

Connecting Across Differences

2ND EDITION

Finding Common Ground With
Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime



Jane Marantz Connor, Ph.D. · Dian Killian, Ph.D.

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Jane Marantz Connor, Ph.D.
and Dian Killian, Ph.D.



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What People Are Saying About *Connecting Across Differences, 2ND Edition*

“*Connecting Across Differences* has changed how I approach my work and life. Using empathy to connect with my feelings and needs and with the feelings and needs of the people around me has made me happier and more effective. Jane and Dian, thank you for guiding me on this journey.”

—ROBERT MCGUIRE, Executive Director, Merck, Inc.

“Dian Killian is a remarkable woman with a great message that brings wisdom to the field of nonviolence.”

—HOWARD GLASSER, Author, *Transforming the Difficult Child: The Nurtured Heart Approach*

“*Connecting Across Differences* capacitates learners with essential personal and interpersonal skills and knowledge needed to nurture and build a culture of peace. Killian and Connor’s thoughtfully constructed guidebook opens doors to the possibility for authentic dialogue between self and others and illuminates multiple paths to living with integrity. This book should be on the shelf of every peacemaker.”

—TONY JENKIS, Director of Education,
National Peace Academy

“Having taught Nonviolent Communication for many years, it seems to me that this book covers every question that I have had myself or been asked about how to learn and integrate this simple yet challenging reframe of communication with self and others. I am grateful to Dian and Jane for this contribution to the field of applied nonviolence.”

—KIT MILLER, Director, M.K.
Gandhi Institute For Nonviolence

What People Have Said About *Connecting Across Differences, 1st Edition*

“*Connecting Across Differences* describes how to communicate in a way that leads to greater understanding and more positive relationships. Ultimately, it provides not just practical methods; it espouses a philosophy of personal responsibility and respect for others and ourselves. The wisdom of this book is a great guide in living with full awareness and compassion.”

—DANIEL PHARR, Ph.D., Chief Psychologist,
Bronx Psychiatric Center

“Fabulous book for developing better relationships! If you want to build awareness, find peace, and make a difference, this practical book helps you communicate with love and compassion and shift from old ways of judging self and others toward connecting more deeply.”

—MARTHA LASLEY, Author, *Courageous Visions: How to Unleash Passionate Energy in Your Life and Organizations*

“*Connecting Across Differences* addresses real life concerns with candor, clarity, and compassion. The authors use a variety of engaging dialogues, exercises, and examples to show how the powerful process of Nonviolent Communication can enrich personal relationships. It is engaging reading for people of all ages who long for more connection and understanding in the world.”

—SURA HART, Coauthor, *Respectful Parents, Respectful Kids, The Compassionate Classroom, and The No-Fault Classroom*

“I’ve utilized *Connecting Across Differences* in both my education and my clinical work as a social worker. As a student, I found the book enlightening and revolutionary in its application of compassion and real world communication skills. As a professional, it has allowed me to be a leader and social advocate and has maximized my ability to hold others with compassion during emotionally difficult times. This is an incredible tool for anyone attempting to live a more compassionate and satisfying life in any context.”

—PETER PRZERADZKI, Case Manager and Psychotherapist

“NVC has been an invaluable tool for connecting with those around me—my clients, family, and friends. NVC has helped me to move beyond doing what is expected and customary to formulating goals and making choices that enrich me and truly meet my needs.”

—ROXANE MANNING, Ph.D., Clinical
Psychologist, Raleigh-Durham

“In my twenty-six years as a professor of communication, I have found that students rarely like textbooks. *Connecting Across Differences* marks a major exception. Students love how this book is written—in a compelling and clear way—and how the examples deal with their everyday lives. Connor and Killian teach how we can communicate and connect, live and love in empathic and compassionate ways that meet our needs and the needs of others. In this time of war, both students and I feel thrilled to learn that alternatives exist to our traditional patterns of linear thinking, judging, criticizing, comparing and contrasting.”

—LOIS EINHORN, Professor of Rhetoric and Composition

“As both a mother and mature student, my communication skills have improved with *Connecting Across Differences*. I find that my relationships, especially with my children, are dramatically changing for the better. Most of all, I have gained insight into how I communicate with myself. I am now learning self-empathy and how to heal some deep-rooted wounds.”

—MAGGIE CLEMENTS, Binghamton University Student

“I taught Nonviolent Communication to a class of peace and social activists using Jane and Dian’s book. The students found it inspiring and invaluable in their learning experience. I love the clarity, organization, and universality of their approach to NVC.”

—CHRISTINE KING, CNVC Certified Trainer

“*Connecting Across Differences*, through numerous illustrations and examples, raises awareness about the covert, passive violence that M.K. Gandhi described as being more insidious than physical violence. Nonviolent Communication and this book offer an antidote.”

—CYNTHIA MOE, Georgia Network for Nonviolent Communication

“This book gives a step-by-step guide for getting closer to our inner world and achieving a better understanding of oneself and others. I especially like the exercises, the sequence of chapters, and how easy to read and understand the language is.”

—MERIKE KAHJA, Empathy Trainer, Tallinn, Estonia

“A captivating book where we are shown tools to increase our understanding of one another and ourselves . . . and the compassion we so desperately want.”

—MICHELLE RUSSO, Binghamton University Student

“Empathy isn’t limited to certain subjects—it works for situations being gay, straight, with school problems, roommate issues, and even comes in handy when dealing with teachers. I think you should have great results with this book because the examples are real life problems—and solutions.”

—JONATHAN CRIMES, Multicultural Psychology Student

“Basic concepts covered in Marshall Rosenberg’s *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* are given a much broader discussion in *Connecting Across Differences*, including more exercises to test my understanding of the practice of communicating nonviolently. This is not another communications-theories book. I found it to be a practical guide to improving interpersonal communications and mediating conflict in my life—at work and at home; with loved ones, colleagues, and even with strangers. I highly recommend this book for those interested in improving the quality of their life through greater connection and more meaningful interaction with the people in their lives.”

—ANONYMOUS, Amazon.com

“I’ve studied Marshall Rosenberg’s *Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life* for three years, and have gotten huge benefits out of it. So why another book on NVC? This book is a wonderful complement to Rosenberg’s book. With clear and detailed explanations, extensive exercises, cartoons and photos, tables and charts, it helps make NVC even more alive and doable. This guidebook is like taking a workshop in compassionate communication.”

—ANONYMOUS, Amazon.com

*To those everywhere with passion and vision
who are willing to take the leap of
imagining and creating change.*

An enemy is one whose story we have not heard.

—GENE KNUDSEN-HOFFMAN

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INTRODUCTION

Living With Awareness and Choice

You just don't understand me. You never listen, do you?

How could I make such a stupid mistake again?

It seems like I never learn.

I just don't know what to do. There are too many choices.

He's just a jerk. All he cares about is himself.

When you read these statements, how do you feel? Put yourself in the speakers' shoes. What do you notice in your body? Do you feel tense or tight? Do you feel anxious, sad, angry, or confused? If you do, it's not surprising. While each statement addresses a different issue, they all involve some kind of judgment. Each indicates a level of miscommunication, disconnection, or blame. And no one enjoys being judged—even by themselves. Also, none of these statements addresses the root cause of what's contributing to the tension and misunderstanding that are taking place, so there is no clear path toward resolving the discomfort involved.

Now read the following statements, which address the same issues in the same order as those above. Here, each fully expresses what the speaker is thinking and feeling.

I'm so frustrated. That's not what I recall saying, and I really value accuracy.

This is the second time this year I've forgotten to pay my Visa bill. I hate getting those late charges, and I really want to attend to my personal matters with care.

Seeing that there are twenty-two different courses that meet the writing requirement, I feel totally overwhelmed. I need to know which to take.

I'm furious. My housemate just spent twenty-five minutes in the shower, and now there's no hot water left. I'd really like some consideration and awareness!

When you read the second set of statements, you may feel a very different kind of response. Do you feel more relaxed, connected, and at ease? Do you notice greater appreciation and understanding—especially when you read what each speaker is wanting (accuracy, care, clarity, and consideration)? Do you find yourself more open to what the speaker desires, and would you be more willing to engage with them?

Now each speaker is taking responsibility for their own experience. Rather than engaging in judgment (which often provides little information), the speaker clearly describes what is bothering them, what they are feeling, and what they're wanting.

These two sets of statements illustrate the practices we'll be exploring in this book: how to move past judgment, and how to name our own experiences in a way that enhances people's ability to listen and care about what is important for each party, including ourselves. These are the practices of Nonviolent Communication™ (NVC), also called Compassionate Communication.* As we

* Some people also like to call NVC authentic or collaborative communication. The name Nonviolent Communication is a translation from the Sanskrit word *ahimsa*, used by Gandhi, which literally means “love in action” or “the force unleashed when the desire to harm is eradicated.” The source of these definitions is <http://www.mettacenter.org/definitions/ahimsa>, where you can find further context for these concepts.

introduce you to these practices, we will also offer a view of the world and of human relations that contributes to interpersonal and intergroup harmony in profound ways. The communication tools presented here and the worldview underlying them support and enhance each other. Together they foster an empathic mind-set and consciousness, and support a compassionate way of seeing and being in the world.

Different—Together

In taking the NVC approach, we examine the commonalities among people. As living organisms, we all have numerous physical needs, including for food, air, water, and rest. We need clothing and shelter for comfort and protection from the elements. We need confidence that we can be safe from illness and other physical harm. And we have needs for warmth, touch, and intimacy, as well as tenderness, care, and sexual expression.

Beyond physical needs, there are numerous other qualities and values that we humans like to experience and express. These include honesty, authenticity, and integrity; community and connection; and spaciousness, autonomy, and choice. Most of us value, at least in some situations, efficiency, effectiveness, movement, and ease. There are many other needs that, when met, contribute to our well-being, such as needs for order, beauty, and meaning. There are dozens of other qualities, such as mutuality, companionship, and consideration, that could be considered primal and basic human needs.

In your own life, what do you value and try to live by, especially in relating to others? Perhaps you value kindness, care, consideration, and autonomy, and the freedom to decide how you want to live. Perhaps you also value self-expression, empowerment, and responsibility. You may also care about dignity, understanding, honesty, and trust. There are probably dozens of other values that

you care about. If you reflect on it, going through life without ever experiencing these qualities as fulfilled would be very hard—like crossing a parched desert. These qualities help us to live life fully and be fully alive.

Now stop and think for a moment. Think about your family, friends, colleagues, and people you simply pass on the street. Is there anyone among them who would not enjoy experiencing the qualities we've mentioned? Is there anyone in the world who would not enjoy food and drink, warmth and shelter, consideration, care, support, ease, and respect? All of these are appreciated and desired by humans everywhere, regardless of where they live or what culture they are a part of. While people address these basic, universal needs in diverse ways and experience them at different times and in different circumstances, there is little doubt that we all share them. This is a theme we explore throughout this book.

Needs—Understanding and Acting on Them

So we are agreed: we all have needs. That's the simple part. Applying this knowledge and using it to create a more compassionate world is more complex. How do we meet our needs in ways that we enjoy, in ways that are consistent with our values and with how we want to live? How can we be confident that everyone's needs—including our own—can be addressed? And then there is this riddle to solve: if we have so much in common, how is it that we so often experience difference, misunderstanding, and conflict?

These are the questions we take up in this book, and we do so by exploring two basic principles. The first is that when we have disagreements or experience disconnection from others, it is because we are disagreeing over *strategies* to meet needs, over what we want to *do* in a given situation. If we are to reconnect with others and resolve the conflict, the needs driving the strategies must first be

discovered. The key to doing this is to truly hear and understand one another on the level of shared values, while holding everyone's needs with care. Once this is accomplished—and this is what the practices in this book are designed to achieve—we are free to discover new strategies that will be far more satisfying, enriching, and unifying. In fact, once all parties have an experience of being heard and knowing that their needs matter, strategies usually organically evolve that are win-wins for all involved.

The second principle is that connecting with and contributing to the well-being of others are instinctive human behaviors that are intrinsically rewarding. If we believe this second principle—that contributing to others is satisfying in itself—finding ways to meet everyone's needs becomes much easier to do. Win-win solutions become the ultimate prize.

The Contribution Test

Do you doubt the second principle? If so, we invite you to try it out in the laboratory of your own life. Take a moment now and think about when you last contributed to another's well-being. Perhaps you gave directions to someone who was lost, helped a child with a task, did something kind for your pet, or ran an errand for a friend. Perhaps you listened with care to a person who wanted your companionship. Or maybe you told a joke, adding some humor, fun, and creativity to the day. Perhaps you expressed gratitude, love, or appreciation to another person.

Now think about how you felt when you contributed to another in this way. As you recall the event, what sensations do you notice in your body? How do you feel? You may feel warm and openhearted, with an expansiveness in your throat, chest, or limbs. You may feel happy, calm, satisfied, or at ease. You may enjoy a sense of fullness, peace, and completion. There is a very important

insight to be gained from this exercise: these are the feelings we typically experience *when our needs are being met*. And this is one way we know that contributing to others is one of the most basic and compelling of human needs: we feel happy when we do so. We all have a desire to contribute to life, to enrich and enhance it for the benefit of all.

Now imagine that all the people you know are enjoying the sensations you just experienced. What would the world look like and how might our daily lives be transformed if people everywhere increased their experience of meeting human needs? What if it were a given that everyone's needs mattered? How would communication and decision making change? What would be the prevailing response to difference and misunderstanding? How might our jobs be structured differently? Our neighborhoods, communities, and schools?

Given the number of people whose needs are not being met in the world today and, further, who believe their needs don't matter, how do we imagine this new world, what it would look like, and how it would function? How is it possible to assure that everyone's needs are held with consideration and care?

Creating Abundance Through Nonviolent Communication

The Nonviolent Communication model offers a blueprint—one that has been tested and proven internationally for decades—for creating such abundance, in our own lives and the world around us.

The approach was developed by Marshall Rosenberg, Ph.D., who was fascinated by a basic question: what is it that contributes to human beings enjoying moments of profound connection and compassion for one another at some times and, at other times, experiencing a lack of compassion, even antipathy and contempt? At a young age, Marshall observed both firsthand. He witnessed race riots in Detroit in the 1940s, in which people were killed, and acts of

immense compassion, including the care his uncle joyfully gave his elderly mother.

Desiring to understand compassion and how to foster it, he studied psychology, learning from the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, among others. Then, after completing his studies, he put his insights to work in a wide array of settings—many of them fraught with conflict and violence, both physical and institutional. As he worked with gangs and prisoners, corporations and other organizations, he created and honed the model that is now being used to increase understanding and cooperation and to resolve conflict among diverse groups of people around the world.

You will find that Nonviolent Communication has limitless applications. As well as fostering self-awareness and connection with others, NVC skills can contribute to decision making, mediation, and needs assessment. NVC works in facilitating meetings in which everyone feels included and involved. The practices you will learn in this book—the fruit of Marshall Rosenberg’s countless journeys to the very heart of conflict—have the power to transform your experience. They can help you live in your own skin and find mutuality with others—in the home, at school and work, and in your most intimate relationships.

