

One in a series of articles by

Rachelle

---

## Connecting With Others: COMPASSIONATE COMMUNICATION AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

In the past, it was my belief that communication was a rather dry subject, something akin to sales and marketing and I had little interest in it. It seemed to me that since I already knew how to speak and had been doing so for decades, I clearly knew how to communicate.

And so, I thought “effective” communication referred to various techniques a person could learn to influence, convince or sell in a way that was possible not completely honest.

I’m not sure at all where my beliefs stemmed from but it’s certain that during the past several years, I have come to see communication in a radically different light. I only wish that I had learned about Compassionate Nonviolent Communication much sooner in my life - I would have then become aware of the extraordinary power of language in creating the human experience. I would have also have avoided a lot of unnecessary suffering in my relationships.

There is a saying that when a hammer is the only tool you have, the rest of the world looks like a nail. In the context of communication, we might say that when we are educated to think primarily in terms of moralistic

judgments or right/wrong thinking, we are accordingly more likely to experience the our words and actions or those of others as either right or wrong.

Like many others who share a profound need to be seen as human, I don’t relish being told that I’m wrong or that what I’ve done is wrong. I can easily learn from a situation if it becomes clear to me that human needs have not been met as a result of my actions, and if this information is provided to me in a way that does not contain criticism. It’s much harder for me however if I’m told things like, “You’re insensitive and inconsiderate.” This kind of message does not inspire me to consider others much less have any feelings of regret.

Blaming messages are instead far more likely to provoke self-defense and counter-attack. What do we achieve by saying that a neighbour is inconsiderate when they play music louder than we enjoy? What do we achieve by saying that a twelve year old is a bully when they physically harm a classmate? What do we achieve by saying that our ex-spouse is irresponsible when they don’t pick up the children at the agreed time?

Nonviolent Communication shows us how describing people in these ways is a tragedy because it increases the likelihood of violence while decreasing the likelihood that we will get what we want. Yes, we want to meet our needs for mutual respect, safety and responsibility, but let’s initiate these changes by using effective life-serving approaches instead of criticism and punishment.

While it is most often not our intention to harm others when we speak, if we become truly conscious during our interactions with others, we will see that our words often create a great deal of pain for ourselves and others. Anytime we use

words that imply rightness or wrongness, it has the effect of objectifying and dehumanizing



Rachelle Lamb

people. It’s hard to see a human being before us if we think of them as criminal or selfish or confrontational or even, on the positive side, as brilliant, amazing or generous. Labels put us into boxes and make it near impossible to be in touch with our true compassionate nature and this being in touch with our compassionate nature represents, I believe, the spiritual component of relating to others, the spiritual dimension of our humanness.

As human beings, we have the power in each living moment to enrich life for ourselves and others - our hearts are filled when we give out of our deep need to enrich life. The question is, how often do we remain conscious of our power to interact in this way and how often do we practice it?

Every faith I know of is based on the fundamental principles: do unto others that which you would like done unto you - judge not lest ye be judged - we are all one. It’s easy to nod our heads affirmatively when we hear these words, especially when we are praying or meditating. However,

it is not so easy to put into practice when we're triggered by some of the things other people do - and isn't it ironic how some of those how trigger us the most happen to live in the same houses as we do!

When I first read *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* by Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, I was guided to examine the communication tools I had already integrated throughout my life (mostly completely unconsciously) to determine whether or not they were serving me and others - words like good, bad, right, wrong, appropriate, inappropriate, can't, have to, should, must, deserve or the notion that punishment and reward are the most effective ways to deter negative behaviours and promote positive behaviours - I learned that these ways of speaking and thinking run counter to our human nature and spirituality. It was a real eye opener to learn just how judgement-laden every day language can be - and how incongruent such language is with the underlying message of Christianity and other faiths.

Since coming into contact with Nonviolent Communication, communication has become my spiritual path, an avenue for applied spirituality in the most tangible sense. What a blessing it has been to have learned new ways of relating to both myself and others. Incidences of conflict in our home have been dramatically reduced and when conflict does occur, people now have effective tools at their disposal and can quickly turn things around before they escalate. There is now compassionate under-standing where there was none before and people know how to listen to each other with empathy.

Imagine telling your spouse that you're nervous about how much money has been spent on a particular activity during the past few months and instead of hearing "You get so uptight - don't worry so much" or worse still, "Listen, I make more than you so I don't think you have any right to question me about it!" your partner actually says, "Are you feeling nervous because you need to trust that our financial resources are being handled in a responsible manner?"

Imagine as well that when these words are said, genuine care is expressed. Learning these tools does indeed transform how people relate to each other - people who have experienced problems with anger can and do learn to express their anger in healthy ways. People who have learned to respond defensively for most of their lives can and do become people who empathize with others and find creative ways to meet everyone's needs. NVC shows us how to be instruments of positive change in the face of that which does not serve life, in a way that is both effective and life-enriching.

Gary Baran, the executive director of the international Center for Nonviolent Communication has compiled a list of ten very practical and effective ways you can begin to contribute to internal, interpersonal, and organizational peace. Practicing these consistently can lead to significant and positive transformation in one's relationships:

1. Spend some time each day quietly reflecting on how you would like to relate to yourself and others.
2. Remember that all human beings have the same needs.
3. Check your intention to see if you are as interested in others getting their needs met as your own.

4. When asking someone to do something, check first to see if you are making a request or a demand.

5. Instead of saying what you DON'T want someone to do, say what you DO want the person to do.

6. Instead of saying what you want someone to BE, say what action you'd like the person to take that you hope will help the person be that way.

7. Before agreeing or disagreeing with anyone's opinions, try to tune in to what the person is feeling and needing.

8. Instead of saying No, say what need of yours prevents you from saying Yes.

9. If you are feeling upset, think about what need of yours is not being met, and what you could do to meet it, instead of thinking about what's wrong with others or yourself.

10. Instead of praising someone who did something you like, express your gratitude by telling the person what need of yours that action met.

YOU'RE INVITED TO SHARE THIS ARTICLE. PLEASE CREDIT THE AUTHOR, RACHELLE LAMB.