

NVC nurtures relationships (2023)

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Why be interested in NVC? Because it works

NVC ("Non-Violent Communication") is a way of **resolving conflicts**. Its creator, Marshall Rosenberg, an American psychologist (1934-2015), succeeded in reconciling Serbs and Croats, Hutus and Tutsis, Palestinians and Israelis, after several members of their families had been killed by members of opposing families.

NVC is not just a psychological process. It connects us to the force that Rosenberg calls the "divine energy of love", the **force of the Holy Spirit**¹ as Christians would say.

The intention of NVC: the relationship

The aim of NVC is to heal our relationships, to make them calmer and more alive. NVC is not about non-violence, but about relationships. Mr Rosenberg points out that he chose the term "non-violence" because it had come into common use. But, he says, the word "non-violence" has the disadvantage of expressing what should not be done (being violent) and not what should be sought (relationship).

To say or think: "I'm right" is to imply that the other person is wrong and therefore to sever the relationship. To say or think that the other person and I are each 50% right and 50% wrong only takes into account the intellectual dimension of the human being (his *reason*). However, to establish a total relationship, it is necessary to take into account the totality of human nature, which also includes feelings (sentiments, emotions, sensations), needs and aspirations.

The key to NVC: needs awareness

If someone says to my face: "You're hopeless", NVC teaches me to translate the insult into another vocabulary². I then hear this person say to me: "I'm suffering". They are suffering because some of their profoundly human needs are not being met. They are talking to me about how they feel, not about who I am. She's talking to me about herself, not about me. I am the 'trigger' for her anger, not the cause.

The key to the NVC process is to **transform accusations** (towards others or myself) **into fundamental unmet human needs** (in others and/or myself). The process makes these needs conscious, whereas they were hidden by the accusations. In the following example³ we will see that helping my attacker to detect his unmet needs is infinitely more effective than attacking him myself.

¹ This identification of the divine energy of love with the power of the Holy Spirit will be justified and developed on p. 4.

² Hence the title of M. ROSENBERG's best-seller: *NonViolent Communication. A language of compassion*. Ebrandbooks.co, 2003.

³ The story is taken from M. ROSENBERG, *NonViolent Communication. A language of compassion*.

Marshall Rosenberg recounts how one day he went to present NVC in a Palestinian refugee camp and a man shouted at him: "Murderer! Marshall wondered what the man's unsatisfied need might be. As luck would have it, on entering the camp he had seen tear-gas grenades with the words "Made in USA" written on them. Marshall realised that the refugees had a huge grudge against the Americans, his compatriots, who were supplying Israel with tear gas and weapons. He addressed the man who had called him a murderer:

- Are you angry because you would like my country to use its resources differently?
- It's clear that I'm angry. Do you think we need tear gas? We need septic tanks, housing, a country of our own.

The dialogue continued for a good twenty minutes. The man expressed his anger, suffering and resentment. Marshall listened and rephrased the man's words, replacing the reproaches with a clarification of the profoundly human needs that the reproaches concealed. He received his attacker's words not as attacks, but as a gift from one of his fellow human beings to connect with their shared humanity.

Once the man felt he understood, he was able to listen to Marshall explain the reasons for his visit to the camp. An hour later, the man who had called him a murderer invited him to his home to share his Ramadan dinner.

Gradually identify which specific needs are not being met

A specific need is often hidden by other needs. The precise need is detected after the other needs have been discovered one after the other⁴.

In a prison, Marshall Rosenberg had a conversation with an angry inmate. It had been more than three weeks since the man had asked the prison governor to allow him to take part in a training course and he still hadn't received a reply. Marshall asked the prisoner:

- What do you need?
- I told you: I need an answer!
- But more deeply?
- I need respect. These directors are cold, anonymous bureaucrats who don't give a damn about anyone but themselves!
- It's this kind of thinking that fuels your anger. You think you're right. Concentrate on your needs.
- (After a long silence.) I need the training I asked for. If I don't get it, I'm sure I'll be arrested again as soon as I get out of prison.
- All right, then. Put yourself in the director's shoes and suppose that I'm the prisoner. Do you think I'd have a better chance of getting what I want if I told you: "I really need this internship and I'm afraid of what might happen to me if I don't get it..." or if I told you I thought you were an anonymous bureaucrat? Even if I don't say those words, my eyes will betray what I'm thinking. (The prisoner stares at the floor, not answering).
- Well, what's happening to you?
- I can't answer that

Three hours later, the prisoner came to see Marshall and said: "If I'd known two years ago what you've just told me, I wouldn't have killed my best friend".