Sounds Great. How Hard Is It to Learn?

The principles of NVC are not hard to understand. As you will see, the model involves four basic steps that can be expressed in shorthand as “OFNR”: making clear *observations*, identifying *feelings* in relation to what you’re observing, identifying *needs* in relation to what you’re feeling, and making a *request* that might contribute to meeting your needs. Learning this new way of communicating, however, requires a willingness to step outside your comfort zone and be a beginner. At first, it involves a certain amount of risk taking, learning about yourself, and trusting that the “real you” (with all

your feelings and needs) has something worthwhile to contribute and communicate to others.

To learn NVC, it is essential that you practice. Learning a communication skill is not like learning history or math. It's not just about principles or theory; it needs to be *lived* every day. Only by applying NVC to your life will you see how it works, and from there you will gain confidence. Because practice is so essential, you will find many exercises in this book to support your practice. All of them are designed to be done more than once. When you revisit them, just think of a different situation that you would like to improve or better understand.

You may also wish to keep a journal while reading this book and learning to practice Nonviolent Communication. In it, you can take notes, record your own insights and reflections, and respond to exercises that ask you to observe and comment on your interactions. You can work on choices you're making or behavior you're interested in understanding and perhaps changing. You can also rewrite and rework situations from the past where you didn't communicate with the connection, awareness, or effectiveness you would have liked.

When you travel to another country, knowing even a few words of its language is helpful. Similarly, even though it takes time to integrate NVC into the fabric of your life, you will benefit as soon as you start. Simply learning to identify feelings and needs, the topics of the first two chapters, is powerful. Over time, as your confidence grows, you will find that you are able to respond effectively to the most challenging people and situations.

A Note About This Book and Language, Choice, and Inclusion

Because we want to include both genders, and for ease and simplicity, in this book, we do not use "he" to refer to an individual

person. Consistent with trends in English toward gender neutrality, we use the third person plural, “they.”

Also, while there are two authors of this book, when one of us speaks about our own experience, we use the first person singular pronoun, “I.” If you are curious about which author is speaking, Jane Marantz Connor lives near Washington, D.C., and includes stories in this book describing how NVC informs her interactions with her daughter and ex-husband, and at the university where she used to teach. Dian Killian lives in Brooklyn, New York, and gives examples of practicing NVC while riding her bicycle, from her teaching NVC and mediating with couples, and when dialoguing with her mother.

Another note on language usage: You may notice that we will frequently say, “I’m wanting,” not “I want,” or “You’re feeling” instead of “You feel.” This is because our feelings and needs are not static; they are always occurring in this specific moment. If we say, for example, “Do you feel happy?” this could suggest that you feel happy all the time. We know this is literally not the case, and by using the continuous tense, “Are you feeling happy?” we highlight this fact. This is a common practice among those who practice NVC; as you will see, the classic model follows this convention.

Your Journey Begins

Now it is time to begin your journey toward bringing greater understanding, compassion, and fulfillment into your life and the lives of those around you. The ten chapters that follow will give you a thorough orientation to the principles and practices of Nonviolent Communication that will guide you on this journey.

In chapter 1, we introduce you to a new way of looking at the world and begin to explore the full range of human feeling. Chapter 2 gets to the root of life: the needs that are our constant companions. In chapter 3, we introduce you to the power of empathy, which

integrates the awareness of feelings and needs. Chapter 4 explores the differences between judgment and observation and the importance of seeing and describing, clearly and objectively, our experiences and the experiences of others.

Chapter 5 discusses the power of making requests that will best serve the cause of ensuring that needs are met. In chapter 6, a very important tool, self-empathy, is discussed. In chapter 7, we explore the fiery emotion of anger. Chapter 8 describes the protective use of force in situations where dialogue is not possible. In chapter 9, we learn to express compliments and gratitude without judgment. Finally, in chapter 10, we explore how to integrate NVC in your everyday life, including a colloquial (nonclassical) practice of the model.



It is our intention and wish that this book will inspire you to embrace and foster the qualities you most want to see in your life, and that through learning the techniques of NVC, you will enjoy ever-deepening connection: with yourself, your colleagues and friends, your loved ones, your community, and the world.

9

Thanks, But No Thanks

Your gift was great! Perfect—and so thoughtful!

You're the best ever. No one tops you as a friend.

You're such a good boy when you pick up your toys.

I love you so much when you're being good.

You did a great job with that client.

Imagine someone saying these kinds of things to you. How would you feel? Many people would say “super” or “great.” Who wouldn’t? After all, these are words of gratitude and respect. What could be more delightful?

Yet such statements, while they express or imply pleasure with respect to something the other person has done, are all judgments: they evaluate the listener and their behavior. While most of us prefer praise to blame, judgments—whether approving or disapproving—are all forms of “right-wrong” thinking on the “good-bad” continuum. Such thinking, “positive” or not, supports our valuing others’ opinions in assessing our own behavior. And such statements provide little or no information about what we’ve actually done (or not) to contribute to another’s well-being.

Look at the first example: “Your gift was great! Perfect—and so thoughtful!” What does “great” mean? While it’s stronger in degree than “nice” or “good,” it doesn’t tell us exactly what pleased the

speaker. Did the receiver of the gift feel seen because the gift related to an interest that was especially meaningful to them? Will the gift support ease in the life of the recipient because it decreases the effort they expend regularly to complete a certain chore? Without hearing a clear observation and the needs that are satisfied by the gift, it's impossible to know why it was experienced as so wonderful; thus, our ability as the gift giver to connect fully to the joyful experience of the recipient is limited. In contrast, full connection to the recipient's joy nourishes our own joy because it gives us complete information about how we've contributed.

In this chapter, we explore how to express gratitude in a way that is judgment free and relates to the values that are meaningful to us. When we use gratitude in this way—rather than as a strategy for other ends such as acceptance or approval—it becomes the “power-fuel” of life, and giving itself becomes the greatest reward. We also explore how, when necessary, to say “no, thanks” with integrity.

EXERCISE 1: Grateful for Judgment?

Part One

Think of three expressions of gratitude you recently heard or spoke:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

In each case, were you completely clear about what actions you'd taken that pleased the speaker, or vice versa? In each expression, what judgment was stated and/or implicit? You can write about this in your journal if you like.

Part Two

Think back on your life to times when you received positive feedback or compliments. Did these judgment(s) influence you in any way? Did you make choices and/or change your behavior in ways that were not in full integrity with your values?

Example:

My high school science teacher gave me a lot of compliments, so I took more science classes, including advanced courses on anatomy, dissection, and histology. The teacher continued his praise. After about two years, though, I realized I wasn't even that interested in science! I'd been taking all these classes because I was hungry for appreciation and for being seen, and because someone was telling me I was "good" at it. When I shared this with my science teacher, I could tell he was hurt and disappointed because his intention was to support my development in a way that was meaningful to *me*, not to get me to do something that *he* valued. He enjoyed my participation in class, and he valued teaching students whom he experienced as interested and engaged; this was also part of his motivation to encourage me to take more science electives. In hindsight, I wish he'd given me a different kind of feedback; and I know he didn't know how. If I'd better understood his needs and mine, I think I would have made different choices that would have supported me more in actually focusing on what I truly had the greatest interest in.

The Power Juice of Gratitude

As we've explored throughout this book, needs are the compelling motivators of all life. When we contribute to another's well-being, we're contributing to meeting their needs, and doing so, in turn, meets one of the greatest needs we all have—to enrich the lives of others. When we do things to enrich our own lives, we have an

immediate feedback system—our feelings—that tells us whether or not we have succeeded in meeting our needs. Yet when we take actions to contribute to others, we don't have direct access to their feelings and needs. As a result, we may not know whether we have succeeded—unless they tell us what their feelings and needs are. Receiving gratitude is an important way in which we find out whether our behavior (intentional or not) has been valuable.

Sometimes, especially when people know each other well or where the context is clear, a simple “thank you” or a smile will suffice. Still, through receiving “needs-based” gratitude, we can better understand a person and what they most desire. We can know how our choices meet needs, and have clarity for decision making, now and in the future. Most gratitude leaves us in the dark. Giving “empathic gratitude”—including observations, needs met, and feelings—is a way to turn on the lights.

EXERCISE 2: The Pleasure Principle

Think of something you did recently that you're confident contributed to the well-being of another.

Part One

Thinking about this action, how do you feel? What sensations do you notice in your body? How does this sensation feel different from sensations you have when you're angry or sad?

Part Two

- A. What action did you take? Describe it in one or two sentences.
- B. What needs were you hoping to meet and what values were you trying to support in taking this action?
- C. Were these needs met and these values supported? How do you know?

- D. What observations do you have from the other person that confirms that you contributed to their well-being?
- E. What in their response leaves you unclear about whether their needs were fully met or not?

Part Three

Have you ever taken an action that you were sure would contribute to another, only to find it wasn't being received as such? This can especially be true for gifts. One time, for example, I cooked up a treat for a friend, only to find out that she was allergic to some of the ingredients. Think of an action that you took to help or contribute to another that did not, in fact, meet needs, all or in part. How did you know needs were not being met?

Use ONF Often

In giving life-enriching gratitude and making clear how an action has contributed to ourselves or another, we simply use the first three steps of the NVC model—Observations, Needs, and Feelings (ONF). Note that I am suggesting we look at needs before feelings in expressing gratitude, and I will explain that shortly. For now, here's how these steps look when expressing gratitude:

(O for Observation)

What, specifically, did you *observe* that you appreciated?

(N for Needs)

Which *needs* did this behavior meet or support? What values do you hold that are consistent with this behavior?

(F for Feelings)

What *feelings* did this behavior stimulate in you?

These steps are familiar to you by now. Yet in expressing gratitude, there are a couple of additional points to keep in mind. Often with gratitude, if we look at the *feelings* the other person's behavior has stimulated without considering the *related needs and values* first, we are primarily aware of feelings of gratitude and pleasure—feelings that are quite general. After connecting with our needs and values, we are likely to become aware of more subtle, specific feelings that convey aspects of our experience that are more tender and personal.

Let's look now at a few examples of “low-octane” gratitude (simply thanking someone) and then the same appreciation translated into high-impact ONF:

Thanks: Thanks for always being there for me. You're the best friend ever.

ONF: When you picked me up at 3 a.m. at the bus station last night, your care and support really meant a lot to me, especially given how ill my mom is. I felt so relieved to have you there and to not have the anxiety of trying to find a taxi and worrying about the expense.

Thanks: Your present was terrific. I can't thank you enough.

ONF: The gift certificate you gave me for that new restaurant is just what I needed! I wanted to celebrate finishing my thesis, and my boyfriend and I are low on funds. Now we can celebrate in style! I'm so excited.

Thanks: You are the best boy ever. I love you so much when you're being good.

ONF: I love how you put your toys back on the shelf today. Because the room is in order now, I feel safe walking around and can easily find things.

In looking at these examples, you may notice they don't follow very closely the “formal” NVC model. The word “needs” is not

used, and only in some cases will you find universal needs explicitly mentioned. Yet in each of these expressions of gratitude, there is a clear observation given—whether about a gift certificate for dinner or being picked up at the bus station at 3 a.m. A feeling is mentioned—for example, safe or excited. And, even when it's not named directly, a need is clearly alluded to and met—be it for celebration, care, safety, ease, or support.

Try reading these aloud. Do you find the ONF gratitude more satisfying and meaningful? How do you experience each kind in your body? In the ONF versions, you may have enjoyed greater understanding and connection (as well as physical openness and relaxation) since you could clearly see the impact on the experience of the receiver, connect with what they're feeling, and appreciate the needs met. This gives a full picture and shared understanding. You may also have been surprised by what you learned, since our actions can contribute to others in unexpected ways. Regarding the gift certificate, for example, a student on a limited budget is certain to enjoy it. Hearing that the student just completed her thesis and wanted to celebrate the event in a special way adds a whole new level of richness and value to the gift.

Perhaps most important, ONF gratitude is always stated in the positive. When giving gratitude, of course, we're talking about fulfillment and “up” experiences. Yet ironically, when giving thanks in a traditional way, people often use negatives. In the case of the boy picking up his toys, for example, the parent might say, “It's great you picked up your toys—it was so messy in here!” Or if someone turns down the music they were listening to, the person who'd requested it might say, “Thanks. That was really giving me a headache.” Referring to what was wrong with the situation—“messy” and “headache”—lacks the same clarity, satisfaction, or connection as describing the needs met, so the statement could easily be heard as an indirect criticism of the gift giver. Stating our needs in the positive—such as for order, safety, or peace—increases the chances that they will be understood, acted upon, and celebrated with us. It also increases the

chances of their being met in the future, since those around us now know what we *want* (rather than what we don't).

EXERCISE 3: Guessing the Need

Part One

Imagine someone making each of the following statements to you. What needs do you think might have been met for the speaker in each expression?

Statement	Possible Needs Met
A. "Thanks so much for your work on the carnival."	Support, creativity, caring
B. "Your presence at my birthday party meant a lot to me."	
C. "You've been a good friend."	
D. "I've always loved your spirit."	
E. "You do so much for me. Thanks a lot."	

Part Two

Think of three expressions of gratitude you recently made that were judgment based. Then translate them into ONF:

- A. Judgment based: _____
 ONF gratitude: _____
- B. Judgment based: _____
 ONF gratitude: _____
- C. Judgment based: _____
 ONF gratitude: _____

Part Three

Take the following “negative” praise and put it in ONF “positive.”

- A. Negative praise: “I’m so glad you cut your hair. It really didn’t suit you before.”

ONF positive celebration: _____

- B. Negative praise: “My mom’s really relieved that you left that dead-end job.”

ONF positive celebration: _____

- C. Negative praise: “This room looks a lot better since you painted it. It was really dreary before.”

ONF positive celebration: _____

What About Compliments and Praise? Aren’t They Good?

The way you played the piano was incredible! You’re a fantastic musician.

You are so smart. You can do anything.

You’re the best athlete in the whole school. I wish I could score the way you do.

Many people think that compliments such as these help others feel appreciated and can boost confidence and self-esteem. Yet if someone feels good hearing positive judgments, how are they supposed to feel when they hear—and they inevitably will—negative judgments? Should we determine what we think of

ourselves and our choices by relying on the judgment of others? Often in giving compliments, we want connection and shared understanding. Judgment-based compliments, like appreciation of the same ilk, focus attention on the *speaker’s* opinions, not on what the recipient did or did not do. They provide little or no information about exactly what happened that impressed the

speaker. For example, what does “perfectly” mean? “Perfect,” like any judgment, can mean different things to different people.

As judgments, such appreciation also places the recipient in a no-man’s-land of static, immovable permanence. No one plays the piano “perfectly” at all times. No one knows everything. Often judgment-based compliments can leave us feeling uncomfortable because we suspect the speaker’s opinion might be different if we’d been seen at another time. We don’t want the responsibility of trying to live up to a global statement of praise. We are much more comfortable when we know specifically what we did, in the moment, that left a positive impression on the speaker.

