

Moving Towards Life-Serving Responsibility in NVC

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Marshall Rosenberg wrote, "In our development toward a state of emotional liberation, most of us experience three stages in the way we relate to others." He labeled these three stages as (1) "emotional slavery," (2) "the obnoxious stage," and (3) "emotional liberation" (*Nonviolent Communication*, Chapter 5).

In recent years, I have become increasingly concerned that we, as an NVC trainer community, have often been ineffective in supporting people to transition between the latter two stages. I interpret a significant proportion of the NVC community as continuing indefinitely in a stage that seems to me to be a bit beyond the "obnoxious stage," but not yet a match for what Marshall described as "emotional liberation."

In the "obnoxious stage," a person is learning to care for and express their needs. But, they often express themselves in a way that does not respect the needs of others.

Reading what Marshall wrote about "emotional liberation," it seems to me that the essence of this stage is learning to fully care for other peoples' needs as much as our own—without subjecting ourselves to fear, guilt, shame, or obligation.

I worry that NVC training sometimes teaches people how to achieve the latter without the former. People learn a way to be "free," or avoid fear, guilt, shame, and obligation. Yet, in my experience, the way that this is taught can get in the way of supporting people's ability to care for others' needs.

I wonder if the label might be part of the problem. The label "emotional liberation" calls attention to the goal of emotional freedom, but doesn't name the goal of care of everyone's needs. I wonder if a label like "wholesome interdependence" might better evoke some aspects of what we are aiming to cultivate?

I'd like for us to have better ways of talking about how we aspire to relate to one another. I want to support both emotional freedom and full care for each other.

Responsibility & Others' Feelings

In NVC, we often invite people to "never accept responsibility for others' feelings." At the risk of stimulating controversy, I experience this teaching as both a gift and a curse.

It's a gift, in the way that it supports people in letting go of guilt, shame, and obligation, in relating to others. It's also a gift, in the way that it invites us to give attention to how our own interpretations and needs affect our feelings.

Yet, I believe this teaching can also be a curse, in the way that it can lead people to deny interdependence.

As social animals, we impact one another's experiences, inherently and profoundly. This is wired into our nervous systems. We can gain considerable freedom and resilience in how we process the impacts of other's choices on us. But, I believe it is inhumane to expect that all such impacts should be erased, or should always be "healed" without addressing the actions that lead to those impacts.

In extreme cases, it seems to be well understood that people impact one another:

- Behavior that gets labeled “verbal abuse” is usually not treated as simply something that the recipient needs to learn to accept (or “hear with Giraffe ears”). Finding ways to prevent such behavior and its impacts is important to collective well-being.
- “Shunning” (cutting people off from communication and care) is considered to be an extreme punishment. When shunning is done intentionally, it is understood that such treatment will impact the recipient; that is why it is done.

People can be profoundly affected by how others interact with them (or avoid interacting with them).

The effects may seem subtle, or less inevitable, in less extreme situations. Yet, I think such effects are nearly always present.

I believe that denial of the reality of how people impact each other leads to unnecessary suffering. It constitutes a form of what Marshall labeled as life-alienating “denial of responsibility.”

Jackal & Giraffe Responsibility

As I see it, the gift and curse can be untangled by getting more rigorous in how we talk about “responsibility.”

What if we invited people to “never accept life-alienating Jackal-responsibility for others’ feelings (or for anything else).” Then we could invite them to learn how to embody *life-serving Giraffe responsibility*.

As I understand it:

- Taking *life-alienating (Jackal) responsibility* is largely about accepting obligation, credit, and blame.
- If I take *life-serving (Giraffe) responsibility* for something, this means:
 - I accept having a unique role in giving attention to and caring for that something.
 - I am connected to the life within me that calls me to take on that role.

This latter model of “responsibility” is not about taking on obligation or blame, but about engaging with an opportunity to make life more wonderful.

I believe that NVC already implicitly contains a distinction between these two types of “responsibility.” We:

1. Reject taking responsibility for others’ feelings;
2. Invite taking responsibility for one’s own feelings, needs, intentions, and actions.

I believe that (1) the responsibility we are asked to reject is Jackal-responsibility, and (2) the responsibility we are invited to take on is Giraffe-responsibility. I don’t think NVC ever calls for us to take Jackal-responsibility for anything.

(For those not steeped in NVC jargon, perhaps it might be better to refer to these as blame-oriented and care-oriented models of responsibility?)

Example

If we learn to distinguish life-alienating and life-serving responsibility, and practice taking life-serving responsibility, this creates new possibilities in how we can relate to others.

If we are only attuned to the life-alienating flavor of responsibility, we are forced towards an all-or-nothing view of causality. Consider this example:

Suppose Joe does something that leads to needs being unmet for Pat. Pat reveals that they are experiencing an unpleasant emotion in response to what Joe did.

Joe may believe that "If I agree that my action had anything to do with Pat's experience, then I will need to agree that I "caused" Pat's pain and will have to take responsibility for it."

Because Joe can only conceive of Jackal-responsibility, it is understandable that Joe wants no part of "taking responsibility." Joe's only way of escaping blame seems to be to deny any causal connection between stimulus and response.

So, Joe might say "I get that you are feeling an emotion that was stimulated by my action. Please take responsibility for your own feelings. They have nothing to do with me."

Likely, Joe wouldn't really say out loud "They have nothing to do with me." But, that belief would be conveyed in Joe's attitude.

Yet, while we can't control other people's experiences, our words and actions do strongly influence others. The reality of causality is not all-or-nothing. People's feelings are the result of a combination of internal and external factors.

