

**CROSSING THE THRESHOLD A THOUSAND TIMES A DAY:
SOCIAL ARTISTRY IN THE WALDORF SCHOOL
USING NONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION**

by Brian Gannon bcgannon@yahoo.com

This paper attempts to address the question “How does Nonviolent Communication (NVC) relate to Anthroposophy, and can it be helpful in the Waldorf movement?” Researching this topic, I sent questionnaires to Waldorf teachers, I attended workshops with Marshall Rosenberg and other certified NVC trainers, I read articles and books on NVC, and I conversed with John Cunningham, veteran Waldorf teacher and certified NVC trainer. I limited the focus of this project to the use of NVC between adults and did not examine the use of NVC between adults and children or between children. I did this not because I disagree with the practice in those situations, but because I needed to limit the project to a manageable size (and yet I still went to 20 pages).

The discussion assumes the reader’s familiarity with both anthroposophy and NVC; its scope does not include teaching about either one. For more information on Rudolf Steiner’s work, please see the attached article (www.newtimes.org/issue/0305/steiner.htm) or any number of books on his life and work. For more information on Marshall Rosenberg’s work, please see the attached article (www.thesunmagazine.org/326_Rosenberg.pdf) and workshop documents, as well as the book on NVC in the bibliography. For a look at the use of NVC in the classroom, I recommend the recently published manuscript by Marshall Rosenberg, Life-Serving Education, published by PuddleDancer Press.

My conclusion is that NVC, as I understand it, resonates with what I understand of anthroposophy, and is a valuable tool that might serve individuals in the Waldorf community well. I intend to show some ways in which I see NVC relating to anthroposophy and give examples of how it might be put to use in the samples provided by teachers. This analysis is not comprehensive, and I hope it can be a stimulus for more interest on the use of NVC in anthroposophical circles.

The staggering array of Rudolf Steiner's work includes contributions to the fields of medicine, education, agriculture, science, the arts; the list goes on. Weaving through all of these topics is a consistency of thought that relates every part to the whole and enables the whole to live in the particular. A central theme that lives in his works is the recognition of the connection among all, which may be described as the re-enlivening of "religion" in its true sense (from religare: to bind or unite). Indeed, Steiner gives an indication of this in the social realm when he describes the impulses that the Angels are striving to bring about in their work with humanity:

*"...in the future no human being is to find peace in the enjoyment of happiness if others beside him are unhappy... Every human being shall see in each and all of his fellow-men a hidden divinity... that every human being is made in the likeness of the Godhead. When that time comes... every meeting between one man and another will of itself be in the nature of a religious rite, a sacrament..."*¹

This re-cognition of the spiritual nature of humanity and the universe is the golden thread running through all of his work. The intention of this "sacrament" as he put it, has been practiced in religious services from time immemorial as the communion with the divine, ultimately to be transformed through human effort into the conscious participation with the spirit as free individuals.

The idea that human beings are working to connect with each other as free spiritual beings characterizes what Steiner termed the social art. It is fitting to observe how this art, which we practice every day in our interaction with others in our personal and professional lives, is perhaps the least understood of all art forms. Could this be because we are still striving towards the realization outlined by Rudolf Steiner in the quote above? That each time we face another human being (and, ultimately, all sense phenomena) we stand at the threshold of the spirit world as a free being (as artist)? And once we truly meet the other, we cross the threshold and become active in the spirit world? Since we are unprepared for this possibility, and perhaps even unaware of it, it may come as no surprise when we encounter problems when it happens. The fact that we can meet another at all may be considered a gift of grace, and an outcome of love. But if we want to make progress towards the ideal of what the Angels are bringing, the question then becomes, "How can consciously work with the social art, living and working artistically

¹ Rudolf Steiner, *The Work of the Angels on Man's Astral Body* (Rudolf Steiner Press, 1972) p.9-10

with others as free individuals?” The history of strife and struggle between individuals, even, notably, within the anthroposophical movement, shows the need to find a way. The key, as I hope to relate, is empathy and the practical method of empathic connection found in Nonviolent Communication.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC), as expressed by Marshall Rosenberg, PhD, is a method for consciously practicing the social art that in my opinion is congruent with the findings of spiritual science. As Rosenberg framed it, NVC seeks to

“...connect with ourselves and each other in a way that allows our natural compassion to flourish. It guides us to reframe the way we express ourselves and listen to others by focusing our consciousness on four areas: what we are observing, feeling, and needing and what we are requesting to enrich our lives. NVC fosters deep listening, respect, and empathy and engenders a mutual desire to give from the heart. NVC is more than a process or a language. On a deeper level, it is an ongoing reminder to keep our attention focused on a place where we are more likely to get what we are seeking.”²

In other words, NVC is first and foremost a consciousness that uses practical technique to enable one person to connect to another.³ NVC is a blueprint to build a bridge across the chasm that separates us from another person (and all creation for that matter) by connecting to our needs as well as the needs of the other through the conscious application of language and techniques that concentrate our awareness on what is living inside us. The anthroposophist would be justified in noting that Dr. Steiner accomplished this a century ago with the publication of The Philosophy of Freedom and his subsequent body of teachings and insights. To that I say that what Steiner brought to the social art in his way, Rosenberg brings today in another, and the two are not incompatible. Indeed, NVC, says Rosenberg “contains nothing new; all that has been integrated into NVC has been known for centuries. The intent is to remind us about what we already know—about how we humans were meant to relate to one another—and to assist us in living in a way that concretely manifests this knowledge.”⁴ NVC, then, may be seen as a method for consciously practicing what Steiner brought as a new impulse to the social realm.

