

Can the Social Order Be Transformed Through Personal Practice?

The Case of Nonviolent Communication

With Miki Kashtan

Some years ago, I was asked to write a review of a book about which I loved everything except the title: *Toward a Socially Responsible Psychology for a Global Era*.^[1] What I most appreciated in that book was that psychologists were taking to task their own profession, delving into critiques long levelled against psychotherapy, and finding painful merit in them. There's nothing in psychotherapy as it's commonly done, or even psychological research and policy, that makes it transformative of the social order. At best, it helps individuals find more personal resilience within the existing system. At worst, focusing on the individual distracts the gaze from social conditions and system considerations, leaving individuals less equipped to see clearly what is in front of them, and to join with others to work for change.

A similar and much stronger claim was made recently by Ronald Purser about mindfulness. In a Guardian article, provocatively titled *The Mindfulness Conspiracy*, Purser argues that "Instead of encouraging radical action, mindfulness says the causes of suffering are disproportionately inside us, not in the political and economic frameworks that shape how we live." Purser's article has been criticized by people I know personally and hold in high respect, and I am not in any way an expert in mindfulness, so I am not going to enter that particular debate. Still, when I read it, I was struck by the depth of questions he raised, by the parallel between them and the claims made in the book I reviewed, and by what it brought up for me in relation to a practice I do have expertise in: Nonviolent Communication (NVC).

NVC is a language-based approach to personal and social transformation; a body of work brought to the world by Marshall Rosenberg. It emerged from Marshall's interest in making what he learned and applied in clinical practice available at a community and peer level and is now carried on by several hundred certified trainers, a larger number of independent facilitators who share it in dozens of countries, and an even larger number of practitioners at various stages of integrating it into their lives and work.

Is this what we want NVC to be used for?

For years now, I have been anguished by the gap I see between the radical potential of NVC and what it has become. From my understanding of Marshall's own work, that of some other people, and my own experience with applying it, I believe that NVC, as a body of work, can contribute to our collective ability to face and transform social conditions and systems, including, in particular, capitalism. Despite this potential, in actual practice, I see much of the way NVC is used and taught drifting into what the contributors to the book I reviewed, and Purser, are concerned about, and what Marshall Rosenberg himself cautioned of: "If I use Nonviolent Communication to liberate people to be less depressed, to get along better with their family, but do not teach them, at the same time, to use their energy to rapidly transform systems in the world, then I am part of the problem. I am essentially calming people down, making them happier to live in the systems as they are, so I am using NVC as a narcotic."^[2] In this piece I focus on making visible some of the radical potential of NVC and the issues that I see with its application. In part two, I begin to sketch that NVC practitioners can attend to these concerns if they share them.

The Radical Roots of NVC

Rather than being exhaustive, I aim to illustrate the transformative potential of NVC by focusing on only a few aspects of it that are particularly important to me in terms of the possibility, ever slimmer, that our species will find a way to turn around the march to extinction that we've been on for hundreds or thousands of years, accelerating again and again since the discovery of converting fossil to fuel. Beyond excavating the radical roots of NVC, my ultimate purpose is to align current NVC practice with them. Some of the ways I see this possibility, to which I return in part two, are about building on NVC's liberating (rather than accommodating) potential for individuals; linking individual liberation to the systemic dimensions of the work; mobilizing the power of community to anchor change as a source of support, feedback, learning, and increased resources; and engaging in the kind of change that becomes possible when the NVC lens is applied in community settings, beyond the individual level.

Marshall Rosenberg's work – as I learned directly from him, from reading materials he developed early on, and from conversations with Marion Little, who is completing a book on the evolution of NVC – emerged from a profound unwillingness to accept the norms of psychology at the time he started to branch out of clinical practice. He was motivated to create what Martin Buber called I-Thou relationships with those he worked with; to freely give away his findings and expertise; to share resources freely; and to engage communities – of teachers, of civil rights activists, of community members in school districts – to create sufficient social traction to counter the individualizing and pathologizing focus of psychology in mental health services, education, prisons, and other institutions.

Over my 25 years of learning and reflecting on what he brought to the world, I have come to appreciate the depth of his commitment to a transformative vision of basing life on what he referred to as the needs for autonomy and interdependence, and to a transformative methodology emerging from popular, community-based education.

I want to use three examples to illustrate the depth of these two commitments.

