

**A Framework for Having Conversations
That Build Bridges, Strengthen Relationships,
and Set Clear Boundaries**

LET'S TALK ABOUT RACE

(AND OTHER HARD THINGS)

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Chapter 1

Where Does Compassionate Dialogue™ Come from, and Why Do We Need It Now?

My first year of college in Arizona, I'd just turned eighteen. Some friends and I were driving from a bar in Casa Grande back to their apartment in the same town. I was in the back seat and the only Black person in the car; the other three were young White men in their twenties, and I was trying to date one of them. You can remember being eighteen and infatuated, right? Anyway, on the way, the two in the front seat stopped at a Circle K convenience store to get some beer. They knew the cashier and decided they didn't like her attitude that night, so they took the doormat on the way out as a prank and teased her about it.

This evening sounds like a typical college experience, but it took a turn that changed the course of my life.

Even though the clerk knew these young men, she got angry, called the police, and said they'd stolen from the store. They were honestly just playing a joke on her and planned to bring the mat back the next day, since they lived nearby. At that point, though, the situation spun out of their control. The police pulled us over, searched the car, found a roach from a joint in the ashtray, and arrested all four of us.

Mind you, I'd never been in the car with this group before, but now I was getting arrested for their small amount of drugs I'd known nothing about. As the only woman, the police took me to a different facility and strip-searched me. I found out later the three guys got searched, but they didn't have to take off their clothes.

We stayed in jail overnight, where I spent the whole time crying in fear, while my friend tried to calm me by talking to me through the vent in his cell. The next day, we each met individually with the judge. The judge asked the driver for his plea to the charges, and he said he pleaded guilty, but the two of us in the back seat should not face charges because we were just getting a ride home. We didn't even know about the stolen mat until the police pulled us over. The judge said the driver would get a weekend in the state penitentiary, to which he replied, "Then I'm changing my plea. I'm not guilty and not going to the state pen for a prank. I'll get a lawyer." The judge set his bail at \$175.

The passenger in the front seat pleaded guilty, not to the drugs but to taking the mat, and reiterated that the two of us in the back should not be charged. He got sentenced to a weekend in the penitentiary. He was nice guy from Texas (but I got the impression it was not his first tangle with law enforcement), so he didn't argue. He said it was just a joke but that he would take his sentence because he did take the rug.

The young man I was interested in explained he'd had no idea what was going on until the police pulled us over, because he was just getting a ride home. He pleaded not guilty to everything, and the judge released him on his own recognizance, with no bail.

I also pleaded not guilty and explained I was only getting a lift home because the friend I'd gone with had left me without a ride. I said I didn't know about the theft and didn't do drugs. The judge set my bail at \$275. My saving grace was the guy I was infatuated with being let out on his own recognizance, because when he got out, he drove to my college, found my roommate, who then found a teacher who agreed to post my bail, even though she'd never met me. She simply understood I had to get out of there.

Picking My Battle

I called my dad, who encouraged me to come home. I couldn't, though, because then I couldn't play volleyball, which paid my tuition and allowed me to attend college. My dad didn't raise me, and we had just met a couple years before, as adults. Even so, he sent me

the money to pay for the bail and hired me a lawyer. The lawyer didn't want to settle because he said my case was obviously a false arrest. He actually wanted me to countersue.

But I was eighteen and scared, so I declined to fight and signed a covenant saying I wouldn't later sue the state of Arizona for false arrest. The lawyer strongly advised against it, because he said I'd been treated unfairly and there was obvious bias in the way the judge set my bail so much higher than the others'. My dad told me not to worry, though, and supported me in picking my battles.

My entire life, I've regretted that decision—not because I missed out on a financial reward but because it allowed a system to continue to victimize people like me. Had I been outspoken and put pressure on the system, I could have made a positive impact. I could have refused to let the issue go and exposed the inherent racism in our different treatment.

I think about that fork in the road and my choice all the time. In fact, it influences the decisions I make today. Sometimes I don't want to stand up and don't have the energy, but I know my actions don't just affect me. All of our actions have rippling effects, and people down the road can and will benefit from what I do right now.

Unequal Outcomes

I settled, and the friend who pleaded guilty spent two days in the state penitentiary. The other two had to go back to court, so I went to support them. A different judge heard their case, and they again explained the mat had just been a prank. The cashier had been angry and taken out her feelings on them, but the situation had spiraled out of proportion. They said they would never steal from a store they lived right next to and visited all the time.

The judge said he couldn't care less about the mat from the Circle K, but he wanted the officer to identify the quantity of drugs involved—a dime bag, a pound, a kilo? The officer said, "Well, it was a roach." The judge was incredulous. He said, "You arrested four people using taxpayer money and put them in jail overnight for a *roach*?" He threw the case out and reprimanded the police officers.

The two men felt relieved to have the charges dropped, because they were in graduate school for aeronautics and couldn't have a criminal record. I, on the other hand, had already spent money I didn't have and shouldn't have had to simply because I felt like I had no other recourse. I was too young and scared to fight what felt like an uphill battle against unequal treatment.

The female officer who strip-searched me seemed extremely harsh. In the moment when I was separated from my friends, I didn't consider that I was receiving different treatment and basically assumed the same was happening to them. Later, when we compared notes, I saw the disparity. I didn't experience brutality or endure slurs, but the difference in treatment could only be attributed to being a Black girl with White guys in an area that did not condone the mixing of races. I was in shock. I could not believe I was being arrested when I'd never been in any kind of trouble. By being in the wrong place at the wrong time, I found myself thrown in a jail cell with criminals. Later, I saw the racial element as well.

This experience represented an inflection point for me, when I realized I would be an advocate for civil rights. I didn't yet know I would become an educator. My treatment forced me to face how much inequality people endure every day. In hindsight...I got off light.

Finding My Calling in Europe

After finishing my first year in Arizona, I applied to a couple of universities in California and received a full scholarship to pursue my undergraduate degree at United States International University in San Diego, an international school with additional campuses in Kenya, Mexico, England, and Japan. Students could transfer their credits to any of the affiliated campuses, which allowed us to travel the world with all our school expenses being paid. This appealed to me for many reasons: one, I could continue my education because the experience in AZ almost threw a wrench in my ability to get another athletic scholarship; and two, I had (have) a bit of wanderlust. The thought of having access to the world in a way that I never thought would be possible due to our financial situation growing up was exciting.