² Marshall Rosenberg, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion* (PuddleDancer Press, 2001) p4.

³ “While I conveniently refer to NVC as a ‘process’ or ‘language,’ it is possible to experience all four pieces of the model without uttering a single word. The essence of NVC is to be found in our consciousness of these four components, not in the actual words that are exchanged” – *ibid.* p7.

⁴ *ibid.* p3

Any art needs to be practiced repeatedly in order to develop the skill of the practitioner, and the social art is no different. Just as it is unreasonable to expect a group of people to come together with no preparation, method or guidance and carve an artistically sublime sculpture, it is equally unreasonable to expect a group to spontaneously create a healthy social organism without providing some path to do so. Of course, there are natural artists who create great works seemingly without effort; so are there “natural social artists” who, through their being, bring social harmony to all they encounter. Rather than hope to someday acquire this ability through a gift of grace (or long experience), we can, just as the fine arts teacher in her lessons, discern methods and techniques that assist us in the social art. The Waldorf School is an ideal medium for practicing the social art because, like a living canvas, it invites our artistic impulses with the palette of the many individuals we meet every day, be they students, colleagues, or parents. Waldorf teachers can employ NVC techniques when practicing the social art, much as they use techniques in the practice of other arts like painting or sculpture.⁵ And just like the application of techniques in other art forms, NVC must be employed in a living way with the ultimate goal kept firmly in mind- connection with the other- to prevent it from degenerating into lifeless method⁶ or harmful weapon of manipulation⁷. The way we do that with NVC is to maintain intention; by keeping in mind Steiner’s reminder that we recognize the divinity of the other.

Empathy is the foundation for connection and the overcoming of the perception that we cannot bridge the gap between ourselves and others. As Rosenberg frames it:

“In relating to others, empathy occurs only when we have successfully shed all preconceived ideas and judgments about them... Instead of empathy, we tend instead to have a strong urge to give advice or reassurance and to explain our own position or feeling. Empathy, on the other hand, requires focusing full attention on the other person’s message... The key ingredient of empathy is presence: we are wholly present

⁵ One could note that the Waldorf School has always been implementing NVC principles with its organizational structure and teaching methods based squarely on the needs of the child.

⁶ Consider a wet on wet painting technique: one doesn’t start with the desired outcome in mind but rather allows it to evolve from the interplay of the colors on the paper. In a similar way, interactions using NVC are not results oriented, but connection (or process) oriented.

⁷ Much like an awl, carving knife, needle or the many other potentially dangerous tools we use within the Waldorf School, NVC must be used with awareness and respect.

with the other party and what they are experiencing. This quality of presence distinguishes empathy from either mental understanding or sympathy.”⁸

Steiner, too, described the crucial role of empathy for humanity:

“It is also necessary that one acquire a certain definite manner of judging one’s fellowmen. It is difficult to attain an uncritical attitude, but understanding must take the place of criticism. It suppresses the advancement of the soul if you confront your fellowman immediately with your own opinion. We must hear the other out first, and this listening is an extraordinarily effective means for the development of the soul eyes. Anybody who reaches a higher level in this direction owes it to having learned to abstain from criticizing and judging everybody and everything. How can we look understandingly into somebody’s being? We should not condemn but understand the criminal’s personality, understand the criminal and the saint equally well. Empathy for each and everyone is required and this is what is meant with higher, occult “listening.” Thus, if a person brings himself with strict self-control to the point of not evaluating his fellowman, or the rest of the world for that matter, according to his personal judgment, opinion and prejudice and instead lets both work on him in silence, he has the chance to gain occult powers.”⁹

Empathy can be seen as the manifestation of our highest sense: the ego-sense, in which we come to perceive the ego (the divinity) of the other person. I perceive the inner experience of the other person in my own being; something inconceivable were there not a connection between us that had theretofore been unrecognized. The other-awareness in place of my regular I-awareness refutes the perception that I am not connected with the other (the materialist’s illusion) and opens the perception that I exist as a spiritual being within a spiritual world.

Here, then, is a cause of social strife; when we meet another, we unknowingly cross the threshold into the spiritual world and face all the trials thereof. What happens when we cross the threshold into the spirit world (knowingly or not)? Entry into the spirit world separates the normally interconnected soul forces of thinking, feeling and willing, and they go off on their own without the ‘usual’ tempering effect of the others. Without proper preparation, the effects of crossing the threshold are destructive. Steiner described the effect of doing so on the soul forces on a student prepared for the event:

⁸ Ibid, pp 98-100. Note the distinction Rosenberg makes between empathy and sympathy. Steiner makes similar distinction throughout his description of the soul forces in *The Foundations of Human Experience*.

⁹ Rudolf Steiner, *The Inner Development of Man* (Anthroposophic Press, 1970)

“Thus the organs of thinking, feeling, and willing become individualized; their connection henceforth is not maintained by laws inherent in themselves, but must be managed by the awakened higher consciousness of the individual. This, then, is the change which the student observes coming over him: that no connection arises of itself between an idea and a feeling or a will-impulse, unless he himself provides one. No impulse urges him from thought to action unless he himself in freedom gives rise to this impulse. He can henceforth confront, devoid of feeling, a fact which before his training would have filled him with glowing love or bitter hatred; and he can remain impassive at the thought which formerly would have spurred him on to action, as though of its own accord. He can perform actions through resolutions of the will for which there is not the slightest reason for anyone not having undergone esoteric training. The student's great achievement is the attainment of complete mastery over the combined activity of the three soul forces; but at the same time the responsibility for this activity is placed entirely in his own hands.”¹⁰

