



# **WALKING THROUGH ANGER**

**a new design  
for confronting  
conflict in an  
emotionally  
charged  
world**

**CHRISTIAN CONTE, PHD**

 **sounds true**  
BOULDER, COLORADO

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If you want to be given everything,  
give everything up.

LAO TZU



## Introduction

Imagine you were trapped in a room and didn't see a way out. If people on the outside talked at you about how they got out of a room before, you'd likely feel pretty defensive. You might even be especially upset if they didn't realize that you were trapped in a completely different kind of room with an altogether different escape route than the one they were once trapped in.

"I'm in a different room!" you shout.

"Yes," someone replies, "but this is what I did to get out . . ."

"Please help me! I'm not in the room you were trapped in!" you respond.

"Well, I felt like that once too," another person on the outside says. "Let me tell you about how I felt . . ."

"I don't want to hear how you felt!" you say in desperation. "You telling me how you felt does nothing to help me get out of this room!"

"What's wrong with you?" a third person says. "Why are you so angry and resistant? We're all only trying to help!"

Because they can fully comprehend only their own experiences and the solutions that worked for them, the people on the outside

genuinely don't understand why their words aren't helpful. And because the people on the outside don't take the time to listen to you describe what the room you're in looks like from your perspective, nor do they own the role they play in their interaction with you, they put the blame entirely on you.

And after all their words, there you are, still trapped in that room. Yes, there is a way out, but the people preaching at you about their experiences won't help you find it. You need solutions that will work for you, and you need those solutions to be relevant to the room you're actually in, not entirely different rooms that others were stuck in previously.

If you can feel the frustration of being in that scenario, if you can see clearly how ineffective it is for people to assume that you being trapped in a room is exactly the same as the experience they had, then you understand the key to circumventing defensiveness in communication. If you truly understand this scenario, in fact, I would argue that you understand why Yield Theory® is revolutionary and transformative. The room in the scenario is ever changing, as is the way out. Only one person can ever be in the room at a time, so no one else in all of time will ever see the room the exact way that you see it. And neither will you ever see the exact room others are in. All we can ever do is hear about each others' rooms.

The rooms are our psyches.

If you want to help people who are trapped in their rooms, there are three things that you can do. You can listen with humility as others teach you about their rooms. You can validate the experience and emotions they're describing. And then you can explore realistic options of what they can do to help themselves from this moment forward.

To do those three things well, it's crucial first and foremost to recognize where people actually are and then to be authentic in your desire to learn what they're willing to teach you about their experience. When you have the humility to lead with compassion instead of ego, you improve your chances of tapping into the creative processes that will help you shine a light of conscious education for others in a way that specifically addresses their individual needs.

Through it all, be mindful about the role you play in every interaction, including what is and isn't in your control. The less attached you are to needing others to see what you see or having things go a certain way, the more you will genuinely help others help themselves to be free.

This is Yield Theory. ◀

Everyone has a story. Everyone. No matter the pain others cause, no matter the impulsivity they display, the mistakes they make, or anything else, there are no monsters among us; there are only human beings who have personal histories. That doesn't mean, of course, that people don't do terrible things, and it certainly doesn't excuse any harm that's done. Explaining behavior never excuses it, but it does help us understand it. Ultimately, just as in your own life, each moment has led to the next in the story of everyone's life. The more you understand those stories, the more effective you'll be at walking through conflict.

I specialize in anger management, and my path has often placed me right in the middle of some extraordinarily intense situations. Through the years, I have witnessed extremely effective and also terrifyingly ineffective approaches to handling anger. I've watched firsthand just how much anger can beget anger and how ego can escalate it; and I've also seen just how powerfully transformative and de-escalating a process I call "leading with compassion" can be. I learned that trying to see the world through other people's eyes requires only a shift in perspective, and it actually doesn't take any more time than not trying to do so. Having a nonjudgmental attitude doesn't mean not acting to de-escalate conflict and speak up, either. To the contrary: I will show you how leading with compassion and seeking to understand will help you navigate clearly and directly through even the most difficult and emotionally charged situations.