⁴ Ibid.

Chasing away all accusations of others or of yourself

In the two preceding stories, there are thoughts and reasonings that judge, accuse and condemn others, and which therefore sever the relationship. The Palestinian refugee called Marshall a murderer, while the prisoner called the warden a cold, anonymous bureaucrat. NVC teaches us to translate these accusatory judgments into : **"He or she is suffering because he or she needs..."**.

It's the same when I say to myself, "I'm terrible. I shouldn't have done that. I'll never change". NVC teaches me to translate these belittling, guilt-inducing judgments into: **"I'm suffering because I need..."**.

In an interview with Gabriele Seils, Marshall Rosenberg said:

It would be intelligent to banish the terms Good and Evil. If, for example, I say to a parent who beats his or her child: "You're a bad father or a bad mother", and you're wrong, and that's not good...", I think I've not chosen the most effective form of communication to convey the message that matters to me. I prefer to put it this way:

"I'm very concerned about what happens to your child when you behave in this way towards him or her. I don't want him or her to suffer; I want them to feel safe. That's why I urge you to seek alternative forms of parenting for your child."

When faced with someone whose behaviour I disapprove of, I just try to be sincere, but I carefully avoid judging them. When I express my own distress at the sight of a child being beaten, I'm certainly assessing the behaviour of the father or mother, but I'm doing so in relation to my own needs⁵.

Strength comes from the divine energy of love

Gabriele Seils asked Marshall Rosenberg: "Do you believe in God?" He replied:

These are not my words. I don't believe in anything, I'm living an experience. What else is there but divine energy when I'm dealing with healing or reconciliation? It's not a belief, it's an observation [...]. I don't believe in electrical energy, but I know what happens when I press the switch: I see the light and I observe that there is a cable running to the lamp. So the force comes from somewhere [...] NVC is a method... for connecting with divine energy⁶.

It's not up to me, I can't heal these wounds; what can one man do to alleviate all this suffering? But the good news is that we don't have to do anything. When we are in empathic connection with someone [i.e. when we make ourselves truly present to someone who is suffering because their profoundly human needs are not being met], divine energy flows through us, doing the work for us⁷. Sometimes this divine energy doesn't work as quickly as I'd like. I remember sitting in my chair one day, listening to all this suffering and rage, and I said to myself: "Divine energy, if you can really heal all this, why is it taking you so long, why are you leaving people in this suffering?" This is what the energy said to me: "Just do what you can to make the connection. Invest your own energy. Connect with others and help them to connect. As for me, I'll take care of the rest⁸.

⁵ M. ROSENBERG, *Dénouer les conflits par la Communication NonViolente*, St-Julien-en-Genevois, Jouvence, p. 96.

⁶ Ibid. p. 87.

⁷ Ibid. p. 86-87.

⁸ M. Rosenberg, *Practical Spirituality, Reflections on the Spiritual Basis of NonViolent Communication*, PuddleDancer Press, 2005.

In the first example of this document it was said that Marshall received the words of the man who had called him a murderer not as attacks, but "as a gift from one of his fellow human beings to connect with their common humanity". The same reality can be expressed in other terms: "he received the words of his attacker as a gift from one of his fellow human beings to connect with the divine energy of love, the source of their common humanity". When we speak of profoundly human needs, we are implicitly referring to the divine energy of love that is the profound source of our common humanity. And it is profitable to enter into explicit dialogue with this divine energy of love, as Marshall Rosenberg himself invites us to do in what has just been quoted above.

Ask for the help of the Holy Spirit, the divine energy of love

The divine energy of love of which Marshall Rosenberg speaks can be identified by Christians with the power of the Holy Spirit⁹. This force unfolded in the life of Jesus from the moment of his baptism by John the Baptist, and was communicated to humanity at Pentecost¹⁰. This power enabled Jesus to perform signs that he had never done before his baptism: he gave sight to the blind. He healed the deaf. He made the paralysed stand on their feet. Thanks to this strength, he contributed to the well-being of his fellow human beings. He never used this strength to coerce anyone. He preferred to be a victim of the brutal force that put him on the cross, rather than use force to harm anyone.

