive. Having examined these unfamiliar words, we can return to the more familiar prayer with restored vigor, adding richness and meaning we had not previously imagined or taking renewed delight in the words we have always prayed. ■

¹ *The Hidden Gospel: Decoding the Spiritual Message of the Aramaic Jesus*. Neil Douglas-Klotz. Quest Books, 1999; pp. 5-6.

‘I Need to Talk to the Pastor, Please’

How can you encourage members of your church to contact BeFriender Ministry directly? How can people become more comfortable with making BeFriender Ministry their “first call for help?”

Whether your BeFriender Ministry program is new or has been around for awhile, it’s not unusual for people to continue to call on the pastor or chaplain when they need someone to talk with. These are established roles that exist in an environment of safety and trust.

There are a number of ways to build that environment for your BeFriender Ministry program, as well; awareness is the key. Keeping the program consistently in front of people helps increase the likelihood that BeFriender Ministry will come to mind when someone needs a friend. Here are some suggestions for continually enhancing awareness of the program:

Brochure. Create a brochure about BeFriender Ministry that is always available at worship services and other occasions for people to pick up. It can be something simple that is produced inexpensively. In the brochure you can:

- give clear information about how to contact BeFriender Ministry
- describe BeFriender Ministry using language that makes sense in your setting (for example, “a listening ministry of care” or “the ministry of being a friend”)
- provide examples of typical circumstances when people might want to ask for a BeFriender (times of grief, loss, illness, divorce, unemployment, etc.)
- emphasize confidentiality
- include a quote from your pastor or chaplain recommending or endorsing the program

Coordinators can find additional suggestions about a brochure in your Coordinator Manual (I.15).

Technology. If you have a voice-messaging system, you can check into the

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possibility of providing a separate voice mailbox for BeFriender Ministry (and make sure someone is assigned to check this mailbox daily). If you have an answering machine with a recorded greeting, include information in that greeting about contacting a BeFriender.

Newsletter. Use your newsletter to publish articles related to BeFriender Ministry. They can be educational articles about issues such as grief, chronic illness or addiction, or they can be personal reflections, written by BeFrienders, about what they have learned or gained as a result of befriending others. End each article with information about how to contact BeFriender Ministry.

Announcements. If your church has an open forum for announcements at services, use the opportunity to remind members where they can find information about BeFriender Ministry.

Bulletin. Put a notice in the bulletin – every week, without fail – that provides the phone number for contacting BeFriender Ministry. Occasionally provide a special insert for the bulletin or place a flyer in hymnal racks in the church pews.

Be proactive. There are many times when it's appropriate to offer friendship to someone without waiting for them to call first. Visit someone who is new to your church community or call on someone who is hospitalized. Identifying yourself as a BeFriender, send a card to someone who is facing a difficult time just to let them know that you care. Attend appropriate church events wearing a name tag identifying yourself as a BeFriender.

Sermon. If it's been awhile since the pastor talked about BeFriender Ministry from the pulpit, provide him or her with ideas for including it in an upcoming sermon.

Referral sources. There are a number of ways of receiving referrals to BeFriender Ministry – from the pastor, pastoral care staff, other members of the faith community, etc. Each is a valid way of sowing the seeds of awareness. If your BeFriender Ministry program is receiving pastoral referrals, celebrate your success at developing a cohesive ministry team that works together to provide pastoral care! ■

If You Can't Say Somethin' Nice ...

My favorite movie as a little girl was “Bambi,” and I had a set of wall hangings in my bedroom featuring three of the characters – Bambi, Thumper and Flower. My parents' move this year from their lifelong farm home evoked the memory of that childhood bedroom. As a child, every time I looked at the wall above my bed I was reminded of a particular moment in “Bambi.” Thumper, having just been admonished by his mother, clutches his paws behind his back, looks sheepishly at the ground (if a rabbit can look sheepish) and responds slowly to his mother, “If you can't say somethin' nice, don't say nothin' at all.” You knew from his squirming that he'd heard the phrase from her a thousand times before.

