

“Reducing Violence by Meeting Human Needs: Applying Nonviolent Communication in Political Conflicts”

by

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Overview: Scope, Basis and Form

Scope

This paper explores aspects of a communication model called Nonviolent Communication (NVC) used in conflict resolution -as well as counselling and education which is out of my interest. The basis of this model is empathic connection and the development and skilled use of four key concepts: observations, feelings, needs and requests. A challenge of using this model is to integrate the process into a consciousness rather using it as a technique. This paper investigates questions that arose from considering the knowledge, process and development of this 'consciousness'.

The paper aims to make contributions to the more general fields of conflict resolution by introducing the premises, skills and consciousness of NVC.

The paper includes definitions of Human Needs Theory that establish the basis for the Nonviolent Communication approach, description of NVC, its view, practice and result, and a demonstration that this model can practically and effectively be used in political conflicts.

My focus is twofold: providing a rationale for offering Nonviolent Communication as a basis for a conflict resolution method in political disputes and suggesting ways in which it might be used to help alleviate (diminish) conflict in political issues. Because this is a new area of study¹ my emphasis on is on establishing a theoretical ground for NVC practitioners who want to use NVC as a conflict resolution method. An in-depth examination of the method in practice, along with other research, remains to be done; this is the subject of the last section of the paper.

Basis

Nonviolent Communication as a conflict resolution method is based on my research and observations during two nine-day intensive workshops in 2005 and in 2007 in Switzerland led by Marshall Rosenberg, the founder of Nonviolent Communication in. During last two years, I studied and practised Nonviolent Communication as a personal practice in a wide range of situations. Based on my observations, intensive interviews and feedback from over 50 Nonviolent Communication practitioners including Marshall Rosenberg, I believe that application of Nonviolent Communication helps to alleviate tension in political conflicts. In

¹ As I suggest in the literature review, Human Needs Theory and Nonviolent Communication as a conflict resolution method are relatively new area of interest.

this paper, I try to illustrate the application of Nonviolent Communication to provide a theoretical basis for this belief. My research still continues, since I still wait responses to my questionnaire from 800 NVC trainers.

Form

This study is divided into Ground, Path and Result sections:

- Ground: Overview and Rationale,
- Path: Methodology, Literature Review and Nonviolent Communication Model as a Conflict Resolution Method in Political Conflicts.
- Result: Opportunities of Nonviolent Communication, Challenges and Future Directions.

In the first section, I lay out the basis for this work. I then describe my methodology, sources I used in this research, a normative model of Nonviolent Communication as a conflict resolution model in politics. In the final section illustrate ways in which Nonviolent Communication can be used as a conflict resolution practice and suggest directions for further study.

A Note on Terminology

Nonviolent Communication is a service mark of the Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC) and Marshall Rosenberg. As the Center requests, I use the term and abbreviation – NVC- when referring materials and ideas of Dr. Rosenberg and CNVC certified trainers.

Rationale: Human Needs Theory, NVC

For six years I have been teaching international relations at the university, enthusiastically demonstrating how International Relations (IR) theories provided answers to problems around the world. I got quite carried out by the beauty, sophisticated elegance of complicated theories. But gradually I started to have an empty feeling. What good were elegant theories which were unable to explain all the violence, exclusion, racism, injustice and unhappiness that exist in the world? I began to ask questions of myself. Why did I never talk to my students about compassion, solidarity, happiness, spirituality, humanity –about the meaning of life? Where was the IR theories that reflected my and my students' real lives? We never discussed the biggest questions. Who am I? Where have I come from? Where am I going to?

I wanted to run away from all the barren theories and models in my textbooks, the department of IR which created IR specialists who couldn't build peaceful solutions to any conflict. I

could not carry on defending the indefensible. I could not respect modern international politics when I saw all the violence around the globe.

These conflicts caused me frustration and alienation, leading to despair. I needed to rediscover myself and a real-life international politics. I needed to search for compassion, ethics and morality in international politics.

Immediate questions came to my mind were the followings: Why there is so much violence in the world? Why do we behave violently? Is violent human nature? Or is it a learnt behaviour? How can violent behaviour successfully be deterred, prevented?²

I also noticed that at the heart of every conflict lies a (mostly unarticulated) need, such as for, safety, consideration, meaning, community or empathy. I got interested in HNT.

Human Needs Theory (HNT)

“The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world”.- **Albert Camus**

Often ignored and neglected by peace researchers, Human Needs Theory (HNT) looks at the roots of conflict and offers valuable insights into the sources of conflict, and thus possible resolutions.

In order to live and attain well-being, humans need certain essentials. These are called human needs or basic human needs. Human needs theorists argue that conflicts and violent conflicts are caused by unmet human needs. Violence occurs when certain individuals or groups do not see any other way to meet their need, or when they need understanding, respect and consideration for their needs.

The great promise of human needs theory (Burton 1990b) is that it would provide a relatively objective basis, transcending local political and cultural differences, for understanding the sources of conflict, designing conflict resolution processes, and founding conflict analysis and resolution as an autonomous discipline. The importance of this ambitious project is now generally recognized by conflict theorists, whether they agree with Burton or not (see Fisher, 1997; Avruch, 1998; Jeong, 2000).

