

# Learning to Harness Human Power

by Roslyn Duffy

## The Power of Nature

What is power all about? What kind of power is in nature? Sun, wind, rain — fire, air, water. Small everyday things with the potential to inspire, soothe, and heal, or the ability to ravage, destroy and crush.

A puff of air can turn into a breeze, a windstorm, or a hurricane harassing the shore. A trickle of water can become a stream, a river or a wall of death bearing down on the land. What else starts so small and packs so much power?

How is human power like nature's forces? It too can start small. A loving word. A guiding hand, a firm response. It too can swell. A slap, a wallop, a bruised heart — a broken collarbone. Human power can grow to monster dimensions as quickly as a tornado can torment the earth but with far more devastating effect.

What is behind people power? Control? Fear? Hurt? Arrogance?

A power struggle threatens between Marty and Barbara but it need not be a hurricane. Marty wants candy before dinner and Barbara, his mom, says no. Instead of puffing up to gale force, Barbara might become a gentle breeze blowing Marty's attention to helping her wash and toss the dinner salad. Marty can adjust to the breeze because he does not feel blown away by it.

Jeff wants his daughter, Molly, to do her homework. Molly wants to play Nintendo. Jeff does not need to create a tsunami. He offers Molly five minutes to finish her game before doing her homework. Molly resists.

"Five minutes is not enough. Give me at least ten," she snarls.



Ten minutes would be fine. Will she agree to turn off the game in ten minutes?

Molly sighs.

"Okay, ten."

In ten minutes, the game is still on and Jeff is back. He clicks off the playing screen. Molly yelps. Then she gets up.

"Okay. I'll do the homework."



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Mr. Smith wants his daughter, Sara, placed in a different classroom. The director, Miss Annie, explains that there is no space available. A lick of flame appears in Mr. Smith's eyes. Miss Annie does not need to fan that flame.

She says: "I understand that you'd prefer Sara to be moved to the other class. I'd like to accommodate you but I'm not sure what to do. If I move Sara to the other class, there will be too many children and no one will be well supervised."

The flame in Mr. Smith's eyes disappears with a small hiss.

"Maybe we can manage where she is for a while longer. Will she be the first to move when there is space?"

"Of course. Absolutely."

We need fire, not to scorch but for its warmth. We need water to nurture us, not to swamp us, and we need air for life, but not to take our breath away. In each of these stories, power provided warmth, guidance, and breathing space. What happened?

## Distraction

Why make it an issue?

Lily and Laura are each determined to be the first to use the new family computer. Aunt Allie holds up the Scrabble game they got for Hanukkah and asks who wants to challenge her to a match?

Either or both girls could choose to play with Aunt Allie, and if only one volunteered, the other would have the computer to herself. No further reason for Lily and Laura to exchange glares.

Marty, in the story above, could let the temptation of the candy go when the chance to spend time helping mom became available.

Why make something an issue?

## Give Choices and Honor Agreements

Choices offer power. Instead of telling someone what she must do, give choices. Giving a choice of actions allows others to feel powerful instead of powerless.

When it is time to go home from preschool at the end of the day, there is no need to get into a battle trying to make Gloria leave. Instead, ask Gloria if she wants to carry her lunch box or hold the keys so that she can unlock the car door. Gloria focuses on which task to choose and clutches the prized keys as she heads out to the car.

In Jeff's story, he didn't give a wide set of choices to his Nintendo-fixated daughter, but once she agreed to a plan, he stuck to the agreement. He stayed as gentle as a misting rain but his actions had the wake-up power of a bracing stream.

## Depose the Dictator: Ask, Don't Tell

Mrs. Jones took her class to the museum for a class trip. She made a long list of all the things she wanted the children to do and not to do and read it to them the day of the event.

It was disastrous. The children didn't hold hands with their partners, they wandered away from the group, and two of them got lost for over half an hour.

For the next outing, Mrs. Jones decides to take a different approach. She asks the students what happened when they went to the museum. They remember that Max and Joby got lost.

