

# Don't Take It Personally

With Rachele Lamb

*As our awareness grows, so does the image of the web, for we are the universe becoming conscious of itself. With sensibilities evolved through millennia of interaction, we can turn now and know that web as our home. It both cradles us and calls us to weave it further.*

—Joanna Macy

You've heard it many times. *"Don't take it personally"* .. a modern day aphorism commonly espoused in personal and professional development trainings and spiritual teachings intended to remind us that the things other people say and do are more ostensibly a reflection of who they are than they are a reflection of who we are, particularly when objectionable words and actions are aimed at us personally. If someone says something hurtful, we're best served to treat it like water off a duck's back. The key distinction here is not that we dismiss everything others say but rather that we give little credence to hurtful words .. or words considered to be offensive, disrespectful, unkind, negative, et

While I've spent a good part of my adult life attempting to practice not taking things personally, I'd like to propose that perhaps this well-intended advice too often falls short of shedding light on the vastness of the relational terrain in which we are (hopefully) rooted as human beings.

## The Bias

Someone says to you, *"I love you"*, *"I feel so grateful to have you in my life"*, *"You're a wonderful person"*. Do these words bring a smile to your face? Do you feel warm inside? Does it please you to hear these words? Do you take it personally? Most probably you do. Amen that we hear messages such as these from time to time. They

typically reinforce our sense of connection and belonging as well as our self-esteem. It's good to know that certain things about us bring joy to others.

Notice what happens though when we hear things like, *"You're not easy to be around"*, *"It feels like you take me for granted"*, *"You're irresponsible"*. This is an opportune time to exercise not taking things personally. Or is it?

One thing at least becomes quite clear in these two different modes of feedback. Few suggest that we don't take things personally when we like what we're hearing. It's another matter, however, when we don't like what we're hearing. It's often then that we opt to not take things personally.

Given the clear bias we have around what we will and won't take personally, I think it would be more accurate to say, don't take matters personally when you don't want to consider a possibility that might be challenging or upsetting to you. Such is our aversion to hearing things that don't align with how we view ourselves or how we view the world. It can be pretty rough to take things personally depending on the message.

## Nonviolent Communication Lens

Let's segue into NVC (Nonviolent Communication) territory for a moment. At least here we have the possibility of opening the lines of communication between people, presuming of course that there's a desire to gain understanding of the other person's take on things. *"You're irresponsible"* Here we might empathize with the speaker, *"Are you feeling hurt and frustrated because your needs for reliability and responsibility weren't met?"*

Now here's where things get tricky. There's a good chance that you've properly identified what's going on for the other person concerning their feelings and needs. It's a good start. The deeper question however would be, ***do you really get where they're coming from?***

Let's say you had promised your spouse that you would prepare a nutritious dinner for your children. Instead, you get caught up in a Netflix series and decide to continue watching uninterrupted. You fetch a package of donuts from the pantry figuring it will satisfy the kids who are only too happy to consume the entire package. Can you see how your actions might be a violation of trust, reliability and responsibility? It's not enough to intellectually guess someone's feelings and needs. What's important is to really **GET** them.

If all we do is name feelings and needs while remaining separate from relational entanglement, we are simply drawing a convenient line between ourselves and others in how we speak; we are not being relational. We might be

***thinking, “Those are your needs right now and that’s perfectly cool, and at the same time I don’t actually share your present understanding of those needs.”***

Even if you have genuine sympathy for their needs, you may remain coolly detached. It’s easy to do: you intellectually get their needs, you don’t object to them, but nor do you align with them when it comes to the choices you make in your own life. You have ‘your’ reality and they have ‘their’ reality.

There’s also the possibility that you might invest notable effort in satisfying the other person’s needs in the future, but you do so out of care for them (a generous gesture) and not from a shared understanding that: a) the food we eat plays a significant role in our health and well being; b) being a mature adult in relationship asks that we recognize and prioritize the needs of our relationships over our own self-interest.

## **Being Relational**

With no shared understanding (in the west) of how to live together in this world, our primary source of reference is our own individual self. The self turns out to be far from reliable in the context of being relational. It’s not a given that *self- anything* will lead to a wise and embodied understanding of living relationally. *(See more on this via video at end of this article)*

If we examine what motivates us and others, we don’t want others to do things solely to satisfy us. Such an aim is too narrow and easily becomes the breeding ground for resentment. Optimally, we want others to do things from the recognition of how doing so will support the situation, the relationship and ultimately life. It’s a much more solid and enduring orientation.