Jesus invites us to ask for divine strength. He even invites us to give thanks before we can see that we have received it. He gave the example of this anticipatory thanksgiving in front of the tomb where the corpse of his friend Lazarus lay: "I bless you Father, for you always hear me". The most fundamental request Jesus made was: "That all may be one". In the language of NVC: "That all may be connected to one another".

Having the quality of the relationship as an intention, asking the Holy Spirit for it, giving thanks in advance because we are sure of being heard, frees the divine force within us to combine with our human efforts.

Anger is a force. It is a destructive force because it attacks others. But when condemnation is replaced by awareness of needs to be met, the force that was present in anger is not lost: it is converted into a constructive force allied to divine force.

Our greatest pleasure is to contribute to the well-being of others

Marshall says, "For me, the spiritual foundation [of NVC] lies in my willingness to connect with the divine energy of others and to connect others with my divine energy, because I believe that when we are truly connected with the divinity within each of us, we enjoy contributing

⁹ This is Michel Bacq's conviction, expressed in his book : *L'empathie fait des miracles*, Éditions jésuites, Paris-Bruxelles, 2020, p. 26.

¹⁰ You will receive power," Jesus promised, "the power of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:8).

to the well-being of others more than anything else in the world¹¹. So, each of us acts for the other out of compassion, inspired by divine energy and with the aim of serving life¹²."

Divine energy never says: "You must, you are obliged".

The opposing force to the divine energy of love is constraint. It encompasses all the "you have to's", the "you must's", the "you don't have a choice". Mr Rosenberg states loud and clear that we always have a choice and that we are never obliged to do anything. He tells the story of a mother who hated cooking and had always done it out of duty. During a NVC training course, she learnt that acting with that kind of energy is destructive, so that evening when she got home she decided not to cook any more. Her children thought: "Phew, she won't be complaining about every meal¹³".

But," a father may ask, "if my baby cries during the night, am I going to let him cry without moving? Let's hear how the author of NVC responds¹⁴. He relates an experience he had when he was thinking about the harmful energy of constraint. One night, his baby started crying. The father said to himself: "You must go and feed him". Furious, he grumbled and got out of bed. But, realising that he was charged with negative energy, he changed his mind and got back under the duvet. This lasted barely ten seconds. The "I must" faded away, and he was able to picture the child in the next room, who didn't yet know how to get food and who was hungry. He leapt to his feet and gave him a bottle... And he did it with pleasure! It wasn't me," he says, "it was something inside me that did it, quite naturally.

Isn't it an endorsement of laxity and permissiveness by affirming that you are never obliged to do anything? Nobody is forced to play football. However, if you choose to play, you choose to abide by the rules of the game. Not doing so would prevent everyone, including you, from enjoying the game.

Commenté [GD1]: This is sort of an oblique response to the question. In the example below, the son did not choose to live in his parent's house where his mother decides the rules. He is obliged to live there until he is 18 years of age.

When it costs me to do something, and yet that something is at the service of life here and now, if I can consciously say to myself: "I freely choose to do this", my complaint turns into satisfaction.

The four stages of NVC: O.F.N.R.

The NVC process unfolds in four stages beginning with four letters : O.F.N.R. These letters stand for Observation, Feelings, Needs and Requests.

¹¹ M. ROSENBERG, *Practical Spirituality, Reflections on the Spiritual Basis of NonViolent Communication*, PuddleDancer Press, 2005.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

O: Observation. Observe the facts and formulate them without interpretation. In the first two stories in this document (p. 2) :

In the refugee camp there are tear gas grenades with the words "Made in USA" written on them. There are no septic tanks. These people are not in their own country.

Three weeks ago, the prisoner applied to the prison governor for training. There was no response.

F: Feeling, which also encompasses emotions and bodily sensations (muscular tension, heat, cold, a knot in the stomach...). To take our two examples again, the Palestinian refugee was angry; so was the prisoner. As for Marshall, in these two situations, he was serene, confident in the effectiveness of the NVC process and in the benevolent and beneficial action of the divine energy of love.