As I reflect on my own story, I can recall two distinct moments from my childhood that ultimately led me to becoming an expert in anger. I invite you to take a guess what those two events might be. My guess is that neither of these experiences is likely to be anything close to what you might imagine. And that's the point. The more you hear of individuals' stories, the less you assume, and the more you understand. More

understanding leads to more effective communication, including in the handling of difficult interactions. Back to my story: Here are those two specific moments that I believe led me to choose the path I took all the way to the publishing of this book. See if your guesses were right.

My dad was a professor of English literature before he changed directions and switched to teaching earth science. When I was young, I saw the fun in storytelling, in mythology, and in the subject of literature; but, admittedly, I did not see the value in studying the ground. As a haughty teenager, I asked my dad why he chose to be an earth scientist. He replied, “If you’re only ever going to live on one planet in your life, don’t you think you ought to know about that planet?” I loved that answer. A few years later, when I entered college, I felt lost and didn’t know what course of study to follow. I thought about my dad’s explanation of why he did what he did. Then the thought occurred to me: I will only ever live with me, so shouldn’t I get to know myself? I decided then and there to study psychology.

My mom was a high school English teacher. She was well respected among the students, because she was a strict disciplinarian. She was the kind of teacher kids tend to complain about as too demanding, only to realize as young adults that they benefited from meeting her requirements. The kids at the high school I attended had fistfights fairly frequently; like in any 1980s teen movie, the students really would circle up around the two kids who were about to duke it out. Before I entered ninth grade, my mom looked at me and said, “I had better never find out that you ever watched a fight. If you see people fighting, step in and break it up.” I did as she taught me. From the time I was young, when I saw conflict, I stepped toward it, not away from it.

I didn’t run from conflict then, and I don’t run from it now: not others’ and not my own. Learning about human behavior—about myself—and being willing to step toward conflict taught me simple but profound life lessons. Anger is natural, it’s usually driven by ego, and we’re not “wrong” or “bad” for feeling it; but we can certainly face regrettable consequences when we react to it impulsively. Perhaps the most awakening truth about the emotion of anger I’ve discovered is this: Regardless of how overwhelming anger ever feels or how scary

conflict ever gets, *it will eventually pass*. In facing the conflict in my own life, I learned a great deal about myself, and the more I learned about me, the more effective I became at handling the anger I experienced. Eventually, I became effective at handling other people's anger, as well.

Now think about the guesses you made regarding the two experiences that shaped the direction I took. Were your guesses accurate? How on point were your assumptions? More importantly, after reading about my experiences, has your mind raced to convince you that what you thought was "pretty much" what I said? In other words, did you try to fit the answers I gave into what you thought they would be?

The way you respond to information that you didn't see coming says a lot about where you are in the process of personal growth. The more open you are to taking in new information, the closer you are to handling anger and conflict well. Conversely, the more your ego works to make the world fit into what you already know, the more prone you are to defensiveness and anger.

Being willing to face conflict effectively takes knowledge, self-awareness, and practice. The more you know about yourself and about how to handle highly charged situations, the more confident you'll be in handling them without allowing your own energy to be changed by them. This book will give you the keys to self-awareness, the knowledge for handling conflict, and the specific methodology to practice to get you to where you want to be.

Intelligence is knowing information, but wisdom is practicing it. It's great to understand intellectually that attachment to ego is at the heart of many episodes of anger and conflict. But being aware of what triggers your ego and understanding how to set your ego aside take effort. If you are attached to needing others to think, believe, or behave in the ways you expect (or demand), you will struggle to resolve conflict. In fact, the extent to which you are attached to needing things to be the way you demand them to be is directly correlated with how much anger you will experience.

As you will discover in this book, the Buddha's teachings have had a deep impact in my life and are interwoven throughout my approach. For example, in the Buddha's famous Fire Sermon, he talked about all



things being on fire. The sermon can seem strange—here is a peaceful figure describing such burning and chaos—until you understand that the fire he described is *change*. Seeing the “fire of anger” in the context of change taught me to walk directly through it without being afraid and without being burned, because the profound truth I learned was that *all anger, all conflict, and in fact all emotional experiences have a beginning, a middle, and an end*. They will inevitably change. Once I understood on the deepest level the true temporary nature of anger, I was significantly empowered to avoid making impulsive decisions in the beginning or middle of tough emotional experiences that I knew would ultimately come to an end.

