

The language of love

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By Chitra Jha

Non-violent Communication is an international programme that helps us communicate in such a way that we achieve internal and external harmony, and also know ourselves and others better, says Chitra Jha



I first heard of Non-violent Communication in June 2013, at Learning Societies' Unconference in Pune (thanks to Shammi Nanda), and understood the concept quite literally, taking the words at their face value. Since I hail from Western UP, where softness and subtlety in language is not a strong point, I tend to be

quite direct (read harsh) in my communiqués, and this 'judgmental' trait bothers me a great deal (making me feel 'not good enough'). Hence, when I came to know about an international convention in non-violent communication being planned for January 2014, I immediately enrolled for it, without knowing anything about the movement or its scope; all I knew was that I needed something like that at this juncture of my life.

In Dec 2013, I went to Mumbai to conduct a workshop on healing relationships, and stayed with my organiser, Priya Soparkar, at Vashi. The very first day, I browsed through her book collection, and was pleasantly surprised to find Non-violent Communication – A language of life by Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D. I picked up the book, and was immediately hooked. Seeing my engrossed interest in the subject, Priya very sweetly gifted the book to me, and the rest as they say is history, albeit current history!

I devoured the book, made notes, and began my practice in earnest – with myself as well as my clients. By the time I reached Trivandrum on January 12, to attend the NVC convention, I was not only deeply entrenched in the subject, but had also used the tool. Without this one-month training, I would have been a little lost there.

The NVC convention at Maria Rani Centre, Trivandrum, was a melting pot of different cultures that had come together in their love for non-violent communication as a tool to

create internal and external harmony. Two hundred delegates from 14 countries, and eight facilitators from as many countries, created an eclectic atmosphere of love, understanding, wisdom and growth. One has to experience such a convention to completely understand NVC's vast scope and myriad applications!

I must add that a major highlight of the convention was the amazingly wholesome, nutritious and finger-lickingly delicious food prepared and served lovingly under the close supervision of Shammi Nanda and Aabha Gupta.

Marshal Rosenberg, the father of the NVC process, believed (as many of us do), that compassion is a human being's true nature. This belief made him ask two questions, over and over again, "What disconnects human beings from their compassionate nature? What leads them to behave violently and exploitatively?" These questions led to another, very pertinent question, "What allows some people to stay connected to their compassionate nature, even under the most trying circumstances?"

As Marshall began to study the factors that affect a person's ability to stay compassionate, he was struck by the crucial role of language – the use of words. This understanding made him identify a scientific approach to communicating, both speaking and listening, in such a manner that it leads to authentic heart connections. He called this approach Non-violent Communication, using the term non-violence as Mahatma Gandhi had used it, to refer to a state of natural compassion – when there is no violence in the heart. This type of communication is compassionate communication. Marshall calls it a language of life or life-enhancing communication.

In my healing work, I had realised how our words (even when we don't consider them to be violent), can lead to hurt and pain; both for ourselves and for others. I had also begun to use honest communication, or communicating what was in my heart; but this communication didn't seem compassionate enough, and didn't always give the desired effect. In NVC, I have found a new language that strengthens my ability to remain a compassionate human, under all circumstances.

This is not a new process, as these tenets have been known to wise people for centuries. Marshall doesn't even claim the authorship for the components of this process. However, the threading together of various components of compassionate communication in a systematic manner is definitely unique, and its credit surely must rest with Marshall B. Rosenberg.

Towards self-discovery

Until I attended the NVC convention, I was under the impression that NVC is used to avoid or resolve conflicts. That was my primary intention in practising NVC. However, this assumption was broken in the first session itself. This session was facilitated by Sabine Geiger, a psychologist and NVC trainer from Germany, with 25 years of experience, and a passion to make NVC accessible to all human beings.



The multi-cultural facilitators of NVC convention

Sabine explained, “In NVC we respect conflict and look at it as a possible tool that helps us learn and grow. In fact, some conflict is normal, natural and necessary for our growth. The NVC process is not as much about resolving conflicts, as it is about understanding ourselves and others clearly while we are going through a conflict. Conflicts, both internal and external, bring us closer to our potential – if we allow them to do so. Without understanding this important point, people choose to avoid conflicts. But by avoiding conflicts, we avoid self-discovery. And non-violent communication is not possible without self-discovery. They both go hand in hand.”

