

Can the Social Order Be Transformed through Personal Practice?

The Case of Nonviolent Communication – Part 2

With Miki Kashtan

In September of last year, I posted the [first part](#) of this piece in response to an article questioning the potential of personal practices like mindfulness to transform, or even challenge, the existing social and economic structures of our social world. I explored three deep questions I have about why and how Nonviolent Communication (NVC), despite its radical roots, has now become associated in many eyes with far narrower goals than Marshall Rosenberg envisioned when he developed and began sharing NVC. His big vision of social change appears to me to have been reduced to a theory of change that implies that just individual practice, writ large, will be sufficient, without clear ideas or pathways about change in systems.

I am one of many people who, having been exposed to the simplicity, elegance, and practicality of NVC, want to unleash its potential in ways that transcend the limitations of a purely individual or interpersonal practice. In fact, this may well be a simple summary of all I aim to do. In this piece, I engage with the question of how those of us who are NVC practitioners, especially those of us who are committed to sharing NVC with others, can more closely align with and expand on what I understand to be the legacy of Marshall's experiments at the social level.

This exploration takes me into three areas. The first is most concerned with how NVC is shared with others: what can we do to increase systemic awareness when we engage with individuals, groups, and organizations in support of their learning and applying NVC? The second involves taking our work outside of the workshop and consulting setting, where money usually exchanges hands, and contribute with our bodies and souls to embedding these practices in the lived context of the communities we form and live within. Such communities then become indispensable to the possibility of inner and outer transformation, in that the collective capacity to shift out of societal patterns when we have webs of support, feedback, and agreements that align with our values far exceeds what we can ever do alone. The last invites us to re-embed NVC within the larger field of applied nonviolence out of which it arose, so we branch beyond interpersonal dialogue as the only method for creating change.

Exposing Invisible Impacts Through Systemic Awareness

In one of my most memorable conversations with Marshall, probably in the spring of 2004, after a workshop in Oakland, he was totally unequivocal that the basic practice template he had developed, which puts observations, feelings, needs, and requests together in a specific choreographed order, was not all there was. He was satisfied with this template, he told me, because it was simple while at the same time containing within it all that was necessary such that if people applied it consistently, it would be sufficient for shifting their consciousness to align with what he called NVC consciousness. He surprised me by saying that he was still struggling with doing the same in terms of the applications of NVC in the social change context. He wasn't satisfied with where he got to in this area, finding that the relative lack of simplicity led to a lot of debate instead of learning in his workshops on such topics.

At the time, I was mesmerized by the idea that a practice, by itself, was sufficient to transform consciousness. It gave deeper meaning to the work I was doing, more hope. Today, I no longer believe

it is. This is because of the difference between our capacity to grasp the immediate and our capacity to see the global or systemic. It is well known through research that both our comprehension and compassion, as a human species, are related to what is immediately in front of us. If we saw, for example, someone being killed in front of us to produce our cell phone, most of us wouldn't buy it. And yet untold numbers of women are killed and tortured in the Congo because of rare earth minerals there that are needed for cell phones, and knowing this doesn't stop almost any of us from buying the phones. Why? Clearly, for any of us, individually, to choose not to buy a cell phone will not change the global picture. No doubt there are many individuals who are aware of the cost, and choosing to nonetheless buy cell phones out of sheer helplessness. My sense is there is more to it, though. A significant part of what goes into this choice is that the impact is far away and we neither comprehend nor can access the compassion circuits in the same way. (This is one of many examples in which the distance is geographic, for those of us living far from the Congo; in many others it is social, with similar effects.) In this and similar ways, the larger systems we live in are putting more and more pressure on us, making us ever more dependent on strangers for our needs, and masking those relationships through money, making it less likely for us to see the impact of our individual and collective behavior or of the systems we participate in.

Because of this, I believe that in our current world it is less and less likely that we will manage to liberate our consciousness, through individual practice alone, from the training we receive that embeds us in existing systems. Without something else that exposes us to the systemic constraints and impacts of our choices, NVC runs a serious risk of continuing to reinforce the myopia that is a necessary condition for the thriving of systems like capitalism and colonialism. Simply connecting to our needs as seen through an exclusively individual lens will not give us a way to examine and consider why some needs are more important to us than they are to people in other cultures, nor how we can expand the circle of those with whom we are in interrelationship about mutual impacts beyond our nuclear families.

Within this tragic set of circumstances, those of us who want to leverage the impact of NVC practices can experiment in the following ways:

- When we engage with individuals, we can draw the links between their personal experiences and challenges on the one hand and the larger forces outside and within that influence it. Just like consciousness raising groups in the women's movements in the 1970s, knowing that our own suffering is shared by others opens our awareness to the possibility, even likelihood, that we are not the source of the problem. In recent "Reckoning with Collapse" calls, I have asked people, who remain invisible to each other on these phone-based conference calls, to press five when they, too, experience what an individual shares about their particular response to global crises, and then I've said how many people pressed five. This both creates relief from self-judgments and/or experiences of being alone, and, simultaneously, redirects attention from individual to systemic sources of challenge. This focus in no way takes away from the transformative practice of connecting with needs that is central to NVC. Rather, it shapes how people will engage with their needs and which needs of their own and of others they are more likely to notice and take action to attend to. Over time, this kind of practice has the potential to liberate people from internalized patterns, which often leads to finding intrinsic motivation to engage with others to transform the systems that limit our individual capacities.
- When we engage with groups, we can tenderly bring to awareness the particular ways that power differences and entrenched social divisions play out in group dynamics. For one-time groups, we may be limited to bringing love and collective mourning to moments and questions that tend to recreate and sometimes even intensify divisions within the group. When we work with groups over time, we can embed these understandings in collective agreements about how to respond when predictable behaviors and responses arise, thereby maintaining more togetherness even while painful challenges likely continue. These pathways have everything to do with NVC principles and practices. Caring for everyone's needs, a core foundation of NVC,

cannot come into practice without increasing capacity to know our needs and make them known to others; to make requests; to dialogue across differences in capacity to put on the table our needs, our concerns, our “no”, and the impacts that we experience differentially based on our social locations. As NVC practitioners, we can learn and share knowledge about the intersection of NVC practice and awareness of power differences. We can also support people in seeing the humanity of everyone within a community, regardless of their structural power and/or social location, by connecting to our own and others’ needs as well as seeing how we are all shaped by the same systems that put us in different locations, thereby bringing tenderness to interactions within the group.

- When working with organizations, we can rapidly increase capacity to collaborate, to effectively attend to shared purpose, and to align with shared values through establishing systems and agreements that support collaboration all around the organization. Even when in contexts in which collaboration is not a central value, or where making explicit agreements is not seen as useful, we can demonstrate its effectiveness through practices grounded in NVC. One such example is Convergent Facilitation, which is a process that results in groups making decisions collaboratively and efficiently.

The above examples are cursory, and by no means exhaustive. I share them as an illustration that more is needed in order to get us to see what is made hidden, to make the connections that are deliberately obscured, and to care beyond the individualization of life that characterizes our current ways.

Transcending the Workshop Model

In the previous section I outlined some things that we can do when we are in a position of being a trainer, coach, or consultant. Now I want to look at that role itself. Over the years, I have more and more doubts about whether the role itself creates a limit on how much of a change we can actually create. Early on in his work, Marshall Rosenberg came to clash with some colleagues because he wanted to make widely available the knowledge he was gaining through his work as a psychologist with children who didn’t easily fit in the existing educational system. He wanted to give the work away. To this day, some NVC trainers and practitioners continue to want that. This is precisely why some of us are drawn to gift economy approaches and why I make so many resources available to anyone, without any request for money. And at the same time I fully understand the pull to make a profession out of NVC practice: people, myself included, want to be able to sustain ourselves while doing this work. These dual pulls have created an ongoing tension within the loose community of NVC practitioners. I don’t pretend to have easy answers to any of the questions I am aware of that this raises; these dilemmas are inherently persistent within a capitalist world. I want to name some of them, and also speak briefly of what some alternative pathways can be.

One of the issues that arise relates to money. From the moment I started working with others as a practitioner, I was deeply troubled by the idea of being paid to do work that feels utterly sacred to me. I have talked in the first part of this post about what I see as the inherent contradiction between the focus on needs and the ways of capitalism. What it actually means in practice remains unclear to me. For example, some NVC trainers have other work that is their livelihood, and offer NVC practice groups free of charge. Others, myself included, are dedicating our entire work life to bringing NVC to the world, and have no other means to sustain ourselves. What can then be done to sustain us? One of the answers and practices I personally have adopted is to move continually in the direction of relying more and more on gifting rather than exchange as a way to sustain the work I do. Still, while this is a path, it neither is available to everyone in all contexts, nor does it address other limitations of the relationships that are formed when one person is in the role of trainer, coach, or consultant, and others are the recipients of knowledge and practices from that person.

One of those limitations is that such relationships mimic all too easily relations of power that exist within society at large, leaving both the person who, for example, offers the workshop and the people who participate less able to relate to each other in their fullness. Participants remain at least slightly disempowered and the person leading the workshop remains alone, no matter how much, like me, they are committed to vulnerability and transparency.

We cannot, individually, transform the structures that maintain the destruction of life on planet earth. Teaching NVC workshops, with its focus on individuals sharing, from a distance, with individuals, doesn't provide enough of a foundation for disrupting that mode of living.

We also cannot create large scale change as lone communities, and, still, creating little islands that extend beyond our individual lives while also aiming to de-socialize ourselves away from the training and conditioning we've received in existing systems provides a bridge to a new layer. We are all embedded in communities that are often invisible or made impotent through stripping us of material intertwinement. I see some potential, as yet little-tapped, to create a different type of ripple from a different type of engagement.

