

*"The mind creates the abyss and the heart crosses it."
--Sri Nisargadatta*

Nonviolent Communication Beyond Judgment and Niceness

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It's Friday afternoon. It was a long week and then a long wait at the supermarket, but finally you are home, arms loaded down with groceries. You open the door -- which gets caught against a pile of dirty socks -- then trip over a dozen video game magazines and three bags of potato chip (crumbs) on your way to the kitchen. Your eyes search in vain amidst the dishes and pots on the counter for an empty spot to deposit your groceries. Sprawled on the couch is your teenage son, attention riveted on the TV screen to a soundtrack of screeching brakes, roaring engines and burning rubber.

You look at the magazines, socks and food on the floor, the pots and dirty dishes in the kitchen. Feelings of exhaustion and agitation arise. You are needing more order and beauty in this place of sanctuary you call home. You would like your son to put away his things and clean the dishes out of appreciation for your needs or simply out of his own sense of order.

However, instead of referring to your feelings of agitation and need for order, you say, "This house is a mess, Felix, how can you stand being such a slob? I'm not responsible for picking up after you all the time, so please clean up." If Felix is like most of us, he will either resist or comply with your demand -- depending on how much guilt, shame, obligation, or fear (of punishment or withdrawal of your love) he experiences. If he does comply, you are likely to pay a high price for clean dishes. That evening of shared warmth and relaxation you've been longing for may suddenly turn into a chapter of the cold war or an outright battle. Repeat this scenario over time and the price is steep: a relationship marred by anger and alienation between you and your son.

Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg, founder of Nonviolent Communication (NVC), uses the term "suicidal language": the more we are in pain and are wanting others to respond, the more likely we are to choose words which elicit no compassionate recognition of our needs -- words which, in fact, repel and disincline others to respond to us in the way we'd like. For example, if I am upset and wanting people to behave in a way that's more in harmony with my values or desires, I tend to express myself through judgments of them as being "inappropriate," "immoral," "wrong," etc. If I want someone who has a different point of view to agree with me, I might label them "stupid" or "ignorant." If I am wanting more intimacy in our relationship than my partner does, I regard

him as "cold and aloof." On the other hand, if he is wanting more intimacy than I do, I regard him as "needy and dependent." When I am wanting more understanding than I am getting from someone, I call them "insensitive". If I'm not getting the respect I'd like from someone, I call them "idiots," "racists," "Feminazis," "bullies," "fanatics," etc.

This kind of thinking and speech leads to self-fulfilling prophecies: if I am wanting someone to share their resources, but express myself by calling them "greedy," chances are they will refuse to share. I then take this as "proof" that they are indeed "greedy." Because the only satisfaction we eke out of this mode of communication is that of "being right," all too often in our interactions we spend our energy proving who's right and wrong instead of devoting our combined resources -- creativity, energy, intelligence, etc. -- to getting both our needs met.

Unlike a language where we blame each other when we are not getting what we want, NVC emphasizes the joy we humans derive from our ability to contribute to each other's well-being.

We experience deep fulfillment from our power to engage in actions and words that can relieve and help those who are suffering a palpable need. All humans have the need both to receive and to express compassion.

The symbol for NVC is the giraffe. Not only do giraffes have the largest heart of any land animal, their height gives them a long view. Giraffe speakers give from the heart, and are able to see far enough to know the consequences of gifts that do not come from the heart. NVC inspires us to give willingly -- to meet each other's needs motivated by compassion rather than by guilt, shame, fear, obligation, extrinsic rewards, or a desire to buy love and approval. We respond to each other's needs from the heart -- not out of "got to," "have to," "must," "supposed to," "ought to," and "should."

If compassion is a natural movement of the heart that is inspired by the awareness of an unfulfilled need, and we wish to respond to each other out of compassion, then it makes sense (1) to express ourselves in such a way that our needs are known to others, and (2) to listen to others in a way that allows us to clearly sense their needs.

In Giraffe language, we rely on four pieces of information in order to honestly express ourselves to others, and we listen empathically for these same four pieces of information within *their* words. We'll use the example of the parent addressing her teenage son, and see how she might have expressed herself differently.