But if I'm not even aware that I'm crossing the threshold, I'm also not aware that my soul forces separate and go their own ways. My thinking, feeling and willing are no longer under the tempering influence of each other and the “control” is replaced by lack thereof.¹¹⁽¹¹⁾ So with the separated soul forces, instead of maintaining neutrality of soul in the face of the experience with the other, we repel them from our consciousness using the ammunition of our out-of-control thoughts, feelings and will-impulses. Immediately upon perceiving the consciousness of the other, we reclaim our own I-perception with a reaction to their “attack”; we have strong feelings, or we start formulating solutions, or we try to run away. We become anti-social. What would happen if this were not so, and if instead of repelling the other, we simply immersed ourselves in the other? This opposite reaction is no less dangerous. By giving ourselves up to the other, we are annihilated: our soul forces split, the “I” is destroyed and replaced with the “I” of another. In effect, we become automatons under the control of the other. This may be stating it in strong language, but, again, we are not aware that this is going on, so the perception is not there¹².

NVC teaches us, in very practical ways, how to exercise our ego sense in an artistic way: as a spiritual being in the spirit world, even if we have not yet had a direct experience of the spirit

¹⁰ Rudolf Steiner, *How to Know Higher Worlds* (Anthroposophic Press, 1994) p. 178.

¹¹ Another effect happens as well, I think: we experience the Lesser Guardian and all of his ugliness. But instead of seeing him, we put all of that ugliness on the other person. But that's beyond the scope of the paper and I don't think I understand it anyway.

¹² This is the method of the advertiser; what I am describing is the engine for our consumer economy. We have become so desensitized to the process that we now, as a culture, are losing (or have lost) our ability to think for ourselves, and now rely on slogans or sound bites instead of thinking things through.

world.¹³ As described by Steiner in the passage noted previously, we must take conscious responsibility for our thoughts, feelings and will when we are across the threshold. NVC gives us the tools to do just that without losing control of our soul forces and without immolating our I, using the four steps of nonviolent expression and receiving:

1. Observation: description of perceptible actions, without evaluation
2. Feeling: emotions related to but not caused by the observed actions
3. Needs: values, desires, expectations or thoughts that create the feelings
4. Strategies stated as Requests: concrete actions I would like taken to meet needs

By clearly delineating between observations, feelings and needs, we ensure safe footing while crossing the threshold of the other. Through the technique of NVC language, thinking, feeling and willing are taken hold of consciously by the I to prevent them from running amok. With the “I” in control of the soul forces, a balance is struck between contraction and expansion, nothing and everything, and empathy is possible. The paradox is not lost: empathy, the requirement for NVC, is also its result. Empathy becomes self-sustaining and a living force between everyone and everything.¹⁴

Ultimately, the realization that we and all around us are manifestations of the Divine brings great responsibility and great opportunity; responsibility towards others to maintain connection to what is alive in them, and the opportunity to do so with compassion. Each meeting of another person has the potential to be transformed from chance, meaningless encounter where the “I” is caught in a “survival of the fittest” nightmare, into conscious method of crossing into and living in the spirit world¹⁵. NVC is an effective technique for maintaining this connection, and doing so with responsibility and compassion. Without this awareness, it becomes a dangerous tool to relationships, preventing the meeting of needs and causing pain for others and ourselves. But with the consciousness of our connections, NVC is a path of compassion that can help us meet our tasks with love, respect and joy. Until we truly conspire (from conspirare to be in harmony, or, more revealingly, com- + spirare to breathe) with the Angels to fulfill their task with us, we can use NVC as a tool towards that awareness.

¹³ NVC techniques apply to sense perceptible phenomena which provide the point of access to the inner life of others.

¹⁴ An added benefit is that we can use the methods of NVC as a path to experiencing the ego sense, even before we're adept at actually using it. Just as our ear can be trained to hear 'better' through practice, so too can our ego sense be developed through NVC.

¹⁵ Could this be another characterization of Karma?

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN STEINER'S IDEAS AND ROSENBERG'S NVC

If we examine what Rosenberg describes as “needs” we see they are, in fact ideas (as examined by philosophers for millennia: “What is beauty/love/truth/etc?” See Needs Inventory in appendix). These ideas exist within the Divine for both Rosenberg and Steiner.

Rosenberg: “What’s alive in us are our needs, and I’m talking about the universal needs, the ones all living creatures have.”¹⁶ “We all have the same needs: our differences lie in our strategies to meet those needs. Needs include peace, beauty, communion, ease, equality, harmony, inspiration, order, sustenance, meaning, autonomy, love . . .”¹⁷ “. . . my name for God is ‘Beloved Divine Energy’ . . . To me this Beloved Divine Energy is life, connection to life.”¹⁸

Steiner: “For monism, the conceptual content of the world is the same for all human individuals. According to monistic principles, one human individual regards another as akin to himself because the same world content expresses itself in him. . . . Thinking leads all perceiving subjects to the same ideal unity in all multiplicity. The unitary world of ideas expresses itself in them as in a multiplicity of individuals [as strategies, to Rosenberg- BG]. As long as a man apprehends himself merely by means of self perception, he sees himself as this particular man; as soon as he looks at the world of ideas [of needs, to Rosenberg –BG] that lights up within him, embracing all that is separate, he sees within himself the absolute reality living and shining forth. Dualism defines the divine primordial Being as that which pervades and lives in all men. Monism finds this divine life, common to all, in reality itself. The ideas [again, needs - BG] of another human being are in substance mine also, and I regard them as different only as long as I perceive, but no longer when I think. [it is important to note that the ‘thinking’ here referred to is not the intellect bound to personality, but intuition, or pure thought in freedom- BG] Every man embraces in his thinking only a part of the total world of ideas, and to that extent individuals differ even in the actual content of their thinking. But all these contents are within a self-contained whole, which embraces the thought contents of all men. Hence every person, in his thinking, lays hold of the universal primordial Being which pervades all men. To live in reality, filled with the content of thought, is at the same time to live in God.”¹⁹

On the nature of human interdependence:

Steiner: “The well-being of a community of people working together will be the greater, the less the individual claims for himself the proceeds of his work, i.e. the more of these

¹⁶ D. Killian *Beyond Good and evil* p7.