As with gratitude, we can use the ONF model to create judgment-free compliments. What did we see or hear that was consistent with our values? What action allowed us to experience our values as supported, embraced, or exemplified? Again, the request step will probably not be necessary unless we’re curious about how it is for the other person to hear our appreciation and praise.

In giving ONF gratitude and compliments, you may wish to refer to them simply as “feedback” since you’re consciously not engaging in evaluation or judgment. Rather, you’re giving “back” about how others’ words and actions have contributed to your life. It is in this exchange (giving and receiving—and letting others know what you’ve received) that you experience the real delight of contributing to others.

EXERCISE 4: Live Feedback—in ONF

Part One

Look again at the examples above of judgment-based compliments and translate them into ONF. Here’s the first one, done for you as an example:

Judgment: “The way you played the piano was incredible! You’re a fantastic musician.”

ONF feedback: “Hearing the speed with which you played the notes in the middle section and the slow meditative way you played the last section was inspiring to me. I didn’t think the same person could play the instrument in such different ways. I feel intrigued to consider experimenting with some contrasts in my own artistic expressions. Bravo!”

A. Judgment: “You are *so* smart. You can do anything.”

ONF feedback: _____

B. Judgment: “You’re the best athlete in the whole school. I wish I could score the way you do.”

ONF feedback: _____

Part Two

Think of three compliments that you’ve given or might have given recently that involved judgment. Use ONF to translate each of these judgments into live feedback. Note that for gratitude, the order we’re suggesting is Observations, Needs, and Feelings (ONF)—a different order than the usual, classical model.

A. Judgment-based compliment: _____

ONF feedback: _____

B. Judgment-based compliment: _____

ONF feedback: _____

C. Judgment-based compliment: _____

ONF feedback: _____

Twice Judged—Not Praised?

There's another thing to watch out for with judgment-based compliments: the judgment can go both ways. Consider an earlier example: "You're the best athlete in the whole school. I wish I could score the way you do." The speaker is complimenting you, and they're also judging themselves, directly or indirectly, via comparison. By saying, "I wish I were just like you . . ." or "I wish I had done that . . ."

they're speaking about their *own* behavior and about needs that have been unmet by the choices they made. The speaker is using your performance (or at least their interpretation of it) as a mirror for what they see as their own deficiency. In such cases, how have your actions contributed to another? Is it really enjoyable to hear "inverted" compliments of this kind? Rather than being a celebration, such "compliments" are in fact coded messages about unmet needs. They bring attention back to the person who's giving them, rather than keeping the focus on the person being celebrated.

When you hear an inverted compliment, you can use your empathic listening skills to support the speaker in connecting to values that are important to them and to how much those values enrich their life. Here's an example:

Speaker: You are the fastest runner ever. I wish I could do that.

Listener: Sounds like you're discouraged. You'd like to be a fast runner too?

Speaker: Not really. It's just frustrating that I practice so much and still never win a race.

Listener: So what you really want is for your effort to pay off?

Speaker: Yeah, maybe this just isn't my sport. But I'd like to think that if I really work at something, it will show.

Listener: What you really want, then, is effectiveness?

Speaker: Yes, exactly. And for there to be some balance between

the effort and energy I put into something and what I achieve. It doesn't actually matter if I win—I just want to see clear improvement.

Listener: Right—I get it. A sense of achievement.

Speaker: Exactly. Hey, how do you practice anyway? Maybe there are some tips you could give me so I could train better?

Listener: Sure! Why don't you run with me tomorrow when I practice—I could show you some tips then.

Speaker: Great! And thanks for listening. I really appreciate it. I'm much clearer now about what I really want.

Compliments as Strategy

In addition to being a form of self-criticism, compliments can also serve as a way of simultaneously not being present and attempting to influence the mood of another. Have you ever noticed that if you're feeling sad or discouraged, some people will try to cheer you up with compliments? They might say, for example, "Don't let one low grade get you down—everyone knows how smart you are, that you're the best in the class!" How satisfying or consoling is a compliment like this? While you may hear the intention behind such a statement, potentially meeting your needs for understanding and support, such "compliments" can negate how you feel and try to "fix" it; they are rarely effective in building confidence. Rather than hearing that your feelings are unfounded (which indicates that the listener is not fully present to hearing your feelings), it is far more satisfying to have the gift of another person's presence and care—for example: "I see that you're feeling really low about the grade you received. Are you worried about mastering the material and reaching your goals?"

Compliments—or Coercion?

As we've discussed, contributing to the well-being of others is one of the most primary of human needs. When met, it leads to the development of connection, trust, and meaning. At the same time, there is a subtle and crucial distinction between doing something because we are responding to our own inner need to contribute to another's well-being and doing it because we want reward, approval, or payoff. Judgment-based compliments and appreciation can easily blur the lines.

In the example about the little boy picking up his toys, does he pick them up because he wants to please his mother and be considered "good"? Perhaps he knows from experience that if he's not "good," he might be screamed at or punished. This is far different from picking up his things out of care for his mother, because he understands how it contributes to her enjoying order, ease, consideration, and safety. This goes back to the questions we've considered before: *What do we want people to do? And why do we want them to do it?* When we give judgment-based compliments and appreciation, the motivation for people's actions can easily come from fear or a desire for approval or reward—not from contributing to others and enjoying shared values, both motivations that support loving connection and openhearted giving.

De-strategizing Praise

What can you do if you suspect praise is being used for a purpose other than appreciation and celebration? Regardless of the strategy—be it punishment and reward, comparison (negative self-judgment), or attempting to influence your feelings, you can go back to OFNR. In the case of negative self-judgment, you can offer empathy for needs unmet. You can check what needs the speaker is attempting to

meet by asking, for example, “Are you wanting to show your care for me by trying to cheer me up?” Or you may wish to guess, as a form of silent empathy, what those needs might be. In doing so, you can gain clarity and understanding about what might be motivating the use of gratitude for other aims in the moment.

EXERCISE 5: Praise as Celebration, Not Strategy

For each of the following statements where praise is used as a strategy for something other than celebration, give an empathy guess to foster understanding and connection. Let’s begin with an example.

Example:

- A. “I can never get things right. I wish I were good at things, the way you are.”

Empathy: “So hearing that you didn’t get the job you wanted, you’re feeling discouraged? You’d like to have the security of a regular income and to trust that you’ll be seen for your talents?”

- B. “You did your homework—you’re such a good girl. And now you can go out and play.”

Empathy: _____

- C. “I wouldn’t worry about losing that game. Everyone knows you’re the best on the team, and that our school is number one.”

Empathy: _____

- D. “You look so beautiful in that outfit. I wish I could wear dresses like that—they just don’t suit me.”

Empathy: _____

ONF Feedback in Action: Enriching Lives, Empowering Choices

Let's look at a real example of these principles in action. About a month ago, I was observing a teacher and a teacher's aide in a small class for students who were having difficulties at school. I noticed both teachers frequently praising the students, saying, for example, "great job," "super," "fine work." The head teacher told me the children were used to receiving a lot of criticism and very little praise. She wanted to build their self-confidence. I valued her intention and was moved by what I saw as her caring and dedication. I was also concerned that the way she was praising the students encouraged them to rely on her judgments rather than developing their own internal sense of what they valued.

At one point the teacher's aide was telling a boy, John, that his poster showing how lungs work was "great, just great." I asked him, "Is there something you like about your drawing?" He said, "No." I told him that I liked the symmetry—the pair of lungs was balanced—and then I asked the aide what she liked about the drawing. She shared what she liked, and soon John was pointing out what he appreciated about it too. If we had not had this conversation, it's likely John would have had no idea what he had done that was so "great." Now he could see for himself, and he was in a position to believe it and act on it again in the future. This was also far more effective in building up his self-confidence and trust than the unclear, nonspecific praise.

"Uh, Thanks!"

The Power of the Observation—A Story of Two Great Cellists

"My great wish was to hear Pablo Casals. One day, my desire was almost fulfilled and I met him. But ironically, it was I who had to play. It was in the home of the Von Mendelssohns, a house filled with

El Grecos, Rembrandts, and Stradivaris. Francesco von Mendelssohn, the son of the banker, who was a talented cellist, telephoned and asked if he could call for me; they had a guest in the house who would like to hear me play.

“Mr. Casals.’ I was introduced to a little bald man with a pipe. He said that he was pleased to meet young musicians such as Serkin and me. Rudolf Serkin, who stood stiffly next to me, seemed, like myself, to be fighting his diffidence. Rudi had played before my arrival, and Casals now wanted to hear us together. Beethoven’s D-Major Sonata was on the piano. ‘Why don’t you play it?’ asked Casals. Both nervous and barely knowing each other, we gave a poor performance that terminated somewhere in the middle.

“Bravo! Bravo! Wonderful!’ Casals applauded. Francesco brought the Schumann Cello Concerto, which Casals wanted to hear. I never played worse. Casals asked for Bach. Exasperated, I obliged with a performance matching the Beethoven and Schumann.

“Splendid! Magnifique!’ said Casals, embracing me.

“Bewildered, I left the house. I knew how badly I had played, but why did he, the master, have to praise and embrace me? This apparent insincerity pained me more than anything else.

“The greater was my shame and delight when, a few years later, I met Casals in Paris. We had dinner together and played duets for two cellos, and I played for him until late at night. Spurred by his great warmth, and happy, I confessed what I had thought of his praising me in Berlin. He reacted with sudden anger. He rushed to the cello, ‘Listen!’ He played a phrase from the Beethoven sonata. ‘Didn’t you play this fingering? Ah, you did! It was novel to me . . . it was good . . . and here, didn’t you attack that passage with up-bow, like this?’ he demonstrated. He went through Schumann and Bach, always emphasizing all he liked that I had done. ‘And for the rest,’ he said passionately, ‘leave it to the ignorant and stupid who judge by counting only the faults. I can be grateful, and so must you be, for even one note, one wonderful phrase.’ I left with the feeling of having been with a great artist and a friend.”⁷

—GREGOR PIATIGORSKY, author of *Celloist*

Uh, Thanks!

Another way we can express gratitude without clarity is through our learned tendency to say “thank you” when we don’t really mean it. From an early age, we’re admonished, “Say thank you!” when we receive a gift, whether we like the gift or not. When I was young, I don’t think I was asked even once whether a gift or action had in fact met my needs. Instead, I was supposed to be “polite” and grateful for what I’d been given. I’m sure that demanding such “gratitude” was an effort to create connection between others and me, and to foster appreciation. Yet how can we feel connected with another if honesty and authenticity are lacking? How can we appreciate gifts and contributions if there is not integrity in how they have in fact contributed to us and our lives?

Even as adults, we sometimes receive gifts that are not consistent with our taste and values. Sometimes a person does something that was intended to meet a need, but it doesn’t have the result that was intended. How do we respond in such a situation? This topic generated a lively discussion in one of my classes: Should you lie and pretend to like the gift, return it, or pass it on to someone else? Should you refrain from letting someone know that their “help” was not helpful? Could you just express your appreciation for the beauty of the intention behind the gift? Each of these strategies, of course, could meet different needs—including for consideration and ease. Yet if we share with honesty and care how we’re truly feeling and how our needs have been met or not, this in itself can be a contribution, fostering intimacy, connection, trust, and understanding.

An incident several years ago illustrated this for me. I came across a doll that I thought my brother’s daughter would love. While I don’t see them often because we live far apart, I know he’s a specialist in Russian studies, and this doll was dressed in a traditional Russian outfit. Also, my niece was of an age that I associated with liking dolls, and I thought this one was adorable. With eagerness and excitement, I bought the gift and sent it to her. Some time later I spoke to my

brother. “Did Monica get the doll? Did she like it?” “Well, yes, she did get it. We appreciate the thought that went into it and why you thought of us. But actually Monica has never liked dolls. We gave it to someone who does. I hope you don’t mind.” I felt sad and disappointed that my “perfect” present, which I had purchased and sent with the intent of providing pleasure, had not reached its mark. In the discussion that ensued, though, I learned some new things about my niece, such as what kinds of things interested her and what didn’t. I also appreciated my brother’s honesty and trust, and as a result of this conversation, our relationship was strengthened as we got to know each other better. My disappointment shifted to feelings of connection and appreciation.

Polite or Real?

When people talk about being “polite” when receiving a gift or assistance, it’s often in the context of wanting to avoid hurting others’ feelings. In my experience, though, when authenticity, understanding, and connection are present, the feelings associated with unmet needs, such as hurt or anxiety, quickly shift. Regardless, do we want to “fake” our responses to people? Do we want to smile when disappointed, or say “yes” when we mean “no”? Or do we want authenticity and realness, including genuine connection and gratitude? If we’re not fully aware of needs met and how our actions have contributed to others, how satisfying is it to hear words of appreciation? It’s almost like getting a huge box wrapped up with a bow and finding it empty inside.

Of course, we also desire to have care and consideration for others. When you’re concerned about others’ feelings or how your honesty may be received, it’s helpful to be aware of all your feelings and needs at the moment and perhaps share them with others in all their complexity. If you’re feeling hesitation and concern because you care about someone’s feelings, for example, you can name

these feelings. You can then also share that you value honesty and integrity, and that you want authentic connection. You may also wish to mention all the needs met and unmet by their gift or helpful act, such as care and consideration, and honor what you see as their intention. You can honor needs met while, at the same time, being honest and authentic.

EXERCISE 6: “No, Thanks” as a Gift

Part One

Think about a gift you received that you did not enjoy. What needs did the gift not meet for you? Did you tell the person how you felt? Why or why not?

Part Two

Imagine saying “No, thanks” in ONF for each of the following situations. As part of your response, try expressing gratitude for needs met and/or what you see as the other’s intention in giving:

- A. A friend offers to help you straighten up your house before a party, yet that is a chore that you find relaxing to do in solitude as a meditative experience.
No: _____
- B. Your supervisor is leaving to join a start-up company and invites you to join him. You have concerns about the financial riskiness of such a move and prefer to stay with your current position.
No: _____
- C. A friend asks you to join her and her husband for an evening playing bridge, but you don’t like playing bridge with them because they argue about how they play their hands.
No: _____

The Appreciation Shortage

Appreciation, when genuine and needs based, is like liquid gold. It energizes the whole giving and receiving system, facilitating needs being identified, celebrated, and met. Yet if gratitude is so energizing and satisfying, why is there not more of it in our lives? As the old saying goes, why is it that most people focus on the glass being half empty rather than half full? Perhaps that's because when our needs are met, we feel contented, satisfied, and fulfilled. In contrast, when our needs are not met, the experience is so unpleasant that we're more expressive and proactive. This can lead to not celebrating what we enjoy in life and instead focusing on what we're lacking. How unfortunate!

Perhaps this explains the lack of appreciation most people seem to feel. Ask yourself: Do you feel appreciated for what you do at work, school, and home? Do you feel that your efforts to contribute to the well-being of others are seen and recognized? Do you know whether your contributions have hit the mark and been experienced as the contributions you intended them to be? Sadly, most people do not feel that their actions are seen, acknowledged, or appreciated. What a missed opportunity!

