

Nonviolent Communication as Core Principle for Any Public Policy to Prevent Humiliation Dynamics

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Humanity is becoming a single global village where our interconnectedness and interdependence are reflected back to us in almost every detail of our lives. In our multicultural world, we inevitably live near others who have a different way of living in, and looking at, the world. Thus our common humanity, but just as significantly, our differences are highlighted. As we try to explain, understand and interact with these differences, and do this in an ever-shrinking world (both in terms of space and resources), challenges to how we relate and interact with each other become more pronounced and their effects felt in wider circles. We seek to manifest 'equal dignity for all' yet we have not developed the relational skills necessary to truly acknowledge our interdependence while celebrating our differences.

There is no human activity that does not depend on a relationship, of one type or another, to steady its course. Relationships are the key to peace and happiness in our time. In a world where rapid advances in technology and the burgeoning of the population have forced groups, communities, cultures and nations into intimate co-existence, relationships are also paramount to human existence and survival. The failure to live in harmony always germinated within the breakdown of a relationship; from the smallest sibling squabble to world-wide war, a broken relationship was the missing link in the chain of peace.

Relationships begin, grow, strengthen and mature through communication, for we relate by sharing ideas, feelings, needs and dreams. Sharing requires communication, and communication is the bedrock of all relationships. Without communication the best we can hope for is strained co-existence. Unfortunately our efforts to relate to one another with compassion and caring are frequently thwarted by a thought system and language that leads to withdrawal, defense, attack or humiliation. These habitual ways of thinking, speaking and acting do violence to, and create experiences of humiliation in, the very relationships in which we hope to find peace. We must find ways to bring to consciousness our habitual patterns of thought and speech if we are to heal our painful relationships.

Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is a powerful approach to such conscious communication – thinking, speaking and listening. NVC four-part model guides us in reframing old, habitual patterns of relating with new, compassionate ways of expressing ourselves and hearing others. It is founded on language and communication skills which transform automatic judgment, criticism, blame, shame and humiliation, and enable people to connect with the life in themselves and others in ways that inspire a compassionate response. Through NVC, relationships – be they intimate or international in scope – become a dance between honest and clear expression and respectful empathic attention.

The NVC model for communication is composed of four (4) components:

- **observing** concrete actions that are affecting our well-being
- expressing our **feelings** in relation to what we are observing
- identifying the **needs**, values, desires, etc which are creating our feelings
- **requesting** concrete actions that are intended to meet these needs and values

NVC requires shifting attention away from judging outwardly to looking inward and seeing what the *need* is. The root of any judgement is a need that is not being met. In fact, judgments of others are alienated, tragic expressions of our unmet needs. Thus, NVC entails having a consciousness of our needs so that we are able to get in touch with the needs that are behind the judgments. In the context of NVC, 'needs' refer to what is most alive in us: our core values, our basic human wants and our deepest longings. Needs are the most powerful motivators for human action since they determine our well being. Thus our behavior and actions are directed, every moment, to do what we think will meet our perceived needs. Needs are universal to the human family; they contain no reference to specific people or specific actions. Since all humans have the same needs, *when we base communication at the need level we have no enemy images*. Human needs are also interdependent. Thus there is a direct relationship between satisfaction of other's needs and my own well-being.

The NVC model enables a person to focus on the shared human needs, instead of thinking, speaking and acting in terms of dehumanizing labels or other habitual patterns of communication which separate and alienate one from the other. It is these habitual patterns which are easily heard as humiliation, and which contribute to humiliation and violence towards ourselves, others and the world around us. Connected to needs, we become grounded in our common humanity and interdependence; and from here we can then celebrate our differences with understanding of and connection to the humanity beneath. The depth of this human connection leads directly to creative problem-solving and the seeking of strategies to meet everyone's needs.

Empowered by NVC, a person can transform the dehumanizing or humiliating words and actions directed at them, reaching a deeper understanding of the other person's/ group's underlying feelings and needs, often hidden beneath a cloud of outer aggressiveness and attack. Or in that moment of perceived attack or humiliation, a person can empathically connect to their own needs that are unmet. Guided by an awareness of their needs they then can take action that will better ensure their well-being. Thus through Nonviolent Communication, people who are engulfed in misunderstanding and humiliation, or caught in conflict are enabled to engage in a compassionate dialogue with their counterparts in order to construct co-created, mutually satisfactory solutions.

Humiliation Dynamics and NVC

Humiliation is correlated with perceiving oneself or one's group as being "put down" in an illegitimate assault. As we struggle to live the value of equal dignity for all in the face of seemingly significant differences, the dynamics of humiliation become more frequent and pronounced. NVC recognizes that the experience of humiliation is very much dependent on the subjective framing of the event; in-other words, the values and beliefs of a person, group, society contribute significantly to how humiliation is defined and experienced. NVC enables us to go deeper into the heart of what drives humiliation dynamics. On the surface

of humiliation are thoughts (and their related actions) of judgment, criticism, blame, shame. But at the heart of the matter are needs that are not being met; and often in the case of humiliation, some hopelessness about getting those needs met except through some form of 'extreme' action (see WTC example below). Correspondingly, what is occurring in a person who is experiencing 'being humiliated'? They too are having needs that are being grossly unmet: their needs for equality and respect (i.e. equal valuing of their humanity), for care and gentleness, for safety and security, for self-worth and dignity are not being met. Acknowledging and honoring all of these needs enable everyone to remain connected to the humanity of all involved. And from this place of connection we can together seek lasting solutions that will enable all people involved to meet their needs.