For Burton, the concept of basic human needs offered a possible method of grounding the field of conflict analysis and resolution (which he and a few other pioneers had essentially

² Within international relations and peace studies, conflict resolution approaches look at these questions. Through conflict resolution, one considers the sources of conflict in order to address the roots of the problem, thereby avoiding or preventing violence.

improvised during the 1960s) in a defensible theory of the person. Together with other peace researchers (see Lederer and Galtung, 1980; Coate and Rosati, 1988; and the writers represented in Burton, 1990b), he set out to reframe the concept in order to provide the new field with a convincing alternative to the prevailing paradigms of postwar social science: mechanistic utilitarianism, behaviourism, cultural relativism, and Hobbesian "Realism." In Burton's view, the needs most salient to an understanding of destructive social conflicts were those for identity, recognition, security, and personal development. Over time, however, he tended to emphasize the failure of existing state systems to satisfy the need for identity as the primary source of modern ethno-nationalist struggles.

NVC as an HNT approach

There are various individuals who have applied human needs theory: Abraham Maslow, John Burton, Manfred Max-Neef and Marshall Rosenberg. Here, the proposals of Marshall Rosenberg will be explored.

Several years ago I was introduced to a model of communication, Nonviolent Communication (NVC), as conceptualized and taught by Marshall Rosenberg. Rosenberg's two nine-day introductory workshops got my attention as he went straight to the heart of my own concerns about moving out of a paradigm of judgment and evaluation to one of compassion and needs. From what I was able to understand, trainers and practitioners have found that NVC training brings our attention to processes and language that make it more likely we will be heard, hear others, clearly express our needs with confidence, and work through conflict with compassion. I took training over several months, culminating in a nine-day intensive residential training with Marshall Rosenberg. I thought I had found a process that brought together my quest for personal growth, harmony with others and to contribute to the well being of others.

Having had four different seminars and trainings with Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication process, hearing these needs encouraged me to consider Nonviolent Communication in political conflicts. Being an researcher in international relations, I wondered if application of Nonviolent Communication would make a difference in political conflicts, particularly in Armenian question.

My curiosity about these questions led me first to experiment with Nonviolent Communication as a conflict resolution method and eventually to use it as a conflict resolution method in my research.

As I did so, I found myself asking whether Nonviolent Communication was a really an effective analytical tool. To answer these questions, I decided to examine how Nonviolent Communication is applied in political conflicts and what was the outcome. This exploration is the inspiration of this paper.

Approach

In this section I describe the methods I used to develop an understanding of applying Nonviolent Communication and an semi interview questionnaire of Nonviolent Communication, show that it is very useful in peacebuilding (resolution of political conflicts).

Developing a Model of Nonviolent Communication

To the extent that there is a common understanding of Nonviolent Communication, it is based on a single book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life*. (Rosenberg, 2003a). Those writing about Nonviolent Communication do so as practioners rather than theorists; no one has, do date, published a normative or analytical model of Nonviolent Communication. Since I needed such a to determine the consequences of the application of Nonviolent Communication into political conflicts (particularly Armenian question concerning this conference) in theory and practice, I tried to develop the one presented here. In doing so, I was less interested in capturing the nuances of Nonviolent Communication or producing a formal grammmer³ than I was in constructing a description of Nonviolent Communication view, practice and result that most practioners would recognize as a reasonable prototype.

I tried to construct the questionnaire in three steps: First I prepared the following questions.

- a) What would be the most suitable questions to measure *observations* in a political conflict?
- b) What would be the most suitable questions to address *feelings* in a political conflict?
- c) What would be the most suitable questions to address *needs* in a political conflict?
- d) What would be the most suitable questions to adress *requests* in a political conflict?

Secondly, I interviewed and asked these questions to more than 100 Nonviolent Communication trainers or practionners in Netherlands and in Switzerlnd, and sent them to trainers email group which has more than 800 trainers. Until now only three NVC practionners gave specific answers to my questions; all the rest have rather focused on the process.

The Literature

In this section, I describe the literature on Nonviolent Communication to stress that there is very little research on Nonviolent Communication, and particularly on Nonviolent Communication and political conflicts.⁴

Developed by Marshall Rosenberg in 1960s, it is most often used in classroom and mediation. The Nonviolent Communication literature, reflecting this focus, consists mostly of experiential descriptions and practice manuals. Generally the literature is by practitioners, for practitioners, and written in non-political language.

The foundation text for Nonviolent Communication is Nonviolent Communication is Rosenberg's *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* (Rosenberg 2003a). It is an instruction manual, describing the basic view of Nonviolent Communication, the process steps and their daily use in everyday situations. This textbook is supported by a workbook, Leu (2003), which describe a thirteen-week study program and provides information on leading Nonviolent Communication practice groups. In 2005, Rosenberg released *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict* (Rosenberg 2005a), drawing on his work on conflict mediation. The book describes Nonviolent Communication process and its spiritual basis, and discusses empathy, anger and using Nonviolent Communication in difficult situations.

Rosenberg has also published a series of shorter guides to specific use of Nonviolent Communicationsuch as working with anger. (Rosenberg 2005) Each of the guides reviews the basic principles of Nonviolent Communication and describes its use in a particular context. One of these, Rosenberg (2004a), collects a series of interviews in which Rosenberg describes the spiritual basis of Nonviolent Communication. The material includes useful clarifications on the Nonviolent Communication's concepts of observations, feelings, needs, requests and empathy.

