

Blame, Responsibility, And Care

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One of the core milestones on the path of consciousness transformation is the moment when we can fully integrate the radical awareness that our emotional responses to the world and to things that happen to us are never caused by another person. This awareness stands in stark contrast to our habitual speech, which states that we feel what we feel because of what someone else did. Instead, we learn, if we apply ourselves deeply to this practice, that our emotions are only caused by the meaning we assign to what someone did, and that meaning is generated from within us, not by the actions.

How We Create Our Experience

The version of this path that is specifically taught as part of training in Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is the idea that our feelings emerge from our needs. For years, I was teaching NVC in exactly that way, naming feelings as caused by our needs, categorizing them into those feelings that arise when our needs are met and those that arise when our needs are not met. Over time, this neat package became more complex, as I realized that whether or not my needs are met is, in and of itself, an assigned meaning to what happens rather than some “objective” reality that is “given” by what happens.

Why do such distinctions matter? I am profoundly committed to discovering and inviting others into discovering the wildest far reaches of the experience of radical inner freedom. To the extent that I believe that “my needs are not met” is a state caused by an external reality, I lose, yet again, the sense of ownership of my experience. I have, time and again, seen people shift their language without shifting their inner conviction that, in some fundamental way, the other person is the one who causes their experience. “I am angry because my need for respect is not met” takes only a small bit of responsibility for the experience compared to “I am angry because you spoke to me in a disrespectful way.” The other person is absent linguistically, not in essence.

The freedom that is available to me in such a moment arises when I become fully and crushingly aware that I am the one who read what was said as not meeting my need for respect, and that I have full choice about how I interpret what the other person did. Some interpretations will lend themselves to more or less pain for me. It is not my needs as abstract entities that affect my experience, it is my needs as a dynamic, lived in the moment, continually re-interpreted, source of meaning in my life, coupled with my interpretation of the other person and their motivation.

Even In Extreme Circumstances...

This applies not only to the daily, mundane rubbing against other people at home and at work. The very same thing applies to any action that another person takes that has an effect on us. If someone physically harms me, to take a more extreme situation, their actions clearly cause effects on my body – I may have bruises, broken limbs, even damaged internal organs. That is still different from the emotional experience I would have. I still am – in theory if not in common practice – free to choose the meaning I assign to this situation. How I make meaning of it will influence what feelings I have even when my body is damaged. I totally see that in order to have an interpretation that allows me to have, say, grief without trauma, I would need to have a great deal of practice, more than most of us will ever have, so that I can see tragedy instead of seeing evil.

Part of the tragedy of such encounters is that the option of tragedy is rarely available to us when things are done to us, and therefore so many of us, throughout human history, have chosen to respond by seeking revenge, eliminating the “evil” in our midst, continuing the cycle of violence, without actually getting satisfaction and relief for the harm we experienced. Instead, those rare individuals who find a way to see the tragic distortion of human needs that leads to acts of violence towards them, or in some other way find a different meaning to assign to harm done to them, may have more peace of mind and healing for themselves. I am not aware of studies done to explore this; I am only basing this assertion on my own experience of supporting healing processes for people, and on my own experiences of healing.

To be clear and precise: this is not about forgiveness, which to me remains steeped in the notion of wrongness. This is about exiting the right/wrong frame altogether. It is not about making it OK that someone did harm, and no substitute for doing everything necessary to protect people from harm. This is only a matter of what frame we hold internally, and therefore what feelings we might have, when harm is done to us. The issue of what is more likely to be protective, whether punitive or restorative processes, in my mind has been put to rest based on what I have already read of the statistics of repeat offences.

When We Are Blamed by Another

All of the above was a preamble, background thinking that I wanted to lay out to be able to focus on the topic I am pursuing today. In response to the kind of thinking I just laid out, the basics of which I learned, along with many others, from Marshall Rosenberg, I have seen many people adopt an attitude which I have never seen as beautifully presented as the following poem, posted with permission of Paul Crosland. I am posting it here because, despite my esthetic pleasure in this poem, I am disturbed by its message, and I wanted to offer an alternative for those of us who understand deeply the freedom that is possible when we let go of blaming.

Lick Your Wounds Please Then Let's Talk

Don't blame me
Even though I've triggered your pain.

It is your pain & therefore your responsibility.
Don't call me unkind; I'd gladly help
you pick your pain apart and see
where it came from and how it can
be speeded on its way to depart.

Forgive me if I seem clinical
and less than compassionate
in how I offer this surgeon's knife;
my training is incomplete.

So, if you don't want this, why not
cease crossing my path with
your stories of blame.
Go, lick your wounds please then
let's talk.

