

PEACE STUDIES JOURNAL

Vol. 4, Issue 3
November 1, 2011

Compassionate Communication: The Power of Vulnerability

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COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION: THE POWER OF VULNERABILITY

Abstract

This essay opens with a narrative—a bit of performative writing—that evokes a particular moment of conflict and healing during a peaceful demonstration. The discussion then broadens to include the ways in which vulnerability, especially as practiced in what Marshall B. Rosenberg (2003) calls Nonviolent (or Compassionate) Communication (NVC), can be a powerful source of connection and peacemaking. The author, who studies and uses NVC in daily life and teaches a college course in Compassionate Communication, offers an overview of NVC and invites readers to learn more through exploring the list of resources provided.

1. Introduction

It is March 20, 2003, the morning after the USA begins to “shock and awe” Iraq. As I head to campus to teach, I take my cue from Jackie Kennedy. I dress deliberately: a simple black dress, a black lace shawl, which can be raised to become a veil. I get a call: “There’s going to be a ‘die-in’ today at noon outside the Student Center.” Perfect: I’m already dressed for it. Approaching the Student Center, I drape the veil over my face.

As I arrive, spontaneous sobs wrench me. Two students, young men I know, are dressed in white-paper “anti-chemical attack” suits. Others are strewn about, chalk-outlined, puddles of sticky red liquid dripping and pooling on the cold concrete. One of the “dead” quietly requests

“More blood” from another who kneels, doling out special effects with the intensity of a battlefield medic. This surreal performance is as close as I ever wish to come to war. It is horrifying. I find that suddenly I *am* the grieving widow. Thankfully, the stage is set to allow me to shudder and keen.

I make my way to a paper-suited favorite student. I cling to him and we mourn together, envisioning real bodies half a world away. To our left lies a coffin, covered in an American flag. The breeze tickles the fabric airborne. The protestors have improvised with small stone weights, but the insistent wind tugs, not beholden to convention. And then, commotion.

I see another favorite student arguing with a man I do not recognize. Their voices escalate: Who can speak for the dead? A soldier, or a soldier’s sister? I watch idly, and it crosses my mind that we all want the same thing. But my white-suited companion is uneasy, fretting, “I don’t know what to do in this situation.” “Oh,” I think, in mild surprise. “I know what to do.”

Confident in my widow’s weeds, I cross the few yards to Flag Man, and gently touch his arm. “Sir? Excuse me, sir,” I say. “We’re not trying to disrespect the flag. We just want to honor the dead.” He turns, but cannot rail at me. He is distressed at the flag touching the ground, tethered by rocks.

I invite him, “Please, help me display it properly.” But he leaves, distraught. Days later, I hear his voice outside my office and step out to meet him. I introduce myself. He admits that he had had to leave because he has seen buddies killed, and this demonstration had seemed to him a mockery. And by the way, he confides, the stars are to be positioned over the *head* of the casket. I thank him, empathize with his loss, and assure him that we intended no disrespect, but only grief. I mention my favorite bumper sticker, “You can no more win a war than you can win an earthquake.” *And he agrees.* We embrace.

This is the power of vulnerability. My male student in the white suit could not so easily have approached Flag Man. Armor is a form of weaponry. It says, “I don’t trust you. I won’t let you in.” Black lace symbolizes mourning, dignity, respectability, vulnerability. *It has holes in it.* It says “I am grieving, but I will let you see my grief. I will let you in.” And in this, paradoxically, there is strength... because it marks our possibility for connection.

Three months later, I was to discover and fall in love with Compassionate Communication, or Nonviolent Communication (NVC).¹ NVC is the name given to a process described by

¹ I began learning NVC on my own in 2003, reading and rereading books and watching videotapes of Marshall Rosenberg. NVC gradually came to impact every area of my life, and I decided to teach a class incorporating it, for the spring semester of 2007. I attended my first introductory training in September, 2006, and my first “residential” (several days, retreat-style) training in August, 2008. As of this writing, I have attended 44 days of training, most of it residential. And the class I first taught in 2007, which my chair expected might attract five students (as a one-time offering), was overflowing with 25. Now it is part of the official curriculum. I have taught it every year since then (and am currently teaching it for the 6th time). For the past few years I have also shared NVC through: volunteering at an elementary school (mostly working with students, but also teachers and parents); doing presentations on

psychologist-turned-peacemaker Marshall Rosenberg. NVC relies on ideas of nonviolent resistance and peaceful change as taught by Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jesus, Buddha, etc. Compassionate Communication, in effect, conveys upon us the power of the black lace shawl, the power of the open heart, no matter what we're wearing or not wearing.

NVC offers a way to use transparency and vulnerability to create and nurture deep connection with ourselves and others. That is its main purpose: to create connection, and thus to make compassionate giving possible and desirable. Through a basic process, we can radically change the quality of interaction, bringing emotional healing to ourselves, friends, loved ones, coworkers, acquaintances, strangers—anyone with whom we interact.