Nonviolent Communication is often taught through video and audiotape demonstration courses. Rosenberg (2004b) is the most referenced introductory course on Nonviolent Communication. Rosenberg (2006) covers most advanced topics such as mediation, reconciliation and the role of Nonviolent Communication in social change.

⁴ I think this is an area of fruitful research, as it will provide a basis for using Nonviolent Communication in social change.

Basis for Applying Nonviolent Communication Model (or Questionnaire) in Political Conflicts

In this section I will try to develop a model or an analytical framework of Nonviolent Communication view, practice and result that is based the work of Rosenberg other prominent practioners in the field. Nonviolent Communication view is described in a series of assertions about reality, human nature, language, action and responsibility, the practice in terms of the Nonviolent Communication process steps, and the result as the freedom to give an receive without fear.

View: The Ground of Nonviolent Communication

“Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is founded on language and communication skills that strengthen our ability to remain human, even under trying circumstances. It contains nothing new; all that has been integrated into NVC has been known for centuries. The intent is to remind us what we already know –about how we humans were meant to relate to one another- and to assist us in a living in a way that concretely manifests this knowledge.” (Rosenberg, 2003a, p.3)

The belief that is explicit throughout Rosenberg’s writings (2003a; 2004b; 2005a) is that it is our human nature to enjoy giving and receiving in a compassionate manner, and thus contribute to and enrich life for other people and for ourselves. Rosenberg explores two important questions in order to identify the crucial role of language:

- 1) What happens to disconnect us from our compassionate nature? And
- 2) What allows people to stay connected even in trying circumstances?

The response he puts forward is integrating various ideas circulated in in different fields into a model called Nonviolent Communication aimed at helping humans stay in touch with our compassionate nature. The importance of language in not only reflecting but also creating reality has been acknowledged by philosophers and linguists alike.⁵ There are may ways in which the language we use perpetrates violence, leading to hurt and pain, in others and ourselves, thus feeling conflicts rather than contribute to their peaceful resolution. The “life-alienating communication” (Rosenberg 2003a), identifies as a major stumbling block in our ability to stay connected to one another, stems from an essentially violent society where people internalize moralistic judgements of right and wrong, good and bad deeply rooted in

⁵ In social linguistics, see the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis about the inter-dependence between language and thinking; as for philosophers, see the writings of the German philosopher Wittgenstein.

the dualistic worldview as well as external motivations and standards for activity, for what *should* be done in order to be rewarded or avoid punishment, thus renouncing personal responsibility and choice. This type of communication is characteristic of what he identifies as a *dominion* system that is placed in opposition to a *life-serving* system, each being organized around certain beliefs about human nature with the language having a crucial role in reinforcing one or the other. (Rosenberg 2003a, 2005a)

The domination system which Rosenberg seeks to transcend through Nonviolent Communication is based on a destructive mythology that views human beings as essentially evil and selfish, therefore having the society organized around the principles of control and “power-over tactics”, including reward and punishment rooted in *deserve* thinking, guilt, shame, obligation. (Rosenberg 2005a) In this type of system, only some people have the power of having their needs met, often at the expense of other people’s needs not being met. Thus, this destructive mythology, fuels moralistic judgments and sets the base for a domination system –expressed in a language that brings pain in relationships and violence in the world. A life-serving system views human beings doing everything they do in order to enrich life, that is to meet their needs, therefore the society is built on the principle of meeting everyone’s needs. Nonviolent Communication is proposed as a tool to address the gaps formed between people in domination systems, contributing to starting off a healing process as well as processes of change, of shifting to more fulfilling social relationships and systems. The importance of starting with inner work for contributing to peaceful conflict resolution is clearly present in many of Rosenberg’s writings along with the acknowledgement of the worldviews people are holding. Using Nonviolent Communication both presupposes and determines a change in the dominator-oriented worldview:

“Speaking peace, using Nonviolent Communication offers the promise of reducing or even eliminating conflict in the first place. For most of us the process of bringing about peaceful change begins with working on our own mindsets, on the way we view ourselves and others, on the way we get our needs met. This basic work is in many ways the most challenging aspect of speaking peace because it requires great honesty and openness, developing a certain literacy of expression, and overcoming deeply engrained learning that emphasizes judgment, fear, obligation, duty, punishment and reward, and shame. (Rosenberg, 2005a, p.10)

While Nonviolent Communication can be a powerful tool for social change and peaceful conflict resolution as expressed explicitly in *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict* (2005a), this

is however a secondary objective; the primary aim of NVC is to establish *connection with other human beings*, social change seen as a natural outcome once connection is established given the premise that one of the most important needs humans have is to contribute to life, to the well-being of others.

The basic model for Nonviolent Communication, Rosenberg proposes (2005a) proposes that combines four components with two parts. The four components –observations, feelings, needs and requests- are specific ideas and actions that fit into the form of the Nonviolent Communication model, while the two parts- empathy and honesty- provide a solid foundation for using Nonviolent Communication as, what Rosenberg calls, a “compassionate communication” or a “language of life.”

Nonviolent Communication asks us to consider a very different view of reality, one which we are an expression of Divine Energy and the world is abundant realm in which our needs can be met without war, cruelty and bloodshed. In it, we find that:

- The world is abundant rather than limited,
- Human nature is giving and compassionate rather than selfis and indifferent,
- Direct personal experience has greater validity than any description of it,
- Violence is a learned behaviour rather than innate human quality,
- Language shapes rather than simply describes, the world we perceive,
- Unrecognized subjective perceptions artificially limit the range of potential action,
- Valid needs are at the root of every action,
- Needs are the universal expressions of human conditions rather than preferences,
- Feelings are an accurate indication of whether or not needs are being met,
- We are individually responsible for the choices we make in meeting our needs.