You, like me, will experience anger in your life. You will also encounter others who are angry. You are the only person in your life you will always live with, and you are the only person you can ever control in any interaction you ever have. The more you understand what leads to what in the story of anger and the concept of nonattachment, as well as the temporary nature of emotions, the better you will understand yourself, and the more open you will be to learning exactly what you need to do to walk directly through anger. In this book, I lay out the methodology for how you can do that.

## **The Origin and Substance of Yield Theory**

I created Yield Theory as my approach to psychotherapy twenty years ago. I’ve used it as a guiding force from which I have interacted with widely diverse clients: individuals struggling with the normal emotions of life, people dealing with very serious mental health issues, families suffering from interpersonal chaos, couples learning how to communicate, adolescents toiling with their ever-present angst, elite athletes competing on the world stage, celebrities coping with too much attention, men and women struggling with issues of intense anger, everyday people suffering in the throes of addiction, and some of the most violent criminals on the planet facing the consequences of their actions. My therapy work has taken me from the comfortable Zen setting of my private practice to national television shows to the deepest regions of solitary confinement in maximum-security prisons.

I have seen thousands of clients, practiced more than 20,000 hours of clinical therapy, run a mental health organization, cofounded a center for people convicted of violent crimes, and taught as a tenured professor at a major university. In everything I've done, Yield Theory has guided me, helping me to counsel, teach, communicate, and cope with experiences I've had.

Yield Theory is a powerful philosophy and an evidenced-based approach to change. It is also a way of life. It is not a panacea by any means, but it is a revolutionary model from which you can learn how to interact with others on a deep level and induce change in a quick, effective way. It can help you connect with people who are resistant to change, and it can guide you through successful ways to handle any conflict. Yield Theory has been demonstrated to work as a de-escalation tool to help even highly resistant inmates classified as the most violent in maximum-security institutions make a statistically significant reduction in their violent outbursts, so imagine how effectively it can help you connect with others and deal with conflict in your own world.

Although it's true that you cannot change others, only yourself, it's also true that you can have an impact. The key to affecting others in a way that ignites a change in them begins with you meeting people where they are, not where you think they "should" be. Unfortunately, the following Zen parable paints a fairly accurate picture of the way most people tend to hope to spark change in others.

► A fool once stood at the top of a mountain. Looking down, he saw that all the other people were at the bottom. He wanted the others to be standing next to him, and he began to get angry. He yelled and screamed at the people to stop going the wrong way, and he shouted over and over that they should be next to him on the mountaintop. But no matter how angry he got, the fact remained that the others were at the bottom of the mountain. They were too far away to hear even a syllable of anything he said. ◀

Often we read stories such as these and believe that the foolish protagonist is someone "out there." We don't realize that at times we also embody the very same characteristics. Everyone who has ever

espoused an angry opinion on social media or in an Internet comment section has been, in that moment, the fool on the mountaintop. More close to home, consider how many times you've wanted others to change so badly that you found yourself preaching *at* them rather than talking with them. "Yes, but it comes from a place of love," you say, and of course it might; but that doesn't change the fact that if you speak *at* others instead of *with* them, you will likely not be heard. If you want others at the bottom of the proverbial mountain to hear you, then it's on you to have the self-discipline to leave the place where you are, climb down the mountain, and meet them where they are. "Yes, but I shouldn't have to do that all the time," you say, and that's a perfectly normal thought to have; but in the moments when you think that, you are most precisely like the man at the top of the mountain yelling down to others.

Going down to the bottom of the mountain creates the opportunity for you to address conflict directly and at its source, instead of staying far away from it, doing nothing effective about it, and hoping it magically changes.

In the following pages, you will learn about yourself, anger, and how you can handle conflict in the most effective way possible. You will learn how to lead with compassion and humility in order to bypass people's defensiveness and how to communicate in ways that get through to them, regardless of their emotional state. The methodology isn't complex, but it does require effort to practice. The more you practice it, the better you'll get at it, until eventually it will become a natural way of interacting for you.

Knowing how to yield is strength.

