Chapter One

Choosing Sides

About eighteen years ago, I had an experience that forever changed my views on raising children. It wasn't as if it came out of the blue, as my views had certainly been moving in that direction for years before that. But it was one of those galvanizing events that, however small it seemed at the time, changed my views for good. There was no going back.

In medicine, it is a kind of cliché for doctors to say they learn many important things from their patients. We heard it often in medical school and residency, and it continues in one's further medical education. In contrast, what I frequently hear from my patients is they did something unusual for whatever ails them, they excitedly went to tell their doctor about it, and the doctor was either not interested or outright dismissive. I have made it my practice for decades that if a patient comes in and tells me they cured their lupus by drinking horse urine, I ask them how much and which horse. It's not necessarily that I automatically believe that this intervention actually cured their lupus or that it will be a therapy worth me looking into, but as a matter of respect for the patient, I owe it to them to listen. Also, I can categorically state that many, if not most of the successful therapies I have

used in my career as a doctor have first been brought to me by my patients. The key, though, is knowing how to ask, how to listen, and how to put this into a larger framework. That is the "technique" of learning from patients—a skill most doctors are sorely lacking.

Let me set the stage for my experience of eighteen years ago, in which a seven-year-old boy taught me a life-changing lesson. In some ways, this book is a way of thanking that guy for taking the trouble to be straight up with me and trusting that I would listen.

At the time, I had been a doctor for about twenty years. For most of those twenty years, I had been practicing anthroposophical medicine in my small general practice. I was also the school doctor for three different Waldorf schools. From the early days of the Waldorf school movement in the 1920s, the college of teachers would meet once a month with the school doctor to have a "child study." In a child study, the various teachers of the child would present their observations and their picture of the child to the entire faculty. In addition, the school doctor would examine the child in their office and observe the child for a two-hour period one morning. Then the school doctor would add their observations to the developing picture of the child presented at the child study. The purpose of the child study was not necessarily to "fix" the child as much as to gain a fuller understanding of just who this human being is.

Having done this for three different schools for twenty years, once per month with each school, I had built up significant experience with observing children, working with children in need, and observing various teachers. Over that time, I seemed to develop at least some skill in presenting

imaginative pictures of children, which helped the teachers work with that child in the future. The experience I had eighteen years ago happened when a nearby Waldorf school, which had no trained doctor in their community, asked me to come down for two days to observe various children in their school and to do a number of child studies for the children I had observed. This two-day visit also came about six months after my first exposure to nonviolent communication (NVC), which influenced the way I conducted my interviews and examinations of the children. In those six months, I intensively studied the work of Carl Rogers—the man Marshall Rosenberg talked about as being the inspiration for NVC—in particular the way he conducted interviews. This is the brief background for the meeting with my seven-year-old friend.

As I set up to work that day in a school I had never visited before, I established the "rules" of how I wanted to conduct my day. The school wanted me to see children they were having issues with, either in relation to behavior or learning, or sometimes physical health challenges. The parents had all consented to my seeing the child one time as a "patient." I asked the primary teacher of the child to write no more than one paragraph explaining why they wanted me to see the child. Then I explained to the parent(s) and child, as they sat down in the exam room, that the first thing I did in these exams was speak directly and ask questions directly to the child. I asked that the parents not intervene or interrupt, no matter how much they disagreed with the child or even if they thought the child was giving me factually inaccurate information. No matter what, no interruptions. Once I had finished talking to the child, I would give the parent(s)

whatever time they needed to tell me whatever they wanted to say. They could fill in details, correct things the child said, or whatever. However, in this phase, I asked that the child be allowed to interrupt the parent. I usually said I realized this was not "fair" but these are the "rules." In all cases, the parents agreed to these rules.

I don't remember much about this particular boy's appearance, only that he appeared robust and had a baseball cap pulled down over his eyes. I explained the "rules" and the mother agreed and only said he probably won't talk to you much. I read the paragraph written by his first-grade teacher, which told me he had no particular physical complaints but was very disruptive in class, even physically lashing out at other children, to the point that they didn't know if they could allow him to continue at the school. As the parents were dedicated to the Waldorf ideals, this was a real crisis for the school and the family. What follows below is my paraphrased recollection of the important points of our dialogue. Obviously, I don't remember his exact words, but the gist of it is accurate.