Enjoying Praise

Many of us have been told that we shouldn't let compliments "go to our head," or become too impressed with ourselves. Some people find it very difficult to accept appreciation or a compliment and will try to deny or minimize the speaker's words by saying things like "Oh, it's not really anything" or "I really did a terrible job—it's not good at all" or "I was just lucky." There can be various reasons why we find compliments difficult to hear. Many of them are probably related to compliments usually occurring as judgments. Being judged, even "positively," can

lead us to also judge ourselves and/or compare ourselves to others, often negatively. As discussed earlier, when we hear an affirming judgment from another, we can experience “performance anxiety,” as well as the prospect of later disappointing the same critic.

For years, I struggled with receiving compliments, and I still do if they're judgment based. I also enjoy knowing, of course, how my actions have contributed. I've now learned to ask people for more information, and I very much enjoy the results. Not only do I receive more appreciation, I've also come to recognize how many needs a single act can meet! After a poetry reading recently, I tried this experiment. Each time a person thanked me for reading my work, I asked them to name one need it met for them. Repeatedly, both the speakers and I were surprised by the results. No one named the same need and, after reflecting a moment, all seemed satisfied and surprised by what they'd identified. Thinking in this way gave them a whole new appreciation of the reading and what it meant to them. Translating “judgment-based” compliments into needs was like opening a fortune cookie!

In teaching and giving workshop presentations, I often ask the same question: “Would you be willing to tell me one thing that you found helpful about the talk?” The answer helps me to translate a general statement of appreciation into a more useful ONF statement. Like my poetry reading experiment, it gives me numerous “fortune cookies” to open and learn from. I also learn more about others—what they value most and what makes them “tick.” In a similar way, when I hear others praising someone, I like to ask, “What does this person do that leads you to say they're ‘awesome’? This would help me to see what's most important to you!” In doing so, I learn a great deal about the speaker: what they see and appreciate and, often, want to emulate themselves.

I try to respond similarly when people tell me they don't like my presentations, although they are usually more specific in those instances anyway. The assumption seems to be that if we're giving people “positive” feedback, no further details are necessary.

The reality is that whatever another person has done, feedback with clear observations and an account of needs met or unmet is extremely helpful. Often people talk about “constructive criticism” as the kind that is given with details and care. Similarly, ONF feedback can be seen as a “constructive compliment”—information that aids and supports you in further meeting your own needs and contributing to others. Hearing such “praise,” you will find yourself wanting to give and receive more gratitude, since it actually has content and is “positive” and “constructive” in a truly meaningful and impactful way.

EXERCISE 7: Naming the One Thing

Think about three things that you’re really excited about and/or enjoy. This could be a person you admire, a work of art or music you love, or an activity you like. For each thing, think of one aspect, in ONF, that is satisfying about it.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Exploring the Appreciation Shortage

In order to understand more deeply the feelings and needs underlying the scarcity most of us experience regarding appreciation, I asked some of my students to write an expression of appreciation—using O, N, and F—that they would love to have received from a particular person.

One student wrote that she would have loved to hear her father give her this appreciation:

When I saw that you had scored more goals than any other girl on the soccer team this year, I was very, very happy. I value you developing your skills to the best of your ability, and I am grateful to have been a part of it by our practicing together. More than anything else, I want you to develop and grow into a strong and healthy person. It also gave me hope that you might get a college soccer scholarship, which I also desperately want for you because I believe college will enrich your life, and I don't earn enough to pay your college expenses. I am so relieved and joyful to have the trust now that you will be able to follow your dreams.

Another student wrote that he would have loved his former girlfriend to have said this:

When I think about the times you have held me in your arms and listened to me talk about my problems with my family and with school, I want you to know how much it meant to me to experience your caring and love. Even though we have chosen not to be together because of different visions we have of the life we want to live, I feel tears of appreciation forming in my eyes when I think of your kindness and support of me.

I then asked them each to guess the needs the person wanted to meet by *not* expressing appreciation in this way. The first student wrote:

I think he was afraid that if he told me how he felt, I wouldn't work so hard and do so well. I also know that talking about feelings is difficult for him. He might have been afraid that I wouldn't think he was strong and a "real man." I also know he had a lot of shame about not earning more money, and perhaps he thought that talking about this would make him feel worse and make us think less of him.

The second student wrote the following:

I'm thinking that my girlfriend didn't want to let me know how much my love meant to her because she was afraid it would threaten her independence and autonomy, which she also valued highly. Breaking up has been hard for us, even though it feels like the right thing, and maybe she wants to protect herself and me from feeling the pain of the breakup again.

In these and other similar stories I hear, fear is the most common thief of appreciation. Fears of being vulnerable or being judged by others can keep people from expressing how they're truly feeling. They fear speaking about their feelings, or how the person receiving their gratitude will hear it. Many of us simply are not accustomed to talking about gratitude; instead we're used to "tough love"—showing how we "care" through criticism and demands. At other times when we receive positive feedback, it comes with a disclaimer: "You're doing X better now, so now you need to do Y"

In addition to fear and lack of gratitude "fluency," another barrier to the expression of appreciation is that people often think their needs are in competition. How can the father earning low wages express his appreciation of his daughter without revealing his sadness and regret about not earning the money he'd like? How can the girlfriend express her gratitude while also meeting her needs for dignity and autonomy? When we really understand them, however, needs are never in conflict; there is never a scarcity in expressing what we most value in life. The strategies we choose to meet one set of needs can sometimes conflict with strategies to meet other needs; the needs themselves, though, are not in competition. The need for encouraging a child's athletic development, for example, is not in conflict with the need for seeing and valuing one's own contributions and integrity. The need for autonomy is not in conflict with the need for connection; you

can't be connected to someone in a meaningful way if you are not given the space to be a separate person.

How do we navigate between seemingly competing feelings and needs and name our gratitude, even if we're fearful? One way is to connect with all that we feel and need in the moment and, if we wish, be transparent about the complexity of our needs. Before expressing our gratitude, we might want to mention other "layers" of feelings that are also alive within us. In the case of the soccer-playing daughter, for example, the father might have said:

I feel sad thinking about how little I earn and my ability to pay for your education. And I'm also really proud of how well you play soccer, and how I've supported you in learning to play. I'm so happy and relieved to know this might help you financially to get through college.

The girlfriend might have said:

You know I really value my autonomy, so I feel a bit self-conscious and even nervous saying this . . . I want you to know how much I appreciate all your support. I don't think I've ever enjoyed so much tenderness and caring.

When you're being transparent in this way, you will probably want to make a connection request, asking how your words are landing or being heard. Connection and shared understanding are especially crucial when we're feeling vulnerable.

When people give us value-based appreciation or compliments without judgment, it is much easier to hear and digest what they are sharing with us. Rather than resorting to false humility or denial, we can join in their celebration of needs met, both for ourselves and for them. Ultimately, this becomes a celebration of shared values and mutual care.

EXERCISE 8: Appreciation You Would Love to Have Received

- A. Write down an expression of appreciation that you would love to have received from a particular person. Be sure to include:
1. What specific appreciated behavior of yours did the person *observe*?
 2. What *needs* in them did your behavior meet or support? Which values did they hold that this behavior was consistent with?
 3. What *feelings* did this behavior stimulate in them?
- B. Stop now and write the appreciation.
- Observation: _____
- Needs: _____
- Feelings: _____
- C. Now that you have written your appreciation, consider what feelings and needs stopped or prevented this person from giving you this appreciation. Try to put yourself in their shoes. Review the list of needs on page 368, if that would be helpful. You may wish to write about this in your journal.

EXERCISE 9: Living With Gratitude

Try practicing empathic gratitude every day for a week. Each day, in the morning or evening, make a list of five things you are grateful for (observations) and then what you are needing and feeling. Be sure to include gratitude you have for yourself!

Example:

Observation: “Last night you drove us fifty miles to see a play
that I wanted to see.”

Needs: Support, fun, companionship, connection

Feelings: Warm, tender, thankful

Now you try it.

Observation:	Needs:	Feelings:
1. _____		
2. _____		
3. _____		
4. _____		
5. _____		

Appreciating Ourselves—and Our Choices

It's safe to say that most of us don't get the appreciation we'd like from others. It's also likely that we don't give much appreciation to ourselves. Because we're the ones contributing to meeting our *own* needs, it can be easy to take our *own* efforts for granted. Yet only by expressing self-gratitude can we become fully aware of what we're doing that's effective (or not) in meeting our needs. In this way, self-gratitude offers a highly enjoyable and stress-free way to engage in “behavior modification”—focusing on and reinforcing the actions we find most life serving and valuable.

Of course, we're not always happy with the choices we make. I have found, though, that choices I regret in some ways (due to unmet needs) I now celebrate in other ways (due to needs met). Awareness of both helps me fully celebrate and act on my values; the gratitude really helps with self-acceptance, ease, and balance.

For example, I am still sad that I left Ireland, where I lived for years. In leaving, I did not meet needs for clarity, understanding, self-care, awareness, self-connection, discernment, and choice (in how I made the decision to leave). No longer living there, I've often had needs that are "up" for beauty, meaning, connection with nature, and shared values (among many others). As a result of leaving, however, I have, over time, met needs for learning, self-development, and self-acceptance; I also learned about NVC, which may not have happened if I'd not returned to the United States.

I can now express gratitude to myself about this once painful choice I made. When I think about how I coped with leaving Ireland, a place I loved so much and that met so many needs for me, I am amazed by my passion for life, determination, and resiliency. Having survived that, I am confident I can survive anything! Expressing gratitude to myself in this way is very satisfying. It gives me appreciation, confidence, self-acceptance, and peace. Ultimately, both mourning needs unmet and celebrating needs met are about celebration: honoring what we most value in life and what contributes to our well-being.

EXERCISE 10: Celebration and Mourning

Choose a situation or decision that you regret in some ways and that you also now celebrate in some ways. Make two lists, one of needs unmet and the other of needs met. If the needs unmet are "up" for you, empathize first with those. Then write how you are grateful to yourself for the needs you have met in response to the same situation. How does it feel to express gratitude to yourself in this way?

Situation (observation): _____

Needs not met: _____

Needs met: _____

Gratitude to yourself: _____

Inviting Gratitude From Others

Just as we're reluctant to engage in self-praise, society has taught us that it's unacceptable (judged as self-serving, arrogant, or perhaps insecure) to request or invite gratitude from others. Yet I hear regularly, especially from couples and members of organizations, about how infrequently individuals' contributions are seen and appreciated to the extent they would like. In the spirit of making requests to meet needs, I like to celebrate when I've taken an action that meets my own needs. And if I want feedback and/or to be seen by another for what I've done, I like to speak up and request it. I find this empowering and connecting, and I also get information about how the other person experienced my actions—which is not always how I imagined! While at first this practice can be a little scary, especially if you're concerned with how the other person may judge you for asking, I have found it consistently worth the risk in terms of the overall connection and understanding that I experience. Sometimes requests for recognition and gratitude can actually resolve misunderstanding and disconnection.

Recently, for example, I was working at a large company to support a team that was in conflict. An employee was complaining about his immediate supervisor, who, in his judgment, was demanding and never happy. Further, he was unreasonable. He did not follow corporate policy regarding life-work balance; the weekend overtime hours this employee had been putting in were, he believed, expected of him. As I listened empathically to his concerns, the core needs that came up were appreciation and recognition. The worker cared about the project and his team, and was more than willing to continue working extra hours, including some weekends. He'd never had a sense, though, that his boss fully appreciated this effort. After some NVC-based coaching, he approached his boss and shared the following:

I'm a little concerned how this may sound to you because I've never done this before. And I'm wondering if you have a sense of how many hours I've worked, including on weekends, over the last two months on this project? I'm pleased about what I see as my level of commitment. And I'm wondering what you see—and if there is anything in particular that you appreciate about how you see me working on this project? I'd really appreciate that feedback.

In response, the worker got information beyond what he was expecting: his boss saw something in his performance that even he had not seen—his ability to collaborate with others on the team. After the supervisor shared this feedback, the employee thanked him and explained that while he was personally motivated to perform on the project, when working the amount of overtime that he was racking up, it was helpful to get some input from his boss, as well. They then made a plan to check in monthly about the various ways needs were being met on the project, rather than focusing simply on what was wrong and needed to be changed.

I find the same dynamics in working with couples, families, and in my own life: gratitude, when observation based and authentic, is connecting and energizing. Many couples and parents focus solely on what's wrong, and after a while, others in the relationship can start to think that nothing is right. Studies have shown that couples who express gratitude to each other regularly have much more success in creating happiness in their relationship and in staying together in the long run.

Inspired by the power of gratitude, I keep a regular gratitude journal, writing in it for ten minutes each day. I continue to be amazed by how much I learn and how deep I can go in self-understanding by focusing on needs met. I've also become what I call an urban gratitude bandit. When I see or hear something I like on the subway or the street, I go up to complete strangers and tell them how I feel. For example, I might say, "I just overheard

how you were speaking to your child, and I'm filled with happiness and appreciation—hearing how you were with her when she was crying gives me hope about how all of us can parent our children!” Or I might say, “I really love the outfit you're wearing, with so many colors. It really brightens my day!” Each time I've delivered a gratitude “valentine” of this kind, the person's face lights up. And I enjoy a brief moment of connection with a passing stranger. I know I've contributed to making their day by noticing and naming something they have said or done that, in my view, has contributed to life being more satisfying and delightful.

EXERCISE 11: Filling Your Gratitude Well

- A. This week, try at least once to play gratitude bandit. If you're too nervous to try it with a complete stranger, try it out first with family members or friends. Remember to give the observation, needs met, and how you genuinely feel.
- B. Is there a place in your life where you'd like recognition and appreciation? If so, think of what actions you've taken that you appreciate and identify the needs this met. What request could you make of another to both celebrate what you've done and invite their appreciation?
- C. Try this week to keep a gratitude journal. Focus on needs met in every area of your life. What impact does keeping this journal have for you?
- D. If you have an empathy buddy, or the next time you have an opportunity to receive empathy, choose to celebrate needs met.

Living in Gratitude

Marianne Williamson sums up well the spirit of value-based compliments and appreciation, and how they involve being fully ourselves, honoring others, and serving life:

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?” Actually, who are you *not* to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It is not just in some of us; it is in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.⁸

It is difficult, if not impossible, to express too much appreciation—as long as it is genuine. We hope you will practice expressing appreciation every day, both of yourself and others. It is one of the best ways to foster compassionate relationships and to become fully aware of what you most value, desire, and want to experience more of in life.

INTEGRATION: Questions and Exercises to Further Explore Chapter 9

A fundamental assumption of NVC is that there is joy in giving. The following exercise is designed to help you explore the part of yourself that is nourished by giving to yourself and others.

- A. During the next week, deliberately and consciously choose to do one thing for yourself that meets your needs, be it for fun, stimulation, rest, or self-care. It could be a material gift, such as an article of clothing, a concert ticket to see your favorite band, a special food item, or something else that you find

pleasurable. Or it could be a nonmaterial present, such as a leisurely bath, meeting up with a friend you've not seen for a while, taking time to read a book, or going for a jog, walk, or swim—anything you would enjoy.