¹⁷ M. Rosenberg from unreviewed lecture notes 4/14/02 NOTE: Each of these needs has been used as a description of the Divine Being, Ground of the World, i.e. God. –BG

¹⁸ M Rosenberg, *The Spiritual Basis of Nonviolent Communication* p1

¹⁹ R. Steiner, *The Philosophy of Freedom* p210-211.

proceeds he makes over to his fellow-workers, the more his own needs are satisfied, not out of his own work but out of the work done by others”

Rosenberg: “Our survival as a species depends on our ability to recognize that our well-being and the well-being of others are, in fact, one and the same.”²⁰

On the nature of “should”

Steiner: “To live in love of action, and let live in understanding of the other’s will, is the fundamental maxim of free human beings. They know no other ‘should’ than the one with which their willing is intuitively in harmony.”²¹

Rosenberg: “The concept ‘should’ is shorthand for all judgments and insults... ‘You should’ is using duty or obligation to make someone else do something... ‘One should’ or ‘I had to’ is denial of personal responsibility for actions.”²²

On the nature of connection:

Steiner: “. . . in the future no human being is to find peace in the enjoyment of happiness if others beside him are unhappy. . . Every human being shall see in each and all of his fellow-men a hidden divinity. . . that every human being is made in the likeness of the Godhead. When that time comes. . . every meeting between one man and another will of itself be in the nature of a religious rite, a sacrament. . .”²³

Rosenberg: “The spiritual basis (of NVC) for me is that I’m trying to connect with the Divine Energy in others and connect them with the Divine in me, because I believe that when we are really connected with that Divinity within each other and ourselves, that people enjoy contributing to one another’s well being more than anything else. So for me, if we’re connected with the Divine in others and ourselves, we are going to enjoy what happens, and that’s the spiritual basis.”²⁴

On the nature of ethical individualism and emotional liberation:

Steiner: “The mature man gives himself his own value. He does not aim at pleasure, which comes to him as a gift of grace on the part of Nature or the Creator; nor does he fulfill an abstract duty which he recognizes as such after he has renounced the striving for pleasure. He acts as he wants to act, that is, in accordance with the standard of his ethical intuitions; and he finds in the achievement of what he wants the true enjoyment of life. He determines the value of life by measuring achievements against aims. An ethics which replaces ‘would’ with mere ‘should’, inclination with mere duty, will consequently determine the value of man by measuring his fulfillment of duty against the demands that it makes. It measures man with a yardstick external to his own being. The view which I have here developed (ethical individualism) refers man back to himself. It recognizes as true value of life only what each individual regards as such, according to the standard of

²⁰ D. Killian “Beyond Good & Evil” p5.

²¹ R. Steiner The Philosophy of Freedom

²² M. Rosenberg, unreviewed lecture notes from 4/24/03

²³ R. Steiner The Work of the Angels in Man’s Astral Body

²⁴ M. Rosenberg The Spiritual Basis of Nonviolent Communication p.4.

his own will. It no more acknowledges a value of life that is not recognized by the individual than it does a purpose of life that has not originated from him. It sees in the individual who knows himself through and through, his own master and his own assessor.”²⁵

Rosenberg: “At emotional liberation, we respond to the needs of others out of compassion, never out of fear, guilt or shame. Our actions are therefore fulfilling to us, as well as to those who receive our efforts. We accept full responsibility for our own intentions and actions, but not for the feelings of others. At this stage, we are aware that we can never meet our own needs at the expense of others. Emotional liberation involves stating clearly what we are needing in a way that communicates we are equally concerned that the needs of others be fulfilled. NVC is designed to support us in relating at this level.”²⁶

On differences between NVC and Anthroposophy

Marshall Rosenberg has said that he does not find it helpful to judge others with ideas of good/bad, right/wrong, etc. since these prevent connection. With that, how are we to see Steiner’s conception of evil, especially his description of beings who are evil, i.e. Lucifer and Ahriman? If we look at what Steiner says about these beings, they do evil in their attempt to do the good from their perspective²⁷; in other words, their actions from their point of view meet their own needs but at the expense of humanity, and therefore act in a violent way according to NVC. Perhaps another way to describe adversarial beings would be “beings who work for their own ends in human evolution at the expense of humanity’s”?

At the risk of sounding accommodating, I would say that other questions on the perceived differences between Rosenberg and Steiner can be resolved if we practice what each recommends.

Rosenberg: “Once you listen with NVC, everyone around you is speaking NVC; you hear the expression of what is alive in the other person.”²⁸

Steiner: “I am free only when I myself produce these mental pictures, not when I am merely able to carry out the motives which another being has implanted in me. A free being is one who can want what he himself considers right.”²⁹

In other words, all that they bring must be put into practice for one’s self to see what is in alignment with one’s values and needs.