My mother left when I was eleven and moved to Europe. It was traumatic for all of us, and it left me with a lot of anger toward her. One thing I realized early on, however, was that living with that kind of anger toward my mom was not healthy for me, so I decided to spend half of my sophomore and junior years of college in England to be closer to her and get to know her better. I wanted to understand why she left and figure out a way to mend our relationship. During my senior year, I got offered a job to coach softball and volleyball at the England campus in exchange for paying for my master's when I graduated, so I moved to England full-time in 1988 to pursue a degree in social work.

I've always been very people centered and social. I'm an identical twin, but I was the outgoing one, the daredevil, the risk taker. When I went to Europe for the first time, I had ten dollars in my pocket. My brother asked what the hell I thought I was doing. I said I could be poor in San Diego or poor in England, and I was choosing England. I bought a round-trip ticket, then once I arrived, room and board were covered. At that time, the school would pick students up from the airport, so I didn't even need money for transportation. In hindsight, I'm probably lucky my parents weren't there to stop me. I never want to look back and wish I had done anything differently, so I tend to forge ahead and pay the piper if I need to later.

When I moved to England for my master's, I learned the program had been canceled due to lack of enrollment. They had sent a letter to the school in San Diego, but I'd already graduated and never received it. Since I was already there, the school offered me a choice of pursuing a master's in business administration or curriculum and instruction. Since I had no interest in business and didn't want to leave school (remember, I have wanderlust), I chose a master's in education focusing on curriculum and instruction.

After a year, I felt burned out on school and decided to take a year off. I happened to be on the cover of a volleyball magazine in England when an international coach saw it and asked if I was interested in playing pro. It was truly an answer to my prayers to be able to travel and take a break from school. So, I moved to Belgium to play pro volleyball. I was twenty-one and started getting in a little trouble drinking all the good beer in Belgium. The

team was considered a semi-pro team, comprised of two fully compensated athletes while the rest of the team received payments for practices and matches. I was one of the full-time pro athletes. We only practiced two nights a week, which left me with a little too much time on my hands. In 1990, a nearby American military base was looking for a substitute teacher, who had to be American for admittance onto the base, so I filled up some of my spare time and put my master's coursework into action by teaching kids who had been expelled from the classroom. I was essentially a detention teacher, but I loved it.

I believe if you let go of attachment to the "way" something needs to unfold or looks and are open to following where you're guided, you usually end up where you're supposed to be. I didn't fight the degree change, and then even though I'd switched to sports, I found myself back in the teaching field...or should I say, teaching found me. Maybe God or the universe was telling me something. Before those experiences, I'd never thought about being a teacher. In fact, I would have said, "Hell, no," if anyone had asked. As it turned out, though, I loved everything about it, including the kids with the greatest challenges.

The next year, the team in Belgium folded. I went back to England to finish my degree, and then I returned to California in 1992. I went into childcare work because I still thought I'd become a social worker. However, I quickly realized social workers don't have enough resources and the system is broken. I was still very committed to working with youth, especially those most marginalized and at risk for school failure. So, through a series of lucky interactions, I discovered the Juvenile Court and Community Schools. I knew that it was, in fact, the educational side of this work that I was being called to do. That year I worked as a childcare worker, which gave me time to go back to school at night to get my teaching credential.

When I think about why I ended up working with children, my family dynamics definitely had an impact on me, but my desire to help people predated my mom leaving. I had the most amazing foundation growing up in West Hollywood, including consistent friendships from early childhood through graduating from high school. I understood community and appreciated how we took care of each other. My upbringing in a close-knit neighborhood

taught me to look out for my community like family. I wanted to bring that sensibility to my work, and more importantly, to the kids I hoped to serve. I would spend the next ten years teaching some of the most amazing students I could ever hope to work with. On some level I think they taught me more than I taught them, but the most important lesson was understanding the value and importance of building relationships first and foremost in the teaching and learning process.

“Non-ness” Lights the Fire

Eventually, I became a professor at California State University–San Marcos, and presenting published papers at conferences was one of the requirements for earning tenure. I was slated to co-present with a colleague at the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) conference, and we were brainstorming about the topic.

My co-presenter, Jennifer, described seeing signs at a hiring event upon entering a County Office of Education shortly after she retired from being a district superintendent. One said, “Certificated Applications,” with an arrow pointing one way, and the other said something to the effect of “Nonessential Personnel.” She was shocked and commented on the language being used to recruit district employees. We really just couldn’t believe a district could hire someone full-time for the benefit of the students but label the work “nonessential.”

We talked about that language mindset, and I said it’s “*non-ness*,” like being “non-White” or a “non-English speaker.” People of color are constantly defined by what we’re *not*, instead of what we are. This approach comes from a deficit mindset that holds that those outside of the narrow White normative norms are somehow deficient. I become non-White instead of being Black. Those two labels differ greatly. Instead of identifying people by their support roles as bus drivers or cafeteria workers, they’re “nonessential personnel.” So, we created a training called the “Tragedy of Non-ness,” which is, of course, a made-up word for a real phenomenon. The training goes a long way in encouraging a person to become more aware, through the play on words, of the language being used.

The dynamic is so insidious we don't even recognize it's happening, but there's a detrimental impact to constantly wearing labels based on what you're not. Jennifer and I created the presentation and wanted to consider how to interrupt such language patterns. We talked through it and realized you have to recognize there's a problem, then you have to interrupt it, and then you have to repair it. The repair piece was important, because it takes significant effort to stay engaged after a confrontation, while recognizing and interrupting come more naturally. The audience responded so well to the presentation that the conference invited us back the next year to do a full-day training, which meant we had to flesh out the content and drill down into exactly what the work would mean.

That conference marked the birth of the Recognize-Repair-Interrupt (RIR) Protocol. It wasn't called Compassionate Dialogue™ at that time, just the RIR. We never progressed much beyond the training, but after a couple of years, I realized I'd started to live it. I practiced it myself in my everyday life. I approached Jennifer and said I wanted to develop the program further, and she gave me her blessing.