Shantigarbha Warren, whose name means ‘seed of peace’, is an international NVC trainer based in Bristol, UK. He has authored a book titled, *Empathy: the art of compassionate presence*. Shantigarbha teaches how compassionate communication can change the world by bringing compassion into our daily life. This compassionate master too talked about the importance of conflict by saying, “A conflict tells us what is important to a human life, and what is being denied to it. It leads us to our core.”

I have been (and still am) one of those people who, despite being uncomfortable in a conflict, face it head on. I don’t like to brush it under the carpet and pretend that all is well. But I still considered the conflict to be a problem; now for the first time, I was looking at all the conflicts in my own life and in our world – as opportunities for self-discovery.

Checking intention

The next assumption was broken, when I began to set a clear intention for initiating the NVC process in a conflict situation. I realised that when I get into a conflict, my unconscious intention is usually to make the other person feel as hurt as I am feeling; wanting them to repent or apologise for what they have done, and make amends ASAP. Paying conscious attention to my intention brought up many of my hidden intents to light. I also learnt that my unconscious unholy intents make my communication (both verbal and non-verbal) devoid of empathy and compassion. And for this understanding, I must thank Emma Collins, a facilitator of compassionate communication trainings, from Switzerland. Emma's words, "NVC is not about being perfectly compassionate in every moment, but to have the intention to come back to compassion as soon as you can", were like a balm to my wounded soul. As a perfectionist, I tend to expect a lot from myself. For example, I desire to remain in compassion 24 x 7, but when I am not in that exalted space, I tend to become very self-critical (not good enough). Emma taught me to offer compassion to myself in those moments, while reminding myself of my wholesome intention. As I looked at the irony of it all – my wanting to offer compassion to others, without having enough of it for myself – I knew why I was learning NVC!

Once the important task of setting clear, conscious, precise intention is done, we can begin the process of NVC as taught by Marshall. The first step is to observe a situation sans diagnosis, evaluation, judgment or criticism; merely observing what actually happened in a situation, and communicating the same like a statement of facts being reported by a news reporter.

Stefan Gebert, a coach and facilitator from Germany, currently based out of New Delhi, who uses NVC in business, counselling, prisons and education, clarifies, "Neutral observation of a situation helps us specify behaviors and conditions that affect us in either life-enriching or life-diminishing ways. This is a very important step. It makes us aware of our unconscious judgments, prejudices, labels, perceptions, and self-image. As an NVC practitioner, our job is to stay in the observation mode, which can be difficult as we are used to colouring every situation with our viewpoint. Remaining objective takes a lot of practice."

And that is so very true. I realise all the time, how I colour my observation with my own stuff! I also realise that I tend to generalise my observation by using words like, 'whenever I see this', 'every time I hear this' or 'whenever you say this'. In NVC, observation is not about bringing up your entire stuff to the surface at one go. It is more like looking through a

window at the current trigger, without going into its history. There is no place for our stories in the observation process.

Sabine, who specialises in using deep body wisdom to teach the NVC process, adds, “The step of observation helps us find a doorway into any conflict, and from there we are guided to take effective actions which may eventually resolve the conflict through non-violent ways. While expressing our ‘observations’ we only talk about what we saw, heard, touched, smelt, remembered, imagined, discovered, thought about, told ourselves, or perceived, which brought forth certain feelings from deep within us. In other words, what was the current trigger or catalyst for our feelings?”

What’s the feeling ?

Observing our feelings in relation to a given situation or observation is the next step of the NVC dance. Now the focus shifts to what got triggered in us in the form of feelings and sensations. We don’t stay in the thoughts that got triggered; we only state how we felt when we observed the trigger situation.

This step is relatively easy for me as I am constantly aware of my feelings, but it remains very challenging for those people who either do not remain in touch with their feelings, or do not have enough vocabulary to clearly describe their emotional states.

