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Unitarian Universalist Church in Anaheim

**Sticking Our Necks out:
Nonviolent Communication for Social Change Work.**

I was requested to speak about Nonviolent Communication and social change work, and I am delighted to do so. Marshall Rosenberg, the developer of NVC, is passionate about social change. That's why he took his introductory book, *Nonviolent Communication*, and rewrote it to focus on social change, to become *Speak Peace in a World of Conflict*. I believe the attitude or consciousness that NVC works to create is the same as that of the great nonviolent social change leaders of the last century. I always wanted the spirituality they had, but I didn't know how to get it. Now I know a way!

First, a brief introduction to Nonviolent Communication. It is a tool, or recipe, for communication that connects people, and helps make life wonderful by making it enjoyable to give to one another. When somebody is doing something we don't like, we don't say what's wrong with them, labeling or blaming or diagnosing. We make an *observation*, express our own *feelings* and our *needs* that are not met by what that person is doing, and make a clear, doable *request* of that person to help meet our needs. That is NVC **honesty**. Here's an example of honesty about a modest social concern on the home front. "Honey, when we run the washing machine with one pair of yoga shorts in it (*observation*) I'm frustrated (*feeling*), because I really want to conserve water (*need*). Will you please check the hamper before you start the washer, and see if you can run a bigger load? (request)" That's honesty.

We also do a certain kind of listening we call **empathy**. No matter how nasty the words coming out of the other person's mouth, we don't need to take it personally. Instead we try to guess a person's feelings and needs behind their unpleasant words. So when a man says of undocumented immigrants, "They're ruining our way of life!" I am curious. Is he feeling scared and needing economic security? Are people of another ethnic group and language becoming the majority in his neighborhood, so he is feeling lonely and anxious, needing belonging? By this kind of empathy, I can transform my enemy image of someone who says things I don't like and see a human being in pain.

Finally, we practice **self-empathy**. This is the same four steps applied to our own thinking, to transform our judgments. I had a booth at a fair, and a woman came to talk to me about nonviolent communication. Then she scolded her five-year-old, who was bored and restless. So when I thought, "That parent is treating her child with emotional violence, right in front of my Nonviolent Communication booth!" I translated that judgment into the same four parts. When I see a child treated that way (*observation*), I *feel* so sad and discouraged. I *need* respect and understanding for all children. And my *request* of myself is to give that parent some empathy right now. So I did.

This process sounds pretty simple right? Simple, but not easy, as members of our Thursday night class can tell you firsthand. It takes courage to speak our honesty when we fear how it will be received. It's hard to listen with empathy when we are in pain ourselves. And it's hard to even remember to do these things when we have so many decades of practice speaking in ways

that label, judge and blame. It's a new language and a new way of thinking. And it's worth the effort, because it works!

Now I'm going to take these three modes of Nonviolent Communication, Self-empathy, Empathy and Honesty, and look at how they apply to social change work.

Self-empathy in social change work means getting clear on the needs behind our activism. We often get caught up in our strategies, the concrete plans we make for change, and then we lose track of the purpose behind those strategies. When we keep that purpose front and center, we can be flexible about the strategies we use. We can also get downright inspirational. If we want to change hearts and minds, inspiration is required.

I'm taking notes right now from a woman named Ruth Beaglehole. She is the founding director of the Center for Nonviolent Education and Parenting in L.A. (<http://www.cnvep.org>) She has a parenting curriculum, and she trains teachers, caregivers, and parent educators. More than that, Ruth is a woman on a mission. Her need, her purpose, is for children to thrive in a safe and supportive home environment, and she says so with passion every time she meets with a group. Her vision and commitment energize me each time I see her. She is always in touch with the needs that drive her work, so she has the energy to do not only the thing she loves most, teaching parents. She also has found the energy to create a nonprofit organization, write grants, supervise employees, and other things which aren't so easy or fun for her.

Self-empathy in social change work also means mourning, getting in touch with the pain we feel when those needs we value so much are not met. For many activists, those unmet needs can be pretty personal. Does anybody want to guess what Ruth Beaglehole's childhood was like? Mourning uses the same process, getting in touch with feelings and needs. It's freeing just to sit with the pain and name the unmet needs. This part might sound like psychotherapy. That is only because our culture does not make space for pain and mourning. Facing pain with courage is a skill we need as activists. And strangely, when we have faced our own pain, we can be more compassionate to others. That's the power of self-empathy.

Empathy in social change work means really understanding and caring about the people you are asking to change. This has two parts. First, empathy means simply understanding the situation of the people you are asking to change. An example. If you want California schools to do something new for kids, begin with some empathy for school administrators and legislators. Observation: they struggle with a state income stream is so variable year to year that any new program introduced one year is almost always lost the next year due to lack of funds. Feelings: despair and hopelessness.

Empathy also means discovering the beautiful needs behind actions we don't like. Everyone does what they do for a good reason, to meet a beautiful human need. I have a friend Jonathan, with whom I have had many discussions about abortion. I am pro-choice. He is not. Our discussions had been in the form of debates in which each of us tried to convince the other why we were right. Then one time he got personal. He told me he was born the year before Roe vs. Wade, and he was adopted. If abortion was legal, he probably would never have been born. Knowing this, I finally understood this deep need behind his passion to criminalize abortion. Jonathan's need was his own life, his very existence. After that bit of empathy, we started talking *with* each other, instead of *at* each other, about abortion.