Before deciding on your “gift,” you may wish to do a “needs inventory.” Make a list of all the needs that are most “up” for you now. After empathizing with those needs, see what gift comes to mind to meet those needs. Then, after giving yourself this gift, see how you're feeling. Are you feeling gratitude and appreciation? What needs have you met, such as for self-care?

- B. Now do something for someone else that you are confident would give them pleasure. Choose something you would genuinely enjoy doing and/or giving and that would meet your needs, as well, such as for expression, meaning, authenticity, and integrity. This action could be as simple as calling a friend or family member you've not connected with recently to let them know that you're thinking about them. Or it could involve helping a friend prepare for a test, assisting your parents with some yard work, or helping out at a local food bank. How did you feel during and after taking this action? What needs did it meet? If you experienced negative feelings, what needs, including your own, seemed to be unmet?
- C. How did the two experiences compare? In what ways were the stimulated feelings similar or different? Which stimulated stronger feelings? Were the needs, met or unmet, similar or different?

10

Integrating NVC in Your Life—and on the Streets

If you've read the preceding chapters, you've learned about ways to powerfully transform how you relate to yourself, others, and the world. You've learned about the three major choices available to you every moment you wish to live in NVC consciousness: self-empathy, empathy, and honest expression. And you've learned about various "supports" in practicing NVC, such as pacing conversations. We're hoping you've already tried some of these steps and seen for yourself the impact and power of empathic connection.

If you have experimented with these tools, you may also have found times when practicing NVC did *not* foster the connection and understanding you'd hoped for. Perhaps these experiences were disappointing, frustrating, or disheartening and you are not quite sure what to make of them. It sounds so good in theory. Why doesn't it always work?

I experienced this myself at my first major immersion in NVC, a nine-day International Intensive Training (IIT) in 2003 organized by the Center for Nonviolent Communication. Those were nine life-changing days; I became aware of NVC's enormous potential to bring greater understanding and connection into my life. I also saw firsthand the possibility of stimulating significant pain in others

while practicing NVC, especially if our relationship history was such that our needs had gone unmet.

For several years, I'd been having a major conflict with my teenage daughter regarding the hours she was keeping, the friends with whom she was spending her time, and her use of alcohol. At the IIT, I was thrilled by the possibility that incorporating NVC into my life would provide a clear road map for our relating more easefully with each other. I was excited and called her a few days before the end of the training; I was eager to try out my new skills, drawing on the concepts I was learning and the dialogues I had been practicing. Ever the optimist, I was sure that now we'd have a warm, fuzzy "kumbaya" conversation that would touch both our hearts.

We talked for a while about small things, events of the day, and so forth. And then the dialogue shifted.

Me: So what plans do you have for the weekend?

Daughter: Oh, I'm going to spend Saturday night at Barbara's house.

I immediately thought: "Wonderful! Now I can apply all the great tools I've been learning." Thinking about her plans and practicing self-empathy silently to myself, I connected with how I was feeling: nervous and scared, needing her safety and security. I also wanted to be heard about my concerns and to be seen for my caring. Connecting with these desires, I decided to opt for honest expression—to tell her in a heartfelt and honest way what my concerns were by expressing my feelings and needs. Then I would make a connection request to see if she understood where I was coming from. I had a plan! I took a deep breath and began:

Me: Hearing you say you're planning to spend Saturday night at Barbara's, I feel nervous and worried because I value your safety. Can you tell me what you're hearing from me? I want to be heard for my concern and care for you.

This did not get the reaction I had envisioned:

Daughter: Mom, why don't you just quit with all the words!

If you're going to forbid me to go, just come out with it and quit being manipulative. I don't need all this bullshit stuff!

Me: I don't know why I even bother to try anymore. Why can't you just cooperate for a change?

As you can imagine, the conversation only went downhill from there, and I hung up feeling heartbroken and immensely discouraged. What had happened to all my NVC training? Why hadn't it worked as well as what we'd practiced in the workshops I'd attended? It had seemed so easy there!

I learned from this interchange a lesson oft-quoted in NVC circles. "NVC's simple—but not easy." What we mean by this is that getting the concepts of NVC on a head level can be fairly straightforward. When practicing in real-life situations, however—especially where there are painful histories with others or circumstances that can trigger old pain or hurt—it can be far more challenging to stay present in NVC consciousness. In the situation I just described, for example, I came to it with the best of intentions; practiced self-empathy live, in real time; and shared my concerns in a heartfelt way. Even so, hearing my daughter's response—which was so far off from what I was hoping for—led me to fall back into old patterns, stories, and despair. I would come to learn that when we're triggered, we're all beginners.

In this chapter, we will explore how to further deepen your practice of NVC so as to support a natural integration of it in your life. We will then consider aspects of NVC as a language tool and how that tool can be used in a colloquial ("street") NVC way that more fully and easily supports practicing NVC consciousness in a range of cultures and subcultures. Finally, we will review how to revisit a conversation where there may not have been the level of

connection you'd wanted: practicing a kind of "NVC first aid." With all these topics, much of what we will be covering is a review or further application of the practices we've already considered earlier in the book. In reading this chapter, understand that what matters most in practicing NVC is your mind-set: a consciousness of compassion—seeing the full humanity of each person, even at their worst moments—and a desire to hold everyone's needs as valuable. The tools and the model support you in maintaining that mind-set and spirit.

It's an "Inside Job"

Integrating NVC into your life entails a major change in how you view yourself and others. For many years of my adult life, I blamed others, especially those closest to me, when I experienced feelings of upset stimulated by something they had said or done. Since their behavior was the stimulus for my upset, I assumed it was the cause. "What you did *makes me* furious," I would say or think, certain that my anger was caused by their words or actions. I was also certain that as the instigator, *they* were the ones who had to change to make things "right." I had no clue that my upset was caused by my needs or values being unmet. Either they had done something "wrong" or I had, or perhaps we both had been "partly at fault." It was then a question of how much was their fault and how much was my fault: a fault/blame way of looking at the situation and seeing the world. It was beyond my thinking to consider that perhaps *neither* of us had done anything wrong. It was hard for me to move from a view of conflict—based heavily on blaming, labeling, and statically classifying people as being one type of person or another—to a view that both parties were attempting to meet valuable and life-serving needs. And when my view was coming from that blaming and labeling perspective, it was hard for the listener to hear my words as nonjudgmental or to imagine that I could be genuinely interested in

them and their well-being. Their most likely response was to become defensive or to attack in return.

How do we get out of the vicious cycle of spiraling disconnection? The most important task for living a greater proportion of our lives in NVC consciousness is to work on our own awareness and presence. Yet how do we increase our awareness of things we are not presently aware of? As the punch line of the old joke “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?” tells us, “Practice, practice, practice!”

As when learning any new skill or way of being, there are different ways to practice: to integrate the new concepts, to remind ourselves of what we already know, and to integrate this knowing in our lives. We can engage in these practices on our own, with an NVC buddy, with NVC trainers, and with the larger NVC community. We can also engage in practices that foster mind-body connection and self-awareness; this provides the best possible “soil” to “plant” your NVC practice in each day.

Following are suggestions (divided into practices you can engage in on your own and with others) for practicing on a regular basis and/or supporting an awareness and consciousness consistent with practicing NVC. These items are not listed in order of priority and are just a few examples. You may wish to consider which will best support your practice and then make an agreement with yourself about what you would like to do on a daily, weekly, monthly, and/or semi-annual or annual basis to support your learning. Regardless of the form it takes, what most supports integration is sustained and regular practice.

Ways to Practice NVC on Your Own

- Read and/or listen to NVC books to reinforce the NVC model and consciousness and to hear examples from other practitioners (see the CNVC bookstore for a full range of materials).

- Do written exercises (from this or other NVC books). Remember, you can do the same exercise multiple times, on different days and applied to different situations, to further your practice.
- Journal. Many NVCers like to keep a daily empathy journal. You can use the journal to practice self-empathy, guess the needs of others, celebrate needs met, support yourself in making decisions (assessing the needs that will be met and unmet through different strategies), as a gratitude journal, or to practice NVC dialogues before or after a conversation. You can also use your journal for “state of the self” explorations (what you are feeling and needing in this moment or point in your life), reviewing recent events in your life, or celebrating milestones. Another use of the journal is to set NVC practice goals for yourself and check in on your progress.
- Keep a judgment journal. As described earlier in this book, you can get a small notebook and record your judgments during the day and then translate them into feelings and needs.
- Watch videos of NVC being practiced, via YouTube (search for NVC, or individual trainers’ names) or by purchasing CDs (from cnvc.org).
- Check in with yourself during the day. While doing tasks that don’t require your full attention (showering, washing dishes, cooking, doing laundry, gardening, driving, etc.), check in with yourself every few minutes to practice and build fluency with the model. Ask yourself: What am I feeling in this moment? What am I needing? See if you can track the thoughts your feelings and needs are connected to (the observations), and see how often your feelings and needs change. You can also check in with yourself during the day in conjunction with a specific activity, such as any time you check your email, hear the phone ring, or eat a meal. Regular check-ins both support the practice of the NVC model and

support self-awareness and connection—both are key in holding NVC consciousness.

- Join NVC Listservs. See the resources section for Listservs on NVC and parenting, social change, and other topics. In addition to sharing information about NVC, upcoming events, and related topics, some lists include members sharing their experiences in practicing NVC.
- Get a set of “GROK” (feelings and needs) magnets and put them on your fridge at home or on a magnetic bulletin board at work. Use the magnets to practice and check in with yourself. (GROK cards and magnets can be ordered from www.collaborative-communication.org)

Ways to Practice NVC With Others—Virtually and in Person

- Find someone to be your empathy buddy. You can meet weekly or biweekly via phone. Take turns (a half-hour each) listening to the other empathically, practicing the four steps of the model and reflection skills. You can also have an agreement about being available to each other for “emergency empathy,” calling each other when needed. Be sure to check in first when you are seeking emergency empathy to see if the other person is willing to listen empathically at that time and, if so, how much time they’re willing to spend.
- Attend NVC trainings, classes, workshops, residential intensives (IITs), family camps, or retreats with a CNVC Certified Trainer and/or other experienced practitioners. See cnvc.org for upcoming trainings and Certified Trainers and supporters. If you’d like to organize a training or retreat in your area, contact individual trainers listed at cnvc.org or request CNVC to post your request on the Certified Trainers list.

- Participate in a teleclass or webinar. Many are offered by the NVC Academy; see the resources section for more details.
- Join an empathy or practice group in person or by phone, ideally one led by a Certified Trainer or experienced practitioner for support. You can also join or organize “leaderful” groups that are self-led by participants; if so, you may especially wish to use Lucy Leu’s book (see resources) for guidance and support and/or receive support from a trainer. You may wish to use NVC lists or meetup.com to organize such groups.
- Join a study group. Invite your friends and others who practice NVC to read, watch, or listen to NVC materials and then practice together; again, such gatherings can be in person or via virtual technology (phone, Skype, webinars).
- Practice through email. Each time you send or receive an email, it’s an opportunity to practice self-empathy, empathy for others, and honest expression.
- Make use of social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and the like) to connect with others and practice.
- Work with a Certified Trainer or experienced practitioner. During these coaching sessions, you can be heard empathically, practice NVC skills, do role-plays (rehearsing or reviewing conversations or situations in your life), and set and assess goals regarding the development of your NVC practice, and your life (personal and professional) in general. Some NVC trainers are also professional life coaches; see the list of trainers and their bios at cnvc.org
- Join a world-wide virtual NVC community that promotes NVC consciousness, such as ctc.learnnvc.com
- Practice at home, at work, and on the street (at the post office, when shopping, or wherever you may be) with everyone you meet, at each moment you remember and are willing to do so. Remember that practicing silently can be as effective as, and sometimes even more connecting than, practicing

NVC aloud. For inspiration on practicing NVC in everyday situations, you may wish to see the book *Urban Empathy*, a collection of verbatim examples of practicing NVC.

Ways to Support Self-Connection and Mindfulness

The following activities support the consciousness that supports the practice of NVC.

- Meditation, such as that taught by Inessa Love (see the resources section) or another form of meditation, sitting in silence, or chanting.
- Focusing and inner relationship focusing (www.focusing.org). This practice is highly consistent with NVC and supports mind-body awareness and self-connection.
- Prayer, intentions, or affirmations (about your intentions for the day or a particular situation or conversation).
- Inspirational readings, poems, or “rememberings” that invite a return to your values in alignment with NVC consciousness. Some authors you may wish to explore could include the Sufi poets Rumi and Hafiz or contemporary poets such as David White or Mary Oliver.
- Yoga, aikido, or tai chi. I find that the stretching and deep breathwork of yoga can be very grounding. Aikido, a nonviolent martial art, offers a physical practice that is highly consistent with NVC principles. You may wish to consider other forms of exercise that help ground and “center” you.
- Connect with nature, walks outdoors, or find other ways to explore the natural world.
- Engage in a spiritual practice. Any practice that supports your sense of interdependence with others or communion with the world fosters a sense of what Martin Luther King Jr. called the “beloved community” and supports the sustaining

of NVC consciousness. This beloved community can include human beings and all life.

Again, it is the consciousness itself—our focus on connection and the value of holding everyone’s needs with care—that truly informs and supports the practice of NVC. In your regular practices, remember to check whether you are indeed holding this awareness and way of being.

EXERCISE 1: Planning to Practice

Review these lists of suggestions again. Which ones resonate with you? Can you think of other ways to practice? What will support your intention and help you remember to practice?

In your journal or on a piece of paper, make a plan for the next week, month and/or year. This could include, for example, writing in your journal each day or several times this week, finding an empathy buddy in the next month, or attending at least one residential training this year.

To make your requests doable, remember to set clear goals and timelines and check in with yourself to see how your practice is working for you. For example, you could decide to meet with your empathy buddy once a week for the next month. At the end of the month, you can check in with yourself and your buddy about how that’s working for both of you. No plan or commitment has to last a lifetime!

If you’re creating daily or weekly practices, see if you can “link” to other regular activities in your life—such as doing laundry, food shopping, going to the gym, cooking, and the like—as a way to remind you to practice NVC. For example, you could decide that each time you hear the phone ring, you’ll take a moment to check in with yourself about your feelings and needs. You could also decide to do a regular check-in about your practice each time you get your hair cut or when you get your car’s oil changed. The idea is to use another

activity in your life as a mnemonic device to help you remember your NVC practice.

Empathy From Hell

In being empathically present to ourselves and others, our consciousness and intention—not the form, method, or words we use—has the greatest impact. Remember that old paradox: which comes first—the chicken or the egg? When it comes to NVC practice, it's clear that consciousness comes first! The model supports this consciousness; it does not replace or “fake” it! If you use one of the empathy templates in the model (“Are you feeling ____ because you're needing ____?”), this is intended to guide where you direct your attention; it is not intended to be a formula for speaking. If your heart isn't in the expression and you're doing the form by rote, this can become what we in NVC call “empathy from hell.” “Hollow,” heartless empathy is so unpleasant to receive that it's worse than getting no empathy at all. If you offer this kind of “faux” empathy, don't be surprised if you get a strong response: “Just quit that psychology crap!” or “Why can't you talk like a normal person?” or “I don't need you to tell me what I'm feeling!”