I had to ask myself what the framework would look like and how I conceived of the goal of the RIR. Most broadly, I wanted people to have tools to compassionately communicate with each other. That's why I trademarked Compassionate Dialogue™ and started clarifying how it could look as a tool.

I've been using the RIR Protocol for about fifteen years at the time of this writing, and the past nine represent some of the most in-depth work on its development. Then, when I co-founded Epoch Education, it became one of our pillars. I started the organization because I wanted to make a difference without the constraints of having to try to do so through someone else's vision that may or may not fully align with my own.

Resolution and Self-Care

Compassionate Dialogue™ is ultimately about grace. If someone doesn't want to engage with me anymore and can't get past an issue, it doesn't matter whether they know or use

the RIR Protocol. I know it, and I live it. I can find a resolution for myself and move on in a healthy way consistent with my values.

One of the biggest benefits of the RIR Protocol is self-care. It offers a way to take care of ourselves and set boundaries regarding how we engage with people and what we allow in our lives. If someone violates those boundaries, we have this process to help us clear the air and move forward. Part of why people are so disgruntled with each other is because they're waiting for the other person to either apologize or forgive them. If the other person can't or won't deliver that closure, then how can we move forward anyway, through forgiving them or ourselves?

Ideally, both parties would participate in the RIR process, but the beauty of using the RIR Protocol is you don't *need* the other person to be a part of that equation. You can't make someone engage with you, but you can always take responsibility for resolving the situation yourself. If you don't, you'll continue to carry that baggage around. Nearly all of us can think of one or two things from the distant past that still stick with us and we wish we'd handled differently. Those memories linger because they're unresolved.

Staying grounded in the RIR Protocol promotes self-regulation, which leads to self-care. If I can use the RIR Protocol and regulate myself, my choice of words, and how I choose to engage, then others don't control my feelings or my actions and trigger me. Suddenly I have the ability to care for myself and make my own choices. External factors don't steer my life, and I can decide whether and when to engage.

I've messed up more than my share, I assure you. Most of my mistakes don't weigh on my conscience, though, because I've been able to resolve them through the RIR. It doesn't matter how long ago you made a mistake, whether you were an adult or a child, whether two days ago or twenty years ago. If you're still thinking about it, it's unresolved. There is some form of regret, shame, or other unprocessed feeling. How many of us in the world are still carrying things that are actually long gone? Wouldn't it be nice to finally set them down?

Stronger Relationships

Collectively, by using Compassionate Dialogue™ within our organizations and groups, we begin to build trust, safety, and belonging. The RIR Protocol allows us to honor each other and meet people where they are, without expectations about where we want them to be. We're having an honest dialogue.

When you build that trust, safety, and belonging, you promote sustainability and consistency. I don't have to worry about how we'll communicate with each other when you see me. I don't have to fear abandonment if I do something wrong. Together, we establish a new norm. It's sustainable because people feel valued and appreciate that they're being heard.

As a result, we can truly, authentically engage with each other. More importantly, we can fail and learn from that failure without being condemned. So many people are unwilling to take risks, because they feel like if they make a mistake, they'll be condemned. However, if we use the RIR Protocol and meet people where they are, we start to create a safe climate and culture that encourages both risk-taking and feedback. We become used to giving and receiving input.

Receiving feedback is more difficult than giving it, because we are so unaccustomed to people critiquing us. A shortcoming of our PC culture is we don't give people honest feedback anymore. The reason we talk *about* people is because we don't talk *to* them. If I give you the feedback you need, there's no reason for me to go behind your back and say what a horrible job you're doing. That direct communication benefits everyone collectively.

The new culture builds empathy and understanding, while allowing us to set boundaries and expectations. We collectively develop a responsible way of engaging with each other that yields stronger and healthier communication dynamics and ultimately, relationships.

Individual Growth

As an individual, I use the RIR Protocol to help stay grounded and centered in difficult conversations. It's my North Star. Instead of reacting, I can respond thoughtfully, because I'm conscious of what's happening in my body. I drive the conversation instead of letting my body take over and follow whatever impulses it wants to. Remember, I am a Sagittarian and a Fire Horse...unchecked impulses are *NEVER* pretty for me!

It's important to understand that using the RIR Protocol doesn't magically make the rage disappear. However, instead of the rage controlling us, we control the rage because we're grounded.

The RIR also helps me manage my expectations of others. Usually when we enter difficult conversations, even though we say we're not trying to change people, we really are. When I use the RIR Protocol, though, I'm sincerely not trying to change you. It reduces my expectations that you'll change to my perspective or be different. My only expectation is that we hear each other, which prevents setting myself and the conversation up for failure. If I think you're supposed to change because you've heard my story and then you don't, I'll be angry for a whole new reason—because you didn't meet my expectation.

The RIR Protocol also provides guidance for why we're having a conversation in the first place. When we talk about Compassionate Dialogue™, we always ask, "Why are you interrupting?" It's essential to think about the "why." In typical, ungrounded conversations, we interrupt someone or something to make a point. We want to shame or blame the other person or prove them wrong. Coming from a more centered, compassionate place, the reason becomes to truly understand the other person and move forward. The why becomes clear, and it focuses on connection rather than a power struggle. We can feel passionate about an issue without trying to control others.

There are times when the slight, or "thing," is just too much, and honestly, I am too tired to try to understand. In these situations when I experience what I call "race fatigue," I try not to interrupt. If I'm enraged, the interruption would be pointless. If I can't come from a place of seeking to understand, then it is simply better not to engage. Engaging with the wrong

motivation would set me (us) up for failure—or, worse, could actually degrade into a dangerous situation. Sometimes choosing not to engage is necessary, because it's better than reacting, cussing someone out, and still not being closer to a resolution. However, the key word here is “choosing,” which in and of itself is empowering. So regardless of whether I choose to interrupt or disengage, the RIR Protocol brings a level of consciousness that allows me to control my actions rather than letting my actions control me.

As a result, the RIR Protocol increases our efficacy as individuals. If we follow the steps, our communication is far more effective than if we don't. It creates more space for connection, because if I try to meet you where you are and seek to understand, then we'll more likely hear each other and meet in the middle.

