

The Power of Silent Empathy

with Rita Herzog

When I first learned about the concept of silent empathy during a workshop with Marshall Rosenberg many years ago, I didn't know how soon I'd have the opportunity to try it out. I was visiting my daughter for four days and even though it seemed to be going well, I must have been acting in my old mother role, making comments about her life, analyzing her behavior, giving her my unsolicited view on everything!

On the third morning we went for a long walk and stopped at a cafe. After we ordered breakfast, she looked at me and said (with much intensity), "So when are you going to stop criticizing me?" I was always taught that if I am asked a question I'm obligated to answer it. But no matter what I would have said, I knew it would quickly escalate into a prolonged argument. There was no way to win.

Just in time, I remembered what I had learned. There was another alternative: silent empathy! So I reached out silently to my daughter, and tuned in. I guessed that she was feeling frustrated and despairing, yearning for an ease of connection with me. She wanted us to be together in a new way, a different kind of mother/daughter relationship.

She took a breath, waiting for me to answer her, waiting for the start of the familiar argument. She looked puzzled for a second. Then she slowly let her breath out...and it was over. We started talking about something else, and had a pleasant day.

I wanted to shout, "Hey, it works!" For the first time, I was able to shift the dynamic of our relationship at that moment of impasse.

I realized that one way my daughter would reach out to me when she felt disconnected was to be provocative, to be sure she would get a response. I had been skeptical that silent empathy could work, that the energy could flow as easily as spoken words. It was difficult for me to imagine how to communicate in silence, or to trust in that energy that can be offered by one person and received by another. I imagined that just sitting in silence in witness to someone's pain might be enough. But silent empathy is not a passive endeavor□ it asks as much of me as when I am offering empathic words to another.

Since NVC is mostly about the spoken word, and practicing what to say to each other, I have not found silent empathy to be discussed or explored very often. But silent empathy is one of the many treasures that NVC has brought to my life.