If you find yourself practicing “empathy from hell,” take a moment to check in with yourself. Are you practicing the NVC form mindlessly, as a habit? Are you using the form as a strategy to meet some other need besides connection? One time, my former partner was telling me about something distressing that had happened during her workday. I was focused on something else. I also wanted to have some light, easy time together after my busy day and was longing to be together in the present moment. I didn't really have the “bandwidth” to take in the intensity of what she was sharing. On automatic, I made an empathy guess—and it landed like concrete hitting the pavement from a ten-story building. She responded with an edge in her voice, “Don't pull that NVC stuff on me!”

At that particular moment, I *was* “pulling” NVC stuff on her! My heart and my presence were not with her. Honest expression would have been a greater contribution than empathy: “I’m getting that you’re stressed about your day, and I notice I’m wanting some space and peace right now—my day was full too. Would you be OK with our just taking a walk silently for a few minutes? I think after dinner I’d be willing to hear about your boss.”

If you are engaging in hollow empathy, it could be because your own needs are not being satisfied in the moment. Perhaps you’re going through the motions of empathy because you think you “should” be compassionate or you think it will defuse the situation, while what you’re really wanting are peace, ease, and relief. Whatever the reason, you’ve chosen to empathize with another without first attending to yourself, when in fact you may be the one most in need. You can be attempting to focus on the needs of another, yet if you have feelings and needs that are up for you, you may be distracted and unable to be fully present.

In these situations you need to fill your empathy cup. Take a moment to check in with your own feelings and needs and give yourself emergency self-empathy. If you can’t get the self-connection and presence you’re wanting, you may wish to postpone your conversation until you can get the empathy you need. You can practice honest expression—as I modeled in the preceding example.

Sometimes, of course, when you’re fully connected to your intention to be empathically present and genuinely wanting to connect, you still get “NVC pushback.” Just because we’re in a place of being present and caring, this does not necessarily mean that it will be heard or received by the other person. At such moments, the response we’re receiving can offer a further opportunity for empathic connection: “Are you having trouble trusting my intention?” or “Do my words sound odd to you?” or “Does this sound weird because you’ve never heard me talk like this before?”

Regardless of the “negative” response to your practice of NVC, the pushback can offer a reminder and further opportunity for

connection with yourself and others. Whatever the judgment or reaction is, there are feelings and needs underneath it that you can connect with. Once the other person has been heard, you can then share the needs you're meeting by practicing NVC and attempting to empathically hear them: "This is something new I've been learning that I hope will help us hear each other. I'm hoping, even though it may sound a bit odd at first, that you'll be open to my trying it!"

EXERCISE 2: Moving From Hell to Heaven

Part One

With your journal in hand, think back to a moment when someone responded to you as if you were offering "empathy from hell." Recreate the dialogue, this time responding empathically (either with honest expression or with a further empathy guess). You may also wish to practice self-empathy, considering what you were feeling and needing at that moment and whether you were in fact focused on empathic connection.

Part Two

Role-play with someone who is familiar with NVC, such as your empathy buddy. Here are the steps to take:

Offer an empathy guess to your partner. "Are you feeling _____ because you're needing _____?"

- Your partner responds as if you've just given "empathy from hell." "What's that jargon you're using?"
- Take a breath and self-connect, practicing self-empathy. What are you feeling and needing at this moment?
- Respond to your partner with honest self-expression and/or further empathy. For example, "Are you confused because you've never heard me speak like this before?" See how your partner responds now, and restore connection through the role-play if you can. Once connection is made, share with

your role-play partner what needs you're seeking to meet in practicing NVC with them.

- Switch roles.
- When both of you have had a turn playing each role, discuss the experience. How was it for your partner to get “empathy from hell”? How was it for you to practice self-empathy and respond with empathy and honest expression? What did you learn from this exercise?

Being Honest: You're a Newbie!

When you're new to NVC and first learning to be a more empathic listener, you can easily elicit cries of “fake empathy.” Here you are, working your hardest to communicate more effectively, and what does it get you? More grief! You have your empathy “antennae” on; they are not yet strong or sturdy enough, though, to get the connection you're wanting or to help you to be as relaxed or authentic with the model as you'd like. You're trying so hard to listen and care, and all you're getting in return are dissatisfaction and static. Others are experiencing your speech as strange: “What's happened to you? You talk strange” or “Are you trying to pull something over on me? Why are you talking that way?” or even “That sounds manipulative to me—telling me how I feel!”

At such times, being proactive up front, using honest expression, is very helpful. Be transparent about your learning something new, and tell the person why it matters to you. When you do, you already have an opportunity for connection and to practice NVC, including requests. “I really want to improve the quality of our communication and am trying out different ways of talking and listening. Could you bear with me for the moment, even though it's a bit awkward?” Or “I know I can come down a bit hard sometimes and be judgmental. I'm trying to learn some new ways to communicate. Are you open to my trying it? I'm new to it, so I know it may sound a bit stilted.”

Here's an example of what this can sound like real time in a conversation:

George is a noncustodial parent of a twelve-year-old son, Jeremy, with whom he has been having a lot of conflict. Part of George's motivation for studying NVC is to improve that relationship, which has not been a close one for a number of years and has become significantly worse since George and his wife separated a year ago. In preparation for this conversation, George spent time over two sessions exploring with his empathy buddy what his relationship with Jeremy means to him and how important empathic connection and mutual respect are to George. He identified feelings of sadness, fear, and hurt within himself, related to times when he was living in ways that were not aligned with values that are important to him. He realized that in talking with Jeremy, he wanted to build on the connection they already have, express his openness, and desire to know Jeremy better, and use connection requests to keep the dialogue going. He did some practice role-plays with his buddy so he would be more fluent in translating his feelings and needs in the moment into words. He was not trying to memorize a script; rather, he practiced connecting to his values and expressing what was true for him about these values.

The dialogue ultimately went like this:

George: Jeremy, I want to tell you about this course I'm taking on something called Nonviolent Communication. I want to let you know about it because I'm learning a lot of things about myself, how I express myself and how I listen, and that sometimes I don't listen very well. Are you open to hearing about it?

Jeremy: Well, OK. I was going to go over to Tim's house—he rented a movie.

George: Would you be OK with our talking for about ten minutes before you go?

Jeremy: I guess that would be OK. Tim was still eating dinner.

George: Great. I really appreciate this chance to tell you about something important to me. This course I'm taking, I think it can help me be a better listener, to put more effort into understanding your view of things. How does that strike you?

Jeremy: Sounds good, I guess.

George: I'm happy to hear that. I know we don't always think alike, and I honestly do want to learn more about your point of view. And there is another important piece too. I want to express myself honestly without blaming you or me—to tell you how I feel about certain things that happen between us. When I don't tell you what's going on with me, it just builds up, and eventually it comes out in an outburst that I think is hard for both of us. Do you know what I mean?

Jeremy: Sure I do. I hate when you yell at me.

George: Me too. And because I'm trying a new way to talk, it may sound strange at times. I want you to be honest about how you feel about the changes in me, and I also want you to have some patience with me. Does this make sense?

Jeremy: You're going to talk differently?

George: Yes. I want to talk respectfully, not just yell. And it may sound awkward at first. But neither of us likes the yelling. I want you to hang in there with me, and together we both may figure out a new way to talk about our disagreements.

Jeremy: OK. Whatever. Can I do my stuff now?

George: OK. So you've had enough talking for now?

Jeremy: Yep.

George: You're OK, though, with my trying this new thing I'm learning?

Jeremy: Yeah. It can't be any worse than when you yell at me!

(They both smile and high-five each other.)

In this dialogue, George clearly identifies a number of values that are very important to him: learning about himself, listening, understanding, self-expression, honesty, and respect. He doesn't directly name his feelings of hurt, loss, and sadness; he implicitly refers to them when he says that he, too, does not like his yelling. George specifically asks Jeremy about how he's reacting to what he has to say, showing appreciation of and openness to Jeremy's perspective.

In some situations it is helpful to first name how one is feeling about even raising an issue because unstated feelings, especially fear, can often be experienced by the other party as aggressive. Naturally, the way you express yourself will be informed by the nature of the current relationship.

Here's another extended example of putting this into practice:

Natasha is bothered by her friend Sophia's habit of leaving her personal belongings in Natasha's living room, hall, and kitchen rather than the guest bedroom when she comes to visit for the weekend. Sophia visits fairly regularly because she does business in the city where Natasha lives. Natasha knows that her own value for orderliness in the home is higher than Sophia's because she has seen Sophia's apartment, and she has been hesitant to tell Sophia that her behavior is bothersome because she doesn't want to damage the friendship. She has been thinking of coming up with an excuse for not hosting Sophia in the future, such as saying she's busy that weekend as a way to avoid the issue, which could potentially make things worse. After studying NVC, she decides instead to address the issue directly, as well as her own feelings of apprehension.

Natasha: Sophia, I'd like to tell you about something you do that bothers me, something I've been afraid to bring up because I really value our friendship and I don't want it to suffer. And yet I am also afraid that not talking about it would be worse—it would mean that we couldn't be real with each other, and grudges and resentments might build up. Is now an OK time to talk about this?

Sophia: Sure. I don't want secrets between us either—or you talking to someone else about what's bothering you and not telling me. I wouldn't like that. What's going on?

Natasha: Well, when you stay with me, I often find your umbrella, coat, books, and other things in the hall, the kitchen, or the living room, not in your guest room. For me, having things around the house like that is uncomfortable and disorienting. I need a certain level of order to find things easily, and to move around the apartment. I'm wondering how this sounds to you?

Sophia: Sure, not a problem. I get it. I might forget sometimes. I know I am just not as neat as you are. But I'm happy to be reminded if need be. I'm surprised this was such a big deal for you. Why didn't you tell me sooner?

Natasha: I guess I'm just not used to making waves. Sometimes when I've spoken up in the past, people got defensive and things were uncomfortable between us. I didn't want to negatively impact our friendship.

Sophia: Yeah, I can understand that. Sometimes I do the same thing—I just don't say anything about what's bugging me. I'm glad we could talk about it. I'd rather be honest with each other and work it out.

Natasha: Me too. I think it will be easier next time if there's a concern I want to share with you. This conversation gives me more confidence about being honest with you.

Sophia: Cool. I really appreciate staying at your house, and I like hanging out together, so I'm glad we could talk about this too!

Given that the whole intention of NVC language is to direct our attention toward understanding other people and their experience, words, and actions, the way in which you express yourself will be informed by the nature of your current relationship with the person. And you may want to get some empathy for your attempts to communicate in a new way. Changing long-established

communication patterns is not a piece of cake. Understand that you may need to get recognition and the “Purple Heart” for all your efforts from someone else, at least at first.

EXERCISE 3: Naming Change

Think of a person you'd like to practice NVC with whom you've known for some time; this could be a friend, family member, or co-worker. After practicing with an empathy buddy or in your journal, honestly express with this person about your learning NVC and why you are doing so. Check whether they are open to your practicing NVC with them, and name what you'd like—such as patience and understanding—as you try something new.

Talking Like a “Regular Person”: Street NVC

In Nonviolent Communication, we place the highest priority on connection between people (and with ourselves). We have spent a substantial amount of time in this book elaborating upon the components of *observations* (free of evaluations), *feelings* (free of thoughts), *needs* (free of strategies), and *requests* (free of demands) because being aware of observations, feelings, needs, and requests supports establishing and maintaining openhearted connection. However, as we have mentioned before, there are many times in real-life dialogue when we do not use strict OFNR format; instead, we use more colloquial expressions. Remember, the goal is *connection*, not a specific way of speaking. We hold an awareness of OFNR in our minds—like having a road map in our back pocket—while our speech can take a wide range of forms that may support connection. When you have a destination to get to, there are usually numerous routes available.

Street NVC refers to language that may not fit an OFNR model and is expressed with an NVC consciousness of caring about the needs of all. For example, suppose I have a friend who is feeling grief and outrage because her boyfriend said that he was dating only her and she found out he was also seeing someone else. I might guess that her intense distress is related to a value for more trust and honesty in her life. If she's talking about how she can't trust this specific person, I might initially empathize with how much she wants trust in this particular relationship rather than trust in general. Compare these two types of responses:

Virginia: I can't believe what a liar he is! He swore he was only seeing me, and now I know that was all a lie!

Classical Response: Thinking about his dating other people, are you furious because you value trust and honesty?

Street Response: Are you furious because you wanted to trust he was being honest with you?

The classical response refers to the general universal values of trust and honesty. The street response refers to the specific situation of wanting *him* to be honest. In the beginning, a guess that references the specifics of the situation (i.e., the person, location, action, time, or object—PLATO) can feel more connecting to the speaker because it includes aspects of the situation that the speaker is attending to. The specifics, by definition, identify a particular strategy for addressing a general need. Assisting the speaker in ultimately connecting to the general values and needs that are important to them frees and empowers them because there are many, many ways to experience the general values that enrich the quality of our lives. While she realizes that her need for trust can be met in a variety of ways and in a variety of relationships (including her relationship with herself!), she doesn't need to hold this particular relationship as the only way to meet her need for trust, and this opens her to a fuller range of possibilities.

In addition to referencing particular aspects of a strategy with the need, it can be helpful when practicing street NVC to leave out formal words in the model such as “feel” or “need” and instead simply state *what* the person is feeling and needing: “Are you *tired* because you’re wanting *support*?” Even while you’re inquiring, with openness, about what the person is actually experiencing, in the colloquial practice of NVC you can also make a statement that communicates a question using intonation (your voice going up at the end of the sentence) or using word choices that indicate you’re checking about the other person’s experience. “So you really want some understanding now . . . is that accurate?”

It’s also helpful to think of synonyms for the formal aspects of the model that more closely match how you speak every day. You may note that the way you speak at work, for example, will be different from how you speak with a loved one at home or a stranger on the street, or that you speak differently depending on the age of the person you’re talking to. For example, in a work environment I would be unlikely to say, “Let me reflect that back to you.” Instead, using words more familiar in a work setting, I might say, “Let me recap that” or “Let’s review what we just discussed.” I might couple this with the need in a colloquial form: “I want to make sure we’re on the same page” (clarity, shared reality) or “The details matter here, for accuracy and moving this forward” (accuracy, movement, effectiveness). Again, feelings and needs can often be implied. What matters is your intention—for understanding and collaboration. You also can include modifiers that are colloquial—such as “a little” or “a lot”—to add naturalness to your NVC speech.

On the next page is a chart that reviews some of these concepts—omitting key words from the model, using synonyms, and using adverbs to make your expression sound more natural.

Street NVC

Street Observations

Leave out “hear, see, think” and put the action in a verb form (direct observation):

“So when Tom *asked* her out for dinner . . .”