Nonviolent Communication asserts that when we experience from this perspective, we see the world and ourselves through a lens of compassion, express our natural capacity to give and receive and assume that others are able to do the same. It asks to rethink basic ideas we have about the nature of reality and human existnce, most importantly that we privilege direct experience over evalutaions of that experience or thoughts about past and future that arise in connection with it. Taking this view brings us into the present moment and reveals that the

world and we are something different than we normally imagine. In this section, I examine each of these assertions in more detail and describe the practice and fruit that comes of working with them.

The World Is Abundant

We are taught to believe that whatever we need isn't and won't be, readily available. (Bryson 2004, p.265) Because the fact of "scarcity" is so much a part of our cultural ethos, it is normally impossible for us to consider the possibility of abundance. (Rosenberg 2003a, p.172) But this is really just an idea that we have been taught. In fact, "we've been given this great and abundant world for creating a world of joy and nurturing." (Rosenberg 2004, p.10)

The assumption of scarcity is reinforced by our education, media and economic systems, so much so that we assume it to be refutable. Nonviolent Communication suggests that seeing in scarcity in another way, as a concept, will help us to realize how often our needs can be satisfied without competing for, or consuming, material resources. Nonviolent Communication also argues that working from an presumption of abundance unleashes our ability to create the world in which abundance is a fact.

The Essence of Human Nature

We are taught that humans are "naturally incapable of peaceful coexistence" (Wink 1999, p.47) and "deprived of original holiness".⁶ In contrast, Nonviolent Communication suggests that we "are Divine Energy, that we have such power to make life wonderful, and there is nothing we like better than to do just that". (Rosenberg, 2004a, p.31) When we connect with this nature, we "enjoy giving and receiving in compassionate manner." (Rosenberg, 2003a, p.1) Moreover, the essence is untainted by any sort of permanent and inherent evil quality.

This assumption about human nature echoes the first; as the world is abundant, so are human beings naturally compassionate and unmarked by inherent evil. The common idea that humans are inherently flawed in some way "contributes to a kind of thinking that attributes wrongness in one's adversaries, and corresponding inability to think of oneself in terms of vulnerability." (Rosenberg 2003a, p.18) To be able to think oneself and others as unmarked by evil makes it possible to distinguish between humans and their actions, even when the latter cause great harm. Consequently, we are more likely to see others as allies rather than adversaries and more accepting of our needs as valid expressions of our nature.

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, <http://www.vatican.va/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p7.htm> (accessed on 26th August 2007)

The Primacy of Experience

Cognitive skills are highly valued in our society, often to the detriment of direct experience.

Nonviolent Communication concludes that direct experience is more than valid than any description or evaluation of it:

“Experience for me the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience. No other person’s ideas, and none of my ideas, are as authoritative as my experience. It is to experience that I must return again and again, to discover a closer approximation to truth as it is in the process of becoming in me. Neither the Bible nor the prophets –neither Freud nor research- neither the revelations of God or man- can take precedence over my own direct experience.” (Rogers 1961, p.23)

Cognition in the form of evaluation, is not to be ignored but it is of limited use in determining our true needs and those of others. Cognitive labeling is always evaluative; the structure of our language prevents it from being anything else. This limitation is apparent even in the labels that we consider to be neutral, such “cook” or “bank teller”. (Rosenberg 2003a, p.28)

Violence is Learned Rather Than Innate

If humans are naturally good than evil, violence must be an acquired behaviour rather than an innate human quality. (Rosenberg, 2005a, 17) Seeing our nature in this way reminds us that our violent thoughts, words and actions are culturally determined, if deeply engrained, strategies for getting our needs met rather than inherent to our nature. If violence is culturally determined rather than innate, we must have the capacity to choose other means for meeting our needs.

Seeing violence as a choice allows us to recognize that human beings are not inherently evil than even when they act in ways that cause immense suffering. It offers the possibility of a world in which nonviolence, rather than violence, is the normal response to conflict, even when force must be used to prevent harm. It also helps us to see the crucial violence between nonviolence and passivity; the former is an act of compassion, the latter one of submission. Nonviolent Communication never suggests that we must submit to violence to avoid using force if force is what it takes to avoid harm, only that our need our need to do so can always be met without judgment or punishment. (Rosenberg, 2003a.p.162)

Language Shape Perceptions

Our habit of mediating through language shapes our perception of, and reactions to, reality. (Connor, Killian 2005, p.25) Nonviolent Communication asks us to consider how the language we commonly use creates artificial distinctions such as right/wriong, abundance/scarsity and friend/enemy. (Rosenberg, 2003a, p.15)

Studies about the role of language in shaping our perception have shown us how we communicate determines what we notice –and don't- in the world around us. Ignoring this fact allows us to avoid taking responsibility for our choices: if we see only “terrorists” when we encounter people entering a mosque, we are unlikely to worry much about the violence inherent in repressing religious expression. Discovering that our every day language distorts our perceptions forces us to consider the relative nature of our jugments and frees us to learn language in new ways. As we do, we are more likely to be tolerant of the views of others, stumble upon opportunities to cooperate and become aware of our independent nature.

