

Nonviolent Communication

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Notes taken during the Day Conference at Stroud in which Marshall Rosenberg introduced Nonviolent Communication to an audience of about 200 people. Nonviolent Communication can be described as a method, or a language, or a consciousness, whose intention is not to solve problems or difficulties but to enable people to become, and to stay, connected.

Marshall Rosenberg led the whole day, encouraging members of the audience to ask questions and present situations from their lives which he then led them to explore through lively, humorous, wise interchange. His stamina, commitment and freshness were, to me, remarkable.

The essence of Nonviolent Communication is free giving; and we experience ourselves as receiving when we give. The basic attitude he asked us to bring to any meeting with another person is the question, 'What is alive in you?' That universal interest is implied in the everyday question, found in every language, 'How are you?' Often it will just be a social ritual, as will the reply we give or receive, but when we choose, or when it is important, are we able to ask that question, and to answer it, with a fuller, more personal and awake meaning? Do we know how to connect? How to voice our inherent wish to enhance life? Think of some of the obvious, habitual ways which interfere with our connecting interest with another person:

I can think what is wrong with the other.

I can say what is wrong with the other.

I can think what is wrong with me.

I can think what the other person might be thinking is wrong with me.

These are some of the examples of how pervasive are our notions of 'deserve' and 'punishment': the system, formal or informal, of retributive justice. In this way of looking at the world, compliments, praise, rewards are just the other side of the same way of interacting. Somewhere at the root of this is the judgment that we are justified in enjoying the suffering of others when they do wrong.

Nonviolent Communication suggests we take a new direction, which promotes connection between people, by acknowledging our feelings—in a clear and yet gentle way. Use feelings as a way of checking, finding our

response, to behavior—of other people, of ourselves. We spell it out to ourselves, internally or outwardly, 'When I see you doing so and so I feel

The second step of Nonviolent Communication is to follow the feeling to find the 'need', in us, from which the feeling grew. 'Needs' is a slightly difficult word and no single word can embrace all the many qualities and conditions—from shelter to safety to community to love—which Nonviolent Communication brings under the umbrella term of 'needs'. Perhaps one can think of it as all that in a positive and living way is an expression of life. Needs are always engaged with, expressive of, and integral to life. We all have—not always at the same time—the same needs and can recognize, often, that all people, even those we might have difficulties with, have these needs. Problems arise in the way that strategies, or ways we go about meeting our needs, get mixed up with the needs, as also do the requests we make of ourselves or others to bring about the strategies which we hope will meet those needs. We often, in many situations, happy or difficult, rush towards a way of meeting our needs before we have clearly lived our way into what we are feeling (or another person is feeling) and what need or needs are at the root of the feeling. We will often rush to a request and that request will often then be a vague, impossible request, often not truly a request but a demand:

I want you to love me.

Think about the reasons we want people to have for doing what we want them to do. Think how often we do not feel free or clear.

If we insist, say, on the other person changing we are almost bound to meet resistance. In fact, our longing for having our own needs met is not able to be satisfied if the needs of others connected to us, in the situation, are not being met. Our need to be involved in the meeting of other people's needs is one of our primary needs.

So, in a simple two-person situation, say, how can we most likely work towards getting both persons' needs met—us and them? Reach out to what they are feeling and needing—and this need, whatever the situation, will be something of value, something fine. We may not agree with the way they are going about meeting that need, but if, via imagining or receiving their feeling, we can gain some understanding of their need then we will have gone far beyond, for the moment at least, criticizing and hearing criticism.

We are here in the act of giving and receiving empathy. This is what is meant by empathizing in Nonviolent Communication—the active, open, respectful searching and receiving from the other person's (or your own in self-empathy) feelings and needs, based in clear observation of what is going on and leading

to some potentially helpful request of yourself or the other person or a third party.

If we don't receive empathy or give ourselves self-empathy then, often, we are unable to give empathy. There may well be too much pain. In such a situation we need to contact, recognize, and express that which is preventing us empathizing with the other person.

When things go wrong between us—we may have tried to take this step into honesty and the intention of connection—there is then the schooling in really learning to enjoy the response of the other even when it involves the other person becoming upset, or telling us what is wrong with us, or responding in a whole variety of ways which seem to reject our intention. Now here is something very clear, demanding, invigorating—we learn to see the good, the true need, or at least to believe it's there, to know it's there, to be gently committed to getting to know it, to hearing it acknowledged by the other person. At times this empathizing is silent, perhaps most of our empathizing is silent—but it does need, for most of us, to be practiced—but with the motive of connection, of being confirmed in our understanding, and of giving confirmation. If the motive is connection, we avoid triggering the irritation of the other person by what might be interpreted as clever, sophisticated psychological analysis.