²⁵ ibid p196-197

²⁶ M. Rosenberg Nonviolent Communication p.63

²⁷ “True, they desire to make him (humans) good — for from the aspect of which I am now speaking, Lucifer desires that there shall be goodness, spirituality, in man.” –The Work of the Angels on Man’s Astral Body

²⁸ M. Rosenberg from lecture notes 4/24/03

²⁹ R. Steiner The Philosophy of Freedom

CORRELATIONS BETWEEN THE SUBSIDIARY EXERCISES AND NVC PRACTICES

The challenge we face when attempting to practice the subsidiary exercises in the social realm is daunting, if not impossible. Steiner counseled starting small (with a pin for the first exercise, for example). We can see in this comparison that the principles outlined in the subsidiary exercises have their correlation to interpersonal interchanges under the guidance of NVC practices. All references to Steiner come from *Guidance in Esoteric Training* and all references to Rosenberg come from *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*.

1. Cultivation of absolutely clear thinking

Steiner: "Acting entirely out of his own free will, he must empty his soul of the ordinary, everyday course of thoughts and by his own initiative place one single thought at the center of his soul." p13

Rosenberg: "Empathy calls upon us to empty our mind and listen to others with our whole being." p112

2. Cultivation of the will

Steiner: "We try to think of some action which in the ordinary course of life we should certainly not have performed. Then we make it a duty to perform this action every day." p14

Rosenberg: "NVC guides us in reframing how we express ourselves and hear others. Instead of being habitual, automatic reactions, our words become conscious responses based firmly on an awareness of what we are perceiving, feeling and wanting." P3

3. Equanimity

Steiner: "Care is taken that no pleasure shall carry us away, no sorrow plunge us into the depths, no experience lead to immoderate anger or vexation, no expectation give rise to anxiety or fear, no situation disconcert us, and so on. There need be no fear that such an exercise will make life arid and unproductive: far rather it will quickly be noticed that the experiences to which this exercise is applied are replaced by purer qualities of soul." p15

Rosenberg: "What others say and do may be the stimulus, but never the cause or our feelings... Emotional responsibility (entails)... 'emotional liberation' – in which we accept full responsibility for our own feelings but not the feelings of others, while being aware that we can never meet our own needs at the expense of others." p64

4. Positivity

Steiner: "It consists in seeking always for the good, the praiseworthy, the beautiful and the like, in all beings, all experiences, all things... In a certain respect this exercise is connected with what is called 'abstention from criticism'... There is a difference between a judgment which, proceeding merely from one's own personality, is colored with the element of personal sympathy or antipathy, and an attitude which enters lovingly into the alien phenomenon or being, always asking: How has it come to be like this or to act like this? Such an attitude will by its very nature be more set upon helping what is imperfect than upon simply finding fault and criticizing." p16

Rosenberg: "Empathizing doesn't mean you have to agree with him; you just have to recognize and empathize with his human needs... As long as you have an enemy image

of the other, connection will be hard to accomplish” (from lecture notes) See many other indications of this throughout Rosenberg’s works.

5. **Open Mindedness**

Steiner: “At every moment he must be ready to encounter and accept absolutely new experiences.” p17

Rosenberg: “In relating to others, empathy occurs only when we have successfully shed all preconceived ideas and judgments about them. The Austrian-born Israeli philosopher Martin Buber describes this quality of presence that life demands of us: ‘In spite of all similarities, every living situation has, like a newborn child, a new face, that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction that cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you.’” p98

6. **Repeat all exercises in regular alternation**

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EXAMPLES OF NVC IN THE WALDORF SCHOOL

The following scenarios were inspired by real-life examples of Waldorf teachers describing interactions with colleagues and parents that they found troubling.

Scenario 1

A suggestion was made at the previous faculty meeting that classes 5 and 6 could perform a series of songs together at the upcoming festival. Outside a classroom, 5th grade teacher Ms. Smith stops Mr. Jones, the 6th grade teacher, to discuss the plan. Mr. Jones responds, "Actually, I changed my mind about the festival. Your class is too astral and I don't want them having a bad influence on mine."

Ms. Smith has a choice to make here; she can:

1. Blame herself or her class for being too astral (whatever that means)
2. Blame Mr. Jones for being an ass
3. Sense her own feelings and needs
4. Sense Mr. Jones' feelings and needs

Let's look at the options:

1. Blame herself: Taking negative comments personally by hearing criticism has terrible effects on our self esteem and misses an opportunity for connection. We choose to accept the other person's judgment and negativity at the expense of hearing what is behind it. This is a common occurrence, especially when the person in Mr. Jones' role has more experience or a stronger personality. Since this option is only expressed inwardly, Ms. Smith can't give anyone else the opportunity to connect with her. Her self-blame is self-perpetuating and may later result in a meltdown with no apparent "cause".
2. Blame the other: Here we're likely to feel anger. We often lash out, ignoring what's really going on and opting for the immediate satisfaction of release; or we stifle our anger and save it for a conversation in the parking lot or an opportunity to kick the dog at home. Ms. Smith expresses herself, but in a way that's unlikely to elicit the empathy she really needs, either from Mr. Jones or her dog. In the parking lot, she may relieve her stress and win supporters, but the health and well being of the school suffers as a result.
3. Sense herself: This option moves her into NVC-territory. Ms. Smith connects with herself by bringing consciousness to her feelings and needs. Once she becomes clearly aware of what's alive in her, she might reply "When I hear you saying that my class is too astral and that they would have a bad influence on your class, I feel hurt, because I need some recognition of my class' good qualities." At that point, she could move on to option 4, or continue with other NVC techniques.
4. Sense the other: Ms. Smith also has the option of shining her light of consciousness on Mr. Jones' thoughts and needs. Here she tunes into what Mr. Jones has said for what it

really is—a request to meet his unmet need (which we have still to discover)—rather than for what it says on the surface.

