

featured interview

(Note: this interview appeared in the March 2003 print version of Focus on Women)

Words of Compassion Rachelle Lamb discusses Nonviolent Communication

interview & photo by Cara Patik

Bio: Rachelle Lamb, certified trainer, Nonviolent Communication

Before moving to Victoria from Ottawa in 1994, Rachelle, her husband and two children (a boy now 16 and a girl now 11), decided to live in Bali for a few months. Lamb had always been interested in cultural anthropology and felt drawn to cultures that "lived in ways I consider to be more in alignment with serving life." The experience was transformative, and upon moving to Victoria, Lamb began working in the area of personal growth. It was after writing her book, *Steps to Conscious Living*, two years ago that Rachelle came across Marshall Rosenberg's book, *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Compassion*. "It really complemented what I was doing on my path already," she says. "I read the book and haven't looked back. I decided then and there I was going to be a certified trainer because it had affected me so powerfully." She is now a certified trainer of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) and president of the nonprofit B.C. Network for Compassionate Communication.

Since the Center for Nonviolent Communication was founded in 1984 in California by Dr Marshall Rosenberg, who has a PhD in clinical psychology, NVC has become a strong international movement with over 100 trainers worldwide. Of the four certified trainers in Canada, three of them live in Victoria - Rachelle, as well as Martha Henry and Penny Wassman. In the last year, Rachelle has personally introduced NVC to 1,300 people. In 2002, she presented to such organizations as the B.C. government, the Military Family Resource Centre, Saanich Volunteer Services Organization, Victoria Community Response Network, and many students and teachers.

For more information on Nonviolent Communication, see the following websites::

Rachelle Lamb: <http://www.rachellelamb.com> (<mailto:info@rachellelamb.com>)

The Center for Nonviolent Communication: <http://www.cnvc.org>

The B.C. Network for Compassionate Communication: <http://www.bcnc.org>

Focus on Women: What is the main premise of Nonviolent Communication?

Rachelle Lamb

The underlying belief in Nonviolent Communication is that what human beings most enjoy doing is playing the game "making life wonderful." NVC facilitates this by giving us tools that strengthen our

ability to stay in touch with our natural compassionate nature even when it may be difficult. It helps us to consciously choose our responses based on meeting needs instead of expressing habitual responses that are likely to alienate others and it serves as a powerful reminder of the power we have to enrich life and inspire heartfelt giving. The word "Nonviolent" is used the same way Gandhi used it, meaning the natural state of compassion that arises when violence has subsided from the heart.

FW: NVC uses the metaphors of giraffe consciousness and jackal consciousness. Could you elaborate?

RL

The giraffe was chosen as a symbol of NVC because it has the largest heart of any land animal. Giraffe consciousness is about being focused on meeting needs and making life wonderful. With Giraffe ears on, we don't take things personally. We don't hear criticism. We only hear a person's feelings and needs. Jackal, on the other hand, plays the game "who's right." Jackal blames others when they're not feeling good. With Jackal ears on, we hear criticism, we take things personally and blame others or ourselves when differences arise.

FW: How would you describe the way we usually communicate?

RL

Much of our communication is based on an ancient belief system that human beings are inherently ignorant and evil and need to be educated about what's right and wrong, and that there are certain people who are qualified to do that job. Much of the time, when we have differences with others, we end up treating them in ways that are basically dehumanizing. We play the game "who's right" and say things that alienate us from each other - this interferes with the very thing we most want, which is openness, honesty, and respect with one another when we're interacting. So our thinking and the way we have been educated to communicate make it very easy for us to see others as enemies when conflict arises. This is such a tragedy, especially when people genuinely want to contribute meaningfully to life.

FW: Can you give us examples of how we've been educated to communicate in ways that are unhealthy?

RL

We have a very rich vocabulary to tell others what's wrong with them - words like: right/wrong, good/bad, normal/abnormal, appropriate/inappropriate, should/shouldn't, selfish, rude, etc. When we speak in this way, we are applying moralistic judgment - and these words are just as harmful when I use them on myself as when I use them with others. Instead of moralistic judgments, NVC promotes the use of value judgments. This means clearly observing the behaviour and letting others know what needs of ours are not met by it. So instead of saying something like, "That person is racist or ignorant," I might say, "When I hear that person tell jokes about people from other cultures, I feel discouraged because I really value respect and equality among people regardless of their ethnicity." This approach paves the way for a different kind of dialogue, one that opens doors instead of closing them.