This is a tender area. Perhaps we can try not to hear or imagine what a person is thinking about us. Sometimes we will be unhappy with the way we have gone about meeting our own needs—the recognition of this feeling of sadness or regret is very different to guilt. There is such a strong 'ought to' in guilt and blame that we are prevented from getting in touch with more truly personal, substantial feelings. We are always trying to reach through criticism or self-criticism, in Nonviolent Communication, so that we can hear the human need in ourselves or the other person.

All this needs patience. 'Say it again' was a request Marshall kept making of people who were describing a situation, their feelings, and their words to another person. He kept asking us to live deeper in the words we were saying or remembering, that we or others had said in moments of great tension, so that we could slowly hear the feelings and the needs. It's a beautiful process, strong and human and, for me, helps clear away any suspicion of manipulation. It is also, I find, very reliable and safe: the realizations which you have create their own security as you explore experiences that are potentially very emotionally charged.

We have such a difficulty, in our culture, of acknowledging 'needs'. We are asked in Nonviolent Communication to hear the precious message about a need that is not being met, in every 'no' or silence or anger or blame. When our needs are not being met we experience a lot of pain and this can lead to

suspicion or blame. We may well find a feeling of sadness and regret, but that is a step which can lead to our wanting to find the common need or the way different people's needs can be met.

Taking time to know the feelings and needs of others, and of ourselves, does not mean that we give up all interest in the behavior of someone else changing. No. There can be a clear 'Please'—please change your behavior—please do this, please do what is more in harmony with my needs. But it is a request. There is a willingness to hear 'No', to have to continue working. It is as strenuous but liberating discipline to keep our observations clear of judgment, blame and criticism ('You're always late!'). If 'Please' is a challenge, so is 'Thank you'. 'Thank you' is part of our consciousness of our moment-to-moment ability to enrich life—or not! Think of expressing gratitude as celebrating, rather than praising or complimenting. This celebrating is vital to our health: we need to experience the gratitude of others but, on the other hand, we can't celebrate when we live in pain. Celebration gives us strength for the difficult times. The intention with praise is still manipulative; it could easily switch into blame. The intention in expressing gratitude is to celebrate the way someone else, or something we are a part of, has enriched our life, or life in general. If, like everything else in Nonviolent Communication, goes back to the specific deed, the feelings, the needs met. Celebration tells me something interesting; praise tells me nothing.

Celebration is a clear way of experiencing how Nonviolent Communication leads us out of the narrowly personal—when others express gratitude to us in this way the effect is to enhance our sense of gratitude to others.

Nonviolent Communication is this rigorous process and it is a consciousness. It is a language. We all partially speak this language and it is a language in tune with our inner nature but it is a language most of us have to practice in order to become natural and fluent. But it is a language in which our attention and intention are what matters rather than easy proficiency. It is a language of the heart.

Anthroposophy, Camphill and Nonviolent Communication

Notes of a contribution by Bob Clay, introducing people mainly from Camphill Communities to Nonviolent Communication. There were about 30 participants and two trainers.

My first contact with Nonviolent Communication came when I was training to become a teacher of the Alexander Technique. One of the teachers on the course, though not a qualified trainer in Nonviolent Communication, was experienced in it, committed to it, and introduced it to me as a way of looking at and enhancing the quality of interaction between student and teacher; the whole area of what we nowadays call giving and receiving 'feedback'. I can clearly remember her drawing a simple cartoon-style drawing in chalk with a plant, with roots in the soil, growing up into the light, accompanied by the simple words 'Feelings grow out of needs'. I was immediately struck by this expression. It touched something very deep which I didn't then put into words but which I would now say was to do with a sense of relief and freedom at being offered a way of acknowledging that I had needs and, more particularly, needs that were not being met. I felt—again I am putting into words something that was proverbial then—that the rigor and simplicity of the process that was being described to me allowed a lot of habitual self-judgment, blame, anger and other moralistic attitudes the chance to dissolve. It is interesting to me to have discovered Nonviolent Communication in this context of exploring the teacher-student relationship because, in preparing this talk, I came across the teacher's maxim given at the end of Rudolf Steiner's Study of Man course to teachers:

Imbue thyself with the power of imagination.

Have courage for the truth.

Sharpen thy feeling for responsibility of soul.