Subjective Perceptions Influence Action

We are unconsciously and habitually influenced by language processes that affect our choice making by distorting our perceptions. “The language we use and the thoughts we have inform the kind of actions we take. (Connor, Killian 2005, p.25) Nonviolent Communication reminds us that to respond creatively to what we are truly needing, we must learn to recognize and discard the cognitive filters that limit our range of choices.

This range is influenced by our culture, language and society. Note that these things are just that, influences. They are not the sole, nor even the most important, determinants of our actions. Nonviolent Communication makes clear that we cannot assign responsibility for what we do to what we have been taught or the world in which we are. Accepting this idea weakens our reliance on externally determined categories, rules and labels and helps us gain gain access, and to take responsibility for, the needs that are at the roof of our actions.

Human Needs Are Universal

However different our differences might be, we share a basic set of inherent needs “that, as humans, we like to experience and express.” (Connor, Killian 2005, p.15) Our needs are a priori reasonable expressions of human nature. This definition makes clear that needs are quite distinct from strategies, the plans that we devise to get our needs. We all experience needs in a common way even if we each express their presence differently. We also learn that our awareness of a particular need of a particular need may be high or low in any moment; we can always choose to forgo meeting some needs in service of others. For example, I might forego

food (as in a hunger strike) thereby consciously choosing –in the service of other needs- not to meet my need for nourishment.

Assuming that needs are universal expressions of human condition makes clear our common nature and moderates the tendency to see our needs as more or less important than the needs of others. Seeing this commonality sparks our natural empathy, “if everyone needs just what we need, I can imagine what they might be feeling when that need arises.” It also helps us to distinguish between what we need and the strategies that we each use to get our needs met. When this difference is clear, it becomes easier to work with others to co-create strategies that meet everyone’s needs in a given situation.

Action Are Always in the Service of Needs

Every human action is in the service of meeting basic, universal needs. (Rosenberg 2005, p.66) Our actions may be destructive or life serving, tragic or heroic, self-serving or compassionate but all are “expressions of our own values and needs.” (Rosenberg 2003a, p.16) This says more “every action has a reason,” it suggests that every action has a reason grounded in the most basic expression of our human nature.

Understanding that actions are in service of needs, we begin choosing what we do based upon our experience rather than our opinions and we are able to see that others are trying to do the same. We are able to recognize the difference between the needs of others and the sometimes poor, even incredibly harmful, choices they make in trying to meet them. We discover that directly connecting with our needs is more likely to lead to choosing actions that meet them in a nonviolent way.

Feelings Are Based on the State of Needs

We commonly assign responsibility for our feeling state to the thoughts and actions of other people or events that we cannot control. (Rosenberg 2005a, p.35) In truth, our feelings arise in accordance with the state of our needs; at most, outside forces stimulate awareness of the state of “met” or “unmet” we are experiencing in the present moment.

Discovering that what others do in the present moment influences but does not determine what we are actually feeling locates control of our life within, rather than outside, our person. Further, accepting that feelings are rooted in what we are needing rather than our cognitive judgments –however influential- creates a connection with them that short circuits our normal

dependence upon evaluation. This connection plays a key role in our ability to remain in the present moment of experience and see, without judgment, what others and we truly need.

Personal Responsibility

Most of the time, we believe that we should not be responsible for our choices because others compel them. Nonviolent Communication asserts that “we don’t do anything that isn’t coming out of choice.” (Rosenberg 2005, p.66) In the same light it is clear that we are not responsible for choices that others make. Nonviolent Communication asks us to see that language, culture, society, personal history and the actions of others may influence our experience but do not relieve us of the responsibility for seeing our needs and the strategies we choose for getting them met.

The idea that personal responsibility makes clear that whatever else is influencing us, we are ultimately in charge of our own lives, our own needs and our own choices. Taking responsibility for ourselves diminishes the probability that will use coercion to get our needs met or submit to others who choose it as a strategy. Nonviolent Communication presumes that all human needs are worthwhile: we needn’t feel guilty or shameful about our needs even though we do need to own them. Accepting this, we diminish the power societal norms based on scarcity, competition and compulsion and are more able to act out our true nature, which is compassionate and giving.

Summary. Nonviolent Communication View

Our dependence upon the language-mediated experience of reality severely limits our ability to perceive human nature and reality for what they are: expressions of Divine Energy. Further, the language we use encourages us to choose actions based on a view of the world as chaotic, competitive and violent. (Le Compte 2004, p.44) The result is that we fail to see the commonality of human needs, believe that we are competing for scarce resources, and are justified in choosing violent strategies in our interactions with others. (Connor, Killian 2005, p.28)

Focusing on practically differentiating between experience, which is inexpressible, and cognitively processed result, as it is known through words, makes clear the limits of the latter. Our true needs are found only in direct experience; thus we learn the difference between needs, as defined here, and strategies, plans of action that we devise to meet our needs. (Connor, Killian 2005, 55) With this difference clear, we can take responsibility not only for meeting our needs but for the strategies we choose in doing so. (Bryson 2004, p.95)

Each of the assertions described here asks us to reconsider our “common sense” understanding of the way the world works and suggests that our cognizing is not always the most useful interface with reality. Moreover, what we take to be certain truths about humanity (for example, that it is inherently evil) are actually concepts that we can choose to discard. Finally, they suggest that the assumption that our needs can be satisfied only if we are willing to engage in strategies of reward and punishment is, experientially, just not so. Accepting these assertions weakens the concepts that keep us from the direct, present moment experience of reality, our feelings and needs, and helps us act out of our nature, which is divine, wise and compassionate.