Needs. Although it took Marshall a couple of decades to zero-in on needs as the basic lens through which to understand human motivation and impacts of action, once he landed there, probably in the early 90s, it settled and remained his essential lens until his death in 2015. The word “needs” is a bit tricky, because it has so many different meanings in different contexts. Within the context of NVC, this word refers to the most essential categories of what motivates humans and what is necessary for life; not to the almost endless strategies of attending to those needs. It's simplest, in this context, to think of four basic categories of needs: physical needs (such as food and shelter), freedom, connection, and meaning. This is precisely where I see the link happening between autonomy and interdependence as two intertwining dimensions, circling around each other like the double helix of the DNA: we cannot have full autonomy if we need to escape connection to have it; we cannot have full connection if it means giving up on freedom in order to have it.

The radical, eminently practical, implications of this lens are too numerous to list in a short piece like this, so I am picking only two.[3] One is the shift in the field of morality and justice that comes from seeing violence, or any other act of transgression, as emerging from acute suffering, from needs, especially the need for dignity, being chronically unattended to. From this understanding come restorative approaches that offer promising new avenues to reducing violence. One of these approaches, Restorative Circles, is a specifically NVC aligned methodology developed by Dominic Barter and others in Brazil. It demonstrates the other aspect of Marshall's specific commitments. As a dialogical system it is based not on professionals who come from the outside to offer services but on agreements and methods designed by the communities that use it and responsive to their specific circumstances and needs.

The other implication I am pointing to is that decision-making that is based on collecting all needs relevant to a decision and engaging stakeholders in converting them to practical strategies that can work for all is likely to result in robust decisions that are less likely to be sabotaged by those carrying them out.

Money and capitalism. As far as I can tell, one of the specific implications of NVC, and the focus on needs, is a basic incompatibility with capitalism; a clash of approaches to resource flow. NVC, with its focus on needs, encodes within it a gift economy approach that I often summarize by the principle of resources flowing from where they are to where they are needed based on willingness and capacity – another instance of where autonomy and interdependence integrate. I hear this in one of Marshall's provocative statements that I have thought about, and have been unpacking and expanding, for over twenty years. The words I wrote down in one workshop in the early 2000s in San Francisco are etched in me: "Never work for pay, and make sure you have all the resources you need to do your work." (If you want more information and to hear similar quotes, you can follow Cleona Lira's post to a video with very similar statements.) The first half of this statement challenges exchange, and invites us to do the work for its own intrinsic meaning rather than for the extrinsic reward of money. The second half captures the commitment to reach for what we need, not less and not more. Capitalism, in stark contrast, is based on exchange and on extracting as much as possible for our own, largely individual, benefit. It is structured in a way that ensures that resources flow, for the most part, to those who already have resources.[4] In the last while, we have been steeped in narratives that suggest that capitalism, and especially its recent neoliberal version, have resulted in reduction of inequality. An article I just read called "Progress and Its Discontents," by Jason Hickel, challenges this narrative and the numbers that it rests on. (The basic argument is that this narrative is based on scant data that is analyzed in incomplete ways that obscure rather than reveal the global trends.) Instead, it argues that neoliberal policies have intensified inequalities and increased global impoverishment, joining those, like economist Thomas Picketty, who claim that growing inequality is inherent to capitalism; not an aberration of it.

To put it starkly: unless we consciously build our economies on direct caring for needs within an awareness of being always part of a larger whole, we are likely to continue to increase the suffering of people. I believe that, with enough courage, we cannot escape the conclusion that capitalism has also been a disaster to non-human life, and to the biosphere overall, creating now imminent threat to most life on the planet. NVC, with its direct and insistent focus on needs, can provide a blueprint for creating economies that nurture life. When we aim to engage with such practices, within active communities of commitment, such as the ones in Brazil or the Nonviolent Global Liberation community, what often happens goes, as with the other examples, beyond individual transformation, restoring a community's capacity to find collective and collaborative ways to sustain itself.

Questions. In the choreographed dialogue template that is used as a practice tool when learning NVC, every expression ends in a question mark. The radical potential of this is the constant reminder, built into the practice, that we are interdependent; always in relationship with others. Asking a question invites us to listen for the response, thus taking us out of the prison of self that statements leave us in, and inviting us into relationship, into caring for self and other through dialogue. Even more specifically, a particular aspect of learning to make requests at the end of what we say is the focus on what are called connection requests: requests that help us know how successful we are at putting the needs, impacts, and resources on the table so we can decide, together with others, how to best attend to the needs and minimize harmful impact, with the resources available to us collectively. For example, rather than asking someone if they are willing to do what we want, which is more focused on the solution, a connection request could be to ask instead for information about how my proposed action might impact the person I am in dialogue with or about how they've understood what I've said. These kinds of requests move us from the individual to the relationship and community, and thus have the potential to directly reweave community and relationship into our lives, undoing the ravages of capitalism.