It seems to me that these three challenges get to the heart of the method, consciousness, which is Nonviolent Communication.

What I would like to do first is to look at what an anthroposophical understanding of the man tells me about the meaning of Nonviolent Communication in our age. Then I would like to look at some of the insights or reminders which Nonviolent Communication can give to us as we live in Camphill Communities, and thirdly I would like to suggest some ways in which, for me, my experience of community life enriches my understanding of Nonviolent Communication.

Anthroposophy and Nonviolent Communication

The widest perspective I would want to bring to my attempt to place Nonviolent Communication is that of the states of existence and consciousness, beyond that of our everyday waking consciousness, which Rudolf Steiner constantly reminds us of. Put most simply we are asked to recognize the world of sleep as more than a state of restorative rest, or information processing, interrupting our consciousness. That which is recognized in sleep can be extended into recognition of the world we belong to beyond death and before birth, and also into the many-layered quality of our everyday consciousness in which more is happening than we are normally aware of. Today our experience of our individualized 'awake' consciousness, rooted in our thinking, conceptual activity is at the nub of our sense of self. The clearest quality of this consciousness is its awakeness and in it we find our everyday sense of personal freedom and autonomy. We assert ourselves as individuals but, at the same time, we can feel somewhat troubled about where in our souls, below the level of clear waking consciousness, the energy of this self-assertion is being generated. All the many issues to do with the socialization of the child, how we take on cultural norms, become involved when we start talking about 'my needs'. In a course such as The Effects of Spiritual Development, Rudolf Steiner helps me to see how this initially unconscious need for self-definition, self-assertion, is the ground from which our interest in the world, and our capacity to express and receive love, can develop.

While recognizing the power of our individualizing activity, Rudolf Steiner describes the process polar to this: that we are social in that part of ourselves which is active in sleep, but that this 'sleep' consciousness is also working in us during the day too. In the well-known lecture, usually entitled Social and Anti-Social Instincts, from the series of lectures, published now as The Challenge of the Times, he describes the swinging of our consciousness, below the level of our ordinary awareness, like a pendulum, alternately protecting and defining the self, and opening out to receive the other. We here confront the direct encounter between ego and ego which anthroposophy affirms.

The understanding of the soul's life through the threefold activities of thinking, feeling and willing gives me another way of approaching how the social and the individualizing tendencies interact, and leads me deeper into understanding Nonviolent Communication as more than, other than, a method of self-empowerment in the narrow sense of getting personal needs met, with no concern for others. In fact, in establishing our separate 'selves' we are also giving birth to our longing for connection. The awake individualized self can bring disharmony into the interaction of our thinking and our willing but this disturbance opens the way to recognizing the crucial importance of our feeling life. The openness and clarity of our meeting and

experiencing the world can be clouded by personal prejudices. Desires and instincts which seem beyond our control can seem to blot out our individual sparks of decision and initiative. A need is felt for the clarity of our thinking to enter the will, the life of the will to quicken our thinking; for color to come into the interaction of light and dark. Here we come to the feelings. Not that this is a realm without confusion, the confusion which Steiner time and again describes in terms of antipathy and sympathy. The relevance of feeling for the exploration of Nonviolent Communication is just that it is the place of movement, of mix, of flow—the meeting of self and other in our experience, of conscious and unconscious, and out of this meeting, if we are coming from the experience of our individualized self, comes the crucial recognition of our incompleteness—both of ourselves and of other people. and caught up as it is in the sense of flow and movement, the experience of incompleteness leads on to the conviction that we all can develop, grow, change. This is the basic power of imagination asked for in the teacher's maxim, carried into all our encounters, not just with children. Feelings make the bridge between the individualizing and the social, and start us wondering, imagining, about how we, or others might change or grow or develop. Here we are, in a richer way, returning to the meaning of 'needs'.

Having started in the clear awakesness of our modern thinking, and found our way to an imagining of the other person with our feelings, the next step is one recognized very clearly in Nonviolent Communication and in the understanding of how people interact which Rudolf Steiner has given us. It could be described as respecting that connection in the realm of sleep which we have with others. It is expressed through cultivating an attitude of patience and requesting, free of demand, free of rush, in our meetings with others. It is an attitude which seeks to leave behind both the urge to power and to subservience, and seeks to find the freedom in our coming together that we started with in the separateness of the thinking individual. This is a fundamental shift in consciousness and is most obviously expressed in Nonviolent Communication in the attempt to frame genuine requests of ourselves and other people: one is free to refuse a genuine request.