Practice: The Process Steps of Nonviolent Communication

The four components as well as two parts detailed below build on one another to create a life-serving communication, allowing for establishing connection between human beings:

1. The first piece is the **observation** of whatever triggered the speaker’s current state of mind. We do our best to state our observation free of any evaluation: *“When I see video game magazines, socks, and food on the floor, and these pots and dirty dishes in the kitchen...”* (Not: *“When I see this huge mess.”*)
2. The second is the speaker’s **feelings** in response to what is observed. We do our best to identify an emotion, sensation or state of mind that is free of thoughts: *“I feel exhausted and agitated...”* (Not: *“I feel I shouldn’t leave you home by yourself.”*)
3. The third is the unfulfilled **need** that is generating the feelings mentioned. We try to identify as closely as possible a universal need or value, or at least a desire stated in positive terms: *“because I am needing more order and beauty in my home.”* (Not: *“Because I don’t want to come home to a pigsty.”*)
4. The fourth piece is a **request** that provides the listener with an opportunity to exercise their power to respond to the speaker’s need with something immediate, concrete, and do-able. The mother offers such an opportunity to the son by asking: *“Would you be willing to put away the things on the floor that belong to you, toss out the garbage, and wash the dishes in the sink?”* (Not: *“Would you quit making such a mess and do something about this room?”*)

The two interconnected parts:

1. **Empathy:** Receiving from the heart creates a means to connect with others and share experiences in a real life enriching way. Empathy goes beyond sympathy and agreeing with the other, rather it implies *presence*, allowing understanding of the others and their needs. It is a powerful tool for being present and aware of personal needs and the needs of others in all situations, hence setting a base for establishing connection.

2. **Honesty:** Giving from the heart is important to be rooted in honesty. Honesty begins with truly understanding ourselves and our own needs, and thus responding to the needs of others in a life enriching way for all.

From these four components and two parts, Rosenberg created a model for a more fulfilling and life enriching communication that can be very effective in solving conflicts with our family, with our friends, with our coworkers, and with ourselves. The basic outline of the model is the following:

When I see that _____

I feel _____

because my need for _____ is/is not met.

Would you be willing to _____?

While making clear thi

s process involves a certain mechanics, Rosenberg also emphasizes the core spirituality that Nonviolent Communication is based on. The mechanics provide a tool, a form in which to learn to express ourselves in a way that contributes to enriching life, the process itself is not being dependent on this particular format. The connection that is being established on the basis of recognizing not only our fundamental oneness, the sameness of our needs but also our connection with a higher universal energy, can be looked at as building progressive unity among people:

“(...) a key purpose of Nonviolent Communication is to connect with other people – and thus with Divine Energy- in a way that enables compassionate giving to take place.” (Rosenberg 2004, p.7)

“(...) the spirituality embodied in Nonviolent Communication exists not so much to help people connect with the divine as to come from the Divine Energy we’re created out of, our natural life-serving energy. It’s a living process to keep us connected to the life within ourselves and the life that’s going on in other people.” (Rosenberg 2005a, p.14)

It is our disconnection from one other and from this Divine Energy that Rosenberg sees responsible for the violence in this world. Thus working for eliminating violence in the world through the Nonviolent Communication connection is essentially founded upon identifying our common needs, and thus recognizing our common humanity as well as unity and interconnectedness, since needs are envisaged as the “quickest, closest way to getting in

connection with that Divine Energy.” (Rosenberg 2004, p.13) Practising Nonviolent Communication requires learning the mechanics of speaking peace but also a change of heart:

“Nonviolent Communication is a combination of thinking and language, as well as a means of using power designed to serve a specific intention. This intention is to create the quality of connection with other people and oneself that allows compassionate giving to take place. In this sense, it is a spiritual practice: all actions are taken for the sole purpose of willingly contributing to the well-being of others and ourselves”. (Rosenberg, 2005a, p.16)

Separating Evaluations from Observations

We are subjective decision makers that see the world filtered through personal history, society and language. Nonviolent Communication suggests that our actions are not completely determined by any of these things even if they are strongly influenced by all of them. But to make decisions that reflect what is actually happening in the world, we must learn to recognize, and to whatever extent we are able, to free ourselves of this filter. This is the task undertaken in the first process step: separating *observation* from *evaluation*.

Rosenberg defines *observation* as “the ability to call to (someone’s) attention to- concretely, specifically- what the person is doing that we like or don’t like, without mixing in an evaluation.” Since we cannot observe that someone else is thinking, statements about another’s mental state are not observations but evaluations. We pay attention, not to what we imagine someone is thinking, but to what we experience them doing. (Rosenberg 2005a, p.31) We can emphasize actual experience over cognitions about it by: (Rosenberg 2003a, p.30)

- Separating facts from opinions and inferences,
- Distinguishing between prediction and certainty;
- Being specific about referents, time and place.

Nonviolent Communication observations are factual statements of who, when, where and most importantly, *what* is happening as we experience the world. Evaluation is not banished (it is seen as a useful tool) but is clearly distinguished from observation. This exposes the

difference between experience and the thoughts and emotions⁷ that experience might be stimulating. The practice of observation makes it clear when we are acting on our judgments about experience, rather than experience itself (Rosenberg 2003a, p.15-24) and establishes a basis for choosing to act without judgment. In making and communicating observations, we also begin to reshape our perception of the world and the range of responses to it that we believe to be available to us under most circumstances.