2. Philosophy

Gandhi is purported to have said, “Be the change you wish to see in the world.”² In other words, inner peace is a helpful and healing first step, a prerequisite to outer peace, as Rosenberg’s successful international peacemaking efforts have shown. There are several fundamental ideas behind NVC, all of which are articulated in Rosenberg’s (2003) *Nonviolent Communication: We all share a set of universal human needs (respect, love, independence, safety, etc.).*³ *Once we get connected to ourselves and other people, we enjoy nothing more than meeting our own needs and the needs of others.* What keeps us apart is violence (and not only physical violence, but verbal violence: judgment, blame, diagnosis and evaluation) that prevents us from recognizing and sharing how we are feeling and what we would like. However, *any act of violence is ‘merely’ a tragic (sadly misguided) expression of unmet needs, likely to serve no one well.* Being a compassionate communicator involves recognizing that needs drive the whole system, not only the “negative” things in life. *Everything we do, we do from a desire to get needs met.*⁴ (And that, in itself, is wonderful: it’s just that we have learned patterns of speech and behavior that blame, manipulate and demand. These guilt- and fear-inducing strategies, although they may appear to “work” sometimes, actually decrease the chances that others will be genuinely excited about helping us meet our needs. And when we act out of a sense of obligation, everyone pays for it, eventually.)

college campuses (to sororities, student groups, the University Women’s Professional Advancement organization, residents in dormitories, and community members); and presenting papers at the National Communication Association.

² Apparently this is disputed, attributed to him by his grandson Arun Gandhi, but denied by Brian Morton (2011) in a recent New York Times editorial.

³ I have heard international students articulate how speaking in terms of individual needs has been a challenge for them, especially when they come from a collectivist culture. But these same students have recognized the ways in which even needs for independence, that are not always valued by a particular culture, do play a strong role in their emotional lives. (One student from China testified in class last week, in fact, “NVC really is a universal language!” and reported on how her NVC practice was helping her get along with her roommates, who were themselves starting to speak about their feelings with more vulnerability. In other words, the practice can “rub off” on others, even though they are not studying NVC themselves.)

⁴ In this sense, terms like “manipulation” no longer make sense. Even the person doing the supposed “manipulating” is acting out of a desire for something important: perhaps it is wanting to contribute to someone else’s life, perhaps it is a desire to protect oneself or another from some imagined threat, and so on.

3. Implications

Needs, far from being shameful or bad, are seen as beautiful and healthy in this view. In the words of Certified NVC trainer Susan Skye (2008), needs are “universal human qualities or values that, when experienced, enhance life.” They are “what is alive in us,” as Rosenberg (2003) says. In other words, when we connect with our own feelings and needs, we answer the question “How are you?” in candid and specific ways, and we can follow up with Rosenberg’s (2003) trademark second question: “How could we make life more wonderful?” When you honestly share “what is alive in you,” you give me a precious gift, because then I have some idea of what your needs are, and how to meet them. When I empathically receive your honest expressions of what is alive in you, nothing will give me more joy than helping you find ways to meet those needs. As Rosenberg (2003) says, *we find joy in “contributing to life.”* So NVC involves *expressing honestly* and *receiving empathically*. And each can be turned *inward, to ourselves*, and *outward, to others*.⁵

4. Process

Below are the basic components of the practice. It is simple and challenging; it gets easier with practice, and the rewards are great. These are not necessarily “steps”—you do not always have to do them in this order, and sometimes you can do some, or all, silently. *Other people do not need to be practicing NVC, and may not even be aware that you are.* They may just feel relieved, and may enjoy a greater sense of support and mutual understanding than in a “regular” conversation where we try to comfort (but often make things worse) with advice, pity, reassurance or distraction.

In this process, we learn to:

- welcome (but not inflict on others) our own judging and blaming thoughts (for the clues they offer us about our feelings and needs);
- make observations without implying blame;
- identify, accept, experience and express our own feelings;
- discover, and welcome, the deeper needs that have caused those feelings;
- make clear requests of ourselves and others;
- and let go of the outcome.

We also learn to listen in this same manner, “translating” harsh language we have all learned to produce into a more compassionate “dialect” that allows our creative energy to solve problems. Rosenberg acknowledges that this is not “new,” but a systematic way of practicing what many spiritual traditions teach or recommend. (For example, what Rosenberg (2003) systematizes as “a

⁵ I do not mean to essentialize, but it is a truism that men in many Western cultures are taught not to express or even recognize most of their own feelings (apart from anger), and women are taught not to express or even recognize most of their own needs. Whether or not this is true for each individual, the point is, learning and practicing NVC presents multiple challenges for each of us. I highly recommend learning with the support of other trainers and participants whenever possible. For those with fewer financial resources, there are free downloads and a free practice group on the NVC Academy, and there is a service at the Center for Nonviolent Communication that helps locate trainers and practice groups in your area. See References for details.

dance of honesty and empathy,” other spiritual teachers represent through the “Golden Rule,” or advice to be fully “present.”)

