

Cultivating Compassionate Connection

During a recent webinar on Self-Empathy offered by the Center for Nonviolent Communication, Mary Mackenzie, a Certified NVC trainer, instructed participants to write down a statement about something that troubles us and to notice our physical reactions. I wrote, "I really hate it when my home is a mess and I can't find things." As I tuned in to my body, I perceived my shoulders stiffening, my jaw clenching, and tension building in my chest, arms, and stomach. Next she told us to rewrite that thought as a positive goal statement and, again, to notice our physical reactions. I wrote, "I love it when my house is neat and I can find things." I felt my shoulders and jaw relax, tension evaporate, and a surge of energy nudging me to begin creating order, one step at a time.

Next Mary instructed us to go deeper by focusing on the positive goal statement and considering what need we would meet by achieving that goal. Then we were to ask ourselves if that need were met, what deeper need would also be met, repeating the question several times until we felt we had discovered our most basic underlying need. In response, I wrote, "When my house is neat and clean and I can find things, my need to feel competent is met. And if my need for feeling competent is met, my need for self-respect is met. If my need for self-respect is met, my need for confidence is met. If my need for confidence is met, my need for safety is met. If my need for safety is met, my need for peace is met." I was amazed to find that my feelings went so deep! No wonder I feel such frustration and anxiety when my home is cluttered. Typically I used to fuss irritably and blame others for not helping more. **Deeper self-understanding enables me to stay calm, start cleaning up, and ask for help in a more positive way.**

How would you like to offer those in your congregation and your community similar opportunities to deepen their self-knowledge, connect with themselves and others more compassionately, work through conflicts in such a way that everyone's needs are met, experience inner peace, and serve as more effective peace-makers in all their spheres of influence? Recently, when invited to teach a communication class for adults in a local church, I recalled reading Marshall Rosenberg's book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*, and ordered it to use as a text, along with the companion workbook for additional ideas and exercises. As we worked our way through the thirteen chapters, week by week, I was delighted by the responses of the group and by their willingness to share their struggles to apply these teachings in their everyday lives. Although I have taught communication skills to couples for years, this was my first experience with singles and married individuals participating without their spouses in the group. The NVC concepts and materials worked perfectly.

Marshall Rosenberg developed Nonviolent Communication, a model for increasing understanding and cooperation, after a lifelong struggle to find solutions to conflict. He was motivated by childhood experiences during the 1943 Detroit race riots and by the beatings he received from classmates because he was Jewish. His Ph.D. studies in Clinical Psychology, his work with Dr. Carl Rogers, and his mediation work with families, businesses, gangs, and prisoners shaped his developing concepts. In 1984 he established the Center for Nonviolent Communication (www.cnvc.org), which now offers training workshops throughout the USA and in more than fifty other countries. The Center also provides mediation and consultation services in places of conflict around the world.

Nonviolent Communication separates experiences into four components: 1) what is actually happening; 2) what we feel about what is happening; 3) what needs we have in relationship to what is happening; and 4) what requests we want to make of ourselves or others

in order to meet those needs. Considering these four components enables us to express honestly, without judgment or criticism, what is going on within us and to receive empathically verbal or nonverbal messages from others. In order to use this process, we must let go of our evaluations and judgments and seek to connect both with our selves and with others. **We usually find that it is not events or words that cause our emotional reactions, but the thoughts we have about them that trigger feelings. Those feelings can, if we observe them carefully, lead us to an understanding of our underlying needs and help us find effective ways to meet those needs, instead of just reacting. We can use the same process to seek understanding of other persons by focusing on what they might need, instead of just judging their words and behavior.**

Although most of us require considerable practice to unlearn our old habits of evaluating and attacking others, the resulting benefits of inner peace and healthy relationships are well worth the effort. While the language of Nonviolent Communication is not overtly Christian, the teachings clearly resonate with Christian concepts and practice. Churches can provide opportunities to learn and practice Nonviolent Communication by contacting certified trainers; publicizing and promoting NVC events, including online webinars; and providing Nonviolent Communication books and resources for use by individuals or groups.

Resources for Learning and Cultivating Nonviolent Communication

CNVC.ORG – Visit this website and click on “How to Use This Site” to find scheduled training events, certified trainers, organizations, practice groups and more.

Connection: A Self-Care Approach to Conflict Management, by Bonnie R. Fraser (2010). 480-278-3702, bonnie@connectionselfcare.com. The author clearly presents the basic concepts of Marshall Rosenberg’s Nonviolent Communication model, with examples and exercises that effectively facilitate understanding and skill development. She emphasizes the importance of active self-care and self-awareness in order to improve our communication and conflict management. This text would serve well for group or individual study. Visit the website www.connectionselfcare.com for sample pages and exercises.

Non-Violent Communication: A Language of Life, (previously *A Language of Compassion*), by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D. (Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press, 1999). This clear and straight-forward text shows how to break through patterns of thinking that lead to arguments and anger and how to communicate with mutual respect and understanding. The skills (separating observation from evaluation, taking responsibility for our feelings, making requests instead of demands, and listening empathically) can enhance any relationship. A Companion Workbook available at the website provides discussion questions and exercises for individual or group study. You can also order related books addressing a variety of topics for parents, teachers, community leaders, and others. (www.nonviolentcommunication.com).

NVCTRaining.COM – This website offers both free and fee-based resources, tools, webinars, and teleconferences. Free resources include Weekly NVC Reflections, NVC Training Videos, and Online Classes. See also <http://www.nonviolentcommunication.com/aboutnvc/aboutnvc.htm>

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