The Gap: NVC as Personal Growth within Capitalism

I mourn deeply that for reasons I am still investigating and may never understand fully, Marshall shifted from doing mostly community-based projects and trainings for those working together to create community change in the 1970's and 1980's, to doing mostly workshops for individuals interested in self-improvement. The result is precisely what he was afraid of and expressed so poignantly in the quote above from his 2005 workshop. Over the last few years I've been reading statements of newly certified NVC trainers, dozens every year, looking in particular for what their understanding of NVC is and what their activities are in terms of how they bring NVC to the world. Especially in the global North, I find that the overwhelming majority of them share NVC in the individualized context of workshops. Those who come are not generally part of communities where mutual support is embedded and don't build such communities with each other; and they come for the purpose of improving their lives, rarely because they want to apply NVC in the context of creating community change or of taking on and attempting to transform the larger systems that so brutally shape our lives.

While those in the global South are often painfully aware of the neoliberal context that so deeply affects their (and all of our) lives, many in the global North are not. Without that active awareness of the systemic backdrop of our individual existence, we regularly recreate and reinforce systems like colonialism and capitalism and their onslaught on life and people. Here's what my colleague Aya Caspi wrote about this in a listserv for NVC certified trainers, highlighting the way that, when applied outside of an interdependent and systemic understanding, powerful NVC principles can be used to the detriment of others, including marginalized groups:

I recently lead a training where we looked at the ways that NVC can turn against its own purpose in the most cruel ways, when being used from within the current paradigm and without going through an inner liberation process, including awakening to the systemic and social impacts on our lives ... Some examples:

- holding to our choice in a way that drops others because 'we have 100% choice';
- denying responsibility for the impact of our choices because 'we are not responsible for other people's feelings and needs';
- judging others for their suffering because 'people are responsible for their feelings and needs';
- asking the 'oppressed' to empathize with the 'oppressor' because 'everyone's needs matter';
- dropping other people's needs / purpose because 'I have an unmet need, and my needs matter'

Despite the radical roots and Marshall's vision, something in the practice when it's not tied directly to those radical roots can easily be taken by the current paradigm in ways that would reinforce it, paralleling what can happen to psychology and mindfulness. Many people who want to bring NVC to the world have their imaginations constrained by the workshop model for doing this. Within that, they will find it far easier to "charge" participants rather than get into the incredibly contested and far from pain-free territory of speaking of and matching resources to needs. This, in turn, will skew the participant population, and, with it, what does or doesn't get discussed, experimented with, and trusted. Points of view and experiences of marginalized people will remain marginal.

Even when the value of work done by and within marginalized communities is recognized, the avenues for such recognition are themselves constrained and often have the effect of reinforcing the dominant systems more than transforming them. One example is the response I've seen when Dominic Barter has brought his community-based projects and experiments to the global North. Dominic engaged with Marshall to restore, expand, and apply his earlier work in education and to develop new applications in the field of restorative justice and gift economics. When learning from these projects is shared in the global North, however, my sense is that most of those hearing about it

have filtered it through the lens of the market, without even realizing it's a filter. This has led to it becoming commercialized and individualized as material for new workshops and programs. These adaptations, clearly done based on excitement about the astonishing results of the work, also tend to miss one more dimension: the specific and local flavor of each application, based on circumstances, systemic agreements, and relationships that cannot be replicated elsewhere. By abstracting it and focusing on process and practice rather than system and co-generation, they end up truncating the liberating and radical potential, rendering the results less impressive than in Brazil while diminishing the impact of the work in its original setting.

In all these ways, Marshall's movement towards a vision of a world where everyone's needs are met is stunted.

What, then, can people who find value in NVC do to practice, integrate, and share it in ways that challenge rather than reinforce the dominant paradigm, bringing aliveness and courage to our lives rather than becoming one more tool for compliance? Two specific aspects I see are about exposing invisible impacts through systemic awareness, and engaging with the limits of dialogue in a violent world. I take up both of these in a separate piece soon to be posted.

Beyond that, I'd like to imagine that what I am aiming to do here in this piece will be mirrored and taken up by other people who are passionate about the potential of NVC in these areas, who will share their own discoveries, and we will learn with and from each other.

[1] Published in the Journal of Peace Psychology, 2015, vol. 21, #2, 299-302.

[2] Quoted from participants' workshop notes in 2005, at a special session on NVC and social change in Switzerland.

[3] If you are particularly interested in this exploration, look at chapters 10 and 11 in my unpublished dissertation, available on the internet through UMI, Beyond Reason: Reconciling Emotion with Social Theory, for more examples.

[4] If you want to know more about this, you can look at the results of the studies that Piketty documents in his book Capital in the Twenty-First Century.