“When you *forgot* your wallet . . .”

“So *knowing* that Sue said X . . .”

Street Expression of Feelings

Here, as with the needs section below, where you see an ellipsis (. . .) you add subject and verb (predicate) and where you see an underscore, you insert a word from the feelings list. For example: “*Are you sitting with some sadness* thinking about your work situation?” or “*I’m tapping in to some real delight* learning to play the piano.” Note that in these colloquial examples the observation step follows the verb—in this case, “your work situation” and “learning to play the piano.”

Being With	Touching On	Experiencing
... sitting with ____	... sitting with ____	... not feeling fully ____
... holding ____	... holding ____	... exploring ____
... having ____	... having ____	... going through ____
... carrying ____	... carrying ____	... experiencing ____
... aware of ____	... aware of ____	

Street Expression of Needs

In the following examples, where you see an ellipsis (. . .) you can insert different phrases and subjects with the appropriate verb and tense; where you see an underscore, you can insert a need. For example, before the words “grateful for,” you could add, “*I’m*

grateful for” or “*You’re* grateful for” or “*They’re* grateful for.” For the need (where the underscore occurs) you could give any need met (or object) that you’re experiencing gratitude for. For example, “I’m grateful for having *a sense of completion* with this issue.” To take another example, from the well-being group, “*A sense of companionship* supports me in my work.”

Meaning/Value	Well-Being	Gratitude
You/I value _____ _____ is important to you/me _____ matters to you/me _____ helps you/me feel _____ You/I care about _____ _____ gives you/me	You/I thrive on _____ _____ helps you/me feel settled _____ nourishes you/me _____ supports you/me _____ sustains you/me _____ keeps you/me going _____ gives you/me hope	You/I appreciate ____ ... love _____ ... cherish _____ ... treasure _____ ... grateful for _____ ... really floats your/ my boat
Longing	Pained Longing	Hope/Future
You/I ... desire _____ ... yearn for _____ ... crave _____ ... thirst for _____ ... long for _____ ... wanting _____ ... long to experience _____	You/I ... ache for _____ ... starved for _____ ... hunger for _____ ... dream of having _____	... desire _____ ... wish for _____ ... hope for _____ ... aspire to experience _____ ... want to cultivate/ create/manifest/ develop/envision/ support/maintain ____

Street Requests

Willing: would like to ... hoping that ... imagining it'd be helpful
 if ... enjoying the idea of ...

Examples

“Would you like to go to dinner now?”

“Are you hoping that we’ll talk about this today?”

“I’m imagining it would be helpful if we reread the report before responding.”

“Are you enjoying the idea of staying home tonight?”

Confirming: “Are you OK with that?” “Is that something you’d do?” “What do you think about ...?” “Does that match your understanding?” “Does that work for you?”

Note: With all steps, you can add modifiers or modal verbs (might, could, can) to match intensity, expression, or accuracy, such as the following:

Observation: “So you’re *really sure* you heard/saw ...”

Feeling: “You’re feeling *a little* ...”

Need: “You *might* like ...”

Request: “I have a *strong* desire ...”

EXERCISE 4: Colloquial NVC

What differences do you notice between colloquial and classical NVC? Come up with two more examples for each category that *you* could imagine saying.

A. Offering reflection (Observations about what was heard):

- “So what I get from this is ...”
- “What you’re saying is ...?”
- “What I’m hearing in this is ...”
- “What matters most to you is ...?”
- “Based on what I’ve heard/read, it sounds like ...”

B. Requesting reflection:

- “Could you tell me back what you heard me say to make sure we’re on the same page?”
- “Can you recap what I just covered so I know I made it clear?”

- “I’m really excited about this and want to fully take it in . . . can you say it back to me so I can hear it a second time?”
- C. Observations:
- “So you heard/saw . . .”
 - “What you saw/heard is . . .”
 - “When you think about . . .”
 - “From your point of view, you saw/heard/read . . .”
- D. Feelings (leave out the word “feeling” and use a feeling word from list):
- “In my gut, I’m . . .”
 - “I’m noticing I’m . . .”
 - “I’m a little . . .”
 - “Are you . . .?”
- E. Needs (use a synonym for “need”):
- “What I’m/you’re wanting is . . .”
 - “I’m/you’re hoping/looking for . . . *or* I’m/you’re desiring/longing for . . .”
- F. Connection requests:
- “How is it for you to hear this?”
 - “I’m wondering what’s going on for you, knowing this?”
 - “I’m curious what thoughts you have about this.”

Choosing the “Right” Frequency

In addition to omitting some key words in the model, using synonyms, and adding colloquial expressions to “naturalize” your practice of NVC, it can also be helpful to consider what intensity of feeling and need you’re using and modify this, depending on the environment and whom you’re speaking to. In a work environment, for example, I would probably be hesitant to ask someone if they were scared. This might not meet other needs, such as comfort, trust, and ease. Instead I’d probably use a word more commonly used in

a work environment, such as “concerned,” even though it’s toned down from what might be the actual intensity of the person’s feeling. Similarly, when speaking with a five-year-old, I’d probably not say, “Are you bored and wanting stimulation and aliveness?” Instead, I’d use familiar vocabulary at their language level: “Do you want to have some fun and play?”

In thinking about these ranges, it’s also helpful to think of how formal the word is. In English, words from Latin (usually polysyllabic) are the most formal and academic. Words from German that came into English tend to be more slang-like and informal. For example, “depressed” and “down” have similar meanings in English; the first is more formal and the second more informal. Often the informal, German-based words make use of a preposition: “*upset*,” “shut *down*,” “opened *up*.” Making use of everyday, colloquial language (the German-based words in English rather than the Latinate ones) can also help your “NVC speak” sound more street. Making use of a range of words can also support your comfort and ease in honest expression, balancing your own needs for authenticity, honesty, and transparency with ease, comfort, confidence, and trust—and creativity and choice! Regardless of the level of formality or intensity, making use of a range of feelings and needs freshens your practice of NVC.

Following are some sample ranges of feelings, addressing formality and intensity:

Intense/Formal	Medium	Low Intensity/Informal
Furious	Mad	Irritated
Despair	Discouraged	Bummed
Euphoric	Happy	Upbeat
Panicked	Afraid	On edge
Shocked	Surprised	Freaked out

Now here are some sample ranges of needs. Note that these words are not exact synonyms; rather, they are in similar “families” of needs. Further, the words that you consider low or informal will depend on your own cultural and social background:

Intense/Formal	Medium	Low/Informal
Harmony	Peace	Ease
Affection	Warmth	Connection
Gratitude	Appreciation	Thanks
Mutuality	Equality	Balance

Also see how you can bring fun, humor, and aliveness into your practice of street NVC by using synonyms, colloquial expressions, and metaphors. For example, you could ask, “Sounds like this news hit you like a ton of bricks?” as a way of referring to surprise or shock. Or you could ask, “At this point you’re wanting a *détente* regarding this situation at work?” as a way of naming the person’s desire for ease, peace, and reconciliation.

Exercise 5: Speaking Street

Part One

Choose three feeling words not used in the example above that you consider formal or intense and come up with medium and low/informal versions of the same words. Include colloquial expressions, metaphor, and prepositional phrases (verb and preposition combinations).

Part Two

Look at the needs list on page 368. What needs words would you feel comfortable using at work? At home? With friends?

Part Three

Look at the feelings and needs list. Come up with five metaphors to describe these experiences.

Silence is Golden: The Value of Silent Empathy

If your NVC “wings” are still new, or if you have tried practicing NVC with someone and experienced NVC pushback, remember the value of silent empathy. While the person is speaking, silently guess to yourself what they are feeling and needing. Also practice self-empathy silently: what are you feeling and needing? Thinking about the model, you may notice it’s helpful to check in silently about what observation (stimulus) the person is responding to; similarly, you can silently consider what strategy (request) might serve at this point. If you continue to practice the model silently, eventually it will begin to influence the way you speak to yourself and others. This is probably the most natural and easily accessed form of street NVC: be clear about your intention (for connection) and practice silent empathy with yourself and others. What comes out of your mouth—and how situations unfold—will already be completely different from what you would have said or done before as a result of this inner connection work.

EXERCISE 6: Silence Speaking

Think of a person or situation you consistently find challenging. Make a conscious choice to practice silent empathy the next time you interact with this person. Without making an effort to change how you speak, notice after the conversation how practicing silent empathy made a difference in the quality of your understanding and connection.

The Golden Rule: Practice What You Seek

Like many people, when I first started to learn NVC, I had a whole list of people I wanted to “try it out on” and who I was certain “needed” NVC—more than I did! I couldn’t wait to use NVC with them and tell them about it. I wanted *them* to change—and fast! If only my mother knew NVC, and my boss, and my dad, and my brother, and some of my friends. It was a pretty long list! If only they learned NVC, life would be so much easier. This was a strategy, of course, for many needs I had: for movement, ease, connection, and relief.

Of course, the person who needed NVC most of all was me. It’s like that old expression: Physician, heal thyself. I was the one being triggered, and I was longing for change in my life. I was the one responding to situations in ways I was not enjoying. I was the one suffering in these interactions. Ultimately, NVC is about taking supreme responsibility for our own experiences, our own feelings and needs, how our needs are held with care, and how they are met. No one else can do that for you—or for me. We can all contribute to one another’s well-being. In the end, though, it was *my* job to learn NVC.

Ironically, by changing my own thoughts and expressions, I started to interact with others differently. And they, in turn, interacted differently with me. While this was not my plan—I know I have no control over how others act, believe, speak, or think—it was the eventual outcome. As the saying goes, it takes two to tango; once I changed my own dance steps, the whole dance changed.

Also, once I modeled NVC in my own life, others became interested in what I was doing differently. One of my favorite stories about this concerns my family. One holiday a few years ago, I was sitting at the dinner table with my mother and brother. My mom said something that clearly irritated my brother, and he turned and said to me, “How do you take her? She’s impossible!” Before I could even reply, my mom piped up, “She can handle me because she knows NVC.” Since then, my mom has also started to learn NVC. Our practicing it together has tremendously supported our relationship and

mutual understanding. I'm convinced this would not have happened if I'd suggested she learn NVC, especially if I'd had any expectation or demand around it. She saw the difference it was making in my life and in our relationship; that's what motivated her to want to learn more.

I believe that practicing NVC yourself, on yourself, is the fastest and most efficient way to learn it. After all, you're with yourself 24/7. I'm also convinced that the vast majority of violence that goes on every day is in our own heads: in how we speak to ourselves. By holding NVC consciousness with yourself, via self-empathy, you can develop your practice of NVC *and* deepen self-connection, mindfulness, and compassion. All of this further supports your practice of NVC with others.

EXERCISE 7: Practicing What You Preach

Take a moment to reflect on how you will practice NVC on yourself this week. What times in your day and week are conducive to practice? When showering, driving, riding the subway, first waking up, or before going to sleep? Will you journal? Will you practice checking in with yourself? Or will you decide to practice self-empathy the next time you're triggered by a particular event?

Charging Your Empathy Batteries; Uncovering Core Beliefs

Throughout this book we've revisited the value of practicing self-empathy. This is especially helpful when you want to be empathic to others and you're triggered by what's happening, when you want to get clear about your own feelings and needs (such as when making decisions), when you're celebrating needs met (when you're happy with choices you've made), and when you're exploring regret (when your actions have left your own needs unmet). A regular

practice of self-empathy is crucial to the overall practice of NVC. We cannot be compassionate with others if we are not practicing compassion with ourselves.

On a meta level, when we're triggered it's usually because some core need comes up: a need that's often unmet in relation to a certain person or situation, or unmet in a significant way since our early years. In addition to practicing self-empathy in the moment, it can be helpful to look at the core beliefs we have that inform these triggers. Many of these we have learned from others (such as parents, siblings, teachers, or society). Many are based on core beliefs in our society as a whole, and these are usually related to separation and scarcity. They are usually "globalized" in some way and, as such, are expressed using adverbs such as "never" and "always." Some versions of core beliefs might include: "I'll never get it right." "No one will ever love me." "There's no point in trying—it never works out." "I always miss the boat."

Because they are so intrinsic to how we see and move through the world, core beliefs can at first be difficult to see. They're like the air we breathe or fish moving through dark water. If you practice self-empathy regularly, though, including connecting with sensations in your body (where old triggers are often held), over time you will begin to notice patterns, both around what kinds of words and situations trigger you and the feelings and core needs that consistently come up for you. This gradually increasing awareness also helps in your self-empathy practice. It's like meeting an old friend on the street—"Oh, there you are again!"—which makes it easier and faster to practice self-empathy. Self-empathy can also offer insight into the core beliefs that are motivating or driving a trigger in the present moment. This is the first step toward liberating our core beliefs and deciding, from a level of full awareness, whether they are truly serving us and our lives or are instead baggage we now wish to let go of.

In this practice of surfacing core beliefs, it can be helpful to receive what's often referred to as "deep empathy" and to do this

work with a skilled trainer. Your empathy buddy may also be willing and able to support you in noticing core belief patterns and connecting with the deeper feelings and needs living underneath them. While the language used may be different, some people also find they can do this kind of deep, healing core belief work with a therapist or coach. I also find I can explore this terrain by journaling and locate more of what I call the “Loch Ness monsters”: the triggers that are lurking beneath the surface of everyday life and consciousness.

EXERCISE 8: Liberating Core Beliefs

Part One

Core beliefs involve heavy doses of self-judgment and judgments about the world. Many of these beliefs in our culture are expressed via idiomatic expressions, such as “The early bird gets the worm” or “You have to watch out for number one.” Take a moment and reflect on idiomatic expressions you heard in your family while growing up, from teachers or among your friends. Then reflect on how these ideas turn up in your own core beliefs. Consider how these beliefs impact triggers you may experience on a regular basis—turning up in a judgment or reaction—and examine what your core needs are. After connecting with your core needs, take a moment to hold them with care and appreciate how much these qualities matter to you. In this step, speak to yourself gently and with compassion, as if to a young child for whom you have complete love and caring. Here’s an example of this process:

Idiom: Everyone’s out for number one.

Core belief: People walk all over me. They just care about themselves.

Trigger: Someone steps in my way, bumps into me, or moves in front of me in line.

Judgment/reaction: What am I, invisible? Chopped chicken liver?

Needs: To matter, to be seen, caring, for my needs to matter.

Self-compassion/integration practice: Take a moment to speak with yourself tenderly, as if to a young child: “You really want to be seen and your needs to matter? You really want caring in the world—and for your needs.”

By repeatedly practicing this process of deep self-empathy you can, over time, transform core beliefs into awareness, openness, and choice.

Part Two

Another way in which core beliefs become part of how we see the world is when they are the result of repeated experiences or trauma early in our lives. Sometimes these experiences are connected to things we heard again and again from our parents, influential family members, or others, or connected to their repeated actions or behaviors.