How Nonviolent Communication Could Inform Community Living

I have now described the main features of how, as I see it, the approach of Nonviolent Communication speaks to an anthroposophical understanding of social interaction and of the modern individual. I will now move on to look at some specific insights each might have to give to the other. I will begin by outlining some reminders Nonviolent Communication might give to community living in Camphill.

First, there is the, to me, important general reminder that the exploration of social issues has to begin as a question of self-knowledge, of understanding

the inner processes in human beings, and the particular nature of any personal interaction.

Secondly, a reminder of the rich opportunities, in a whole variety of relationships, from singing in a choir to unblocking a drain, to find peace and relationship in activity. I am here dwelling in the wish to develop 'courage for the truth' as the teacher's maxims put it. This courage, to me, is about giving time and attention to getting to know each other, in all the activities of life, and neither rushing into getting things done nor staying in a safe space of shared inwardness. I firmly believe that the more truly we engage in this challenging work of patient enquiry, of 'living with' each other as Rudolf Steiner puts it so simply in the Social and Antisocial Instincts lecture, then we will enhance our social effectiveness, the quality of what we do together. Effective social initiatives—healthy social organisms—grow out of a wide base of explored personal relationships.

My third reminder is a gentle one: to acknowledge that a significant help which Nonviolent Communication could bring to our lives is in the overcoming of the anxiety, vulnerability and lack of self-esteem—all that which spiritual teachers such as the Dalai Lama find so puzzlingly prevalent in the West today. In Camphill we often turn to the path of Parsifal as he learns to be able to ask the question, 'What ails thee?' That is the same path as that described in Nonviolent Communication but, hand-in-hand with the impulse to open out to the other person goes the path of learning which allows us to receive empathy from others and from ourselves—and I believe Nonviolent Communication offers us a humanizing of this mirroring.

A more specific point: Nonviolent Communication alerts us to the disconnection expressed in labels which ignore the individual and put us in boxes of all sorts. Many terms we use to describe ourselves or others have this quality although we might not normally recognize it. There are many obvious labels for categories of people in our communities and I believe it would be liberating to consciously work to do without them.

Finally, the particular label of 'special needs', and others which are a paraphrase of that one: Non-violent Communication speaks of universal needs, universal values, universal expressions of life. Because we have grown, perhaps reluctantly, to use and then perhaps reject, labels which imply that needs can be special to a particular group, then the attempt to acknowledge and meet the universal needs which we all share—and this attempt is community living—will be one we can enliven and confirm. But, again, doing without labels takes that extra bit of time and attention. The path of spiritual development belonging to our time is one which values the free human personality and being true to this path is, for me, worth a bit of awkward self-consciousness in our use of language.

How Campbell Could Enhance Nonviolent Communication

Finally, I would like to offer some insights or perspectives from community living in Camphill which, for me, add depth or color to the core of Nonviolent Communication.

They all revolve around our understanding of the word 'conscience' and my belief that we do have a genuine voice of transcendence within us. The place I started this presentation from asked us to recognize the many voices and potential dialogues within the self and between selves. That which lies beyond our clear waking consciousness, whether we're thinking in terms of above/below or within/ without, belongs to what we call the spiritual as much as to what we think of as the instinctual.

Within us, feelings and needs change and develop and we are not simply observers of this process but are each involved in what Jaspers calls deciding 'what one is going to be'. Put another way, community living allows me to experience that in the meeting between people, a 'we' is discovered that is somehow supra-personal. The sense of an environment which the individuals involved have helped shape, can allow this experience of enhanced connection to really shine out and reveal how no one individual's needs can be met in isolation. For me, I am here speaking of the working of Christ.

Connected to this experience, would be the subtle process by which those apparently negative emotions—guilt, shame, self-criticism—can be appreciated as somehow protective, teaching us about earthly life and at the same time leading the way beyond our earthly consciousness. Non-violent Communication welcomes these difficult emotions, asking us to follow them to the good which has brought them into being. Community living, for me, enriches this positive understanding by enabling me to relate, in a very ordinary everyday way, to an active, higher world offering me a vista which moves beyond, but also respects, our earthly morality.

If I go deeply into this area then I would say that, for me, Non-violent Communication asks me to consider the nature of Evil: I find myself helped to take responsibility for my values, my actions, my feelings and at the same time to let go of fixed objectifying notions of good and evil, right and wrong. However, how individual striving for morality relates to the moral complexities working in world and cosmic history remains a mystery which it would not be appropriate to explore further in this short introduction.