When we are connected with our own needs (self-empathy) and the needs of the people we are asking to change (empathy), we can overcome enemy images. We can feel connection and compassion with people who are doing things that trigger pain in us. This is the attitude from which we want to take the next step for social change, making powerful requests.

Honesty in social change means making powerful requests. Not demands. Change involves both structures and attitudes. You can change structures by force. You can't change attitudes by force. And when somebody gives in to a demand you make, one of you is going to pay for it. We want people to *want* to make a change, to meet their own needs... for compassion, integrity, effectiveness, harmony, or whatever.

Making powerful requests. What makes a request powerful? When a majority of voters make a request for a candidate, that's powerful, as we saw last week. A request is powerful when it is convincing to the person who sets policy in an organization. I got the runaround at my son's school when I asked to do a pilot program teaching Nonviolent Communication to kids, until I talked to the principal. She decides, and she said yes! (NVC with sixth graders. What an experience!)

A request is powerful when it gets people's attention and makes them see an issue in a new way. An organization of workers went to a corporation in Irvine and unfurled an eight-foot-long copy of the paycheck of a low-wage worker at that company. They went around the offices, asking the people, "Could you live on this? Could anybody live on this?" They did it with humor, and then they explained whose check it was, and I think a few people really heard their concerns at a heart level. Making powerful requests... creative, subversive, fun, or dangerous requests. That is the public part of social change work.

I will go through these steps of Nonviolent Communication with a cause that is dear to my heart. Over the years I have worked for the acceptance and inclusion of gay and Lesbian people in Christian churches. That is the change I seek. What's my need? Inclusion. Acceptance. Access to God! Is it personal? Sure, it's personal. In the church where I grew up, I could not have been ordained, nor could I even preach, because I am a woman. I want the church I support to practice inclusion. Acceptance. I need access to God for everyone! And I can get pretty passionate about it. And I still mourn the lack of inclusion in Christian churches.

In 1992 the church I belonged to (United Methodist) passed rules limiting gay people's participation. They didn't kick gay people out, but they did say, "The practice of homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teachings..." I was so furious and hurt. I first considered leaving that church. (My husband teased me, "What are you going to do, start the 'church of Terry' so you can agree with all the teachings?") I decided to stay, and to make a *request* to host an "official" retreat for parents of gay children, where inclusion would be taught and modeled. I was pleasantly surprised when people in high places supported my idea. Then we didn't know if anyone would show up. As it turned out, this retreat was a small but shining witness to inclusion that went all around the state of Minnesota in bulletins and newsletters, and it was powerful for the handful of participants, including me.

At this retreat for parents of gay children I learned empathy. I heard a mother express her confusion about her church's teachings. She needed to love her child, and she needed integrity

in her beliefs. I did a lot of listening before she got clear on her own integrity with her son. Her husband took a long time before he started to talk. When he did, he told a story about the abuse he had witnessed as a child, that had formed his ideas about same-sex relationships. And he was beginning to see a different perspective.

If you want to change hearts and minds, if you want to bring people together to work through differences, a structured retreat is a great strategy. When Marshall Rosenberg works in war zones, he brings together willing participants from both sides in neutral territory, for at least a week, so that they can really hear and know each other, and so really have empathy for the “other side”—beyond kind feelings to a gut-level understanding of the griefs and hopes of those who have been labeled wrong or enemies.

I did this retreat work in Minnesota with Methodists. Then I moved to Irvine. I had the disorienting experience of joining Irvine United Church of Christ, one of the first UCC churches openly accepting of gays. What was I going to do with myself if I didn't have to struggle for inclusion any more? What I have done often at my home church is celebrate. Celebration is an important part of NVC-style social change work. We do it by giving our *honesty* about the thing we want to celebrate. So here goes. When Irvine UCC called an openly gay, partnered pastor two years ago by a unanimous vote, I felt so joyful and proud! My need for inclusion really got met. And I can give you many other celebrations of when my need for inclusion was met at that church.

You know that social change is long and hard work, and sometimes it's discouraging when things don't change. I have a need for hope when my requests don't get the response I want. What are some ways of meeting that need? One way is spending time around people who inspire us, like Ruth Beaglehole. I also have a spiritual practice that helps me get in touch with that purpose every morning. A part of that practice is celebration of every time I can remember that I have connected with someone and made a difference. The wonderful gift of NVC is that the process itself meets so many needs of mine!

I want to hear about your social change efforts. I want to hear your deep and passionate needs that inspire your action. I want to hear some outrageous ideas for making powerful requests. And I want to hear some empathy for the other side.

Nonviolent communication is a tool to make your social change work more effective. And it is more than that. It is a tool to cut through the kind of judgmental thinking that separates family members, and coworkers and neighbors, and enemies, and allows us to care for and enjoy one another better. There is no other way I would rather spend my time. Your particular cause may prosper, or not. That is sometimes beyond our control. If you are committed to Nonviolent Communication as you work for change, your heart will grow, as will your compassionate presence, and your honesty, and in those ways alone, you *will* make a difference.