FW: You say that obedience to authority is highly valued in our society. How does this figure in?

RL

Well, to start off with, we teach our children this message when we say things like, "Do as you're told" or by manipulating them using threat of punishment, praise or rewards. Even though it may be coming from a well-meaning place, this form of educating doesn't nurture the development of personal

responsibility or an awareness of needs. So, for example, if I have a five-year-old who is hitting my two-year, and I go up to her, and take her by the arm and say, "That's bad. We don't hit people. What a naughty thing to do," that's the beginning of the training right there. Naturally I want to put a stop to the hitting, but I want to do it in a different way. I don't want anybody to do things because they're following orders, but rather because they can see that other strategies will better meet everyone's needs. In this particular case, we'll want to address needs for safety and respect and also understand how frustrating it can be when a younger sibling takes our toys.

FW: If we had a world that operated on the principles of NVC, would conflict disappear?

RL

No. As long as there are people, there will be differences in opinion. Conflict, however, is not the problem. Needs are not the problem. The key is how we choose to resolve conflict. Whenever we have enemy images of others, the likelihood of violence increases dramatically. If we approach a situation compassionately, however, we will see each other as human beings and find creative ways to resolve differences that meet everyone's needs without resorting to violence and destruction.

FW: After you were introduced to NVC, what effects did you notice in your own life?

RL

I was filled with immense hope and optimism as I recognized my own power to deepen my connection with myself and others using this model. NVC helped me get real clarity on my intentions, identify my feelings and needs, make clear requests to meet those needs, and support others to do the same. I also noticed that I began to see the world differently. So often in our communication we look at others as the source of our pain and NVC has a completely different way of looking at it - it's our own unmet needs that are the source of our feelings. While people do things that trigger us, they're not the cause of our feelings. I found this revelation to be tremendously liberating - it's a wonderful thing to be able to see people doing things I don't enjoy and not have labels for them. Instead, I recognize that I might not like what they're doing and identify the need I have that is not met by their action or words, but I don't see them as "selfish." When we learn how to communicate our feelings and needs to others in a way that doesn't blame or criticize and also takes their needs into account, then we're on the road to facilitating respectful connection with others and discovering creative solutions. The way I see it, this way of communicating is helping me to live more fully and compassionately and in a way that is in harmony with my values.

FW: Do you have personal anecdote to share about NVC in action?

RL

Yes. I was angry with my husband about something that had happened one evening. The following morning, noticing my mood, he asked me, "How are you feeling?" In the past, my typical response would have been a cold "nothing's wrong," followed by hurtful accusations. Instead, after a moment of checking in with myself, I said, "Actually, I'm feeling quite angry right now and I don't want to talk about it. I don't have the level of clarity that I would like in order to express myself and I'm worried that if I do say something, I will regret it later. I'd really like to come from a place of respect, which is something I really value in our relationship." Saying this instantly shifted the direction of our dialogue to one of respect, honesty and openness and our difference was quickly

resolved. I still get myself into plenty of communication messes, especially with loved ones, but I've noticed that issues that would have taken hours or days to resolve in the past now take minutes, literally.

FW: What happens if no one else in your family, for example, wants to learn about NVC? Can it still work?

RL

Absolutely! It only takes one person - it can't help but rub off on other people. When others sense our sincere desire to find solutions that include their needs, they will naturally join in. My husband now refers to feelings and needs in his conversations with me. He is definitely practicing NVC and appreciating the results. My children are not as practiced verbally with it, but I am frequently delighted by what I witness as growing expressions of genuine caring and giving from them. It's also worth mentioning that the best way for others to learn NVC is through our modelling. I caution people not to try "teaching" it to family members as "teaching" is likely to create resistance.

FW: What are the reasons someone might be sceptical about NVC?