In reading a recent article by a local newspaper columnist, I was reminded of Thumper and his message all over again. The columnist wrote about *lashon hara* or “evil tongue.” *Lashon hara* is a principle addressed in the Talmud, a rabbinical

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commentary on the Tenach (Jewish Bible) which contains the civil and canonical law of the Jewish people. Most of us regard gossip, libel and slander as sinful, since they are falsehoods. The Talmud, however, addresses a different aspect of harmful speech in its warnings against *lashon hara*. The rabbis define *lashon hara* as any statement that is true but serves to lower the reputation or status of the person about whom it is said. The columnist had some fun with the topic, imagining a world where journalists said only nice things about politicians, but her column inspired me to do some self-reflection.

“Any statement that is true” casts a pretty big net around what might be harmful speech. The Talmud does provide a couple of exceptions, but they don’t remotely touch most daily conversations. The Talmud also observes that the laws regarding *lashon hara* are broken frequently and easily. Just how easily, I wondered, as I thought about conversations I’d had recently. Had I meant to elevate the status of the person whose conflict-avoidant behaviors I had described in some detail? Had I been trying to create positive energy about the person whose actions I had carefully recounted with no small irritation? Had I uplifted the reputation of the person whom I had implied was not doing a fair share of the work? I may have been giving the facts in each case, but my heart-searching answer to those three questions would still have to be no, no and no. I also looked at some of my more ambiguous past statements. “She has such a ‘different’ take on things.” (Inflection says so much.) “I wonder why he always seems reluctant to say what’s on his mind ...” (Leaving the end of the sentence to the listener’s inference didn’t let me off the hook.) “I think she was just trying to cover her own mistake.” (Saying it in a sympathetic tone is not a mitigating factor.) I won’t even get into how I rolled my eyes as someone passed my office while I was having a particularly frustrating phone conversation with a service provider. The sound you hear? That’s me, breaking Talmudic law, left and right. The other sound, I suppose, is the hissing from the air being let out of all my excuses.

In investigating a bit more about *lashon hara*, I found one source that instead used the terminology *lishan telitaë* or “third tongue,” so-called because it slays three persons: the speaker, the spoken to and the spoken of.¹ We’re also not off the hook for when we’re both the speaker and the spoken of; negative, if accurate, comments about ourselves are not permitted either. That got me thinking about the number of times recently I’ve made “joking” comments about my own lack of aesthetic taste. Examining my real motivation for those jokes, I certainly wasn’t trying to raise others’ esteem of me; I was trying to hide my own embarrassment at a particularly sensitive perceived lack of talent.

Yet another moment of synchronicity arrived when I talked with Peg Wangenstein and Don Gault for this issue’s cover article on family violence. I listened as they talked about the capacity within each of us to perpetrate violence and thought about the violent image of being “slain” by words. Just like my old reluctant hero, Thumper, I squirmed when I heard them say that verbal abuse was both the hardest to define and perhaps the most devastating because it damages the sense of self. I’ve always thought of myself as a basically peaceful person, but my recent reflections on *lashon hara* were suddenly highlighting my own capacity for verbally violent behavior.

As even the Talmud states, it’s easy for us to commit ; in fact, we can become very skillful at how we use words and how we rationalize “just telling it like it is.” If each of us became a bit more attentive to not saying anything at all when we have nothing nice to say, though, I wonder how much more readily others would believe

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they could enter into a trusting relationship with us. If we each dispensed with a few of our self-deprecating jokes, I wonder how much more easily those in pain could see the value of their own being, regardless of what they believe to be their flaws or weaknesses.

Bambi, Thumper and Flower have been in my sister's safekeeping for awhile. I decided they needed to make a reappearance in my life, and they arrived safely by mail last week. ■

- Joanne Hansen

¹ *Everyman's Talmud: The Major Teachings of the Rabbinic Sages.* Abraham Cohen. Schocken Books Inc., New York. 1995.

If you would like to read more about lashon hara, I recommend two books by Rabbi Joseph Telushkin:

- The Book of Jewish Values: A Day-by-Day Guide to Ethical Living, *Bell Tower, 2000.*
- Words That Hurt; Words That Heal, *William Morrow & Co., 1998.* (This book was the motivating force behind Senators Joseph Lieberman and Connie Mack's 1996 Senate Resolution #151 to establish "National Speak No Evil Day.")

- J.H.