An article by journalist Lawrence Wright in *The New Yorker* (January 5, 2004; Pg. 63) describes interviews he conducted with relatives of the pilots who flew airplanes into the World Trade Center in New York City. Wright states,

"There was a sameness to the stories of the hijacker pilots. They had become Muslim extremists in Europe and America – presumably as a way of holding onto their sense of who they were in the engulfing West. Their own cultures offered them no way to be powerful in the world. ... Unemployment and idleness became central facts of life for young Saudi men ... Bin Laden gave young men with no control over their lives an identity and a wanton chance to make history. "Death is better than life in humiliation!": bin Laden said".

I imagine these unemployed and idle men were feeling hopelessness and despair, and struggling to connect to their own sense of self-worth, self-respect, dignity; to a sense of purpose that contributed mightily to the world; and to their own power to effect change in their lives and in the world. I imagine there was also some loneliness struggling to make their lives work in a foreign culture in which new connections were not easily achieved. These are at least some of the needs, (accompanied by what I am guessing was the enormous pain of not having any way of meeting these needs), that lead to these men making the choice to attack the twin towers. Al Qaeda gave these men hope by offering them culturally acceptable strategies to meet many of their needs. For example, Al Qaeda helped them to meet needs for connection, companionship and community; support, shared purpose and meaning, acceptance, shared experience, empathy, and spiritual connection with something larger than themselves. Al Qaeda also offered a way to understand the 'what and why' of the pain in their lives and through enemy images of the West (US) gave them a more clear and stronger sense of self-identity, self-respect and dignity. It also gave them a clear path of action in which to meet these needs. Clearly the strategies these men chose in an attempt to meet their needs are horrific, yet it is easy to recognize the value of the needs themselves as they are ones we all strive to meet. Rather than labeling them as terrorists or extremists, NVC invites us to connect to the painful feelings and deep needs underlying these painful strategies. And (ideally, in the form of prevention) to work with these men's needs and offer them support in finding other ways to meet their needs that would have been less violent and destructive. In some circumstances NVC recognizes that it may be necessary to temporarily use force in order to *protect needs* rather than to punish.

What Contributes to Resilience to Humiliation Dynamics

I have noticed that there are certain times or certain types of events in which I am more resilient to humiliation than at other times. Similarly, there are certain experiences in which I seem to have more resilience to 'being humiliated' than the person next to me, and other times when s/he seems to have more resilience than I do. What is it that makes this

difference? I have come to recognize that my resiliency is linked to my internal ability to stay connected to my own sense of my worth and dignity. It is when I lose connection to those needs that I become more vulnerable to the experience of humiliation. Or, viewing this from another direction, there are certain events (e.g. other's actions) which resonate with or reinforce areas of doubt about my worth and value as a human being and this resonance leads me to identify more strongly with the doubts than with the truth of my dignity and value. I have no way of knowing how I would respond if I were a naked, chained prisoner in Abu Gharab being threatened by dogs (or any of the many similar horrific situations in the world). Nevertheless, I have found that the more I have practiced and am able to maintain a connection with my needs, and the needs being met by the person who is 'doing the act of humiliation', the more I can hold onto the truth of my own dignity. NVC offers concrete skills to achieve both of these connections.

Similarly, what choices can I make to avoid being a contributor to humiliation? I can do everything in my power to stay connected to the humanity of the other person even when their actions have painful consequences for me. First, I must learn to be empathically present with my own pain. This, in turn, frees me to empathize with the needs driving the actions of the person who is upsetting me. It is very difficult to be cruel to another human when am connected to her needs. When I perceive another person as an enemy I am listening to my judgments of him, instead of wondering what his needs are, and I am much more likely to use humiliation as a strategy to meet my needs. Or when I see the person before me as the 'perpetrator of my pain', then my own pain, and my beliefs about how I relieve that pain, lead me to act against my brother with vengeance. If he humiliated me, then I am righteously justified to return treatment in kind. NVC enables me to see beyond the actions and words of the other person and to stay connected to their humanity. It also supports me in taking responsibility for my actions.

How Do We Address the Challenge of Humiliation?

The capacity of every person to interact in a peaceful and compassionate manner is the core of Nonviolent Communication. Drawing on this capacity, the power of NVC lies in its ability to reestablish the humanity of our 'enemy' and to allow our 'enemy' to rehumanize us. The use of humiliation is often a desperate, final attempt to be heard about the pain and problems in the relationship, and is frequently born out of hopelessness and despair due to the failure of all other attempts to resolve the relational problems. As pain builds without being heard, enemy images of the other grow to violent proportions. NVC concretely demonstrates that when both parties to humiliation dynamics empathically hear the pain stimulated by each other's choices and actions, a common bond of humanity is reestablished leading to deep healing and lasting reconciliation. Even if only one party to humiliation learns NVC, their new skills to connect (to their needs and the needs of the other party) will change the 'dance steps' in the relationship and will enable the dynamics of humiliation to be permanently shifted toward dignity and equality.

In conjunction with the reconciliation of the relationship, we must also seek to ground this new connection in ways of relating that meets everyone's needs. This will require a dissemination of an awareness of the value of relationships grounded in equal dignity, and the development and teaching of innovative social skills, such as NVC, which will enable all groups to maintain new, more constructive ways of relating grounded in dignity.

At its best, policy manifests our visions and dreams of how we want to live in the world into concrete action. In order to manifest the vision of equal dignity for all, Nonviolent Communication provides a practical framework and a set of essential skills which remove the blocks of misunderstanding, mistrust and humiliation endemic in all communication today. NVC's form is simple, yet powerfully transformative. It offers the functional tools we need to create a world where a celebration of our differences is deeply grounded in our interdependence.

General References

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