In my family, for example, I was often criticized and blamed for doing something “wrong”—and this could be followed by physical punishment. So I became determined at an early age to “get things right.” No matter how hard I tried, though, at some point my parents would inevitably become angry again. My hope and excitement during periods of “reprieve” (when there were relative harmony and safety) collapsed once again into discouragement, apprehension, and fear. The core beliefs I adopted during this time (as a strategy to protect myself from further disappointment and self-blame) was “It’s no use—I’ll never get it right!” and “It’s never good enough.” I also internalized comments I heard my parents say, such as “You just have to pay attention!”

As an adult, I realized that I was giving “free rent” to these beliefs and that often my emotional responses in the present (such as deep and sudden disappointment and discouragement) were being triggered by my early experiences. This also impacted my choices

and responses in the present; because these were rooted in core beliefs, I often didn't see this clearly at first, and they were so familiar to me that they seemed "natural."

Through the regular practice of empathy, self-empathy, and other mindfulness practices, I've become aware of many of my core beliefs and have learned to befriend them. I can now recognize them more easily and respond with compassion for myself (and my parents). I even chuckle sometimes when I see them surface once again—"Oh, there you are!" As a result, I am enjoying more choice in the present moment.

Take a few minutes and brainstorm a list of the statements you heard in your family when you were growing up. You may notice that these relate in some way to beliefs in scarcity or isolation. For example, in the context of sharing with others you may remember, "Don't be such a pig!" or "You expect too much." You may also wish to reflect on repeated painful experiences from your childhood (such as a parent being absent from the home) that led to your adopting certain core beliefs. Next, take some time to explore how these beliefs manifest today in your life, both in what you tell yourself and in the actions you take.

As a bonus, you may wish to guess your family members' feelings and needs when they spoke as they did or acted in these ways, as well as the needs you were meeting or seeking to meet by adopting your core beliefs. (In my own example, a need beneath my adopting the belief that "It's never good enough!" was to protect myself from further disappointment.)

Finally, you may wish to create a new "story," some feeling- and needs-based affirmations for yourself, and practice deep self-empathy and compassion around these early experiences and how your core beliefs have continued to play out in your life. A sample affirmation might be, "There's sufficient space for everyone, and I can fully meet my needs." You can gently remind yourself of this new story throughout the day and when you notice one of your familiar friends, a core belief, popping up. You can also return to the

deep self-empathy and compassion practice in part one above. Most simply, this is a practice of holding gentleness, loving kindness, and compassion for yourself as well as any history of sadness and loss around unmet needs. Ultimately, this kind of “mourning” becomes a celebration of all that you most value in life and wish to see fully manifest in yourself and in the world.

Profound Moments of Compassion

However you go about liberating your core beliefs, unearthing them into the light of day, this kind of deep empathy is hugely helpful in freeing up internal space for greater compassion and living in NVC consciousness. The more you practice NVC and the more self-empathy and deep empathy you do, the more you will find that old triggers fall away. You will become better and better able to turn up fully in each moment with authenticity, connection, and power. In those moments, it doesn't matter what words or formal model you are using. Through your consistent practice with it, the NVC road map has already brought you to the place you desire to be.

I recently experienced a profound moment of such trigger-free response. I was running late to teach a class and hit more traffic than expected. I had just put on my turn signal and was backing into a parking space (with one minute to spare!) when someone else pulled into the spot I had chosen. Given the time I had and the time of day (and the number of spots available in midtown Manhattan), I didn't want to continue looking for parking. Before my NVC training, if an incident like this had happened I would have cursed, given up the spot, and kept looking—even though I would have been aggravated and even later for my class. It was the first night, and I really wanted to be on time! I would have been in a “bad” mood for hours.

This time, though, I experienced what I would consider an NVC “miracle.” I put on the hazard lights, turned off the car, left it double-parked where it was, and went to speak with the driver of the other

car. I could tell he was reluctant to roll down his window—or even speak with me. When he did lower it, I said, “Hi! I had my turn signal and backup lights on and was planning to take this spot—I’m late to teach a class. I’d really appreciate it if you’d pull out and let me take it.” At first he protested: “No, you did not have your signal on—and you were pulled too far ahead!” Of course, he didn’t want to give up the spot and continue looking any more than I did—I could understand that! I repeated my request, this time with a dose of empathy: “I know you’re already parked here, and I really am late. I’d so appreciate it if you’d let me have this spot! It would really help me out.”

The man rolled up his window without replying. I assumed this meant he wasn’t going to listen to me anymore—or budge from the spot. Before learning NVC, looking at my core beliefs, and practicing self-empathy numerous times, I know how I would have responded: I would have been triggered and “lost it” at this point, and probably shouted some choice words at him. Instead—and it is this moment that I consider the true miracle—I simply went back to my car. I was practicing self-empathy (sitting with my disappointment and imagining my choices at this point, such as paying \$20 to park) when I looked in my rearview mirror: the man was leaving the spot so I could take it! I waved thanks to him, parked, and made my class on time.

For me, this was a powerful example of “dogging” for my own needs, making a true request (while being open to hearing no), making a powerful request (clear, concrete, and doable), and holding compassion for myself and for the other person. This is a golden reminder for me of a certain paradox: we have no control over others *and* the choices we make infinitely impact what happens and the choices others make. I could have just driven away, given up, and spent the evening cursing the other driver. Even more compelling for me, if I’d shouted at him or cursed him out when he rolled his window up, he may have decided to simply turn off his car, lock his doors, and leave. I didn’t know that he was planning to give me

the spot at that point. While I cannot prove this, I believe it was my response in the moment that supported him in following through on his decision to offer me the parking place.

While I was practicing a colloquial form of NVC, what really made a difference were my consciousness and energy. I was completely neutral and calm when speaking to the man and making my request and even when he rolled his window up. Of course, it was the four steps of the NVC model that supported me in holding this consciousness, as well as years of developing ease in practicing the model. The model feeds the consciousness, and it is the consciousness that matters most.

I could offer many, many other examples of what I consider to be NVC miracles. Many have happened while I was receiving deep empathy from others (“a-ha” moments when I experienced a shift and insight), while journaling or practicing self-empathy (furthering self-awareness and compassion), and while practicing NVC consciousness face to face with others. It has happened in more challenging situations than conflict over a parking space; I have truly experienced nonviolence, collaboration, and compassion in action. I consider these moments miracles because the outcomes were radically different from what I would otherwise have expected and from what I have experienced in similar situations before. I have also repeatedly experienced levels of internal resources, peace, and choice within myself that I continue to find inspiring.



Our wish for you is that soon you will experience these kinds of miracles yourself. We trust that the practices in this chapter for integrating NVC in your daily life and practicing a colloquial form of the model will support your ease in practicing NVC, living in NVC consciousness, and generating miracles every day.



The Four-Part Nonviolent Communication Process

Clearly expressing
how **I am**
without blaming
or criticizing

Empathically receiving
how **you are**
without hearing
blame or criticism

OBSERVATIONS

1. What I observe (*see, hear, remember, imagine, free from my evaluations*) that does or does not contribute to my well-being:

“When I (see, hear) . . . ”

1. What you observe (*see, hear, remember, imagine, free from your evaluations*) that does or does not contribute to your well-being:

“When you see/hear . . . ”

(Sometimes unspoken when offering empathy)

FEELINGS

2. How I feel (*emotion or sensation rather than thought*) in relation to what I observe:

“I feel . . . ”

2. How you feel (*emotion or sensation rather than thought*) in relation to what you observe:

“You feel . . . ”

NEEDS

3. What I need or value (*rather than a preference, or a specific action*) that causes my feelings:

“. . . because I need/value . . . ”

3. What you need or value (*rather than a preference, or a specific action*) that causes your feelings:

“. . . because you need/value . . . ”

Clearly requesting that
which would enrich **my**
life without demanding

Empathically receiving that
which would enrich **your** life
without hearing any demand

REQUESTS

4. The concrete actions I would like taken:

“Would you be willing to . . . ?”

4. The concrete actions you would like taken:

“Would you like . . . ?”

(Sometimes unspoken when offering empathy)



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About Nonviolent Communication

From the bedroom to the boardroom, from the classroom to the war zone, Nonviolent Communication (NVC) is changing lives every day. NVC provides an easy-to-grasp, effective method to get to the root of violence and pain peacefully. By examining the unmet needs behind what we do and say, NVC helps reduce hostility, heal pain, and strengthen professional and personal relationships. NVC is now being taught in corporations, classrooms, prisons, and mediation centers worldwide. And it is affecting cultural shifts as institutions, corporations, and governments integrate NVC consciousness into their organizational structures and their approach to leadership.

Most of us are hungry for skills that can improve the quality of our relationships, to deepen our sense of personal empowerment or simply help us communicate more effectively. Unfortunately, most of us have been educated from birth to compete, judge, demand, and diagnose; to think and communicate in terms of what is “right” and “wrong” with people. At best, the habitual ways we think and speak hinder communication and create misunderstanding or frustration. And still worse, they can cause anger and pain, and may lead to violence. Without wanting to, even people with the best of intentions generate needless conflict.

NVC helps us reach beneath the surface and discover what is alive and vital within us, and how all of our actions are based on human needs that we are seeking to meet. We learn to develop a vocabulary of feelings and needs that helps us more clearly express what is going on in us at any given moment. When we understand and acknowledge our needs, we develop a shared foundation for much more satisfying relationships. Join the thousands of people worldwide who have improved their relationships and their lives with this simple yet revolutionary process.



About PuddleDancer Press

PuddleDancer Press (PDP) is the premier publisher of Nonviolent Communication™ related works. Its mission is to provide high-quality materials to help people create a world in which all needs are met compassionately. Publishing revenues are used to develop new books, and implement promotion campaigns for NVC and Marshall Rosenberg. By working in partnership with the Center for Nonviolent Communication and NVC trainers, teams, and local supporters, PDP has created a comprehensive promotion effort that has helped bring NVC to thousands of new people each year.

Since 2003 PDP has donated more than 60,000 NVC books to organizations, decision-makers, and individuals in need around the world. This program is supported in part by donations made to CNVC and by partnerships with like-minded organizations around the world.

Visit the PDP website at www.NonviolentCommunication.com to find the following resources:

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- **About Marshall Rosenberg**—Access press materials, biography, and more about this world-renowned peacemaker, educator, bestselling author, and founder of the Center for Nonviolent Communication.
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About the Center for Nonviolent Communication

The Center for Nonviolent Communication (CNVC) is an international nonprofit peacemaking organization whose vision is a world where everyone's needs are met peacefully. CNVC is devoted to supporting the spread of Nonviolent Communication (NVC) around the world.

Founded in 1984 by Dr. Marshall B. Rosenberg, CNVC has been contributing to a vast social transformation in thinking, speaking and acting—showing people how to connect in ways that inspire compassionate results. NVC is now being taught around the globe in communities, schools, prisons, mediation centers, churches, businesses, professional conferences, and more. More than 200 certified trainers and hundreds more teach NVC to approximately 250,000 people each year in 35 countries.

CNVC believes that NVC training is a crucial step to continue building a compassionate, peaceful society. Your tax-deductible donation will help CNVC continue to provide training in some of the most impoverished, violent corners of the world. It will also support the development and continuation of organized projects aimed at bringing NVC training to high-need geographic regions and populations.

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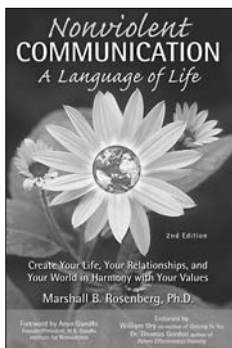
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Nonviolent Communication: A Language of Life, Second Edition

*Create Your Life, Your Relationships, and Your World
in Harmony With Your Values*

Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D.

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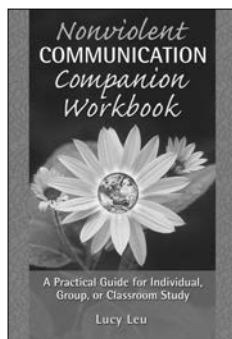
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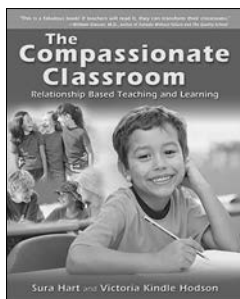
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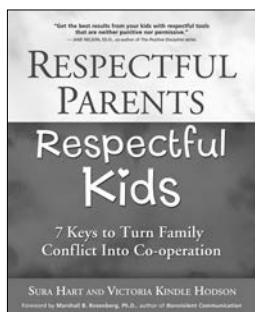
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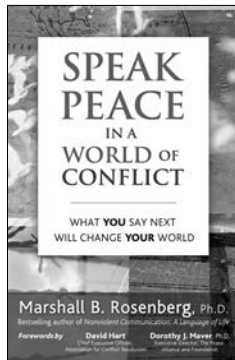
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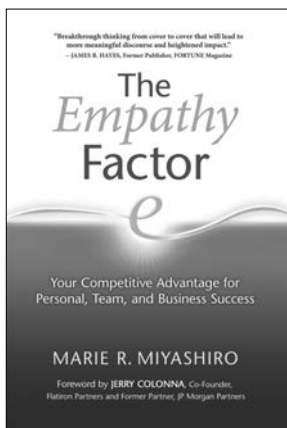
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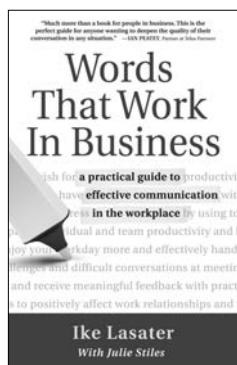
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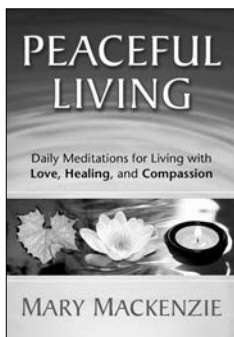
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Daily Meditations for Living With Love, Healing, and Compassion

by **Mary Mackenzie**

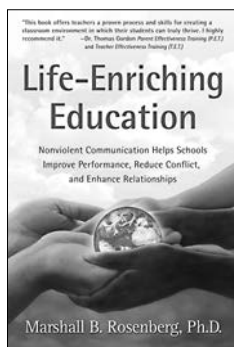
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by **Marshall B. Rosenberg, Ph.D.**

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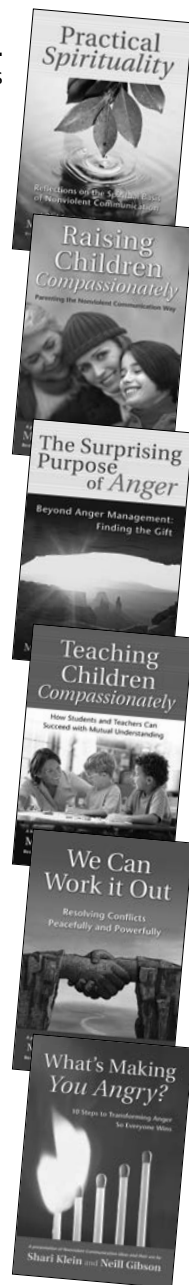
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