N: Need. Here, we are talking about fundamental human needs. They are the same for all human beings. Detecting them, making them conscious and formulating them necessarily means connecting each of us to what we have in common: our humanity. In our two examples, Marshall's interlocutors had :

a need for a septic tank, a home, a country of their own;

a need for training.

And on Marshall's part: a need to take pleasure in contributing to the needs of others.

R: Request. To ensure that our needs are met, we should, *immediately* after expressing our observations, feelings and needs to others, ask them to take concrete action to satisfy our needs. We formulate the desired acts in such a way that by doing them, others can take real pleasure in contributing to our well-being. In our two examples :

Marshall implicitly told the Palestinian refugee that he had observed the presence of tear-gas grenades marked "Made in USA", he explicitly said that he observed the anger of his interlocutor and he asked him to tell him if he wanted the USA to use its resources differently.

The prisoner was invited to tell the prison governor: "I'm worried that I haven't received a reply to my letter. I really need this training because I fear that without it I will re-offend. I would like you to register me before the closing date for applications.

Five conditions for the O.F.N.R. process to work

A mother taking part in a NVC session led by Mr Rosenberg said to him on the second day of the course:

- NVC doesn't work.
- Why?" asks Marshall.
- I came home last night to find my teenage son's waistcoat on the floor in the hallway. I was furious because he hadn't put it on the coat rack. I went to find my son, following the four steps of NVC I learned yesterday:

O. Observation: "Your waistcoat is on the floor in the hallway.

F. Feelings: I'm annoyed.

N. Needs: "I need order, cleanliness, hygiene and fairness: for everyone to contribute to the well-being of everyone else in the house".

R. Request: "I want you to put your waistcoat on the coat rack.

- Very well, says Marshall. And then, what happened?
- My son didn't move.
- What were you hoping for?
- Put his waistcoat on the coat rack.
- Ah," says Marshall, "if that was your intention, it couldn't work. NVC can only work if our intention is to establish or re-establish a quality relationship with others. This implies that we accept that others may say 'No' to us, or, in some way, make us feel it.

Accepting that your teenager says or makes you feel "No" respects their freedom and avoids putting pressure on them or making them act out of obligation, with negative energy.

So all you have to do is submit to a teenager? No. For the OFNR process to be effective, there are five conditions to be met, four of which are prerequisites to the process. The fifth condition ends the process.

- 1° Start by breathing consciously and **keeping quiet so that** my anger doesn't explode and push me to say or do something I'll regret later.
- 2° Reformulate my innermost intention: "**I want to look after the relationship** between myself and the other person".
- 3° **Ask the Holy Spirit** what to say and what not to say, what to do and what not to do.
- 4° **Detect and chase away the guilty thoughts** that pop into my head, such as: "I'm going to wring his neck", "He'll never change", "I'm rubbish".
- 5° End with a **Thank You**, *describing* which of my specific needs have been met.

In the previous example, by fulfilling these conditions, the mother empathises with herself. In other words, she becomes aware of her needs and her ability to satisfy them using her own resources, with the help of the divine energy within her. She is then ready to empathise with her offspring, i.e. to find out what **her son's feelings, needs and requests (implicit requests)** might be. He may have sensed from the tone of his mother's voice that her request was in fact a demand. But he needs freedom... he's a teenager☺. He's reluctant to obey an "order giver". Or maybe he got into a fight with his best friend and threw his waistcoat on the ground to express his anger? Perhaps he needs to take a twenty-minute breather after playing football with his mates? Or does he want to wait until lunchtime to put his waistcoat on the coat rack when he comes downstairs? Or maybe he simply doesn't know that his waistcoat is on the floor? These are all questions that can be asked tactfully to establish or re-establish the relationship between mother and son.

Getting through and beyond the "terrible stage"

Mr Rosenberg tells us that when his daughter was young, she often tended to act to please others, but not to please herself. Her father had often pointed this out to her without any change in her behaviour. One day Marshall received a phone call from the headmaster of the school where his daughter was studying: "Mr Rosenberg, I must inform you that your daughter came to class today dressed in a manner unworthy of the reputation of our school. I told her so and she replied: 'Fuck you'". On the one hand, Mr Rosenberg was happy because his

daughter had finally been able to express herself freely. On the other hand, he was disappointed that she had done so in a way that hurt human relations.

