Much as you might expect in a play, the active voice in this book often shifts. Yet as discussed in Chapter VIII, after extensive discussion the group agreed to define the pilot project described here as fundamentally an arts project. The experimental workshop was then organized using collaborative theatre-making techniques and principles. So the majority of this book is written in Rachel’s voice, the “I” you will often see below (except where otherwise indicated), and the core will be a description of the curriculum of the final six-week experiential learning project.

We focus on that phase of the collaboration as it is itself a summary investigation of what the entire process taught us. Interspersed amongst the sections are poems that arose from the six-week workshop, either from law-enforcement participants, or from a group of performance poets who are members of Poetic Theater in NYC and who were themselves collaborators in the project. These poems reflect on both the content and the concepts that arose throughout this collaboration.

Most of this book is a compilation of critical reflection and planned session content. The intention is to take the reader through a practical, informative and reflective journey that somewhat parallels our own. The lessons we expect to learn along the way are never as bold as the ones that arise unexpectedly. The two main concepts that arose through this
The Other Side of the Door

combination of planned content and ongoing critical reflection are the need to shift our metaphor for policing, and the impossibility of ever putting yourself in someone else’s shoes.

In order to start unpacking these two concepts a little bit, I want to tell you about a recurring experience I had for nearly two years, over encounters with a number of serving officers. I started off just meeting officers, talking to them about my work and their work, and just getting to know them in an informal way. I travel a lot for work, and at some point in a conversation, I’d mention a place I was headed to, or somewhere else I would soon be traveling. Literally every initial encounter I had with a police officer would end in an eerily similar way. A business card, or an offer of a phone number of a friend, or an email of another person whom I could contact in this place or that, would be handed over to me "just in case." "Just in case of what?" would be the thought backing up my spoken and genuine words of thanks to this officer. But the answer was clear — just in case I was ever in a jam, just in case I needed help, and needed someone to call on. The motivation for these sincerely moving overtures of caretaking from multiple individuals from multiple police forces was staggering. There is danger everywhere. The overarching world view. The world is terribly dangerous. AND.... the only thing you can trust is a personal contact. There is no system that is trustworthy. There is no force that protects us. There is nothing we can count on other than small sets of individuals. And officer after officer extended this care to me, a stranger, nobody special. They want to protect. They want to save. But the world is a big place. And individuals can only do so much. This stays with me, an experience simultaneously beautiful, touching, and terribly, terribly sad.

This experience, consistently reinforced, led me to think about the error in how we understand the idea of serving and protecting. It seems that in both directions this conjures simultaneous images of servants and warlords, an almost oxymoronic definition of the role of police. Clearly that
is deeply problematic, both for the public and for the law enforcement officers.

Jack has a few training points that he continually reinforces. One of these is that whenever role (i.e. the role law enforcement officials are expected to reveal as professionals) and voice conflict, then people, the public, will only believe the voice. When you’re serving as a law enforcement official, you are expected to play a very specific role. If your voice (or your posture or your nonverbal communication) says something that conflicts with the role you ought to be revealing as a professional, the person will believe the voice rather than the role. Implicit in this training point, and in the need to reiterate it ad infinitum, is that there is a disconnect between what law enforcement officials often think they are communicating, and what their voice and body and manner actually do communicate to the public. What then is the role of the police? It seems a new conception of this is long overdue.

As I sat with these new experiences and information I began to wonder what would happen if we could shift our understanding, and try a new metaphor. Perhaps we could instead look at our own bodies and think of our skin. Think about skin for a moment: It serves and it protects. My skin polices my body. It takes care of me. It feels for me. It keeps me protected. It lets some things in and keeps other things out. It is a part of me. How might our relationship to policing change if this were the metaphor through which we understood their “force”?

The starting assumption that often pervades sensitivity and communication trainings is that people would act differently if only they could see things from another person’s point of view. A concept that arose during our project was the realization of this as an impossibility. It implies that you can take off your perspective and slip into someone else’s. But that’s impossible. You can’t remove yourself from a situation. You can never see through someone else’s eyes. That would be like asking yourself to remove your own skin and to put on someone else’s, as a kind of suit.
What we found was that in addition to being impossible, putting focus on this goal was not liberating but rather distracting from another, related, yet substantively different opportunity that promotes the general idea of “emotional competence.” Instead of focusing on trying to be someone else, we can try to increase our own awareness of the different components of our own perspective, and our ability to manage these components in crisis. The only thing you can do is to understand all the different things that go into making up your perception of a situation, and to try to perceive the things that may be going on from another person’s perspective simultaneously.

We have to train ourselves to listen with all of our senses. We can do that. If we give it a little bit of time. And a lot of validation. The aim of the final six-week project became to begin to find a path to shifting patterns of thinking in intense, crisis oriented situations. Our challenge at the final stage of our collaboration was the question: How can we move our manner of thinking and acting from a place of rigidity to a place of fluidity?
I am human.
I have feelings.
I cry but I don’t show you.
I love with all my heart.
I will die to save you.
I protect you.
I don’t sleep.

I see what you can not see.

I am a target.

I am a friend, a husband, a brother, an uncle. I can listen I can judge I can kill.
But you see me as an oppressor an occupying army.
You see me as evil. You will never understand, but I understand you.

We are both human.