

Jeanne Marcus: The Spirituality of Non-Violent Communication

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Our theme for this [liturgical season](#) is “Unpacking our Prophetic Baggage.” This theme is partly about arriving here in our new home, and becoming aware of what we brought along with us, besides the cups and place mats and hymnals. However, I also take it as an invitation for those of us who have been traveling from a sense of Call to talk about what we have brought back home with us besides our dirty laundry: to talk about what we are bringing back spiritually.

I just recently returned from Canandaigua, New York, where I attended a 9-day Intensive Training on Non-Violent Communication, [“NVC”.] As most of you know, last January, the School of Christian Living offered a three-week series on Non-Violent Communication, facilitated by Trish, Kevin, Else and me. In addition, in late spring, a six-week follow-up NVC class was offered. Therefore, after having been involved in offering 9 weeks of NVC training at Seekers, and doing 4 weeks with Hope and a Home staff, I found I wanted to get a deeper feel for NVC, and how it worked, and to become fluent enough that it began to feel natural. This 9-day training was to be my “immersion program.”

So, let me unpack some of what I brought back:

[Unpacks Seekers ribbon; Finger Lakes Visitors Guide; latest edition of Marshall Rosenberg book, "Non-violent Communication: a Language of Life; wooden giraffe-since giraffes are the mammals with the largest hearts, an NVC symbol for compassionate communication].

The Intensive Training was held in a Catholic retreat center high over Canadaigua Lake. There were over 30 people attending: the group included organizational development consultants, chaplains, body-workers, professors, executives, psychotherapists, teachers, a mother and a young anarchist. Most had worked with NVC for many years, and many had come to previous 9-day intensives. Therefore, there were many fluent speakers of NVC with much to offer me.

Many of you were part of one of the Seekers classes on NVC, but for those who were not, I want to give a quick and simple sense of what Non-Violent Communication is. It is built on the assumption that it is part of our human nature. Indeed, it is one of our deepest needs, to want to give and receive from each other compassionately.

Much of the time, we do not experience other people as compassionate, and we do not feel very compassionate ourselves. That is because we have been acculturated into ways of organizing ourselves and communicating with each other that do not serve us well: in fact, we talk and act in ways that actually make it **less** likely for us to connect with others, and to get what we most desire and value for our lives. Instead of building the kinds of relationships that we truly want, our words and actions are the stimulus for hurt and pain in others and ourselves. We criticize, we make judgments, we

get defensive; we either burst out in anger, or else we clam up and say nothing.

NVC provides some simple tools for creating a better way. There are two basic NVC templates, one for speaking honestly about what's important to us; and one for listening empathically to someone else's feelings and needs. These templates are very simple in structure. They are so simple, in fact, that they are easy to parody. The basic components are simple enough to learn in five minutes, but to have it be a natural part of your communicating can take a long time.

To give you just a very small taste of these templates, I'd like to request three or four volunteers who have some familiarity with NVC, through class or otherwise, to volunteer to be part of a simple NVC warm-up exercise.

[Three volunteers come forward.]

So imagine that you have just seen or heard something that has had an impact on your sense of well-being. The NVC template for speaking honestly about what's going on within us at a particular moment asks us to begin with an observation of what we have witnessed or experienced that is affecting our well-being; without judgment, just naming what we have experienced. We follow that by naming our **feelings** as specifically and honestly as we can. Third, because we know that these feelings are really about the needs and values we hold within ourselves, we name our **needs** that have given rise to our feelings; and finally, we make a specific, do-able request that we believe would help meet our needs and enrich our lives.

The template looks like this: "When I see/hear_____, I

feel_____ because I'm needing_____. Would you be willing to _____?"

[Each volunteer was asked to respond to one of these situations in NVC:

- 1. someone interrupts you several times in the course of conversation.*
- 2. your neighbor's dog has been making messes on your lawn.*
- 3. your teenage child has a midnight curfew and came in at 2 a.m.]*

The second template helps when we are trying to listen empathically to someone else, especially when we are listening to something that is hard for us to hear. It is a way of engaging someone at the level of their feelings and needs, instead of only engaging their criticisms and judgments.

The second template looks like this: "Are you feeling- _____ because you are needing_____"

[Volunteers are asked to translate each of these into NVC:

- 1. "I'm furious with my husband. He's never around when I need him."*
- 2. "I know you want us to talk NVC and all that, but we have work to do and we can't spend all day yakking."*

Expression of appreciation to volunteers, who sit down]

In a way, what could be easier? You simply fill in the blanks. However, just learning how to fill in those little blanks can be a powerful way to change our lives. The process leads us to ask ourselves repeatedly about our real feelings, and more importantly, our deep needs. Moreover, by trying to put

ourselves in someone else's place so we can guess what they are feeling and needs builds our capacity for empathy and compassion. We are re-training ourselves so that we can hear and speak to each other in more connected, more life-enriching ways.

I think it is possible to do a halfway decent job of "speaking giraffe" without really being a "giraffe." You can learn the forms, and maybe remember to use them when you are in a tight spot; but your mind is still functioning in its typical judgmental, demanding and diagnostic ways. Sometimes, it's easy to start thinking about "NVC-speak" as a strategy for getting people to change or for getting a particular result: I tell you what I'm feeling and needing, and then I ask that you change to do it the way that I believe is correct. For NVC, the quality of connection is the only real point. "Being" giraffe is to stay committed to creating that quality of connecting.

