

THE DAY OF THE JACKAL



FOR *SUZANNE ADEY*, TRAINING IN
NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION
HAS HAD A HEALING IMPACT
ON ALL HER RELATIONSHIPS

I was introduced to nonviolent communication (NVC) as part of a Zen Buddhist retreat in Liverpool last year. Although NVC is not affiliated to Buddhism in any direct way, the principle of cultivating compassion is common to both. After being introduced to the concept, I went on to complete the weekend foundation training, which teaches the main concepts and tools of the approach, followed by a 'Deepening the Foundation' training, which builds and develops NVC fluency.

ABOUT NVC

NVC is a process devised by Dr Marshall Rosenberg¹ that aims to reduce or resolve conflicts that occur as a result of misunderstandings during interpersonal communications. It can be applied in all areas of life, from intimate relationships with partners and family to conflict resolution between warring nations. There are several courses currently available, some referred to as 'compassionate communication'. Trainers are qualified and certified by the Center for Nonviolent Communication in the USA² after undergoing extensive training in delivering the learning.

In his book *Nonviolent communication: a language of life*, Rosenberg¹ asserts that all human beings have similar needs and that all our actions are attempts to get those needs met. However, most conflict situations arise because of our choice of language and the strategies we employ in our attempts to get our needs met; we are educated in our development of these by the systems and culture in which we grow and live. However, the strategies and language that we utilise in order to try and get our needs met are often 'suicidal'³ and counterproductive. Rosenberg goes on to state that conflict is never at the level of need, as our similarities in this area outweigh our differences, but is always at the level of strategy – the methods we employ to try and get our needs met.

In his extensive work and research over 40 years in the area of conflict resolution, Rosenberg was able to identify common mistakes that occur in everyday conversation that often lead to conflict between people and groups. Traps we can fall into include: diagnosing ourselves and others ie saying what's wrong, and the use of static language which implies an unchanging, permanent state of wrongness. An example of this might be: 'That's just typical of you to be so selfish'. The NVC process enables people to state clearly and congruently what is alive in them, ie feelings and needs, at a particular moment in time. This is done in a way that is free of judgment, blaming or storytelling, and in a way that states the actual facts. It is also done within a conscious intention to remain

nonviolent and foster connection with the other party at a heart level. One of the main requirements in the approach is empathy for self and others.

THE MAIN ELEMENTS

The four basic steps of NVC are:

- the identification and expression of the *observation* (the event that has triggered a reaction in us or someone else);
- the *feeling* (physical or emotional/clearly distinct from thought);
- the *need* (a comprehensive list of human needs is provided in NVC literature);
- a *request* (a clear action request that is not a demand).

These four elements are learned and practised in three modes:

- internally, in relation to self – an important component for developing empathy for oneself;
- Externally, as an expression of our own experience;
- Externally, as a receiving of the experience of the other person.

During the trainings, these steps are presented in a 'dance floor' format as an aid to learning where we are in the process at any particular moment. When correctly executed, they may sound something like this:

'When I heard you say you were leaving (*observation*), I felt sad (*feeling*), because I have a need for company (*need*). Would you be willing to stay for another half hour and talk with me? (*request*).'

This kind of transparent communication – which could be responded to with a denial of the request – can feel uncomfortable for someone used to different styles of strategy for getting their needs met. However, as Rosenberg¹ clearly acknowledges, NVC is not about getting your own way; allowing space for the listener to refuse a request is a salient part of the process. He also maintains that it is when we are unwilling to appear vulnerable that violence starts to look attractive.

An example of using the four steps in order to receive another might be as follows:

'When you heard me say I didn't like your dress (*observation*), did you feel hurt (*feeling*) because you have a need for appreciation (*need*)? Would you like some reassurance that I still find you attractive? (*request*).'

An important aspect of using NVC to receive others is to remember to offer our enquiries as questions and not as statements. This gives the other person an opportunity to let us know if we are guessing incorrectly and reduces the

probability of them perceiving our interjection as a diagnosis. According to Rosenberg¹, if the other person senses we are attempting to empathise with them, they will respond to this even if we get it wrong, especially if we leave room for them to say what's really going on for them.

The use of NVC can be effective in fostering peaceful connections even if the other person is not versed in it and is not aware that we are using it. Of course, much practice is required to maintain one's focus in real life situations. A carefully chosen NVC intervention will not always be received graciously. Icy blasts of resentment and anger can be tricky to handle if we are revealing our true feelings and needs and inviting the other person into that space. Such responses can see us scurrying for cover in the old, equally icy and resentful shell that we may have inhabited hitherto. The solution is to remember to listen for the need underneath the words. Rosenberg¹ explains at length how it is possible to do this and to connect with the other person no matter what language they use. If we can empathise with their pain, even in the midst of a tirade, and give them enough empathy, then sooner or later they are going to respond to us and connection becomes possible.

