

Leaf Miners, Swiss Chard, Interdependence, and Me: Key Distinctions in the Garden

Straddling the garden bed, I reach around each Swiss chard plant with a sharp knife poised in one hand. I brush my fingers between the leaves, looking for the thin, brown, patchy evidence of leaf miners. The dry membranes left behind by these microscopic creatures once flummoxed me as I wondered why my plants were dying.

On the world wide web, I have learned that these hungry little mites multiply nearly as fast as they eat. One of the best ways to protect a bed of Swiss chard is to harvest every leaf that shows signs of being dined upon. Today, I gather green leaves with one or two blemishes to steam for lunch. Nowadays, we share, the leaf miners and I. Honoring us both is in alignment with my practice of Nonviolent Communication.

Over the years, my anger at slugs, snails, and other such “garden pests” has diminished, giving way to a healthier respect for all of life. Years ago, when I gave up poisoning snails, I watched my neighborhood raccoons come to the rescue when the mollusk population hit critical mass. Doing nothing is also doing something. Our every action and inaction impact sundry beings around us. All of life is interdependent, whether we are aware of it or not. It is no wonder that Marshall Rosenberg’s Key Distinctions include a juxtaposition of “Interdependence and Independence/Dependence.”

I gather leaves of chard into my basket and turn to the cucumbers. Lifting yellow blossoms and jagged edged leaves, I look under each for fruiting bodies, using all my senses. The 6-foot-tall plant generously offers 2-3 tapered English cucumbers daily. I agree with Indigenous botanist Robin Wall Kimmerer’s view that the fruitful abundance of these dear plants is a sign that they love me as much as I love them.¹ In my twenties, I saw gardening as a way to become independent, self-reliant. Over time, I’ve learned to appreciate the sovereignty and partnership of plants and animals. It turns out that gardening is not something that I “do” alone. It’s a way of being. Or perhaps, as Thích Nhất Hạnh would say, “inter-being.”²

When I harvest Swiss chard, it is stimulated to grow. The clipping of cucumbers spurs ongoing blossoms. The garden and I “do” for one another in the same breath. From the moment we thought of living together, these plants and my family have been interdependent. Arguably,

the arrangement stretches further back, generations even. Our feelings for one another have evolved. My grandmother and her parents before her (they met in Independence, Oregon) picked fruits and vegetables seasonally as a vocation. I am nourished by these stories. I am here because the plants helped them to survive.

My harvest basket overflows with nettle, cucumber, kale, arugula, tomatoes, and green beans. I pull out the cutting board in my kitchen to prepare them and more fully receive this bounty. Slicing softly in the stillness of morning, I recall writing the chapter on the key distinction of Interdependence with Stephanie Bachmann Mattei, my co-author for *The Heart of Nonviolent Communication: 25 Keys to Shift from Separation to Connection*.³ Writing and rewriting the chapter, we discussed at length how babies could be seen as dependent or interdependent. We related how Western mainstream culture heralds “independence” as a sign of adulthood. We noted that seeing ourselves as “dependent” can shift us into a state of powerlessness (49).

Stephanie and I agree that while interdependence is a part of life, awareness of it is often lacking. I suspect it is impossible to live in full and constant awareness of all the beings that support us all the time. And still, I still believe what we wrote: “Nothing can separate us from the web of life” (56).

Our children grew up on this little urban farm and learned the names of domestic and wild plants here. From the age of 2, they could chew up and administer a poultice of plantain or blackberry leaf to take the sting out of nettle or to use as an antidote for the venom of a wasp. They garnered skills that one might view as signs of independence, particularly if one sees plants as things rather than beings. These skills, inner resources, have served them and others well. At ages 20 and 22, they started a hiking/guiding business in Alaska, sharing their love of native plants with visitors to Denali National Park. Independence or interdependence?

The beauty of Rosenberg’s key distinctions is that they do not champion an either/or position. Aliveness exists in the dynamic of both/and instead. There is nothing inherently bad or wrong with the dichotomy of dependence/independence, though a focus on either in isolation can lead to a sense of separation. Vitality can be found in welcoming both and nurturing that precious, paradoxical territory between the two while also valuing interdependence. My children appeared dependent on me and on this land as they evolved to actively serve it. Over time, they stepped into a relationship of greater giving and receiving, a space where the flow of

abundance nullifies who is the giver and who the receiver. Sounds much like the way Marshall Rosenberg described empathy, doesn't it?

That is how I see interdependence. It is an empathic, energetic co-creation, a place where we nourish one another as we are nourished. While I direct life energy by removing and eating leaves mildly affected by leaf miners, I also respect their lives and actions. My heart is open to them. Together, we play vital roles in the life cycle and evolution of Swiss chard as well as countless other species of animals, bugs, and plants. When I'm at my best, leaf miners are not the enemy. They are not even "other" to me; they are a part of the greater ecosystem that I too inhabit. Eating, and being eaten, we are a part the living entity of Earth and the cosmos.

Tipping the cutting board, I guide diced cucumbers and tomatoes into a bowl of beans and rice with feta. I wrap three sets of cucumbers to pass on to the neighbors and one for a local food rescue's "store" that provides sustenance while honoring the dignity and choice of folks who are stretched to meet their basic needs. The giving and receiving goes on, expanding outwards and within my heart.

How do you live your awareness of interdependence? And how does your understanding of dependence and independence influence your experience of compassion?

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Kristin K. Collier is a co-author with Stephanie Bachmann Mattei of [The Heart of Nonviolent Communication: 25 Keys to Shift From Separation to Connection](#), published by PuddleDancer Press in April, 2023. A writer, educator, and YouTuber, Kristin's work, supported by Nonviolent Communication, now focuses on joy. You can find her at www.collierconnections.com.

¹ Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Press, 2013).

² Thích Nhất Hạnh, *The Art of Living: Peace and Freedom in the Here and Now* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2017).

³ Stephanie Bachmann Mattei and Kristin K. Collier, *The Heart of Nonviolent Communication: 25 Keys to Shift From Separation to Connection* (Encinitas: PuddleDancer Press, 2023).