

*Imagine you are walking in the woods and you see a small dog sitting by a tree. As you approach it, it suddenly lunges at you, teeth bared. You are frightened and angry. But then you notice that one of its legs is caught in a trap. Immediately your mood shifts from anger to concern: You see that the dog's aggression is coming from a place of vulnerability and pain. This applies to all of us. When we behave in hurtful ways, it is because we are caught in some kind of painful trap. The more we look through the eyes of wisdom at ourselves and each other, the more we cultivate a compassionate heart. It is such a blessing to forgive!*

—TARA BRACH

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## *Zeke and the KKK*



Sixteen-year-old Zeke was an active member of the Ku Klux Klan. I met him when I was teaching a two-day workshop on nonviolence for high schoolers in the San Francisco Bay Area. The first day of the workshop, we focused on how to transcend fixed ideas and perceptions of others while considering their human needs. On the second day, we worked on conflict resolution skills, but we also really wanted to support the connections between students.

Zeke was uncomfortable with all of this, and by the second day, he had sat with his discomfort long enough. In a room full of people he saw as Jewish, gay, black, liberal, the wrong kind of white, and female, he had trouble keeping quiet. When it was

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revealed that a Jewish girl's sister was getting married to another woman, he couldn't help saying what was on his mind.

"That's just wrong!" he exclaimed.

"Are you uncomfortable because there are people in here you're not used to connecting with?" I asked.

In response, Zeke explained why he thought certain people were simply "born inferior." His monologue agitated several people in the room, but he continued.

"I hate these people, but you know, don't get me wrong. I'm not a violent person. I wouldn't want harm to come to them. It's just that I hate certain people."

"Hmm," I replied. "Now I'm confused, because you're saying you hate these people, yet you don't want any harm to come to them. I'm guessing you might even have some confusion about your feelings toward these people. Because you say you don't want to be violent, yet you speak of hate."

Zeke listened with his arms folded across his chest, his eyes fixed on mine.

I continued, "I'm also confused about your choice to be a member of the KKK. From what I know, they have created a lot of violence against the folks you say you hate. Can you tell me why you're a member? What was your primary motivation to join?"

Zeke looked straight into me and said, "My dad is a member of the KKK!"

The others bristled with comments.

One student chimed in, "Ah man, just 'cause your dad's a hater doesn't mean you gotta be one too!"

Nodding at that profound statement, I looked into Zeke's eyes as intensely as he had looked into mine and reflected what I heard.

"I'm hearing how much you'd like to connect to your dad. I am also hearing that maybe you feel conflicted about being a member of an organization that tries to create connection through violence and hating others."

## *The Healing Power of Empathy*

Leaning toward Zeke, trying to tangibly soften the room with my presence, I asked, “Has this really met your need to connect with your father?”

“Yeah, I guess I joined ’cause I hoped to get closer to my dad. I just wanted to get along with him,” he replied, looking a little unsteady.

Zeke’s eyes swelled but he did not want to cry, not in front of this group. He paused, breathed in fully, and then exhaled audibly, trying to regain his composure. I wasn’t sure if he was affected by the gravity of this new awareness or if he merely wanted to hold back his tears.

It didn’t matter. The wheels were already in motion.

When Zeke sat for a little longer in this empathic connection, which afforded him the opportunity to link up his mind with his heart, he realized that he had not joined the KKK because he hated certain people. Rather, he was desperate to find a way to connect with his father.

We carried on with the day, but he walked up to me after the workshop and said, “You know, that was the first time I felt fear begin to leave my body. I’m actually relieved.”

With his new clarity, he began to assess the effectiveness of his choice, and he decided that hating others was truly not his path, not an expression of his authentic presence. He was able to get past the enemy images his mind had created about some of these other people—and the fixed ideas he had about himself—to see what he really needed. Zeke ultimately decided to quit the KKK. He developed new friendships. And he continued to work on various other strategies to find connection with his dad.

—CATHERINE CADDEN, [www.zenvc.org](http://www.zenvc.org)