The Pursuit

I recently conducted a training with a group of women. A White woman in her seventies described being in the post office in Glen Ellen, California, after President Biden's inauguration, and seeing a younger woman walk in wearing a MAGA hat and MAGA shirt. The woman from my training said, in a joking (rather than threatening) way, “You're brave wearing that in here.” She knew the younger woman was a fish out of water in this community. They ended up having an amazing dialogue, and in the end, the young woman thanked her for being the first person to talk to her and try to understand where she was coming from rather than just flipping her off. They didn't change each other's minds about MAGA, but they both left feeling more connected. They saw each other as people instead of simply behaviors they didn't like.

Author and lecturer Dr. Gholdnesca Muhammed shared an idea that deeply resonates with me. Historically, Black literary groups from the 1800s always talked about the pursuit of education. (Why we don't know about these groups today is for another conversation.) Today, we talk about it as a standard. When education is a pursuit, the only goal is to learn more. When we're in a tough conversation, if I seek to understand you, I'm actually pursuing personal growth. By contrast, it's very egocentric for us to think we have all the

answers and already know everything we need to know. I don't know your lived experiences. You don't know mine. And the way we find out about those experiences is through interacting and through pursuit.

Even if, on the surface, we appear to hold different beliefs, the more we talk, the more we'll find similarities. Through connection, we can bridge those differences, because our similarities are so strong. If my goal in Compassionate Dialogue™ is to seek to understand you, then I'm broadening my perspective. I won't necessarily change my mind, but I'll gain a level of understanding and empathy that I would not have had if I'd simply focused on your MAGA hat. If I focus on the hat, I can easily decide you're not my kind of person—but is that really true?

Why Now?

My sense of urgency in sharing compassionate communication techniques and the RIR Protocol in particular stems from watching the trajectory of our country. With each passing year, we become more and more divided, primarily as a nation but also globally. At the same time, our society as a whole continues to become more diverse. As we interact with more diversity, how can we have compassionate conversations? If we don't figure out how to resolve our differences and divisions, we risk destroying ourselves.

Political correctness has had some harmful effects, but not the ones its critics on the right tend to mention. Rather, I think a consequence of political correctness is that people have stopped talking to each other about issues that matter. Traditionally in polite conversation, you don't talk about religion, race, or politics. However, avoiding those subjects in public doesn't change the fact that they represent significant identities that matter to most of us.

Stifling the conversation makes us more and more isolated, and we don't know what to do because we don't practice having tough conversations. When we do get into them, we don't know how to engage with each other. Big portions of our lives become mysteries to people we care about because we get in the habit of compartmentalizing. Someone wrote to me

and said a friend posted a picture of a politician's severed head on her social media, and she told me she was going to unfriend her. I said that approach is part of the problem. She may not change her friend's mind, but it's important to have a conversation about what the post means to her based on the value of that relationship.

The alternative is cancel culture, in which she might cut her friend out of her life without ever telling her why. What's the point? In that scenario, the woman who was angry would continue suffering from her anger, but the canceled friend wouldn't even know she was mad. Having an open conversation, on the other hand, about her perspective and why the behavior is hurtful, could lead to positive change. If it doesn't, then she could say, "I really can't condone that behavior. I wish you the best. I send you blessings, but we can't engage anymore." That conversation offers a mature way to end a relationship, with mutual respect and acknowledgment. It doesn't have to be disrespectful.

Political correctness combined with fear of conflict leads us not to say what we really mean. That lack of conversation doesn't actually change what we believe, though. I lived in Myrtle Beach for six months, and it was very clear who liked me and who didn't. Having been raised in Southern California, I have been weaned on a certain level of fakeness, where people are nice to your face then talk behind your back. But being in the South was actually refreshing; I appreciated not having to guess. People didn't pretend I was okay to my face and then talk about me behind my back or sabotage my efforts.

Transforming Anger

I advocate having more open conversations about hard subjects. Calling out has a place, but it's for extreme situations, not everyday interactions. After the riots of January 6, 2021, I wrote a blog post and included pictures. I was calling out the rioters in a productive way. I wanted to invite Americans to look at ourselves and consider who we are and who we want to be. My point wasn't simply to label people as extremists. I do feel that way about them—don't get me wrong. Part of me is angry and frustrated by the response but dwelling in that place doesn't achieve anything positive.

For me, the RIR Protocol takes the anger living inside of me, and instead of letting it eat me up and change me, I make it productive. Transforming it is my responsibility and the essence of the Protocol. The process doesn't prevent the initial anger, disgust, and frustration. The change comes when I choose to interrupt in a way committed to societal betterment. People who commit violence still need to be arrested and face consequences, but the goal is not just punishing the behavior. We also have to heal.

In the case of the Capitol riot, there were instances of some people involved temporarily blocking officers from more violent attacks. Those moments helped spare human life, which is good, but there also has to be accountability. An officer can feel grateful the rioters found their humanity for a moment, but also, what the hell were they doing there in the first place? The RIR Protocol holds space for that complexity, human compassion, anger, and the need for consequences.

We need to hold people accountable, but the way we go about it matters. If we want to climb out of the hole we're in, we have to figure out how to heal the hurt—because everyone who marched in Washington feels hurt, too. I can acknowledge that pain. Whether it's rational or not, I can't diminish that they are hurt. So how do we heal all of our hurt?