She then asks them what could be done to prevent problems this time. The children come up with their own plan, which ends up almost the same as Mrs. Jones previous list of do's and don'ts, but this time it is their list. The docent at the science center comments that she has never seen a better-behaved group of visiting children.

At the school mentioned previously, Miss Annie allowed the problem to become our problem. At that moment, Mr. Smith and Miss Annie moved to the same side — teammates assessing the same playing field.

## Give and Take

Bonnie and her best friend, Martha, are arguing in the dress-up corner.

"I get to be the princess and you have to be the mean witch," Bonnie says.

"No! I want to be the princess. You always get to be the princess!" Martha says.

Give and take is a simple concept that most of us use without realizing it. In order to take a privilege, we must be able to give that same or another privilege away. Bonnie can learn that, in exchange for the chance to take charge of the play decisions some of the time, she needs to give Martha a chance to do so at other times.

The principle of give and take works when a parent and teen are hassling over which radio station to listen to in the car, sisters want to choose the evening's television program or children clamor to sit on mommy or teacher's lap.

Give and take is a sharing of power or privileges. Some days the car will vibrate with mom's down-home twangs, and other times it will rock to young men crooning "Baby, Bye, Bye, Bye."

### The Power of Three

Imagine the corner of a room where two walls meet. One wall is painted white and one black. When your nose is pressed to the corner, the only choices you can see are black or white: my way or your way. The power of three gets us out of the corner.

The day begins with Harold pounding on the bathroom door demanding that Margot "Hurry up!" Other days start out with Margot hopping up and down in front of the same bathroom door screeching at Harold to "Get out NOW!"

Their mom, Annie, nearly bites her lip in two trying not to get involved. But when the din rages longer than usual one morning, Annie tells them both the bickering must end. She asks them to meet with her Saturday morning to discuss solutions. She adds that she expects each of them to come up with at least three ideas.

On Saturday, they sit around the kitchen table. Annie sets the stage by saying she does not want to hear about the sins of the other. Silence settles.

Annie asks for their ideas on how to share the bathroom each morning. Margot starts out, "Harold should shower at night." Harold jumps up and says, "Why can't Margot shower at night?" The picture is pretty black and white.

Annie asks for three new ideas from each of them. They brood. After a minute or two, they begin to talk. Margot suggests that she take her shower in Annie's bathroom. Harold wants to limit shower time to a half an hour each. More ideas emerge.

#### Distraction (why make it an issue?)

"No cookie, right now. Would you like to help me wash the salad?"

#### Give Choices

"It's time to go. Do you want to hold the keys or your lunch box?"

#### Honor Agreements

"Ten minutes is up; time for homework."

#### Depose the Dictator: Ask, Don't Tell

Involve others in planning and decisions. "What will help our field trip go smoothly?"

#### Give and Take

"You can be the princess today, and tomorrow I get to be the princess."

#### The Power of Three (get unstuck)

Think of a problem you have. Come up with three new solutions.

We don't have to cross the river at the waterfall when there is a shallow ford nearby. Look around.

In the end, they agree that Margot will be out of the shower by 6:30. She can start as early as she needs to in order to have enough time, but if she sleeps in, she will still be out by 6:30. That leaves Harold with half an hour in the bathroom, from 6:30 until 7:00. All three smile and feel pleased with the new plan.

The power of three gets people unstuck. Things look less black and white.

### Your Power

What are your struggles? Can nature help? Have you tried gentle words whispered in an ear, the healing warmth of a hug, or the perseverance of a guiding hand setting a different course?

We don't have to cross the river at the waterfall when there is a shallow ford nearby. Look around. Can you persuade instead of demand, distract instead of insist, or find an easier path instead of the steepest outcropping on the mountain? What can you do?

Power — it need not share space with struggles. Natural power can be awe-inspiring rather than horrific. When human power is propelled by love, it can be the greatest force on earth.