LAO TZU



## **Yield Theory**

### Compassion as the Cornerstone of Communication

Twenty years of clinical experience have taught me that the world boils down to two kinds of people: people with issues and dead people. That means if you are currently alive, then you, like me, have issues. It means that everyone with whom you interact also has issues. And when issues collide, conflict arises. Conflict is a natural and frequent part of human interaction, yet for the most part, people seem to struggle immensely with how to handle it. In this book, I share with you the approach I created to help connect with others and walk directly through anger and conflict, which I call *Yield Theory*. Yield Theory gives you the tools to lead with compassion so that you can effectively get around other people's defense mechanisms and communicate with them in ways that are heard, regardless of what emotional state they're in when you interact. It teaches you to connect with others quickly and get to a deep place with them much faster than you ever thought possible.

It all begins with you learning about you, because you cannot escape living with yourself, and you are the only person over whom you will ever have complete control. I understand the term “Yield Theory” can sound technical or dry and academic. To the contrary: Whereas Yield Theory is a systematic and empirical methodology based on years of research and practice, it is also a practical, accessible approach to changing how you handle the conflict that you will inevitably encounter in life. Using Yield Theory’s three-step model, stories about real people from my clinical experience, the ancient wisdom of Zen tales, and our latest scientific understanding of the brain, I’ll share with you how you can change the way you communicate and handle conflict in every part of your life.

Yielding isn’t about giving angry people everything they want; it’s about meeting people where they are, setting your ego aside, and following others into the depths of who they are. As the father of Taoism, Lao Tzu, once said, “If you want to lead others, you have to learn how to follow.” Since individuals alone hold the key to the door to their vast, inner, subjective selves, the only way through the minds of others is to follow their lead. To do so entails strength. Yielding does not in any way equate with giving in or condoning unwanted behavior, but it does involve having the confidence to recognize and own what you do not and cannot know, and it most definitely requires having the courage to fully let go of the things that you cannot control.

Everyone has issues, and everyone experiences anger to some degree. You do. I do. We all do. Learning to deal effectively with your own anger is a prerequisite to your being able to help guide others through theirs. So, yes, Yield Theory is a method of handling the conflict you encounter, but it is first and foremost a tool for you to handle your own anger. Of all the strategies that don’t work in anger and conflict management, people not being able to demonstrate that they live their message tops the list. The self-righteous perspective of “Do what I say, not what I do” offers little help to others, especially those who are angry. It’s like whispering instructions to people a mile away—they simply won’t hear it.

Being heard requires listeners who are ready to hear, and whether individually or in a group, angry audiences with a lot to say do not make ideal listeners. Communicating clearly and effectively in the heat

of conflict can feel overwhelming, but by showing you how to meet people where they are, merge with them in the energetic direction they are already going, and then lead them away from their rage, Yield Theory offers you a clear methodology of hope in the face of the seemingly impassable barriers of conflict and anger.

## **Compassion at the Core**

The Buddha taught that anger will never be overcome by anger—only by love alone. But how can you actually overcome anger with love? When I was young, I heard the metaphor about not judging others until you’ve walked a mile in their shoes, and that thought resonated with me. As I developed Yield Theory, however, I began to realize that walking a mile in someone else’s shoes is not enough to enable me to truly understand another person. I asked myself this question: What if I lived every single day as that person? The more I thought about it, the more I realized that it would be logically impossible to say that, had I lived as others, I might have made different decisions. In other words, if I had other people’s cognitive abilities, affective range, and life experiences, I believe I would have made every single decision they made. Of course, there really can be no proof one way or the other, but I found that subscribing to this idea helped me wipe away my judgment of people, be fully present with them, and consistently lead with compassion. Genuinely trying to see the world through other people’s eyes is how I believe that we can overcome anger with love.

Compassion, then, is the foundation of Yield Theory. You might think it strange that someone who specializes in working with people convicted of violent crimes would be so passionate about leading with compassion. The following true story might give you a better sense of the perspective I have regarding both why I believe people hurt each other in conflict and why I believe that compassion is so important.

## **The Labyrinth: Why People Hurt Each Other**

When my daughter, Kaia, was in second grade, she came home upset because another girl in her class had said something mean to her. Kaia