RL

Well, for one thing, the kind of honesty I'm talking about can sometimes be scary. Because NVC is about expressing our honesty, we may feel vulnerable at times but the quality of connection that results can be very gratifying. Still, people can feel hesitancy about taking such a risk. Another reason for scepticism is that some people just don't trust that it's possible to get results. What if someone we're talking to says, "Hey, stop talking to me like that! What psychology class are you taking now?" This person likely doesn't trust us and is worried that we might be using the latest technique on them in order to manipulate them in some way. It can be hard to respond in such situations when we're just starting out. That's why practice and support are so important. Learning NVC is like learning a new language and takes some time. But I am awed with the significant breakthroughs people report even very early on in their learning of NVC.

FW: How do we use NVC with ourselves?

RL

First of all, we become clear on all the judgments we're using on ourselves. For example, I might be telling myself, "That was a really dumb thing for me to do," or "Why am I not achieving more?" This kind of self-talk can help us identify the needs that are not being met and when we get clarity on what the needs are, we can get in touch with our feelings. Often when I ask people what they're feeling when they're in pain, they respond with some kind of a self-diagnosis or criticism, like "I'm not good enough," when really what they're feeling is discouragement or despair. So with self-empathy, we learn to replace the critical language that we have about ourselves with feelings and needs language. Once we've gone through these steps, we're likely to come up with a strategy that would better meet our and others' needs. It's critical to have self-compassion. It is hard to extend compassion to others if we don't give it to ourselves.

FW: Can NVC help at all in the larger social and political context?

RL

I'm deeply concerned about what's going on in the world, and all the more motivated to share this information with people. I really believe that we can create a compassionate world if we focus on our

close relationships - it's easy to believe that the problems we face globally have nothing to do with us. I hope that we can all take responsibility and help our children see the world and others through compassionate eyes. If we become aware of how we view people in our own families, neighbourhoods and workplaces as enemies, if we can get a handle on that, I believe it's possible for us to create a ripple of healing compassion in the world. NVC holds more promise than anything else I know of.

COMMUNICATION QUICK FIX

Alienating Language

ie. language that makes it difficult to remain connected to our compassionate nature.

1. Words that imply wrongness, usually comparative, diagnostic and judgmental: e.g. should, ought, good, bad, right, wrong, always, never, stupid.
2. Words that label others: e.g. loser, racist, alcoholic. These words are static and have a dehumanizing effect.
3. Words that minimize choice and respect for others' autonomy (demands): e.g. you must, you have to. These words usually guarantee resistance and provoke rebellious or submissive responses.
4. Words that deny one's responsibility for actions taken: e.g. I had to; it's company policy; that's just the way it is; it's not possible.
5. Words associated with the concept that certain actions merit reward/punishment: e.g. he/she deserves...

The NVC Model

The following four steps of the NVC model guide us in connecting with what is alive in us and others.

1. Observation: Stating clearly what a person is saying or doing that is or isn't enriching life without using words that evaluate, judge, label, analyze, criticize, and/or diagnose. NOT: "You're always late!" Rephrased: "When you arrive 45 minutes later than we had agreed on, I feel..."
2. Feelings: Connecting with and expressing what is alive in us using words that accurately describe the emotions and sensations we are experiencing. NOT "I feel you're always criticizing me." Rephrased: "When you tell me that I didn't do a good job, I feel hurt..."
3. Needs: Connecting with the met or unmet need or value that is the source of the feelings. Needs, also referred to as values, are common to all people. The universality of needs makes them easy to identify. Examples of needs would be food, shelter, caring, attention, love, trust, respect, connection, understanding, contribution. NOT "I need you to do your homework." Rephrased: "I'm feeling anxious because I really value your growth and learning. Would you be willing to get started on your homework right after dinner?"
4. Requests: Asking for that which should enrich life. The request is not a strategy to get people to do things they don't want to do or a way to manipulate or change people. "Would you be willing to look into my eyes when we talk?" Use of the words "Would you be willing?" conveys that we are making a request rather than a demand. We are open to them saying no and learning from them what needs of theirs would not be met by acting on our request.

- From "Communication Basics: An Overview of Nonviolent Communication" by Rachele Lamb