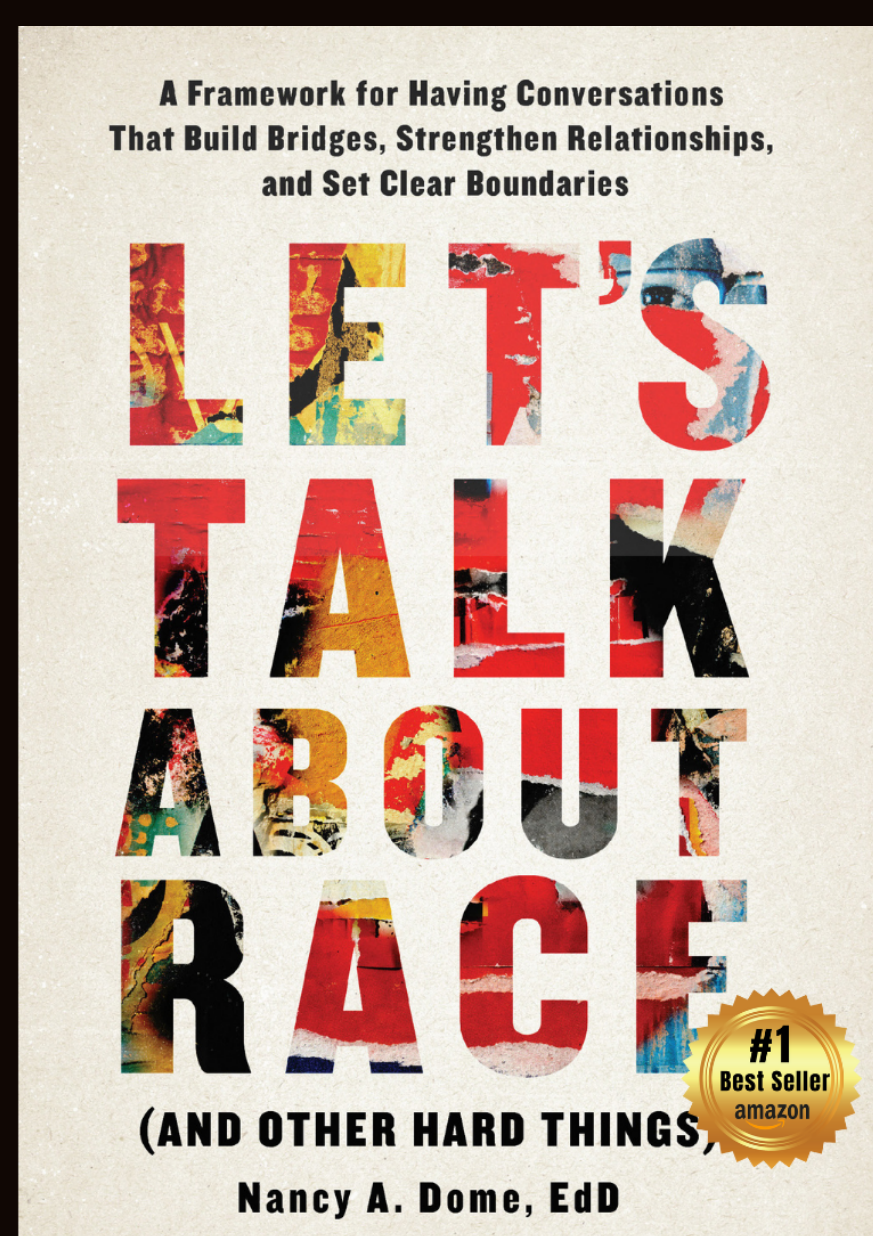
Before we get there, let's lay some contextual foundation about the different ways in which we communicate. Once we understand the different styles, we can pinpoint which one we align the most with—and, most importantly, learn how to use that information to enhance our experience using the RIR Protocol.



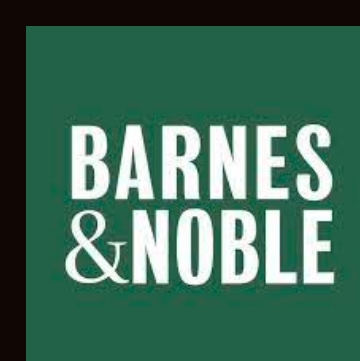
Renowned speaker, author, and equity consultant Dr. Nancy A. Dome co-founded Epoch Education in 2014 to provide leaders in education and business with accessible professional development in diversity, inclusion and belonging, and equity. As an educator for nearly three decades, Dr. Dome taught in the juvenile court and community schools teaching our most vulnerable students and has served as a Distinguished Teacher in Residence and faculty member at California State University San Marcos.

Her transformative approach helps school districts and educational agencies throughout the country navigate complex topics, build bridges, and work together for inclusive, impactful change.

For more information, visit www.drnancydome.com



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Compassionate Dialogue

JOURNEY



A WORKBOOK FOR
GROWTH AND SELF-DISCOVERY

NANCY A. DOME, Ed.D

FOREWORD

To quote my friend Dr. Nancy Dome: “This will feel like soul work because it’s supposed to.” With those words, Dr. Dome captures the true power and joy of this book. Her tireless dedication to promoting equity, inclusion, and justice has inspired countless individuals—including me—to rise up and take action towards creating a more understanding and considerate world.

Given the incredible impact she has had on my own life, it was a tremendous honor when she asked me to write the foreword for this workbook, which celebrates not only her life, but also her powerful work around issues of diversity and race. Conversations about these topics can be challenging and uncomfortable, yet they are more essential than ever in our society.

In this workbook and throughout her life, Nancy continually brings us back to one truth: when the stakes are high and emotions run strong, we have three choices. We can avoid a critical conversation and suffer the consequences later (and make no mistake: there will be consequences, both to ourselves and to those around us). We can handle the conversation poorly and suffer the consequences of doing so in the present moment. Or, we can apply the lessons and strategies in this workbook and experience an immediate and profound impact on our relationships, career, happiness, and future.

In a world where differences in opinion and perspective seem to divide us more than ever before, this work of connecting with each other, of being in community—this work that we call diversity, equity, and inclusion—might feel daunting and neverending. But it doesn’t have to be, and that’s what Nancy so brilliantly conveys in this workbook. Through real-life examples, practical techniques, and insightful reflections, Nancy illuminates the power of listening, asking questions, creating connections, and promoting understanding. In doing so, she teaches us the art of engaging in Compassionate Dialogue™, which, at its heart, is really a simple, heartfelt conversation that leaves space for us and the other person to stand in the truth of our shared humanity.

This is a timely contribution to the ongoing effort for belonging in our world, and I truly believe it will inspire all who read it to engage in the impactful conversations that are so crucial to creating a more compassionate and diverse society, while simultaneously providing the tools necessary to navigate these conversations with empathy and respect.