5. Intrinsic or Extrinsic Motivation

Alfie Cohn (1993/1999) wrote an influential book called *Punished By Rewards*. Often we think that punishment and reward are opposites, like insults and compliments. But Rosenberg also sees this implicit danger even in rewards and compliments: they imply that it is OK for me to judge you. Although you may be a “good girl/boy” today, behind that approval is the suggestion that someday, if you don’t do what I want, you will be a “bad girl/boy.”

“What do you want the other person to do?” When we stop here, we may find that punishment or reward may seem “effective” tools to get the job done. But if we continue to a second question, “What do I want that other person’s reasons for doing X to be?” then NVC clearly moves away from reward and punishment. Because in NVC, we want to encourage people to do what contributes to life, to give freely from the heart, to “do only that which counts as play” (Rosenberg, 2003)—all of these are ways of saying the same thing, that *we do not want action to be motivated by fear, shame, or guilt*.

In other words, we want students to be in school because they are excited to learn new things. We want partners/friends to remain together because they meet one another’s needs for love, support, play and companionship. We want to offer our own gifts with a sense of joy in sharing with others, not from a sense of obligation that leads to resentment or depression. Sometimes it’s hard to find the joy in doing what we have thought of as “obligations,” but it’s a matter of identifying what need of ours is being met through even activities that we have not much enjoyed. Once we have identified the underlying needs, we can make our choices conscious: Do we still want to do this? Sometimes we might decide that this action is still the best way we can think of to get a particular need met, and other times we decide that it is not worth it (and then we quit doing that activity). Either way, making the choice conscious is likely to meet our needs for autonomy and self-responsibility, and thus to decrease our discomfort (such as frustration, resentment or panic at what we thought of as being “trapped”).

6. Living Compassionately

Compassionate communication is a loving process, but also a strong one. It does not mean being “permissive,” or even “compromising.” “Compromising” and “negotiating” share a connotation of giving up some of what I want, because I believe that both people’s needs cannot be met simultaneously. (NVC is a *flexible practice*; encouraging us not to get “addicted” to our preferred strategies/requests for getting our needs met.) Because another fundamental premise of nonviolent communication is that *needs do not have to conflict, and everyone’s needs are equally valuable*. Rosenberg (2003) and other NVC trainers (for example, at the NVC Training Institute, the Center for Living Compassion, the Center for Nonviolent Communication, or the NVC Academy)⁶ call this “Abundance Consciousness,” the win-win idea that there are many

⁶ In addition to attending trainings by each of these organizations, I have participated in live NVC Academy “teleclasses” and have purchased and downloaded many recordings on specialized topics such as working with

possible ways to meet any individual need. When we open ourselves to compassion (for ourselves and others), creative possibilities arise for valuing (and meeting) everyone's needs. (In contrast, most of us are well-educated in the opposite, in "Poverty (or Scarcity) Consciousness," the familiar idea that if you win, then I lose, and that the only way to solve a conflict is to find some middle ground in which we each get something, but also give something up.) NVC does not settle for compromising.

For example, your need for autonomy and my need for connection can both be met, perhaps even simultaneously. *It's the strategies that we choose to meet our needs that often conflict, and lead to friction.* If we talk about how we are feeling without making the other person "wrong" or responsible for our pain, then we are more likely to feel relaxed and trust that our needs matter. When we are willing to let go of our strategies, and are no longer trying to convince the other person that our way is the only way, we can find creative ways to get everyone's needs met. (You may choose to do something alone, and I may choose to connect with another friend, because I value both your need for freedom and my need for companionship. Or perhaps, having heard my need for connection and having experienced the relief of realizing that my request was not, in fact, a demand, you might be willing to spend time with me after all! In NVC we like to say that "shift happens.") So when we begin practicing NVC, instead of focusing on the outcome that we think we want (the strategy or request that we think will meet our needs) we focus on what NVC trainers and NVC "dance floor" creators Gina Lawrie and Bridget Belgrave call our *intention to connect*, and put our *attention in the present moment, at the heart* (ours and the other's).

Compassionate communication "works" because it is not trying to achieve a particular outcome, other than deeper connection to self and others.

This is not a persuasive technique or a secret weapon to get people to do what you want.

When you put your attention at the heart,
and listen for feelings and needs,
rather than thoughts, judgments and evaluations,
you will necessarily feel more compassionate
toward yourself and others.

Flash back to March of 2003: Had I known NVC vocabulary at the time, I might have seen myself and the soldier as achieving a tender and vulnerable connection through our willingness to express our shared needs for mourning (honoring the lives of people lost). In expressing our sorrow, we both embodied and responded to mutual longings for respect and understanding. I must admit that I initially labeled him as "Flag Man" out of a sense of frustration and sadness at not having been able to "reach him" at the rally. But days later, he was more able to receive and trust my caring intentions. In his willingness to trust me with his inner life, he became "Mike," a full and complex person, a soldier who understood that war cannot be "won," that it is a tragedy

children, mediation, etc. I can recommend each of these paths to learning and practicing NVC with the support of others.

for all involved. And in that moment, no, we did not stop the war in Iraq, but we stopped the war between one veteran and one protestor.

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