1. The first piece is the **observation** of whatever triggered the speaker's current state of mind. We do our best to state our observation free of any evaluation: *"When I see video game magazines, socks, and food on the floor, and these pots and dirty dishes in*

the kitchen..."

(Not: "*When I see this huge mess.*")

2. The second is the speaker's **feelings** in response to what is observed. We do our best to identify an emotion, sensation or state of mind that is free of thoughts: "*I feel exhausted and agitated....*"

(Not: "*I feel I shouldn't leave you home by yourself.*")

3. The third is the unfulfilled **need** that is generating the feelings mentioned. We try to identify as closely as possible a universal need or value, or at least a desire stated in positive terms: "*because I am needing more order and beauty in my home.*"

(Not: "*Because I don't want to come home to a pigsty.*")

4. The fourth piece is a **request** that provides the listener with an opportunity to exercise their power to respond to the speaker's need with something immediate, concrete, and doable. The mother offers such an opportunity to the son by asking: "*Would you be willing to put away the things on the floor that belong to you, toss out the garbage, and wash the dishes in the sink?*"

(Not: "*Would you quit making such a mess and do something about this room?*")

When we reveal our feelings and needs, we offer others an arena where they can express their compassion. It is our vulnerability that inspires others to want to give to us from the heart. We all know it's no fun giving gifts to someone who doesn't need anything.

In a world, however, where people habitually express themselves by blaming, analyzing and judging each other, it may seem dangerous, if not downright dumb, to be exposing ourselves in this vulnerable fashion. That is why it is necessary for us to grow our Giraffe ears. Not only do we want to be able to express our own feelings and needs, it is equally important to be able to hear the other person's feelings and needs behind their words, gestures, or silences.

If my partner calls me "cold and aloof," instead of hearing judgment, I now focus my attention on his feelings and needs, and check them out with him if I'm not sure: "*When you say that I am 'cold and aloof,' are you feeling sad, because you have a need for more intimacy than you're getting?*" If someone calls me stupid, I may sense that she is frustrated and wanting acknowledgment or support for her views. With Giraffe ears, I hear no judgments of myself or of others, only feelings and needs -- mine and theirs. As Dr. Rosenberg

explains, "All judgments are tragic expressions of unmet needs."

Having been schooled in the language of the head, most of us are skillful in analyzing, diagnosing and labelling people, but have difficulty sensing feelings and needs and making or eliciting clear requests. It may take some time to master NVC grammar, to explore and develop a new vocabulary of feelings and needs, and to develop the fluency we desire.

Gradually, however, as our words flow out of our own feelings and needs, and we learn how to empathize with others through Giraffe ears, we discover that we have freed ourselves from the compulsion to "be right" or "be nice." Our speech then embodies both our deepest truths and our deepest compassion. NVC is a set of immediately applicable skills as well as a lifelong practice of developing consciousness. As we increase moment-to-moment awareness of the feelings and needs behind all words and actions, we are transforming the world for ourselves and for others.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC): A Sample Dialogue

The mother begins the dialogue with her son by expressing herself in classic Giraffe using the four pieces: **O**bservation, **F**eeling, **N**eed, **R**equest.

Mother: "When I see video game magazines, socks and food on the floor, and these pots and dirty dishes in the kitchen (O), Felix, I feel exhausted and agitated (F), because I am needing more order and beauty in my home (N). Would you be willing to put away the things on the floor that belong to you, toss out the garbage and wash the dishes in the sink?" (R)

(If Felix had been raised in a Giraffe home, he may very well hear his mother's need for order and be moved to respond. Otherwise, he may hear blame and demand no matter how she expresses herself. Fortunately, when we use NVC, we don't need the other person to be NVC-literate -- all we need is to make sure we have our Giraffe ears on.)

Felix: "Order and beauty! Order and beauty! Sordid and pukey! Mom, why do you have to be so compulsive about everything? Really!"

Mother (with Giraffe ears, hears no mockery or accusation, because she is listening only for feelings and needs): "So, Felix, are you feeling kind of irritated because you'd really like more ease...maybe more relaxation around the way the house looks?"