Suppose Pat had heard Joe telling someone "Pat is a fat pig." Do you think it would be life-serving for Joe to say or believe that Pat's response has "nothing to do with me"?

It seems to me that such a belief tends to interfere with Joe's ability to acknowledge Pat's experience and be responsive to Pat's needs. One might reasonably judge Joe's response as "obnoxious." Such a response frees Joe from experiencing obligation or guilt, yet offers little respect or care for Pat's needs.

What might have happened instead if Joe was connected to an intention of taking life-serving (Giraffe) responsibility for the impact of their words on others?

Pat tells Joe what Pat observed, and what feelings this stimulated. (Pat may or may not also offer a need and request. Joe is able to listen with "Giraffe ears" whether or not these elements are offered.)

As Joe realizes their words had had a painful impact on Pat, Joe might initially feel a flash of guilt and defensiveness. Joe does a bit of emergency self-empathy, connecting with a desire to experience themselves as a "good" person. Joe connects with a desire to not just seem caring, but to be caring, even if it requires sometimes admitting making a choice that they now regret. Joe remembers the intention to take Giraffe responsibility for their impact on others. Joe feels more centered. Joe feels sad and embarrassed, but no longer feels guilty or defensive.

Joe says "Thank you for letting me know what happened and how it is affecting you. I feel embarrassed and sad. What I said doesn't match how I want to be showing up in the world. I want you to have more care and support for dignity. I want to have a more positive impact on your life. There are some painful things going on in my life. In retrospect, I took my pain out on you. I'm sorry."

Because Joe knows how to take life-serving (Giraffe) responsibility, there is no need to entirely deny any causal connection between Joe's words and Pat's response. Joe is able to both offer care to Pat, and avoid taking on life-alienating (Jackal) responsibility or blame.

Joe knows how to take Giraffe-responsibility without taking on Jackal-responsibility. As a result, even if Joe didn't understand why Joe's actions led to an unpleasant impact, it would be safe for Joe to be curious about why Joe's actions hadn't met Pat's needs.

I was fortunate that, early in my NVC training, I encountered trainers who modeled this Giraffe-responsibility way of responding. I imagined that most NVC trainers would respond in this way. Yet, as I've interacted with a wider cross section of the NVC community, I have been surprised by how rarely I've experienced NVC-trained people responding in this way.

Responsibility For Actions And Impacts

Marshall wrote that in the stage of "emotional liberation" one takes responsibility for one's actions, but doesn't take responsibility for others' feelings. This seems to me like an awkward, unclear way of trying to draw a line between what a person is and is not responsible for.

Actions lead to needs being met or unmet, and NVC teaches that feelings reflect the state of our needs. So, there is a definite link between actions and feelings—though it is not a simple one. It seems as if Marshall is saying people are responsible for one of the factors that leads to people's feelings, but that the existence of other factors completely absolves them of responsibility for the outcome. This seems to me like peculiar logic.

I suspect Marshall said what he did to try to keep things simple because most people are stuck in all-or-nothing thinking. People want a clear distinction between what they "caused" and what they didn't. They are uncomfortable with the realistic idea that they contribute to an outcome but don't uniquely determine it. They may not be prepared to accept the idea that they partially "caused" another person's experience, because their conditioning tells them this would lead to Jackal-responsibility.

So, Marshall said "You're not responsible for other people's feelings" because he saw it as essential to free people from taking on guilt, shame, and obligation. And, he said "You're responsible for your actions" so that people would take some responsibility for what they do.

But, I don't think this solution works very well. Taking responsibility for our actions becomes meaningless if we deny that our actions have consequences and impact others.

To me, it becomes clearer how to think about all this if we distinguish life-alienating and life-serving responsibility:

- I invite people to never take on life-alienating (Jackal) responsibility, not for people's feelings, and not for anything else.
- I invite people to take on life-serving (Giraffe) responsibility for what is within their "locus of control." This includes taking Giraffe-responsibility for one's feelings, needs, intentions, and actions.
- I also invite people to take Giraffe responsibility for their influence—to the extent that they can do so. This involves bringing kind attention and care to

considering the impacts of one's words and actions on others. (The invitation is to care for both one's needs and those of others, with an open heart, and without obligation or guilt. This can be really difficult. But, trying to do this builds our capacity. And, I find it's amazingly satisfying when we can achieve this.)

Marshall wrote that in the stage of "emotional liberation" a person doesn't take responsibility *for* others, but is responsible *to* them. The vision I've described above helps me make sense of his words.

I long for us to be able to live up to Marshall's aspiration that in addition to expressing our own needs "we are equally concerned that the needs of others be fulfilled."

I don't think our practice of NVC will be fully "nonviolent" and able to consistently "make life more wonderful" until we integrate a life-serving (Giraffe) notion of responsibility, and become capable of caring for the impacts we have on others.

Inquiry

To me, this subject seems important to whether or not NVC will achieve its full potential to contribute to human well-being.

- Does this subject seem important to you?
- Do you see an opportunity being present, to better support people in moving towards being able to care for everyone's needs?
- Do you have strategies for supporting people in growing their capacity to be responsible to others?
- Do you perceive NVC-trained people sometimes denying interdependence in life-alienating ways?
- How do you feel about the idea of Giraffe responsibility?
- Having read this essay, what is alive in you?

I would love to see some discussion emerge around these ideas.

I also welcome learning what impacts my words have had for you (especially if you're open to my following up with you).