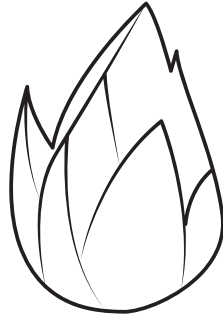
There is no time better than now to lean into this work. The world we live in has left so many of us reeling, desperate to find a way to end the senseless suffering and hatred that seems to permeate every level of society. And yet, in the midst of the suffering, there's hope: the hope that if we could just understand each other better, we could and would get along better.

Nancy's workbook makes this hope seem achievable. It makes it attainable. It makes it practical. It makes it WORK! By embracing its lessons, we learn to become part of the group tapestry that makes the phrase "liberty and justice for all" ring true.

This workbook is a testament to the transformative force that education, activism, and empathy can have on our lives and communities. It is my sincerest hope that this book not only honors my friend's life and legacy, but also serves as a call to action for us all to continue working towards a more just and equitable world, while inspiring readers to discover the profound sense of peace and compassion that lies within us all.

– With Love, Amikaeyla Gaston

Founder, The International Cultural Arts and Healing Sciences Institute (ICAHSI)
Co-Executive Director, World Trust



Module 1: What is Compassionate Dialogue, and Why Am I On This Journey?

"Compassion is for all of us—others and ourselves."

Why are you here? And why now? What is compelling you to take this journey? Did you have an incident at work? Were you profoundly affected by the latest headline, school shooting, natural disaster, display of inequity?

I ask these questions because reflecting on how and why we've arrived here can help inform our efforts moving forward.

And those efforts start with understanding a core concept: What is Compassionate Dialogue, anyway?

A Closer Look at Compassionate Dialogue

You've had a lot of terms come your way in a short amount of time, so let's revisit our definition.

Compassionate Dialogue is a way to resolve a problem or find a solution through connection and showing empathy for others and ourselves. It is a more humane, kind, and productive way to engage, disagree, heal, grow, solve problems, and move forward. So often, we get blocked by fear—fear of not saying the right thing, fear of retaliation, fear of not having the right information, fear of not knowing enough, or fear of not having the right to speak on a topic. All these barriers get in the way of effectively engaging with one another. Compassionate Dialogue removes those barriers by proposing a new way to approach these conversations—a way that says you don't have to have all the answers. Instead, you simply have to self-reflect, check in, ask questions, and commit to staying engaged.

There's a lot more to it than that, though.

Compassionate Dialogue is powerful for many reasons, not the least of which is this: the person (or people) with whom you're communicating don't have to know it for it to be effective, making it a very practical form of self-care.

Conversations or outcomes may certainly be more productive if everyone is "speaking the same language," sure—but there is beauty in the fact that such a dynamic is not necessary for you to make progress in the interaction (this is the intrapersonal piece that we'll cover soon).

On the whole, Compassionate Dialogue accomplishes the following individually:

- Keeps us **grounded and centered** during difficult conversations. When you're in a charged situation, it's easy to lose focus on the issue at hand and bring up old actions or inactions. Compassionate Dialogue provides a container to keep the conversation on track and a way to help you navigate the situation with selfawareness.
- Helps us **manage our expectations** of others. Seeking to understand someone instead of seeking to change someone helps us manage our expectations of them—and a given situation—in a monumental way. When we eliminate the expectation that whatever we say will have enough of an impact to change someone's mind and instead proceed with curiosity, not only are we

setting ourselves up not to be disappointed, but we can be more at peace with the result of the interaction—whatever that is.

- Gives us our **“Why.”** When we choose to interrupt, we know why very specifically because we’ve slowed down enough to think about it.
- Makes the **“How” more effective.** When you interrupt using Compassionate Dialogue, your “how” is more powerful because you’re communicating in a way that is not only self-regulated but that helps you be heard. While it doesn’t guarantee that you’ll be successful, it does create a discourse where we’re at least trying to hear each other and gives us a chance at success and deeper connection.
- Is a form of **self-care.** If you’re holding onto something that happened days, months, or even years ago, have you ever thought about what that is doing to your body? If you can still remember it, it is still weighing on you. Compassionate Dialogue allows you to give your body and your soul release in those moments, affording us the room to heal and take better care of ourselves. At the end of the day, being able to have difficult conversations with compassion is one of the best medicines we can prescribe for ourselves.

And the following collectively:

- Builds trust, safety, and belonging within our environments, both of which lead to **sustainability and consistency.** It’s no secret that it’s easier to have conversations that are comfortable and to communicate when there isn’t a problem. What about when neither of those are the case? It is in these situations that connections can be forged if trust and safety are present—both of which Compassionate Dialogue fosters. Compassionate Dialogue helps us build the trust muscle that says, “I am safe in this space. I can trust you, and you can trust me, even though this feels challenging right now.” If this belief is a collective and consistent one, it can grow and sustain healthy organizational cultures and personal structures such as families and friend groups.
- Provides opportunities to engage, fail, and learn without being condemned, which can lead to **new approaches.** When you’re not worried about shame or

retaliation—and when you know there truly are no such things as bad questions— you open the door for so much productivity, growth, and innovation that would have otherwise been stifled. This creates space for new ways of thinking and acting that can lead to new innovative approaches

- Builds empathy and understanding to set boundaries and expectations, which can lead to **collective responsibility**. Communicating with empathy even and especially in the face of a problem allows us to be part of the solution. Often, that solution will involve boundaries and expectations, some of which may apply to a group in order to achieve the best results. There is a problem with equating “racism” as a moral designation rather than a social or historical practice that we have the power to change. When someone does not uphold those boundaries and expectations, you then get to answer one empowering question for yourself: “There is a point where this conversation is no longer going to be effective. Where is that line?”

The Good Person/Bad Person Binary

Part of practicing Compassionate Dialogue is to rid your consciousness of binaries, at least as they relate to human beings. In a binary, there are only two options: Right or Wrong / Black or White / Good or Bad.

The truth, though, is that we are far more complex creatures than that. It’s no secret that there is beauty in the in-betweens. We often are quick to extend grace for and a willingness to step into that grayness when it comes to things like art or cultural exploration, but we don’t always give ourselves that same permission.

Take, for example, seeing yourself as a “good person.” That is, of course, an inherently positive and healthy view.

But what if, in doing so, we—even subconsciously—hold so tightly to that label that it makes us afraid to make a mistake? Afraid to ask a question for fear of saying the wrong thing?