LISTENING TO OUR 'JACKAL VOICES'

The strength to engage in this kind of admirable response comes from firstly empathising with oneself – 'self empathy'. During the 'Deepening' training, this stage in the process stood out for me as being the foundation stone of all NVC endeavour. Learning to hear and embrace my own inner dialogue of accusing, resentful and judgmental voices and identify the need that they were attempting to get met was a liberation in itself. These voices are called 'jackal voices' in NVC, and they are often referred to therapeutically in ways that carry implicit judgment of them as being somehow erroneous. A variety of adjectives are used to describe them, examples of which include: irrational, negative, shadow, critical parent, maladapted child. In my experience as a therapist, it is a common therapeutic tactic to want to get rid of these voices as quickly as possible as it is believed that they can be the cause of the client's unhappiness, and that if the client can be helped to change the tone and nature of their inner dialogue to a more positive, rational one then they would no longer be unhappy. The philosophy of NVC points to a different cause of the unhappiness: it is not the inner dialogue and what we tell ourselves that makes us unhappy or makes us speak violently; it is the unmet needs that our dialogues are attempting to flag up which are the source of the unhappiness.

The inner dialogue is merely an expression of an unmet need and often a component in a strategy to try and get the need met, albeit usually unsuccessfully.

From this perspective, the 'jackal voices' are as valued and welcomed as the needle on a compass when one is lost in a dense forest. The social and political implications of this are far reaching and it challenges the basis of some popular therapeutic approaches. In his book *Fire in the belly: on being a man*, Sam Keen³ warns us to beware the psychological cheerleaders who assure you all you need to do is think positively, avoid negative emotions, manage your stress, change your diet, exercise more, learn to relax in your job, adjust your priorities, and learn to communicate better. He writes that stress is not simply a disease but a symptom that you are living somebody else's life, playing a role you didn't create, living a script written by an alien authority.

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Depression is more than low self-esteem, it is a warning that you are on the wrong path and that something in you is being pressed down and dishonoured. We can accept responsibility for our feelings, rather than blaming other people, by acknowledging our own needs, desires, expectations, values and thoughts. It is an undeniable fact that empathy, and enough of it, must precede education. Repetitive storytelling and the inability to move forward can be manifestations of an unmet need for empathy in clients. Until a person's need for empathy is satisfied, then they are unlikely to receive any educational intervention made by a therapist.

THE 'VOICE OF THE GIRAFFE'

NVC also teaches us to hear and speak in the 'voice of the giraffe'¹. This is the compassionate, nonviolent voice that empathises with self and others, so called because the giraffe is the animal with the biggest heart on the planet. The 'giraffe voice' does not blame, does not judge, and is both explicit and factual. Rosenberg² claims that any conflict can be resolved in a short space of time once both parties can empathise with each other. This works whether the conflict arises between two or more people, or internally within a single person. He claims that any conflict can be resolved permanently and without compromise on either side, and that it's possible for everyone to get their needs met; NVC teaches that conflict is never at the level of need but always at the level of strategy.

Needless to say, learning the principles and application of the NVC process requires commitment and intensive guidance and support. My personal experience of learning NVC has been literally like learning to speak a new language. It has also required a commitment to the whole ethos that underpins Rosenberg's intention for devising this system of communication, namely, to become nonviolent toward myself and in my interactions with other human beings. Adopting this approach involved identifying and laying to rest many fears of what becoming nonviolent might mean: fears of being required to be passive and allowing

people to ride roughshod over me, of always giving way to the needs of others, of rendering myself vulnerable to hurt. Because I have been conditioned in a society that runs on competition and retributive justice, a paradigm shift in attitude was required of me, as well as an openness to the possibility of a different way of being. The reality was that, from the start, my very first faltering attempts at using NVC produced remarkable results that spoke for themselves. A few more tries and, when it appeared that the first remarkable results had not been a fluke, I was quickly converted to being a committed NVC practitioner.

To date I have undertaken two weekend trainings with Laura Harvey, a certified NVC trainer, in Oxford.

They have been rich and demanding experiences. It has been a privilege to witness Laura manifest NVC so fluently and expertly in real time, and to benefit from her highly skilled level of teaching. I am very much looking forward to attending the 'Deepening' training on anger in the spring. Whilst still a beginner with a lot of learning and skill development ahead of me, I have witnessed the healing impact of NVC on every relationship in my life, including the relationship I have with myself. In our conflict-torn world, NVC offers a practical solution to healing the rifts, within and without, that get in the way of our lives being as wonderful as they could be. ■

Suzanne Adey is a counsellor and supervisor in Liverpool.

For information on nonviolent communication (NVC) courses run by Laura Harvey, and/or to join the mailing list, please visit www.sharedspace.org.uk Foundation trainings, such as the one attended by Suzanne Adey, are available from April 2012.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Rosenberg M. *Nonviolent communication: a language of life*. Place: PuddleDancer Press; 1999.
- ² www.cnvc.org
- ³ Keen S. *Fire in the belly: on being a man*. Reissue edition. Bantam USA; 1992

READER RESPONSE

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