

SPEAKING FROM THE HEART

“GIVE ME ALL your money now!”
“Are you desperate and needing money to survive?”

In a narrow alley in London, this was how Aniruddha responded when, late one night, a tall man jumped out of the darkness and blocked his path. Aniruddha was staying in the UK while training as a Nonviolent Communication (NVC) trainer, before returning to India to bring NVC to the vast community of Dalit people with whom he is connected, the people who used to be labelled the ‘untouchable’ caste.

In 1999, the World Bank conducted a survey amongst 60,000 people living on less than a dollar a day. When asked what they felt would make the greatest difference to their lives, the number one answer, above even food and shelter, was access to a voice. Our need to express ourselves and be heard, to have a voice, is absolutely fundamental to human beings. But which voice will build a nonviolent world?

If Aniruddha had responded (or even thought), “Get off, you scum! You don’t deserve to even walk on the streets!” what would have ensued? It is not hard to imagine.

Yet around the world people use their voices to express judgemental thinking, labels, stereotypes, accusations, threats and defensiveness. This language creates and perpetuates violence. Marshall Rosenberg caught sight of this, and set about unpeeling the disconnecting, violence-provoking aspects of language, to find the core of the language that connects humans in respect, trust and willing co-operation. He then found a way to make this core language learnable. He called the process that emerged Nonviolent Communication (NVC), to align his work with activists for nonviolence. NVC offers a practical ‘how to’ guide to creating the quality of consciousness and relating that is living nonviolence, a quality that can also be described as compassion in action. Around the world people from all walks of life are learning NVC and using it in an extraordinary range of situations.

That night in London Aniruddha was not yet convinced of the power of NVC. Through his Buddhist spiritual

The power of Nonviolent Communication in practice.

practice he was committed in his heart to nonviolence, yet he was sceptical that something as simple as NVC could be effective. But he couldn’t think of anything else to do. His legs were frozen with fear, and images of a friend who had recently been attacked when he tried to run away from a mugging were flashing through his head. So he tried what he knew of NVC. He accessed that voice.

First he connected with himself, in particular his feelings and the universal needs underlying those feelings: “I’m scared, vulnerable. I need safety, security, courage.” This gave him enough inner strength to focus outwards on the man’s feelings and needs: “Are you desperate and needing money to survive?”

“Don’t talk to me. Just give me all your money. Aren’t you scared?” The man could immediately sense that if Aniruddha talked to him in this way, the spell of disconnection that put him in a state where he could attack another person would be broken. In fact he was already awakening from this spell, to ask about the feeling of the human being he was trying to rob.

“Of course I am feeling scared and shaky. At the same time I want to help you and meet your need for money.”

The man tried to re-establish disconnection, “I said don’t talk to me. Just give me the money.” But he didn’t manage to disconnect entirely, and revealed more of himself. “I’m hungry and I want some chicken.”

Aniruddha, now in the flow of connection, empathised, “So you are feeling hungry and need to eat?”

He took the £9.50 he had in coins out of his pocket and, giving it to the man, said, “There you are, have your chicken. I wish I could give you more.”

This expression of care again broke

the spell of disconnection and the man again enquired, “Aren’t you scared?”

“I am feeling scared. I am also feeling concerned about how I will get home. I haven’t got any money left.”

“You are a very generous person. I need only £2 for my chicken. Take your money back,” and the man poured the £9.50 back into Aniruddha’s hands. Aniruddha, still holding out his hands, said, “Take the £2 for your chicken.” The man refused. So Aniruddha picked out £2 and put it into his hands. The man said, “God bless you!” and disappeared into the darkness.

The profundity of this exchange is astonishing. Instead of an outcome where one person meets their needs at the expense of another, and both people are left dehumanised and needing help to restore their trust in people and in life, both are left more humanly connected, and with their immediate needs met. Even more astonishing is that this is a reliable outcome of relating with the NVC process.

JAMESTEACHES AT a primary school in east London. He had been learning NVC for a few months when he was called to deal with an eleven-year-old child who was in the wrong playground. Ms Cade, the teacher on duty, was shouting at the child because he was refusing to follow her instructions. James noticed that both child and adult seemed annoyed and angry. He said to the child, “You seem annoyed and angry.”

“Yeah...she keeps moaning and shouting.”

James had learned enough NVC to know how to listen through this comment to hear the universal human needs being expressed. “And you need to be talked to quietly and with respect?”



ILLUSTRATION: JAY LUTTMAN-JOHNSON

“Yeah.”

James then asked the child to walk over with him to the teacher, who was still angry. “Luke, can you see that Ms Cade is angry?” Luke nodded. “And that is because she needs order and fairness. Is that right, Ms Cade?”

At each interchange James checked if his guess was right, not assuming he knew better than them about what was going on for them. This quickly created trust in his intervention.

“Yes. He knows he is not meant to be in the young children’s playground. All the older children will turn up if they see him here.”

“So you need everyone to be treated fairly and be safe in their own playground?”

“Yes.”

Luke indicated that he understood Ms Cade’s needs and said that he also wanted everyone to be treated equally.

James then suggested, “Luke, would you be willing to ask the teacher on duty before you visit the young children’s playground?” Hearing this, Ms Cade stopped shouting, lowered her voice and said, “I’ll be happy to see Luke if he comes to talk to me first.” Luke nodded and strolled off, whistling and relaxed.

IT CAN BE SURPRISING how quickly and naturally everyone shifts their focus to needs, once one person does. And to experience how hostility dissolves and understanding grows. Needs – such as safety, respect, love, justice – are drops of the essence of life that nourish all human beings. They reveal our common humanity. Focusing on needs resolves conflicts and awakens the urge to co-operate.

It doesn’t take two to make this shift – it takes just one. One who has

access to this voice of nonviolence. This voice is not always a quiet and calm one. Teachers, parents, couples, activists, anyone using NVC, sometimes raise their voices. Their volume reflects the intensity of their feelings, or sometimes is simply a practical choice, to enable them to be heard above the hubbub. There is a world of difference between yelling out blame, labels, rules and demands, and yelling out personally owned facts, feelings, needs and requests. This is heart-based information, and everyone can hear when someone speaks from their heart, whatever the volume. ☪

For more information please visit www.cnvc.org

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