What if, in clinging so tightly to this image of being “good people,” we’ve collectively lost our ability to dance in discomfort and be honest not only about what we know, but what we don’t? And, as a byproduct, learn from what that dance teaches us?

Part of being a “good person” is understanding that you might not know the exact right thing to say to every person or the exact right way to handle every situation, but that doesn’t take you out of the equation. Instead, those moments in between the binary are invitations to become a better person. To lead, ask, and learn with compassion, curiosity, and courage.

The inverse is true here, too: If someone says or does something that you perceive makes them a “bad person,” do you write them off? How “bad” do they have to be before you explode, retreat, or freeze? Sometimes—as we’ll discuss in depth when we cover the “Repair” in The RIR Protocol—writing off is what is best . . . but not always. There is so much room for complexity between the good person/bad person binary that we owe it to ourselves, and each other, to explore it a little more in a compassionate way.



When was the last time you avoided having a conversation (or avoided asking a question) out of fear of being perceived as less than a “good person?”

- What happened?
- How did you react, and how did that make you feel?
- When was the last time you thought someone was a “bad person?”
What happened?
- How did you react, and how did that make you feel?

Tone and Body Language

We all have different styles of communicating and different affects with which we engage with others based on our circumstances. It is not only our words that convey

how we communicate, though. So does our tone and our body language, much of which is unconscious. And while it is helpful for us to understand that we are conveying these messages, it's also important for the receiver to understand that body language and tone don't outweigh the message being conveyed. And sometimes it is incumbent upon the listener to be able to hear with different ears to get to the heart of the matter rather than getting lost in how someone sounds or what their body language is saying. When we choose to focus on tone and body language, we are actually detouring from the real issue. This doesn't mean that we have to like "how" someone is saying something, but it's important for us to understand that they may not have control in that moment. What would it be like to give grace to how that message is coming across and instead focus on the message?

If you're feeling uncomfortable with the way someone is communicating, try expressing that in a way that's productive. For example, you might say, "I'm really trying to hear you right now. It would help if we could turn down the heat a little," (or something similar). Choose a prompt that works for you and lets the other party know you're trying to hear them (without making their compliance feel like a prerequisite for being heard).



Activity: Find Your Equity Avatar

Part of making progress in your Compassionate Dialogue journey is understanding where you're starting from on the equity front, as that is the foundation upon which communities of belonging can be built. This will look different for each of us. For example, some of us have been doing the work to ensure we create belonging and inclusion in our climates and cultures for some time, and others haven't thought of what equity might look like for those who don't look like them. That's okay! What's important is the passion for this work and the willingness to keep learning as we move through it. I say "we" on purpose because I'm still learning as I go, too.

In this activity, I'll ask that you try to put an image or language to where you're at right now in your journey. This is important because it will create a baseline for how we look at growth when we revisit this activity later in the book. As you think about what to choose, give yourself grace and understanding. This might be all new to you, and that's okay.

It's also okay to personalize this in a way that is meaningful for you.

For example, the equity avatar that felt most true to me a few years ago was not a picture but a song: "More Than Words" by Extreme. When I heard the lyrics, it spoke to how I felt about equity and the DEI space in general, a space in which I've spent a significant portion of my life: this work should be so much more than words. The action is where we connect with ourselves, others, and the world.

Here's a sample response from a Compassionate Dialogue Journeyer who chose to use language as her avatar:

"There is a hymn that we sing often in our church that starts with the line 'Because I have been given much, I too must give.' This has been a mantra of mine for years now. I recognize that I am one of those blessed people that have been showered with good fortune. I'm beautiful and so have received attention and benefits throughout life that I know are a direct result of just the way I look. I was born into an upper-middle class family with plenty of material goods and have never had to want for anything. I've grown up and raised my kids in one of the wealthiest, most beautiful places in the world. I also have a lot of energy and ability and have been a hard worker, helping others, volunteering at local schools and charities.

About 20 years ago I also realized that I have a higher capacity for this kind of work than others. When my kids were young, their friends were constantly at the house—including one friend of my daughters who did not return the invitation. It would frustrate me that things seemed so 'uneven.' But then, in getting to know this friend's mother better, I learned that having another child in the house was hard for her. It required her to have a lot of mental energy, so she timed it according to when she felt like she could handle it. This was SO far from my experience of the world that I couldn't even fathom that as the reason. We all have different capabilities, and we shouldn't judge others based on what WE have or what WE can do but just accept that most everyone else is trying their best.

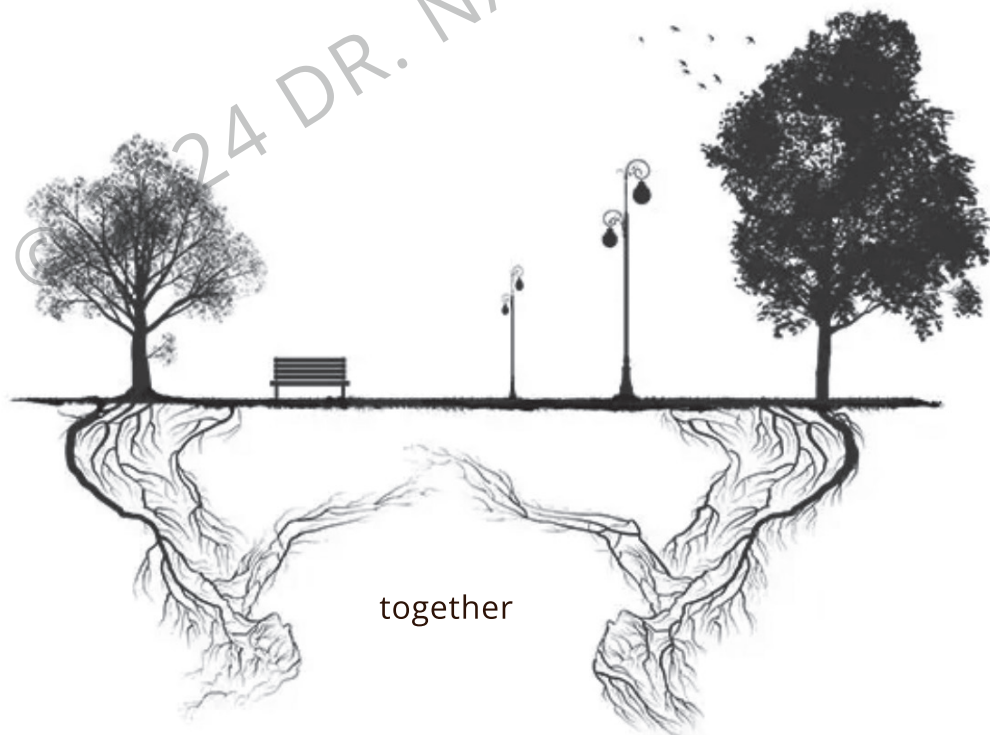
I, on the other hand, was capable of more, so it was required of me to DO more.

