

NVC AND MY JOURNEY AS A COUNSELLOR

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When I received my degree in counselling psychology in 1997, I had learned about the essence of many different theories of counselling and considered myself to be most closely aligned with the theories of Carl Rogers (empathy) and Viktor Frankl (meaning). I was convinced that empathy was a healing force and meaning was very important to me.

It was not until 2001 that I discovered the book, *Nonviolent Communication, A Language of Life* by Marshall Rosenberg. It seemed that Marshall had put these two concepts together in a cognitive model. I was so excited! Now I had found a model which I likened to a map. This map could facilitate my journey to the territory or consciousness of compassion and empathy!

The question then became, how do I integrate Nonviolent Communication, or NVC, into my practice? Do I just continue to use empathy, expanded to this new dimension? Do I teach it? Can you teach empathy? What about the rest of the model?

For several years I think that I became quite preoccupied with the map, and although I learned and integrated the cognitive ideas, I actually spent very little time in the territory. I became a cartographer and often found my practice of NVC to be stressful and wrought with performance anxiety, as I struggled to follow that map. I also began to notice that there were denizens of the territory that had no understanding of the map; they just lived in the territory.

There are three areas to focus on when you work with the model of NVC. There is expressing with honesty, receiving with empathy, and connecting to self with empathy. I had been focusing my learning almost exclusively on expressing with honesty. Maybe it was because I so craved the opportunity to express fully and authentically, something not particularly encouraged in our socialization process. I then made valiant attempts at NVC empathy, where I tried to separate and distinguish it from the Rogerian empathy I had been trained in. There was something that was just not satisfying about what I was doing.

I decided to loosen my grip on the map and just allow myself to experience the territory. Maybe I was missing a step. Before I could teach people to receive empathically and express authentically, maybe more skill connecting authentically and empathically with myself using NVC would help.

I started to focus on self empathy. I worked with a format developed by Penny Wassman (my NVC mentor) and continued to refine it with a colleague, Katrina Kaneda. An 'aha' moment occurred when I began to notice that often I was unaware that I was triggered and in dire need of empathy. Recognizing the cues that I was triggered became a valuable learning. The more I could connect with myself authentically and empathetically, the easier it was to extend that to others. I also noticed that my expression of honesty shifted as I integrated my awareness of empathy.

However, the dilemma still existed around teaching a cognitive model and facilitating the experience of connection with self and others that is available with empathy (the magic show, as Marshall calls it). Cognitive learning occurs in a different

part of the brain than experiencing the safe and nurturing experience of empathy.

Recently, I taught the NVC model to camp counsellors, restorative justice volunteers, drug and alcohol counsellors, nursing students and Yoga students. The challenge is always to find a way to present a cognitive model and at the same time demonstrate a radical thinking shift to a paradigm that is so very different from the one most of us have been raised in. The power-over paradigm is so integrated into the fabric of our thinking that it is not easy to trust and allow a shift into a paradigm of restoration, equality and partnership. It's the paradigm shift that is often overlooked when we become preoccupied with the model itself, as I did in my early days.

I experienced another 'aha' when I finished my class with the Yoga group. They simply said, "Oh ya I see, it's a practice, like yoga." Yes, I think it is! What I am noticing is that if I can demonstrate how to connect with empathy to self, the rest of the learning and integration comes slowly over time and with practice, like yoga, improves over time as we learn, providing amazing benefit in the moment even as we learn!

So, as I begin to see this learning as an ongoing lifetime process, I realize that for me, learning is easiest in a context of lightness and laughter, not cognitive heaviness.

I have recently discovered a communication manual called *Communication FUNDamentals*, by Jean Morrison and Christine King, which is based entirely on Marshall's work. It contains cartoons and VERY few words. There are sound bytes that are small and manageable and can be learned in a context of fun and laughter. I do a Learning Series now, that is focused on empathy (both self-empathy and empathy for others) with a few sound bytes of the model from this book thrown in each week. To facilitate the learning of these small sound bytes, I also use an NVC interactive game called GROK, both the book and the game are available at www.nvcproducts.com.

What motivates me to counsel and teach, besides my desire to contribute, is to accelerate my own learning and growth. This series has been most successful in producing results for me.

Last spring I went to a retreat for therapists put on by Miki Kashtan in San Francisco. It was an amazing experience to sit in a room of therapists of different stripes...psychiatrists, clinical psychologists and counsellors. It was interesting to see how each theory of counselling could be understood within the context of NVC. However, all of us had one thing in common...empathy and a desire to connect more fully with it, for ourselves and in our practices. It was magical and healing to enhance our ability to experience the nurturing and healing benefits of empathy under Miki's guidance. I would love to see NVC become the model of choice for communication in every avenue of life, but in counselling in particular. For me the more I connect to the essence available with this practice, the more I feel like I am coming home.

*See her ad in the Natural YellowPages under Counselling
She will be presenting the 'Laughter and Learning Series'
starting in January 2008 .. in Kelowna*