My favorite part of this poem is the middle segment, because in it I see humility, a willingness to take responsibility for some part of the complexity of a situation, and the commitment to ongoing learning. It is because of this that I am trusting that Paul would be open to my offering what I hope would be a contribution to him and the many others I have seen – both in NVC communities and in other groups that reach similar conclusions through somewhat different paths.

Staying Within The Interdependent Web

That my actions didn't cause another's pain (except the physical, when physical is involved) is not to say that the other person's pain is unrelated to what I did. Teasing out the nature of that relationship has been an ongoing quest for me, because part of understanding interdependence, for me, has been that our actions, always, have an effect on others. What can we possibly mean when we say, first, that my actions don't cause another's emotional pain and that my actions have an effect on others?

One way that I have made sense of this, and that I am still investigating, is a little bit like a probability distribution. For example, if I tell someone that because of something they did they are not welcome somewhere, I am not causing them to have the meaning frame of "rejection." However, if I know anything about humans, and if I know in particular anything about the culture or sub-culture within which I live, it would be easy to infer the likelihood of that experience. In most contexts that I have known, that likelihood is pretty high. Taking seriously the significance of our interdependence, and with a commitment to acting with care within it, I would want to find a way to make it as easy as possible for the other person to interpret my actions through a different frame than "rejection."

If I haven't done that, if I only acted with awareness of my own needs and wishes, without conscious choice about how they will affect others, then I want to be available, with an open heart, and not with the intention of "educating" the person who is feeling devastated and

didn't ask for education. I want to find a way to take responsibility for my actions, to own their effect without making myself wrong, without making myself the cause and without letting myself so completely off the hook that the other person is left alone to hold their pain. I am part of what created that experience for them, and that means something to me.

Responding To Blame With Care

In simple terms, when someone blames me for their experience, I'd like to find a way to engage with them, to be humanly available, to know that the message of freedom can best be received by that person when they have been heard and when they experience my care. They would need to know that their pain and experience are understood, and that is not enough. How I show my care is an essential ingredient in the possibility of healing and transforming the experience of blame for that person. I show my care through mourning the effect of my actions, in a deeply heartfelt way, whether or not I agree with the interpretation of what those actions meant. Much more often than not, the possibility of shifting the meaning of what happened is only available after such care and mourning are taken in by the person who is, initially, blaming. This is a big reason for why people ask for apologies. This is what troubles me so much about this poem. I simply don't hear care in it. Only the attempt to educate another person about why it would be better to take responsibility for their pain instead of putting it on me.

This is not an easy practice when someone throws blame and anger our way in response to something we did. I still, personally, struggle to be able to express that kind of mourning reliably. I still get caught, more often than I ever want, in the human longing to be seen in my own innocence. I have no trouble mourning when my actions were not aligned with my values, because I clearly wish I had done something different, and I can have that deep mourning without slipping into guilt. It's hard when I remain aligned with my actions even though they resulted in so much pain. Instead of mourning their effect, independently of my intention, I remain caught in wanting the other person to understand why I made the choices I made, believing that this understanding would support relief for them, and forgetting how essential the mourning is before that relief could happen.

Living With An Open Heart

In closing, I come back to just how profoundly challenging it is to be human and to aim to live with an open heart. It's so much easier to fall into the many traps that our conditioning and millennia of civilization offer us. I am just now in the midst of a conversation with one of my dearest people which started with my saying something that was scary to say and also important, because I was in pain which I knew stemmed from my interpretation of this other person's actions. I was afraid, because I was pretty confident that my interpretation, even when fully owned by me as simply my interpretation and not "the truth", would be really hard for the other person to hear. Sure enough, the initial reaction was a huge surge of pain for the other person, which included some anger. That was precisely what I was afraid of. Because our friendship is one in which trust predominates, there was no real risk to the relationship itself. So much so, that we could have the conversation in chunks, to honor our respective full plates, without losing warmth and friendliness even when we left things

dangling for some days. We have both learned from this dialogue – both about the topic and about ourselves. We are now collaborating in finding strategies to address the underlying needs that led me to speak up. This is a better outcome than I ever dreamed of.

Although my life has been challenging, for as long as I can remember, I also in parallel feel enormously fortunate, privileged. One of those privileges is having come to a place where I can both express pain I have about others' actions without holding blame towards them, and hear others' pain, at least some of the time, without losing presence, without guilt or defensiveness. I wish with all my heart that the luminous beauty of the possibilities that open up when we can do this together would be widely familiar. This is one way that we can forge alternatives to war, on the small scale and beyond.