As Marshall Rosenberg put it in a lecture: “All anyone ever says is ‘Please’ and ‘Thank you’. ‘Please fulfill my need’ and ‘Thank you for fulfilling my need.’” We get a pretty good hint of the nature of the needs from what is said, and using NVC methods we can discover what they are.

Thus, Ms. Smith might ask, “Are you feeling overwhelmed because you need support for the amount of work you already have?” In this case, Ms. Smith sees that Mr. Jones’ feelings are not caused by her or her class, but by Mr. Jones himself. This does not prevent her from connecting with Mr. Jones, since she sees what he said in its true light: a request for empathy.

Does this sound too difficult or unrealistic? It is unrealistic if we maintain our ‘normal’ consciousness of good/bad, right/wrong, friend/enemy. Profound realization of the reality described by Rudolf Steiner overcomes this barrier to connection, and some of us live this way already. For the rest of us, the use and practice of NVC helps us on our path of connection.

Scenario 2

While the 3rd graders come into the school before main lesson in an excited chaos of laughter, coats and bustle, a parent approaches Ms. Simmons with a frown and begins to talk in a low voice, “I need to tell you I’ve got a problem with Billy’s progress in math. His cousin, who goes to 3rd grade in the public school, is way ahead with his long division. I’ll be sitting in this morning to get a better idea of what’s going on.” Ms. Simmons has to make a quick decision, though she is feeling hurt and vulnerable and worries about how to respond without giving in to the pressure of the parent’s announcement.

Let’s look at some options:

1. Ms. Simmons responds curtly, “Absolutely not. If you have a complaint, write a letter to the administrator. Please leave.” This response erects a brick wall to provide Ms. Simmons with some protection from a perceived attack. Ms. Simmons’ ‘fight or flight’ instinct is choosing to ‘fight’ and one can imagine that she’ll get one, if not at that moment, then tenfold after school. Her unstated message (translated into NVC) would be something like “When I see your insistence on coming into class unannounced, I feel scared and defensive because I need autonomy and respect...” but I doubt the parent heard it that way.
2. Ms. Simmons gives up on her own needs and values in the moment as she apologizes, “I’m so sorry. It’s my fault. I should’ve talked to you earlier. I guess you can watch...” Ms. Simmons’ ‘fight or flight’ instinct is choosing ‘flight’ this time. In this lose-lose option, she isn’t really addressing the parent’s needs, since she’s not trying to empathically connect with her, nor is she acknowledging her own needs, which will surely strain their relationship into the future.
3. Ms. Simmons takes a moment, using NVC, to connect with her own needs and feelings, and then with those of the parent. She then sees clearly her choices in the moment,

either to address the situation immediately and go with a bit of chaos among the children until she can give them her full attention, or to suggest meeting with the parent after main lesson by saying, “I can see that you’re upset and you want to understand what is going on in the classroom. I want to respect that, and I want to make sure you and I can discuss this to both our satisfaction first. Would you be willing to meet with me at 10:20 in the faculty lounge? I want to be present for the children with my undivided attention, and I would like to give you the same when we talk.” If the parent continues to insist on attending the class, Ms. Simmons could then consider using NVC with the parent while the children work on their own at their desks. As long as Ms. Simmons’ need for autonomy and respect is not being met, she cannot continue with her work.

NVC does not mean giving up your own needs or the supplication to others. NVC does not work if all needs are not being met, including one’s own. NVC is not the use of a gentle, soothing voice, an ever-suffering sympathetic gaze or fawning self-sacrifice. NVC can be shouted or done silently, with another, with a group or with one’s self. To me, we must transcend the concept of victim/perpetrator if we are going to live in freedom with others, and embrace the choice and responsibility that comes with it.

Scenario 3

In faculty meetings, tension is palpable. Factions have formed among the staff; crotchety, pedantic ‘old timers’ and irresponsible, clueless ‘newbies’. The old timers see the work of the newbies as misinformed and irresponsible, while the newbies think the old timers are stuck in old, irrelevant forms and need to get with the times. The following conversation ensues.

“I’ve been teaching for over 25 years,” Phil reminds Jane, “and I feel that what you suggest is not appropriate. Never once have I heard of that being done in a Waldorf School”.

Jane responds with some irritation, “I feel that you’re being pedantic, Phil. Times have changed since 1924.”

“You are too young to know. How long have you been teaching? One year? Next thing you know, we’ll have interactive nature programs on computers for the kindergarten!”

“Listen; you and your Waldorf methods are woefully behind the times. I have a Ph.D. from Harvard and I know what’s going on outside the Waldorf-womb you live in. Waldorf needs to get with the times and you’re scared of change.”

Communication is so poor that a mediator is brought in.

Let’s look at what the mediator faces:

1. The different “camps” have de-humanized each other by pinning labels and judgments on their colleagues. The use of the verb “to be” with other people is dangerous since it often leads to judgments and blame. When we talk of what another person “is”, we

limit them to that definition to the exclusion of the rest of who they are. The result is a judgment that limits our perception of them and prevents the other from hearing our message, thus perpetuating division. Using NVC, rather than focusing on what we think the other "is", we focus on what they (and we) are feeling and needing. This maintains our multi-leveled humanity and puts us in a frame of mind that highlights our commonality rather than our differences.

2. Many conversations lead to strife because we mix up feelings with non-feelings, or thoughts. The NVC-based mediator raises awareness of the role language plays in communicating our thoughts and feelings, and shows how clarity in the words we use is necessary if we are going to create empathic connection.