Me: Hey, how's it going?
Boy: Ok.
Me: I hear you're in first grade, is that correct?
Boy: Yes.
Me: How's it going in school?
Boy: Fine.

At this point, I probably asked a few more general questions about how many brothers and sisters he had, what he likes to do, things like that. In each case, he would give one-word answers, clearly not that interested in talking much to me. At some point, soon, I got back to the issue:

Me: So, I hear there are some troubles at school, do you know anything about this?
Boy: Yes, my teacher lies.

The mother was clearly taken aback and looked like she wanted to say something, I gave her a look as if to remind her of the "rules," and she remained quiet. The important step at this point is to continue the dialogue and get as much information as possible but never to ask a "why" question. For some reason, that seems to stop the dialogue in its tracks and leads nowhere.

Me: What does she lie about?
Boy: Well, the other day she said I hit Freddy, but I didn't, and the teacher said I did and lied about it.
Me: Can you tell me what happened that led up to her saying you hit Freddy
Boy: Freddy shot a spit ball at my friend Joey. I told Freddy to stop and he wouldn't.
Me: Then what happened?
Boy: I kept telling him to stop and he wouldn't listen. Another boy laughed at Joey and called him a baby.
Me: Then what did you do?
Boy: I went over to Freddy and said he had to stop now, but he wouldn't listen. He pushed me so I pushed him back, and that was the end of it. The teacher saw me push Freddy and sent me out of the room. She lied. Freddy pushed me first. She always lies and blames me for everything.
Me: Can you think of another time when she blamed you for something?
Boy: Yes, it happens almost every day; someone laughs or talks loud, and so I join in the laughing. She only punishes me. It's not fair.

Me: Was there something that happened the other day?
Boy: Yes, she lied again, someone threw a glass at one of the other kids, not me, and the teacher blamed me for it. She lies all the time.
Me: So you didn't throw the glass?
Boy: No, someone else did, but I would throw a glass.
Mother (who can't help herself): But the teacher said she saw you throw the glass. That's why you got sent home from school that day; someone could have gotten really hurt.

I reminded the mother of the rules, but since this was said, I had to deal with it.

Me: Did you also throw a glass?
Boy: Jimmy threw the glass first, then other people threw things, and I threw a glass jar and it broke.
Me: Is there anything else about school you want to tell me?

At this point, the boy who supposedly wouldn't talk to me launched into a ten-minute monologue about all the unfair things that happened at school, how he was not allowed to go out for recess—the only part he liked—if the class was bad, how everyone talked out of turn, but the teacher lied and blamed it on him. He talked about how he hated school and wanted to play in the creek in the back of the new house they had just moved into. Throughout this time, I just kept asking him clarifying questions, mostly telling him I just wanted to make sure I got the story correct. He probably went on for half an hour describing everything in life and school, and in particular everything that he thought was unfair.

Mostly because I had other children to see, I said I needed to move on here but wanted to know if he thought I had heard his story and if he thought I understood the situation. He looked at his mother and said the first of two things that changed my world. He said, "Hey, he's on my side." At that point, you are allowed to ask one "why" question, only one, so make it a good one. I asked him, "So, why did you throw that glass jar?"

He looked at me and said, "So they would send me home and I would never come back."

I asked him my final question, which was: "Is there anything you would like me to do for you right now?"

He answered, "Yes, tell them to let me stay home and play or to stop lying."

I said I would do my best, but the outcome was probably not up to me. I asked the mother if she had anything she wanted to add, but she was too shaken up to say much. I examined him and told them both I would be talking to the teachers later that day. We shook hands, he gave me a big grin, and we parted ways.

Here is my first and most important message of this book, one that seems so simple but can be so hard to see. It is the message that came through loud and clear in this visit: If you want to raise a healthy child in a toxic culture, get on your child's side and stay there, *no matter what*.

The rest of the book explores what staying on your child's side really means.