When we embed ourselves within a group of people with a shared purpose – be it creating a collective of practitioners; an experimental school; a live-in community; or a production facility – we become part of an emergent field of exploration rather than a solitary perceived fountain of knowledge. This is especially so when we also tackle, within whatever community we find ourselves in, the immensely challenging task of aiming to find willingness and capacity to share more risks with each other – both emotional and material – liberating ourselves bit by bit from full individual dependence on market forces to satisfy our basic needs. Our NVC practices then become valuable resources to bring to navigating our differences, deepening our freedom, creating and attending to our systems of agreements, and more. Once again practicing NVC becomes a living experiment in truth, as it was for Marshall, rather than a fully codified set of practices that are passed on as “the way to do things,” which usually happens in workshops. I have more trust that this approach will continue to pull us out of our social conditioning and into laying micro-foundations for a social infrastructure for the future.

Beyond Dialogue: Nonviolence in a Violent World

NVC as it's currently practiced and taught in much of the world, especially in places that benefit the most from current global power structures, is primarily focused on the intra- and interpersonal dimensions. In NVC workshops, we learn tools for inner practice that can liberate us for more choice and more compassion. We also learn tools for interpersonal practice that can support conflict resolution and connected pathways to change. Again, without active attention to branching out beyond the individual level, NVC practitioners will remain unaware of the limitations of this kind of dialogue.

NVC can clearly lead to both internal and interpersonal change when there is a shared willingness to even engage, and some, even a tiny amount, of mutual goodwill. What happens, however, when willingness to engage, trust, or goodwill are absent? In our current global context, all three are dangerously low. We cannot rely on dialogue alone in a violent world.

From my readings, it appears that nonviolence was the predominant way of living for humans for most of the apparently 300,000 years of our living, until about 7,000 years ago in some places, and, in some others, only centuries or even decades ago. And yet these societies often crumbled when invaded. There are many reasons for this, and one of them, I believe, is that they were unused to engaging nonviolently with those who engage violently.

While NVC practitioners find amazing capacity to transform relationships with friends and family, even

to connect and create togetherness across vast political or cultural differences and in this way increase trust, few such stories include engaging with someone who is actively trying to kill the person in front of them, let alone trying to subjugate or exploit millions of people.

No matter what needs the people who did the invasions that have wreaked havoc on the planet had – which I assume were exactly the same needs as I have – dialogue would not have been enough to create change in those circumstances. For dialogue to work, again, there needs to be a willingness, even small or partial, to see the person seeking dialogue as human, as worth investing in, as even existing. So often these were not the conditions that nonviolent cultures experienced in dealing with colonizers. Indeed, there are multiple stories of indigenous populations offering warmth, reconciliation, even support to colonizers only to be imprisoned, killed, or exploited. They misread the colonizers, and couldn't have understood them, as there was no context of colonization in most of the world when Europeans began to arrive in other continents.

This is part of why Marshall was speaking of the protective use of force: the force we use to protect life, not to punish, shame, or hurt anyone, when the stakes are extremely high. Teasing out what it means and what it doesn't mean, and especially in the context of large movements, is one of the big tasks that Marshall left to us, to which I return below. Without finding our answers and enacting them, we can easily be in dialogue with those who vote for Trump while the planet burns up and millions are still hungry. If we stick with dialogue alone while the harm continues, our children are likely to see the end of human life, if not we ourselves. Some communities are already in collapse because of how some of us, myself included, are living. I want us to be able to look at the challenge directly and not shy away from the reality of it. To the extent that dialogue becomes, implicitly, the only method that is seen by NVC practitioners as caring for everyone, NVC loses its capacity to be a tool for those whose lives are directly on the line and those who directly act in solidarity with them.

Clearly, one of the results of patriarchal conditioning is that we respond by escalating, and most of us deeply underestimate the power of dialogue to create change. Gandhi and MLK never lost sight of this clarity, and continued to dialogue with those in power even while engaging in significant civil disobedience also designed to shift the options and enhance the pressure on those in power to come to the table to dialogue and create change. At the same time, relying only on dialogue doesn't demonstrate a true understanding of the immensity of the systemic challenges we face, globally.

Simplicity and Complexity

I want to end by looking at the task of what it would take to restore NVC to its radical roots. We don't and can't know why Marshall didn't write the book about social change that he longed to write; the one that would offer something as simple as the basic practice template. My own guess is that he didn't write it because he hadn't distilled it sufficiently to be able to capture it in simple form. I don't believe he didn't write it because the practice template for interpersonal dialogue, with observations, feelings, needs, and requests, is all he wanted to leave behind.

He did leave a heap of pointers and placeholders, in the form of sentences here and there, in workshops, interviews, and conversations that people remember. It is our task, those of us who ache to complete and make available the work he started, to develop these incomplete references enough to be able to reach simplicity. Some of us have access to early work – workshop notes, booklets that are no longer in print, and segments of early newsletters that describe what he did. What would it take to review all of his work, especially those early pieces, pull out of it quotes that are such pointers, catalog them, and maybe then see what we can collectively do to codify those parts? What would a fully needs-based nonviolent civil disobedience campaign look like at this time? Will we find simple enough and robust enough practices that reliably increase our capacity to mourn, celebrate, and act in community? Will NVC, when radicalized again, support us in such necessary endeavors as reclaiming

the commons, restoring dignity to work, taking learning out of schools and into the community, radically transforming how we engage with conflicts, and restoring the flow of resources necessary to sustain all life? I don't know the answer. I know I want companionship in looking for it.