Again and again we hear sentences like "I feel that we need to try something new," "I feel you don't give me a chance to express myself fully," or "I feel Bill has been closed minded about all this." In each case, a feeling is not being expressed, but rather a thought or interpretation. In English, we can use feelings without using the word feel: that's the litmus test to see if what you're saying is a feeling or not. For example, "I'm irritated" or "I'm worried" or "I'm exasperated" are feelings.

Other examples of "non-feelings" are sentences that describe what we think others are doing around us. For example "I feel misunderstood by this group," "I feel ignored," "I feel unappreciated for all I've done for this school." In each case, no feeling was expressed, but rather an assumption of what others are thinking or doing.

In our culture of respect for others' feelings, we rarely recognize the difference between feelings and non-feelings; but that difference is profound. Feelings, we may think (not feel!), don't need as rigorous a reasoning behind them to maintain their validity, and therefore are unassailable by anyone except the most heartless. In reality, by using language clearly and differentiating between thought and feeling, we become clearer to ourselves as well as others, and we avoid the traps of misinterpretation that cause so much strife.

3. The mediator must realize that each group is doing the correct thing; neither is wrong, in that they are trying their best to do what they think is right. But the mediator's task could be seen as re-focusing the groups from their strategies (which conflict) to the needs underlying the feelings. Basic needs have not been met, and the effect is causing great pain. Interestingly, both sides have the same needs: respect, appreciation, support, trust, understanding, peace, community, and a desire to teach the children. This re-focusing of intention from strategies to needs will have a unifying effect. People will see that they are not so far from one another after all.
4. The mediator recognizes that each group needs empathy before any progress can be made. That is the first and most important role for the mediator. Any intention to

figure out who is right, or who is to blame takes us away from the ultimate goal of working on a faculty, which is to connect with others and meet everyone's needs.

Scenario 4

In the faculty lounge, the 1st grade teacher is practicing a song to teach the children that uses a minor key. The 4th grade teacher overhears her and wants to express her concern that the song is inappropriate for 1st grade.

Let's look what can happen!

The 4th grade teacher has several paths ahead of her to deal with this situation, but if she is going to use NVC, she must first be aware of her intent behind her actions.

Firstly, she lets go of her desire to control or coerce her colleague, since she recognizes her as a free individuality that must be left to make her own decisions. Once she lets go, she can phrase her content in a life-giving way, as a gift to her, and as a way of satisfying both her own need for expression and her colleague's need for independence and respect.

She could say something to the effect of: "I see you'll be teaching that song to your class. When I hear the minor key in a song for 1st graders, I feel apprehensive because I need reassurance that it is beneficial for them. Would you be willing to tell me what it is about that song you like so much to teach it to your class?"

The speaker has given her observation without judgment, expressed her feelings and the unmet need that caused the feeling, and asked the 1st grade teacher a request. At this point, the 1st grade teacher's response could be any number of things, but if she doesn't work with NVC, she's likely to respond with a variation on, "It's none of your business!" If so, it's up to the 4th grade teacher to keep her connection with the other by recognizing that she's uncovered a need that can be met!

Scenario 5

Teacher Ted has just had an emotionally charged exchange with a colleague and is very upset. He is sitting in the faculty lounge breathing heavily with his fists clenched and a scowl on his face. His colleague Joan walks into the lounge.

"Is something wrong, Ted?" asks Joan.

Ted slams his fist on the table and says, "I swear I can't stand when Fred talks to me like that!"

Joan pats him on the shoulder and says "You're a Waldorf teacher; exercise your equanimity! Just get over it; arguments are par for course for teachers."

A couple of things have gone on here that can be looked at.

At a superficial level, we see two people failing to connect with each other. Ted is expressing anger, and Joan is trying to express support by giving advice. It's a safe bet that neither one will leave satisfied at the level of connection they've created in this situation.

Interchanges like this happen all the time, but slip past us as unrealized opportunities for connection.

Ted's anger is a sure sign that he's not getting his needs met, and Joan, if she can recognize the anger for what it really is, is being given the wonderful opportunity to connect with him. Unfortunately, her usual reaction to someone expressing anger is usually not the most helpful. In fact, most of us find it most difficult to give empathy at those times when it is most needed! We see displays of anger as "violence" or "aggression" or "a choleric run amok," when actually they're "tragic expressions of unmet needs."³⁰ If Joan could see Ted's emotions in that light, she could connect with him not as a bully or jerk, but as someone expressing an inner experience as valid as weeping or laughter, only expressed differently.

Joan, despite her seemingly cold reaction, really is trying to help, but actually, her reaction could in some ways be considered more "violent" than Ted's. Whereas Ted was at least trying to express his feelings and connect with Joan, as ineffectual as the attempt may have been, Joan isn't connecting with Ted. She is falling into the trap we all do so often: fix the problem now! Rather than connecting with what's going on inside Ted, she leaps ahead to a solution. It's a safe bet that Ted isn't going to feel better after Joan's advice; in fact, he may blow up at her next, thus confirming (tragically!) her judgment that he's a jerk anyway.

But if we use NVC on Joan as well, we see that she actually is doing her own tragic expressing. With her advice to Ted, she is expressing her need for peace, and her desire to help, ineffectual as it may be. Her inner experience may be a combination of annoyance that her need for a quiet space in the school is not being met, and genuine concern that her desire to see Ted in a better state of mind is not happening. So she is not the insensitive, patronizing person we might label her to be; she is a person whose needs are not being met, and who could benefit from some understanding. She, too, could benefit from some NVC, but in his state, Ted might not be able to give it. How many times does it happen, in even the most seemingly fleeting and inconsequential meetings between people that hurt and disconnection result where connection and healing could have taken place?