I can't do much to create better equity in the world, but what I can do is live with a little more grace for those around me and with the assumption that others are trying just as hard as I am. And if I am able, I should do more in order to ease the burdens of others and make their life a little easier. So many people have smoothed the way in my life to make my life easier (grandparents, parents, and husband), that when I can turn around and do that for others, I should!"

As I have continued to grow, so has my avatar. Here is my current equity avatar, to give you another example, which I found via a simple Internet search.

(Remember, while I'm giving you several options to choose from, you only need one equity avatar. Choose the format that speaks to you: a poem, a collage, a story, etc . . . whatever is the best medium to express what you're feeling in the moment when you think about this work.)

While the following image is widely-shared¹, it means a lot to me:



1. "Can the Wood-Wide Web Really Help Trees Talk to Each Other?" BBC Science Focus Magazine. Accessed January 3, 2024. <https://www.sciencefocus.com/nature/mycorrhizal-networks-wood-wide-web>.

"Like trees who share the same root system, we are but individual expressions of the greater whole. When we raise a revolution in our personal psyche, we are serving the quickening of collective consciousness."

-DREAMWORK with Toko-pa

My equity avatar has evolved over time and after so many years of doing this work and, sometimes, feeling like it has been an uphill battle, I feel like I have finally come through the other side.

I have found the simple truth that we are ALL connected and interdependent whether we want to believe it or not. So my work now is to demonstrate to the best of my ability, that simple truth."

Please understand that your avatar can evolve. My first avatar (the song) was when I was at the beginning of this work, back when I felt people were paying lip service without putting in real effort. It was two years after the murder of George Floyd, and I was frustrated and disappointed at the lack of action. Today, the tree avatar represents an evolution in my thinking: that there is still a degree of frustration, but I can be part of the solution by fostering connection and belonging. One day, I might go back to the song or choose another avatar altogether. Like ourselves as humans, our relationship to equity is ever-evolving.

Your turn! It's time to meet yourself where you are. Ask yourself honestly: Where are you in your knowledge and ability to navigate issues around equity? What is the difference between equity and equality, in your mind?



In your journal, let's explore that line of questioning a little more:

- What does equity mean to you?
- When have you experienced it? When haven't you?
- When you close your eyes and say the word to yourself, what do you feel?
- When you picture your relationship to equity, what do you see?

Next, do an online search (or browse a magazine or scan your favorite playlist) to find

one image or song that speaks to where you are right now in your own personal journey around equity. Maybe you're part of the way down a path, but the road ahead looks long and windy. Maybe it looks clear and safe, like you're almost there. Maybe you find an image of someone holding a sign and marching, or maybe you feel more like a duckling just hatching out of its shell. **Remember, you can also just write and describe your avatar like the sample above . . . whatever resonates with you the most. This is your journey!**

In your journal, cut and paste the image (or describe it) to come back to later. If you chose a song, write the part of the lyrics that most speak to you. Then, describe why this image represents your journey in your typed response. Share this with a friend or colleague, whether they're taking this journey with you or not. We'll come back to this later and see if it still resonates with you or if your image has changed.

Practice & Implementation

Let's revisit Compassionate Dialogue and what it can do for you (and others). It's time to get a little more focused with your reflections and your reasoning for taking this journey.

The following questions are designed to make you think more deeply about not only why you chose to do this work, but also how you think you'll use what you'll learn. Often, calling to mind a real-life scenario helps bring answers to the forefront.



Please answer the following in your journal, and share with any peers who are making this effort alongside you (if you have them):

- In what situations or scenarios do you hope Compassionate Dialogue can help in your life, specifically?
- Is there a situation you can readily call to mind that, upon reflecting, you feel would have ended more productively had you employed a more compassionate approach?

- What value might this bring to your day to day experience of the world, internally?
- What value might this bring to your relationships?
- What value might this bring to your organizations or systems?
- How might this impact how we engage with one another overall?

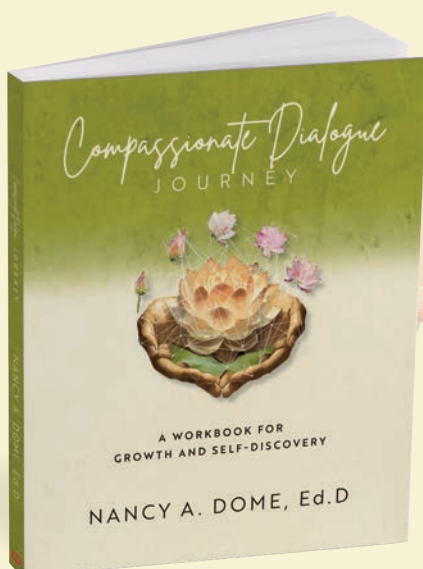
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Renowned speaker, author, and equity consultant Dr. Nancy A. Dome co-founded Epoch Education in 2014 to provide leaders in education and business with accessible professional development in diversity, inclusion and belonging, and equity. As an educator for nearly three decades, Dr. Dome taught in the juvenile court and community schools teaching our most vulnerable students and has served as a Distinguished Teacher in Residence and faculty member at California State University San Marcos.

Her transformative approach helps school districts and educational agencies throughout the country navigate complex topics, build bridges, and work together for inclusive, impactful change.

For more information, visit www.drnancydome.com



A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to be 'Nancy A. Dome'.

Dr. Nancy A. Dome