My sister Kalpana is one such person. She says, “I do not know what exactly I am feeling. I only know whether I am feeling good or bad.” Simran Kaur Wester, a certified NVC trainer from Hamburg, Germany, who uses NVC in promoting emotional intelligence, parenting, relationships, spiritual growth and social change, says, “People do not know what exactly they are feeling because as a society we do not encourage an honest expression of our feelings. It doesn’t mean that people do not carry strong feelings within them; it simply means that they haven’t learnt to become aware of, identify, acknowledge, or voice their feelings.”

Marshall describes how our language too limits us in our expression. For example, the English language allows us to use the word ‘feel’ without actually expressing a feeling; such as, “I feel like a failure. I feel I am useless. I feel my husband is being insensitive.”

Conversely, we can express a feeling without using the word ‘feel’; such as, “I am angry. I am frustrated.”

Marion Guerin, another master facilitator, coach and consultant from Germany, clarifies, “There are primarily two sets of feelings; one set is about feeling good, and the other about feeling bad. The NVC process helps us in expressing both, by first building and expanding our vocabulary of feeling words.”

Marshall's book carries both the lists, and is very helpful in precisely expressing what we are feeling. NVC facilitators also carry 'feeling cards' or lists to help their clients identify and name their feelings. Ever since I have started using these cards, I have identified many more subtle feelings not in my conscious awareness. I have also learnt that in any given situation there arises a cocktail of various emotions, feelings and sensations. And over a period of time, everyone experiences every possible emotion and feeling.

Underlying needs

Marion adds, "We feel good when our needs are being met with, and we feel bad when our needs are not being met with. This understanding leads us to the next step of NVC. We learn to acknowledge that the roots of our feelings lie in our needs. We become aware that what others say or do is only a trigger, and not the cause of our feelings. Our feelings come from our particular needs and expectations in that moment. This understanding makes us own complete responsibility for our feelings, and our focus shifts from blame to ownership."

Kirsten Kristensen, a senior NVC trainer from Denmark, dreams of a world where everybody's needs are met with peacefully. Using NVC in programmes like 'education for peace', 'peace in practice' and 'change is possible', she brings this tool to schools, kindergartens and families – contributing to growth of teams and warm supportive communities. Speaking about feelings and needs, Kirsten explains, "Just like the fragrance of a flower leads us to the flowering bush, our feelings lead us to our needs. Pleasurable feelings lead to fulfilled needs, while painful feelings lead to unfulfilled needs. However, we need to ask the right questions to get to our needs. If we ask, "I am experiencing these painful feelings, what is wrong with me?", we will seek some kind of therapy or treatment. But if we ask, "What are my painful feelings telling me? Where are they leading me? What do I need in this moment?", we will seek action for change and transformation. In the former, we give away our power; while in the latter we become empowered. In the former, we move away from our feelings and needs; in the latter, we pro-actively become aware of our unmet needs."

Sabine Gieger adds, "When we are not in touch with our needs, we tend to express them indirectly through evaluations and interpretations. And when we do that, others hear criticism and judgment, which prompts them to use their energy in either self-defense or counter-attack. This becomes a virtual battlefield."

Ah, this was eureka moment for me! Since I haven't learnt how to express my needs in a direct manner, I tend to do it indirectly. For example, when I tell my husband, "You don't hear me", I am expressing my unfulfilled need to be heard. But I am expressing it in a

violent manner, which makes him either defend himself or use a strategy to counter-attack. This indirect (perceived as violent) expression is the cause of all misunderstandings and conflicts in my life.

As I work through this understanding, I learn that acknowledging my judgments, criticisms, diagnoses, and interpretations as distorted expressions of my inner needs is only a small step; expressing my needs in a clear manner is another thing altogether. This process needs a lot of practice as I am accustomed to finding faults with others (or with myself), when my needs are not being fulfilled.

The other stumbling block in practising NVC is my social conditioning. The idea of identifying and expressing my needs is very frightening when I have habitually denied, ignored and sacrificed my needs in order to take care of others. Stefan says, “Our beliefs reflect and reinforce the idea that we neither have a genuine right to our needs, nor are our needs important enough. In such an environment we do not learn to clearly express our needs.”

In my work, I realise that it is not only about being fearful of asking for what we need, it is also about not knowing what we need. Because just as we are not connected with our feelings, we are not connected with our needs either. NVC offers an exhaustive list of universal human needs for those who are not too sure about what they need in any given moment.