Let's look at what could have happened had NVC been used.

"Is something wrong, Ted?" asks Joan.

Ted slams his fist on the table and says, "I swear I can't stand when Fred talks to me like that!"

Joan takes a deep breath and connects with the annoyance that she feels welling up within her. She was hoping to correct some homework in the lounge, only to find Ted in such a state! She pauses, acknowledges the feeling and its cause, and decides that she can either leave the room and do her work elsewhere or stay and talk. She chooses to stay. She sits across from Ted and, taking clues from what he said and his body language, begins to reflect his message, trying to connect to what is within him.

"Sounds like you're angry" she says. "Do you want to tell me about it?"

"Fred is an asshole! He never listens to what I say! He's so damned arrogant!"

Joan stays with Ted's anger without trying to change it and without judging it.

She asks, "Are you angry because you want to speak to Fred openly and it's not possible?"

³⁰ M. Rosenberg, from lecture notes 4/24/03

Joan is guessing at this point, but it does 2 things: it lets Ted know she perceives what he's going through without judgment, and it encourages him to correct her and thereby articulate what's really going on within. Notice that Joan does not intimate blame or judgment in the cause of the anger, either.

Ted looks up at her and says, "He said I am too choleric! Can you believe that? All I was doing was telling him about my lesson today and he starts judging me. I swear I'm going to bring this up at the next faculty meeting. He does this all the time. He's always judging other people and I won't let him do it anymore."

"Sounds like you feel hurt because you want respect and you aren't getting it."

"Respect?" snorts Ted. "You'll never get that from Fred. How about some courtesy?"

"Courtesy from your colleagues to show that they see how hard you're working?"

"It's not like I didn't spend 5 hours last night memorizing the lesson!" says Ted. "I missed my son's baseball game yesterday because I had meetings all afternoon, and then had to go prepare for today's lesson. And then I get Fred on my back about the way I teach?? Screw him!"

"Sounds like you need some acknowledgement for how hard you're working and how much the class gets from what you bring. You're making sacrifices to be as good a teacher as you can, but that's not what people see."

There's a visible change in Ted's demeanor. He's much calmer now, his breathing is slower, and Joan can see that his eyes start shining with tears. Ted finds it difficult to speak.

"Yes," he says. "I tell you, Joan, I don't know how I can do this. I miss my son and I'm afraid I'm not there enough for him. This is so hard."

"Are you worried because you need to connect with your son, but your work life makes that hard?"

"Sometimes," he says, "sometimes I feel like I'm missing out on enjoying time with him."

Now Ted and Joan are getting to the root causes of what is alive in Ted. Oftentimes the immediate stimulus for what happens is not the true cause, and we waste much time and energy putting band-aids on the wrong hurt. Ted and Joan have connected in this exchange and have opened up an opportunity for an intimacy that was not present beforehand. Joan is not giving methods to solve Ted's problem; but she may decide to talk with him to explore strategies that would meet all needs: Ted's need for balance in home/work life, Fred's need for sharing his experience and offering help, Joan's need for calmness and connection, Ted's son's need for time with his father, the school's need for healthy, balanced faculty...the possibility is vast!

Scenario 6

In a faculty meeting, the chair asks for a volunteer to coordinate the upcoming festival. The 1st grade teacher has never volunteered to coordinate any festivals, so a colleague points this out and asks if she can do this one. She already feels overwhelmed with all she's doing, but she doesn't want to seem selfish. How can she say no?

Contrary to common perception, NVC doesn't need to be quiet. It can be shouted, if necessary, as long as all needs are met and connection is maintained.

In this scenario, the teacher wants to protect herself, and also be a full participant in the school: a seeming contradiction on the surface. But if we go below outer descriptions and enter into the level of intent, we can see that both needs can be met. Once she connects with her needs and the needs of the school, she can see that fundamentally they are the same, and all that must be sorted out is the strategy for meeting all of the needs. By addressing her colleagues using NVC techniques with an honest intent, she can connect with them and collaborate.

“I see all of the hard work that everyone is doing to support the festivals, and I feel grateful to work with such dedicated colleagues. When I think of all of the work I need to do preparing to teach; all of the reading I need to do, stories to make up, lessons to plan, parents to call. . . I feel overwhelmed! I really need understanding from you all and a sense of acceptance for all I’m going through. Would you be willing to allow me to say no to this request, until I feel more secure in my teaching role? When that happens, I will be happy to give all I can to the festivals. Until then, I really need your understanding and trust to do what I need to do in the classroom.”

Let’s say she’s met with an objection from Mr. Lewis:

“Come on, Jane! You’re being unreasonable! Don’t you think we all have a lot on our plate? We all have too much to do but you don’t see us complaining, do you?”

Jane, of course, has several paths she could choose. She could acquiesce and help with the festival (but this “submission” would leave bad feelings within her, if not with the others), or she could stick to her ‘no’ come hell or high water (but this “rebellion” could make her out to be a problematic, uncooperative colleague). Or, she could try another route. She could spend time empathizing with Mr. Lewis by connecting with what is behind his words: she may even uncover an unspoken problem the entire faculty shares but could never express! In this way she becomes a free catalyst for meeting the needs of others by making sure her needs are met as well.

Note that when we apply NVC principles to different situations, we take the time we need, which may seem like a lot at that moment. The conversation that arises may be quite a bit longer than what we’re used to, exchanging expediency for connection. But how much time do we lose in the future trying to undo the damage done by our normal way of conversing? How much time and energy is wasted in re-addressing unresolved issues after the initial event? My guess is that we would work far more effectively if we slowed down and took the time to really connect with each other with the NVC techniques.