Marshall recounts a reaction his son had when he went to his new school on the first day. When the headmaster saw him he said: 'Oh, what a pretty little girl'. His son had long hair. The father asked his son: "How did you react?" "Oh Dad," he said, "I remembered what you taught us. I kept quiet and remained very calm. I realised that this man's needs weren't being met: he was bald."

These stories illustrate three stages in the discovery of NVC.

- The first stage is that of the sweet, submissive little girl, who is careful not to express her feelings or needs so as not to compromise her relationship with others.
- The second stage, which Marshall calls "atrocious", is when we dare to demand the satisfaction of our needs without mercy towards others, even if this cuts off our relationship with them.
- Third stage: the one where, full of empathy with ourselves, we are able to formulate a request to others in such a way that they take pleasure in contributing to our well-being.

When we use the principles of NVC to help people move from stage 1 to stage 3^e, it is very important not to remain trapped in stage 2^e (the atrocious stage), as this would lead to a more deplorable situation than if we had not introduced NVC to the group.

How the NVC practice group works

You can't learn to swim by reading a swimming manual. You have to take the plunge. The aim of the group is to help one another practise NVC based on situations experienced by each other. Together, we try to transform accusations into fundamental human needs and demands. Role-playing may be useful.

It's worth rereading a few pages of this little manual after taking part in two or three NVC practice meetings. The theory is then better understood.

Table summarising the stages of NVC : O.F.N.R.

O Observation What is the fact? (without interpretation)  	F Feelings, sensations, émotions Sadness ? Anger? Fear ? Borderom?... 
N Needs, longings Respect ? Understanding ? Justice ? ... 	R Requests Please give me... Please tell me 

For it to work

First, be SILENT 	INTENTION : relationship 	« Holy Spirit: S.O.S. » 
Malicious THOUGHTS to dispel: condemnations, accusations, blame... 		
End by saying THANK YOU, telling which particular need has been met:..... 		

Basic human needs

Relationship with God¹⁵, with oneself, with others, with all creation ...
Communion. Union. Unity. Covenant. "May they all be one" (Jn 17, 21) ...
Life. Vitality. Fertility. Contribute to the flourishing of life. Exercising our talents to the full in the service of life (Mt 25, 14-30) ...
Giving of yourself. Generosity. Giving freely. Taking pleasure in giving. Not out of duty...
Surpassing yourself. Wanting to progress, to improve...
Unconditional love. Friendship. Tenderness...
Plenitude. Intimacy. Inviolability...
Reciprocity: keeping the balance between *giving* and *receiving*.
Share. Welcoming. Hospitality...
Participation. Collaboration...
Insurance. Security. Protection. Support. Help...
Confidence in yourself, in others, in life, in Providence...
Solidarity. Belonging to a group, a team, (family, scouts, sports club, choir, school, class, association, community, company, nation...)...
Freedom of choice. Responsibility...
Autonomy. Differentiation. Being yourself, not someone else...
Justice: we are all equal, with the same basic human needs...
Empathy. Compassion: I can feel what you're feeling, put myself in your shoes. I won't leave you alone in your suffering...
Self-empathy. Being aware of your needs. Self-esteem...
Respect for others, for oneself, for God. Delicacy. Tact. Dignity. Respect for what has been agreed together. Punctuality...
Listening. To be listened to by others. To listen to... Understanding: to be understood. Understand
Honesty. Truthfulness. Authenticity. Saying what you really think...
Experimentation. Exploration. Curiosity. Learning...
Education. Training. Reflection...
Meaning: that my life has meaning. Usefulness: that my life be useful. Transcendence. ...
Passing on everything I've learnt... Teaching others...
Beauty. Harmony. Order. Peace. Celebration. Benediction. Adoration...
Amazement. Gratitude. Gratitude...
Reconciliation. Forgiveness. Renewing broken ties...
Creativity. Boldness...
Time. Patience. Space...
Air. Water. Light. Food. Elimination. Hygiene. Health....
Movement. Rest....
....

¹⁵ "God" or: "Supreme Being", "divine energy of love", "Holy Spirit"...