Imagine you are called in to negotiate a hostage situation: A man has barricaded himself and his five year old son in their home and threatens to kill the boy unless his ex-wife grants him full custody rights. You stand on the other side of the door, anxious that one wrong move could turn this whole situation into a bloodbath. At this critical moment, your most powerful tool of influence is not a gun but your ability to emotionally connect with the aggrieved father. But how do you do that as your heart races and the father rants?

Emotional competence is critical to effective hostage negotiation. It can mean the difference between cooperation and crisis, life and death. But it is also essential for police officers more broadly: even at junior levels they routinely encounter people who are under great stress. And at the extreme, a trained hostage negotiator is rarely the first responder to an emergent scene. The curriculum you are now reading presents essential insights to turn emotional competence from abstract theory into a concrete set of frameworks and tools.

I came to see the importance of emotional competence within law enforcement through collaboration with the New York Police Department’s renowned Hostage Negotiation Team. More than a decade ago, I received an unexpected email from negotiation consultant Chris Honeyman asking whether I wanted to participate in the NYPD’s premier hostage negotiation training program. Chris had negotiated per-
mission for a few academics to join in, and I jumped at the opportunity.

The training program was led by Lt. Jack Cambria, distinguished Commanding Officer of the NYPD’s Hostage Negotiation Team (2001-2015). The moment we met, he greeted me with a warm smile, firm handshake, and his trademark impeccable character, and for the next five days, I learned from him and his team about the tools of the trade. A big wooden door sat at the front of the room, and we role played crisis situations with police officers acting as hostage negotiators on one side of the door and professional actors playing hostage takers on the other.

I was captivated by the negotiation skill of Lt. Cambria and his close colleague Detective Lydia Martinez, who each maintained laser-like focus on building emotional connection with the hostage taker on the other side of the door. Nothing could shake their focus: The aggrieved party would curse, disparage them, and threaten violence, and they each responded with strength, equanimity, and compassion — to the point that the door between them and the hostage taker seemed to disappear.

Some people might label the skill of Lt. Cambria and Lydia Martinez as “empathy,” but it was so much more. Their egos disappeared as they attuned to the hostage taker’s emotional world. While an outside observer might judge the perpetrator as “crazy,” they sought to discover the logic in that person’s seemingly irrational behavior.

More recently, I received another unexpected communication, this time from Lt. Jack Cambria, whose usually strong voice quivered as he told me that Lydia had taken her own life. She was family to him and a role model for me. I was heartbroken. To this day, I do not know the details of how it happened or why, but I have come to realize that true connection is an energy-intensive activity. Lydia had a rare gift for connecting with even the most anguished soul, to the extent that it may have drained the energy from her own.
So why this book? Because the tools and activities within these pages can help young police officers and officers-in-training learn something of how hostage negotiators attune to their own emotional world and that of the hostage taker. Lydia was blessed with an unusual ability to connect, and she was able to save the lives of countless individuals through her selfless belief in the human spirit. This book reveals some of the tools that Lydia intuitively applied to connect with others.

I wish I could have just one more conversation with Lydia, to let her know the extent to which she emotionally touched the lives of so many people, mine included. This book speaks to the heart of Detective Martinez’s gift, offering a powerful program to bring people dealing with a crisis one step closer to each other, so that both justice and humanity can flourish.