Experiencing Feelings

In Western culture, the word *feeling* is used to describe both affective and cognitive states. Unfortunately, the affective sense has also acquired a connotation as being a less than trustworthy state of being.⁸ This being so, we tend to prefer thinking about feelings over experiencing them. The second process step of Nonviolent Communication, *experiencing feelings*, distinguishes between the affective cognitive sense and privileges the former over the latter. In essence, it asks to explore our inner state with the same awareness as the step suggests we pay attention to the outer.

This introduces the idea that feelings are experienced somatically and quite distinctly from thoughts. (Connor Killian 2005, p.30) The experience of this distinction leads to the discovery that feeling is the key to uncovering our needs. (Rosenberg, 2003a, p.42) To experience feelings directly, we must learn to:

- Distinguish between thoughts (cognitive) and feelings (affective),
- Experience and name feelings accurately but non-judgmentally,
- Accept feelings to be internally rather than externally caused.

Calling attention to the difference between feelings as affect and feelings as cognition emphasizes the relative nature of cognitive evaluation. Studying how our feelings manifest, we discover that using certain words in connection with the phrase “I feel” causes us to mistake thoughts about what we are feeling for the experience itself: (Rosenberg 2003a, p.41)

- Words such as *that, like, as if,*
- The pronouns such as *I, you, he, she, they, it,*
- Names or nouns referring to people,

⁷ There is an important distinction between feeling and emotion in Nonviolent Communication: feelings are direct affective experience while emotion is a mixture of a feeling and our thoughts about it.

- Descriptions of what we think or believe,
- Descriptions of other people's actions, thoughts or words.

Believing that feeling is a cognitive process leads us to assume that feeling is predicated on outside events rather than our internal state. Compare for example, "I feel abandoned when you tell me that you want to spend the evening alone" to "I feel lonely." In the first, "abandoned" is a judgement that may or may not be connected to our affective state and it suggests that our feelings are mostly contingent on external activity when they, in fact, are not. In the second, feeling is understood and experienced to be affective, self-referenced and without evaluation of self or other.

The difference between these two statements of feelings makes clear our current locus of control, gives us way to test whether we are actually experiencing our feelings or just thinking about them and demonstrates how verbal expressions of feeling mixed with evaluation are likely to limit connection with others. (Rosenberg 2003a, p.46) Taking responsibility for our actions is also more more likely when we understand that our feeling state, upon which we base most of our choices, is largely independent of external causes. In choosing experience our feelings rather than separate ourselves from them through cognition, we gain a more accurate understanding of the relationship between the external world, our needs and our affective state.

Uncovering Needs

Needs are internal states of lack. Our awareness of a need is nor predicated upon specific actions by others or our preferences but on an affective sense, arising out of experience, that we might best label as "wanting". Defined as such, needs are quite distinct from strategies:⁹ actions that we take because we believe that they will meet a particular need. (Connor, Killian 2005, p.62) The confusion between needs and strategies is a fundamental stumbling block to meeting needs satisfying ways. To reduce this confusion, we must distinguish between the awareness of needs, which is an affective experience, and the generation of strategies to meet needs, which is cognitive activity. Accurately experiencing our needs requires us to:

- See the difference between needs as causes and strategies as responses,
- Stay with and name the experience of needing accurately,

⁹ There is a vast literature on wants and needs. In it, *needs* are often defined as things that we must have to survive while *wants* niceties of one kind or another; we can use *strategies* to satisfy either. Nonviolent Communication has no notion of "wanting" as typically defined.

- Accepts needs to be internally, rather than, externally determined.

The ability to see the difference between experience and cognition is critical to naming needs in ways that we and others can understand, recognizing the underlying needs driving our strategies, accepting needs as internally resourced and taking responsibility for meeting them. The process of connecting with our needs requires an “emptying the mind and listening with the whole being” (Rosenberg 2003a, p.91) and then naming what we encounter directly and simply. Through this experience,¹⁰ we learn to recognize our real needs and maximize the chance that we can develop satisfying nonviolent strategies for meeting them. (Rosenberg 2004a, p.54) Finally, we discover the strength of the link between feeling and needing and weakness of the links between either of these external causes.

Making Requests

In our usual interactions, we assume that we are, in a real sense, disconnected from the world around us. The first three steps reveals the source of this assumption –our cognitive filters- and how to overcome it, while the fourth, making *requests*, shows us how to reconnect: we ask others to participate voluntarily in the process of meeting our needs and we offer to do the same for them. This step highlights the opportunity for connection inherent in asking others for help in meeting our needs even though we cannot make them responsible for doing so. (Rosenberg 2003a, p.67) Working with making requests also reveals how often we try to meet our needs by employing strategies of reward and punishment rather than invitation and cooperation.

Requests ask for positive, observable action, something that others can *do* rather than they must stop doing. Limiting requests to observable to observable actions insures that we can gauge the extent to to which our request has been fulfilled, something not possible if we are requesting a change in thought, opinion or attitude. Asking for something to be done, rather than not done, limits our ability to rely on negative or coercive language. Because any request –if it has been preceded by the other three process steps- is an acknowledgment of our independence, it is also a request for connection. This is true even if we apparently need “non-connection.” For example in asking, “Can you leave the apartment for an our so I can have some time alone?” we are asking for the cooperation of another even as we are requesting to be by ourselves.