Elaborating upon universal human needs, Shantigarbha adds, “The NVC process doesn’t stop at becoming conscious of our own feelings, desires, expectations, values, thoughts and needs; it also prompts us to shine the light of consciousness upon others’ feelings, desires, expectations, values, thoughts and needs. That is when we learn that these things are as much individual as universal. Our common humanity is connected on the basis of our universal feelings and needs – the desires that enrich our lives. When we understand this fact, we develop compassion for all; reaching out to people with empathy and honest self-expression.”

Simran agrees, “NVC process guides us in re-framing our verbal expressions based upon an awareness of what we perceive, feel, and need. At the same time becoming aware of – or at least guessing – the others’ perceptions, feelings, and needs. In an NVC exchange, we not only begin to understand, identify, and acknowledge our own affected needs but those of others as well. And then, when we do express our needs, it is important to connect them to a request (and not a demand), for the other person to know that we are not guilt-tripping them, but inviting them to finding a solution that pleases both.”

Make a request

After connecting our feelings to our needs, NVC process moves into the final step of making a request to others (or ourselves) to respond compassionately to those needs. The question, “What is it that you need right now and what would you like to request from one another in relation to those needs?”, is a very important question in NVC. Answering it in NVC language does take some patient practice.

In my life, I have learnt how painful it can be when I do not openly acknowledge my needs; and how very painful when I do! It is because I do not know how to make a request.

Emma tells me, “In the NVC process, request making is a fine art, where we respond to our own needs with self-compassion while being equally concerned about the fulfilment of others’ needs. I have learnt that the more directly we can connect our feelings to our needs, the easier it becomes for all concerned to respond compassionately to our requests.”

Sabine adds, “The NVC request is made in order to enrich our life – asking for specific actions that are likely to fulfill our needs. It is worded positively – requesting clear, concrete actions that the others might undertake to help fulfil our needs. The clearer we are about what we want, the more likely we are to get it. However, the NVC request doesn’t put pressure on the other person to take action as requested. This is not a demand. When I make a request, I must offer the other person the choice to say no. A request becomes authentic when we are empathetic towards the other person’s needs as well.”



“A conflict tells us what is important to a human life, and what is being denied to it. It leads us to our core.”

-Shantigarbha Warren

Shantigarbha explains, “A need has fluidity. There is no single strategy to fulfil a particular need. In fact, there can be as many strategies as there are people having that need. The more we stay in touch with our needs, the more able we are to create strategies to fulfil them. The most important thing is to stay open and not expect

any particular person to fulfil all our needs. We can offer people the choice of saying ‘no’ to our requests, only when we have other strategies in place.”

This has been another 'aha' moment for me. All these days I was carrying judgments and criticisms because I was expecting only certain people in my life to fulfil my needs.

Kirsten advised us to make a list of eight to 10 personal needs that are alive in us, and meditate upon them, without thinking of how to fulfil them; simply allowing the universe to lead us to multiple possible strategies. This exercise completely resonates with me. Now that I deliberately pay attention to every need lurking behind every feeling, I have noticed that even though my needs vary from time to time, there are some needs that are more alive than others; for example, the need for ease, pleasure, appreciation, compassion, dignity, acceptance, beauty, peace of mind, respect, belonging, and support. I just surrender these needs to the Universe, remaining open to creative ways of fulfilling them. Hopefully, this strategy will relieve my near and dear ones from the unsaid pressure of fulfilling my unmet needs!

Stefan elaborates the importance of non-verbal communication by saying, "Our unsaid words too affect our energy field, and our energy field affects everyone who comes in contact with us. This energy either attracts people or repels them. So, even when someone is physically present with you, they may be energetically miles away from you. This creates barriers in communication. The NVC process makes us aware of this effect. The awareness itself is very powerful, and it urges us to use our words with care. We begin to understand why we are not being heard, and how to make amends."

In the past one month, I have used NVC to make many amends. The most important of them has been my relationship with physical pain. I had been silently suffering from a painful anal fissure for a long time. When I communicated my need for physical well-being and peace to my body cells, the pain disappeared as though by magic; and hasn't since returned.

