Book review

If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face? My Adventures in the Art and Science of Relating and Communicating by Alan Alda

New York, NY: Random House.
240 pp., \$28.00, hardcover.

Reviewed by Frances C. Roberts

As a teenager in the 1970s, I adored watching Alan Alda in his role as “Hawkeye” Pierce, the idealistic, antiwar doctor on *M*A*S*H*. His comic timing was perfection itself. He was nominated 21 times for Emmy Awards for that show and won 5. He also was a producer and creative consultant and helped write 19 episodes of the show. His touch seemed to be all over that amazing show.

His awards are almost too numerous to count. He won two additional Emmy Awards and received three Tony nominations. He is an inductee of the Television Hall of Fame and was nominated for an Academy Award for his role in *The Aviator*.

Turns out that Alan Alda is not only a man of the arts but a man of science, too. He is deeply involved in the scientific community. For 11 seasons, he interviewed numerous top names in science for his award-winning show on PBS called *Scientific American Frontiers* and became adept at getting them to explain their complex work so that laypeople could understand. He also founded the Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science at Stony Brook University, where he is also a visiting professor, with the purpose of graduating scientists who are also accomplished communicators. Hence his third book, *If I Understood You, Would I Have This Look on My Face?* His previous two books are memoirs, but his third book is a guide to how to be a better communicator.

Alda believes that communicating well can mean the difference between life and death.

When patients can't relate to their doctors and don't follow their orders, when engineers can't convince a town that the dam could break, when a parent can't win the trust of a child enough to warn her off a lethal drug, they can all be heading for a serious ending.

Miscommunication happens all of the time in our daily lives, and Alda shares some amusing stories of his own, including how an episode with his dentist had lasting unfortunate repercussions.

Those few minutes I spent in his chair have become a symbol for me of really, really poor communication and what causes it: disengagement from the person we hope will understand us. That disengagement can stand in the way of all kinds of happiness and success, from the world of business to the business of love.

Alda combines findings from recent scientific studies with the methods he's learned and used in improvisational theater that can help people communicate better. These include listening with our eyes, looking for clues in another's face, using the power of a compelling story, avoiding jargon, and reading another person so well that you become “in sync” with them. In essence, to order to communicate well with someone, it's vital to build empathy with them. This is the “fundamental ingredient” or real communication can't happen.

This is an important point for doctors when it comes to the health of their patients.

A meta-analysis of 127 studies on how patients react to their doctors' communication skills found that “expressing empathy and concern, providing information on the illness and its treatment, and encouraging patient participation in decision-making” made a real difference. The study found that those patients were “19 percent more likely to follow their physicians' recommendations on medication, diet, exercise, and screening than those patients whose physicians communicated poorly.”

Alda tells many stories in the book, mostly about how he learned certain information and his own attempts to improve his communication skills. Storytelling in itself is a powerful tool in communicating.

“When scientists need funding,” he writes, “or a business needs to capture the imagination of the public, or a parent just wants to impart wisdom to a child, it seems to me that the most vivid way to do it is with a good, dramatic story.”

At just under 200 pages, Alda's latest book is a quick and entertaining read and will leave you with some good nuggets of wisdom in how to communicate better both personally and professionally.

The reviewer, **Frances C. Roberts**, is a freelance writer in Leesburg, Virginia.