Felix: "Yeah, it's not like it's such a big deal. I mean, do you really think we're gonna get sick or something because there's stuff lying around and a few dirty dishes?"

Mother (continuing to hear what Felix is feeling and needing behind his words rather than getting hooked into his rhetorical question of what she "really thinks"): "Sounds like you're a little annoyed, and would like me to understand that there are no harmful consequences to the things you do around the house."

Felix: "That's right! It's just a matter of taste, and everyone's got their own taste. So what I see as order isn't what you see as order. But how come you have the right to order me to make order for you?"

The Mother takes time to empathize with herself in silence by getting in touch with her own feelings and needs: "Ooh, when he talks in that tone, I get so angry I want to scream, "Because I'm the mother, THAT'S WHY!" So what's my need here? What's my need? Um, it sounds like I need respect, but perhaps... it's more like consideration that I'm needing. Yeah, I want him to consider -- to be aware of -- how much of my life I devote to his well-being just out of pure and simple love, and for him to feel moved, to want to do something I might ask, instead of telling me that I'm ordering him around to do something for me."

Having gotten in touch with her unfulfilled need, the mother senses a shift in herself; she is no longer angry even as she is aware of a deep sadness. Turning back to the conversation, she can choose either to continue listening to Felix or to express her own feelings and needs of the moment. She chooses to listen some more, knowing that he will be more able to hear her feelings and needs after he has received adequate empathy and understanding for his own.)

Mother: "Am I hearing you say that you want some respect for your autonomy?"

That you'd like to be able to choose what to do to fulfill your own sense of order, rather than have to meet someone else's sense of order?"

Felix: **"That's exactly it, Mom. I don't see why it's always got to be your standards we're using. I thought this was my home too."**

Mother: **"You'd like more say in how standards are set? ...Maybe for us to decide together how much or what kind of order gets established?"**

Felix: **"Yeah, that's right. Like me, I don't see that this place is such an impossible wreck right now."**

Mother: **"So are you wanting me to understand that the present condition meets your standards?"**

Felix: **"Yeah."** (Silence or a diminishing of words is often a sign that the person has received adequate empathy for their feelings and needs.)

Mother (guessing at Felix's request): **"So would you like me to discuss standards with you so that we can arrive at a common agreement?"**

Felix: **"Maybe later. I'm getting hungry; will you make dinner now?"**

Mother (switching from empathy to expression): **"Well, now I am feeling really frustrated! I did all this shopping, bought tortellini and that really yummy sauce, but when I come in and see the kitchen counters and sink all full of stuff, I don't even feel like cooking. As I told you before, I get to feeling exhausted and agitated because I need more order in my environment. (Sigh) Felix, I think it would help me know that I've been understood if you were willing to tell me what you just heard me say."** (She makes a request that addresses her need for understanding.)

Felix: **"You're tired and upset and don't feel like cooking because I made such a mess in the house."**

Mother: "Thank you. Yes, I do feel tired and upset. However, it's not because you made such a mess, but because of my own need for order and beauty." (Here she is being careful to take responsibility for her own feelings.)

Felix (thinks silently, then): "Tell you what, Mom. Why don't you just disappear into your orderly room and soak up a big dose of order and beauty, while I cook the tortellini and get dinner ready. Then maybe after we eat, I won't be hungry and you won't be tired, and we can figure out something about cleaning up, okay?"

The dialogue may continue, depending on whether Mother is satisfied with Felix's suggestion. However, an important change takes place in the common search for solutions when both parties become convinced that their needs are understood by the other. Dr. Rosenberg once mediated between two tribes in Nigeria in a room where some of the participants had children who had been killed by others in the same room. Out of that experience, he concluded, *"No matter how big the issue, there will be peace if each party trusts that their needs matter to the other. On the other hand, no matter how small the issue, there will be war if one or both parties believe that the other party does not care about their needs."*

The purpose of NVC is not to manipulate others into doing what we want, but to create a process where we connect from the heart, hear each other's needs and feel inspired to exercise our power to enrich another person's life.

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