The other amends is being made with my mother. I have realised that I find it difficult to verbally communicate my innermost feelings and needs, while I am very good at communicating them in writing (that needs less courage). I use e-mail for honest expressions with my husband and sons, but my mother has remained out of this loop as she doesn't access mail; so a lot remains unsaid inside me. Now, I am going to meet my need to be heard, to appreciate, and to apologise – using NVC, through the long forgotten mode of snail mail. The very thought is making me excited, though I know that a lot of tears will be shed in the process – from both sides.

I am also beginning to offer self-empathy and self-compassion whenever I habitually put myself down. And that is a big step for me.



“As a society we do not encourage an honest expression of our feelings.”

-Simran Kaur

There is also greater awareness about the way I offer compliments. In the NVC convention, I experientially learnt how compliments can become a form of violent communication, and that was quite a revelation. In my work, offering compliments is a part of practice, and I often look for ways to offer compliments to people. During one ‘empathy group session’ I noticed how our group leader Marion Sere, a young NVC practitioner from France, effectively offered empathy, and I complimented her by saying, “Marion, you are an amazing facilitator. You are awesome.” I was expecting a thank you from this very efficient girl, when she said, “You know, your words are feeling heavy to

me, and my shoulders are coming forward in a protective stance. Try to reframe your compliment using the NVC language.” I closed my eyes, connected with myself, and said, “When I observed your empathetic response to our group mate Shivani, I felt a twinge of guilt for not being so empathetic myself. There was an unmet need to feel good about myself, so I immediately paid a compliment to you, expecting a thank you from you, which would have made me feel good about myself.”

Marion answered, “This feels better. I can relax because your compliment is not putting undue pressure on me to be an amazing facilitator. I am also understanding that the compliment was more about you and your need; and I can empathise with that as I too feel this need from time to time.”

The entire process was a revelation to me. Now I am more conscious of why I pay compliments, and how to pay them, if I must.

The same thing happened in the session on gratitude. Expressing gratitude in NVC language truly brings about tears and smiles. It touches the heart like no simple ‘thank you’ can. Marion says, “NVC has made me understand that violence is not only about fighting,

shouting, killing, beating and waging wars. That definition is very limited and leaves a vast majority of us out of its purview as most of us do not indulge in such violent behaviors. This limited view stops us from acknowledging our contribution to violence as we remain ignorant of it. And this ignorance becomes a barrier in bringing about a qualitative change in our attitudes. With NVC I am becoming more and more aware of the subtle violence inside me and others. It helps me connect better with my partner, who also practices NVC. It is such a blessing.”

As I understand it, NVC is about dynamic compassion. It takes into account the harm which is caused by unconscious communication as well as conscious withholding; offering us a compassionate approach, where true empowerment can happen. NVC is not about asking the other person to do something in a certain way. It is more about, ‘I see this. This is how I feel. This is what I need. These are the choices before me and these are the possible results I see. This is my intention. Will you be willing to help me?’ Through NVC our personally lived wisdom becomes an aid to others, who, through their own choices, learn to become self-responsible.

NVC process in a nutshell

I am planning to go to Kailash- Mansarovar in July. The other day, on a hunch, I looked for my passport (it was last used in 2005), and realised that its validity is due to expire in March. I went online to understand the process for re-issue, and downloaded the form. As I looked at the form, I learnt that I didn't have the necessary data to fill in, and all kinds of thoughts started flooding my head. I brought out my diary and began writing.

What is the intention? To travel to Kailash as scheduled.

What is the observation? I do not have the necessary data to fill up the form immediately.

What am I feeling? Impatient, afraid, disappointed, helpless, uncomfortable and exasperated

What do I need? Security, peace of mind, assurance, ease, power, support, care, compassion, hope, trust, flow, faith. What is the request? Dear Universe, will you please see to it that my passport is re-issued on time for my visa requirements? Dear husband, will you please help me with the references in Bangalore? Dear Internet, will you please help me connect with people whose references I may be using, so that I can obtain their permission in time?

The blessing is that each one of us is given ample opportunities in our everyday life to practice all the steps of NVC. And for those of us who dream of living in a compassionate world, the NVC process is a dream come true! However, the practice must continue.....

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