¹⁰ What Rosenberg calls “seeing what is alive in us”.

Requesting also helps us to see whether we are actually demanding, rather than asking, for help by suggesting we watch how to react when our appeal is met with some form of “no”. True requests are explicitly free of the presumption of reward or punishment, while demands are not. Our response to “no” gives us a sense of our willingness to be personally responsible for our needs and the extent to which we participate in reward/punishment thinking.

Making requests caps the Nonviolent Communication process. In the first three steps, we discover how to relate more directly and less judgementally to our experience and to discern the needs that drive our desire to interact with others. In the fourth step, we learn to formulate strategies for meeting our needs that encourages non-coercive connection and to articulate those strategies in a way that makes clear that we are inviting the participation of others directly to our life.

Summary: Nonviolent Communication Process

Nonviolent Communication practice changes the way we relate to the world, first by asking questions about our mode of perception, then offering an alternative and finally, by giving us a way to behave based upon it. It is expressed in steps that work with one or more aspects of this view. Though the practice seems to focus on connecting with our own needs and asking the cooperation of others, it also teaches us how to experience the joy of giving as often as we do the gift of receiving.

Process actions –observing, feeling, needing and requesting- help us to distinguish between direct experience and cognitions about experience. Discovering this distinction leads to a more direct connection with our needs and improves our ability to ask others, directly and simply, for help in meeting them. With practice, we recognize our dependence upon others, their role in helping us meet our needs and our natural ability “to establish relationships based on honesty and empathy that will eventually fulfill everyone’s needs.” (Rosenberg 2003a, p.60) This recognition is the fruition of the process of clearly observing the world around us, experiencing our feelings, understanding and naming our needs and requesting assistance in fulfilling them.

Nonviolent Communication also asks us to see what others do and ask in the same light, as requests coming out of reasonable and wholesome needs based upon an underlying nature of Divine Energy. In the complete practice, everything we say and hear is a request for cooperation, all actions by self and other are in the service of valid needs and every interaction is an opportunity for connection.

Conclusion: Challenges of Practice

In writing this paper, I hoped to show that Marshall Rosenberg's Nonviolent Communication process could serve as an alternative framework for resolving political conflicts peacefully.

To do so, I presented definitions of NVC and tried to demonstrate that Nonviolent Communication is practically useful to understand human nature thus to change suffering caused by political conflicts. My research on applying NVC in political conflicts in theory and practice arose out of my hope that the result would serve as a starting point for me and other researchers to develop skillful ways of working with political conflicts. Research on how this understanding develops in practice in political conflicts remain to be seen/examined.

In watching my own use of NVC and watching others who were learning the process, I noticed that the retention of NVC skills was at best uneven. With some, skills tend to wane over time and would often vanish when triggered by some event or person. In some, the NVC process seemed so wooden and odd sounding that it would even interfere with communication and connection. In others the learning seemed to stick and their approach to the NVC language skills seemed to be natural and they offered a sense of presence, strength and compassion. My ongoing commitment to deepen my own understanding of NVC as well as those of others necessitates the examination of such challenges in the practice of NVC.

Trainers often describe NVC as both a set of skills and a kind of consciousness that is often referred to as Giraffe Consciousness. The Giraffe metaphor is used in NVC teaching because the Giraffe is the land animal with the largest heart, and it is able to see great distances because of its long neck. Thus, giraffe consciousness symbolizes both heart and vision. I became curious about several aspects about this consciousness. What are the qualities of this consciousness? How is it developed in people? Why is there variation in how quickly it develops in people? Why do some people, when exposed to NVC, become so immediately enthusiastic with it? What do they see and experience? How do trainers recognize this quality? What do they do to help learners enhance it? A key factor in the success of NVC seems to lie in how well the learner or practitioner "gets it", and further, how well this "getting it" serves them through the challenges of practice. I thought if I could understand what these factors were and how they play a part in NVC and in similar processes, that I could perhaps enhance how NVC is taught, learned and conceptualized. Furthermore, I was inspired by a personal conversation with Marshall Rosenberg (September 18, 2004) in which he expressed his desire for trainers to put more emphasis on the consciousness of the model rather than the techniques of the model.

As my overall purpose is to contribute to search for practice of NVC in political conflicts, I have an intention of bringing new perspectives and possibilities to conflict resolution practitioners that will be both immediately useful and be an inspiration to further personal and academic investigation. A more specific goal is to promote a greater awareness and understanding of the knowledge, process and development about the NVC 'Giraffe' consciousness. I wish to discover if there are methods used by NVC trainers that target these shifts in consciousness, and if so whether this facilitates a transformation in learners' awareness of NVC and this consciousness. In addition I wish to contribute to this knowledge by reviewing literature that would enhance an understanding about this consciousness and its development. The particular methods, experiences and literature are those that deepen a sense of empathy, connection and sense of witnessing and are less likely to produce acts of judgment, coercion or domination. As there is little by way of literature and research within the NVC community, I hope this project will make a contribution to this field. Further, I hope that this model of communication will be attractive to conflict resolution studies as a tool for deepening human connection. The scope of this project will be more of a general probe into these questions rather than a comprehensive investigation. I hope to further my research in this area of study to develop an analytical framework to use NVC in political conflicts.

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