*Every religious tradition on which we draw has a reverence for life. We are a part of an intricate web of life. Every tradition on which we draw teaches that the ultimate expression of our spirituality is our action. Deep spirituality leads to action in the world. A deep reverence for life, love of nature’s complex beauty and sense of intimate connection with the cosmos leads inevitably to a commitment to work for environmental and social justice.*

— *Peter Morales*

The art of deep relating requires that we, in fact, take things personally but that at the same time we recognize our personal selves to be deeply embedded in a larger ecology of organic symbiotic relatedness. Deep relating asks that we grant sincere consideration to the things that other people say about us, even when they might be painful for us to hear and even when they are expressed in a manner that we perceive as cruel or judging.

If someone call's you narcissistic and selfish for instance, it should be easy to recognize (at least from the NVC understanding) that this person is letting you know that they do not presently trust that their needs are being considered. The truth is, even reframing the message and appreciating the underlying need for consideration is no guarantee that we will welcome hearing the news.

There's absolutely no guarantee when we hear from others that their needs are sorely violated by our words or actions, that we will want to entertain the very real possibility that we might be acting solely from our own needs and preferences with little interest in other people's needs.

If we're willing to courageously wade into the relational current, what is needed in a time like this is mourning. Deep mourning that we have transgressed against another, against ourselves, against the web. It's not a time to beat up on ourselves.

Self-loathing only ensures that no real learning will occur and bypasses the real work of mourning and learning.

Of course, taking things personally does not mean that another person's assessment of us is accurate. Your 16-year-old daughter might call you selfish when she asks if she can borrow your car and you explain that you need it to get to an appointment. People sometimes say things from a place of childlike reactivity when they don't get what they want.

Not taking things personally might also speak to the merit of extending compassion to others when they exhibit less than exemplary behaviour such as in the teenage daughter scenario. They're doing the best they can is the old adage. I'm not sure I buy that people are always doing their 'best'. I'm not even sure I would advise people to always do their 'best' lest they become a tyrant unto themselves and others. I would simply say that people do what they do, which on some occasions might be their best, and on other occasions might be far from it. Again, discernment is to be cultivated.

Not taking things personally in such a context should not also mean tolerating or enabling poor behaviour. If someone's ways of *'being themselves'* is fraught with behaviours that generate pain for others, whose shoulders does it land on to draw attention to the fact? I would say if we care about the relational web .. and if we care about life .. then it's up to each of us to weigh in. And hopefully, we will speak relationally rather than punitively.

It's important to develop some discernment and tractability around the unwelcome feedback we sometimes receive. We can deepen in terms of our humanness, maturity, integrity, and wholeness if we pay attention to the ways in which we become reactively defensive, closed and rigid around the things we prefer not to consider. Which doesn't mean we should automatically agree with what we hear, but rather that we soften our defensiveness and entertain the possibility that our take on things until this moment has not been as fully informed as it could be.

### Consider this ...

we are each and every one of us standing on one of the finely woven delicate strands that either directly or indirectly binds us together within the relational web.

Whatever we say and do does not remain confined within the borders of our bodies but rather travels out along those sensile filaments to others and to all of life. In this sense, it's *not* possible to *not* be impacted by events and occurrences unfolding elsewhere within the web. What *IS* possible however is that we respond effectively and relationally to the impact we receive or generate or conversely, that we consistently harden ourselves to the impact. You could think of how much better it is for a car and its passengers to have an effective suspension system. It's a rough ride without it.

To harden oneself to such an extent that one no longer recognizes him or herself as part of the relational web is to deny one's capacity to be relational. It is ultimately and tragically a denial of one's humanness.

So yes then, take it personally, take it all personally. But do it skillfully. Feel deeply, reflect deeply, renew your kinship with the relational web. The purpose of the 360-degree feedback is not to diminish people. It is to strengthen people and their bonds. It is to provide vision where our own seeing cannot reach. It is to reestablish our place of belonging within the sacred web of life.

*And while I stood there  
I saw more than I can tell,  
and I understood more than I saw; for I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of  
things in the spirit,  
and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being.*

—Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*

[Here is a beautiful story](#) from Chief Oren Lyons where he reflects on the question, “Who am I?” and what it means ultimately to live relationally.

*Rachelle Lamb’s lifelong interest in human development, relationship dynamics and the roles that culture and ecology play in people’s lives, along with her ability to skillfully pave the way for transformational dialogue between people consistently produces powerful learning experiences for individuals and audiences. Learn more about her at [www.RachelleLamb.com](http://www.RachelleLamb.com) .*