I went to Canandaigua without expectations: the only information that CNVC sent about the 9 days was a generic schedule of meal times and class times. However, if I **had** had expectations, I would have expected that the time there would have focused largely on the same kinds of skill-building that were covered in the book, and that we did in the classes here. Those kinds of exercises were offered, of course; but the real focus of the training was different.

Though the word was not used much, I would say that the focus was spiritual. The teaching I experienced in New York was centered on the deeply spiritual understanding that it is our true nature as humans to want to serve life in others and ourselves. Moreover, because we take pleasure and feel more complete when serving the life in others, it means that we

meet our own deep needs when we can give to others freely and naturally.

One of the things I value so much in NVC is that it has given me some very clear and practical ways of seeing how I am failing to live up to my aspirations; where my heart hasn't yet been really converted to compassion, and I'm not yet willing to give myself to others freely.

For instance, now that I have some experience using NVC to listen empathically to persons when they are angry or otherwise difficult to be around, I have found out something new about myself. Now that I know I have a choice about whether to respond compassionately, I can see quite clearly that sometimes I feel very stubborn: "Hell, no", I'm saying inwardly, "I'm not going to give them that much empathy! They do not deserve it! They are wrong, and I am right! If they were in my place, they would not practice empathy, so why should I? They'll just take advantage of me." Or whatever, on and on.

NVC has a name for this process of watching ourselves still harboring negative, reactive thoughts and judgments: it is called "enjoying the jackal show." The point of enjoying the jackal show is to learn not to beat yourself up when you find all that negativity is percolating inside again. Instead, you give yourself some self-empathy: behind that stubbornness and anger, there might be hurt, or disappointment or fear-something tender, with which we can spend just a few moments connecting. Some important need has not been met in my life, and now it is making itself known, in this awkward way. If we can get our selves back to this level, then we can probably get free enough to connect to the other person with some

empathy for them, too.

When we can really listen to someone else, especially when we had to struggle with the temptation of making them “the enemy”; when we can put aside whatever agenda we are carrying, whatever need we have to make things turn out our way; when we can make no demands and give no advice, then we are giving someone a very great gift. When I have been able to do that, or have experienced someone else doing that, I have felt that God is in that place. Something shifts; there is a real sense of release, of things being at peace, a quietness, for that moment, something sacred has come forth.

Another NVC principle is that honestly expressing what is alive in you in the moment, just nakedly revealing the truth of your inner experience to someone else, is another great gift we can give to others.

NVCers say that 90 percent of an honest connection to someone is about naming our needs, and only 10% is about telling our feelings. One therapist there in New York shared his insight that typically, therapy is all about naming our feelings. We often get good at that. Nevertheless, therapy typically has not thought about helping us name our deep needs-either to ourselves or to each other. Therefore, we do not know how to do this very well.

I can tell you that I am **feeling** a bit jittery giving this sermon, maybe a little insecure; but feeling some excitement, as well. That is some of how things are with me now. Nevertheless, you do not yet know what I am deeply wanting. Even when I have gotten pretty clear about this myself, it is still remains harder to talk about my needs. It feels more

vulnerable. So, right now, it is easier to say that I feel jittery and insecure and elated than it is for me to tell you what I need: I need to be known; I want to be connected; I want to be accepted; and I want these things that I'm sharing to matter. I hope that telling you about this passion of mine might matter.

When we are able to share the sweetness of what our hearts really need, God is in that place, as well. I am wondering whether it might be that God resides in our deepest, truest needs.

The NVC classes in the School of Christian Living have ended. Maybe there will be other classes to carry this forward, but who knows? My hope is that just because the class is over, we will not put what we have begun to learn behind us and simply move on to the next thing. I truly believe that if we share in learning NVC and remember to use it in our mission groups, in Stewards, in our spiritual guides' relationships, and in just plain every-day conversations between us, it will enrich our lives greatly, and increase the joy we feel in being with each other.

Of course, that is only the beginning of how we could use it. Each of us has so many other relationships-at work, in our families, in our neighborhoods and civic involvements. These create that many other places to practice, and that many other opportunities to help serve what is most alive in others.

However, it is not at all easy to do any of this without a practice partner or community to help us. That is something I

really want Seekers to be able to do for each other. I want it for myself, and I want to learn how to give it to others. Being this kind of community for each other is something that I am ready to put my time and energy available towards, in whatever ways I can.

That is what I have found unpacking my prophetic baggage as I return from New York. I want to end with some words from a poem by Denise Levertov, called "Making Peace." What she is saying here about poetry, I believe is true of all our communicating. That is why our efforts here are so important.

*"...But peace, like a poem,
is not there ahead of itself,
can't be imagined before it is made,
can't be known except
in the words of its making,
grammar of justice,
syntax of mutual aid...."*

*A line of peace might appear
if we restructured the sentence our lives are making...*

*A cadence of peace might balance its weight
on that different fulcrum; peace, a presence,
an energy field more intense than war,
might pulse then,
stanza by stanza into the world,
each act of living
one of its words, each word
a vibration of light-facets
of the forming crystal."*