

# Spreading Empathy: Nonviolent Communication, Moving into the Future

Sarah Peyton

From "Jeez, Mom, leave me alone!" to "The square root of nine is three," to "Want to see a movie?", language gives us the opportunity to shape a shared understanding of our world. While experiential insight and behavioral studies of language have given us solid guesses at understanding ourselves over the last century through western philosophy, linguistics, communication, psychology, and transformational growth movements, the last few decades we have started to see research-based explorations of the brain and neurobiology that are making our efforts to heal one another with language, self-understanding, and relationship exponentially more effective. Among these are J.M.G. Williams, et al. (2008) using mindfulness with bipolar diagnoses; Jeffrey M. Schwartz (1997) integrating Theravada Buddhism and brain education to address obsessive-compulsive disorder; Tabibnia, Lieberman, and Craske (2008) with fMRI's showing the calming of the amygdala when emotional experience is named; and many others. Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) is even making inroads into the broader community in the areas of personal growth and transformation. In this article, we will take a look at how IPNB has the capacity to both contribute to and possibly illuminate the future of one area of personal growth that focuses largely on the use of language to change brains and relationships—Nonviolent Communication (NVC).

## NVC's Past: The Vision of Marshall Rosenberg

Nonviolent Communication has, until its present incarnation, largely been the embodied dream of its founder, Marshall Rosenberg. In 1961, Rosenberg received a doctorate in clinical psychology from the University of Wisconsin, where he studied under Carl Rogers. He later developed the NVC process (now formalized in the use of Observations, Feelings, Needs, and Requests in interpersonal communication), and first used it in

federally-funded school integration projects in the 1960's. In 1984, he founded the Center for Nonviolent Communication, which has developed from a small, grass-roots organization into a global presence, with NVC trainers offering classes all over the world to many different audiences.

## Present Developments: International Impact and the Integration of IPNB

This global presence currently includes approximately 298 certified trainers taking NVC into over 44 countries; social justice projects that bring NVC into prisons, schools, parenting, apply NVC to environmental and gender issues, and to the field of criminal justice and social connection in Restorative Circles; and thousands of individuals working on their own with the printed material from [www.cnvc.org](http://www.cnvc.org) in practice groups.

The conversation about Restorative Circles takes us to the electric, vitalizing work of Dominic Barter, who developed an integration of Restorative Justice and Nonviolent Communication in the favelas of Brazil, and now teaches this approach to bringing communities together in the wake of tragedy or pain worldwide. It is an unusually hopeful message. Brazil represents one of the most racially diverse and economically unequal countries on earth. The UN calculates that while Brazil has 2.8% of the world's population, over 13% of the world's murders are committed in this country. Barter's (2010) website states,

Early data show that the number of cases "judicialized"—reaching the judge—diminish significantly where the NVC Restorative Circles are present in the schools and local community. In over 90% of cases, agreements are reached and kept, transforming the experience of all those involved in violent

conflict and promoting an unprecedented cultural shift wherever Circles have been adapted as a way to handle conflict. (D. Barter, <http://www.restorativecircles.org>)

Other areas that are integrating Nonviolent Communication include large group facilitation technologies, corporate change and transition management, and Gendlin's Focusing, with its global yahoo group "NVC-focusing." For example, Alan Seid, certified NVC trainer from Bellingham, Washington, uses NVC as one of the tools in his toolbox, his passion being large group facilitation and teaching facilitators "Communication Skills for Effective Collaboration," especially in resource management. These groups work with intense scenarios having to do with dialogues between such parties as representatives of oil companies, first nations, and state regulatory agencies. He has recently developed his own proprietary methodology for facilitation that integrates NVC, and has a book about his work underway.

With 40 years of experience in corporate change and transition management, Dan Miller (of Dan Miller Consulting) has been using NVC as part of his toolkit since he ran across Marshall Rosenberg giving a talk in a high school auditorium in the 1990's. It is now a cornerstone of his consulting work with companies and organizations like the US Department of Energy in DC, Nike, Eastman Kodak, the Bureau of Land Management, City of Portland, Con-Way, and RR Donnelley and Sons. He uses the term "needs-based communication" to refer to his implementation of NVC. Dan says,

If I look at the effect of needs-based communication on my work in the many spokes of the wheel of organizational transformation—and there are many—it deepens the whole concept that people make a difference, since the whole organization is made up of people. And you can get safety down to 2%, with efficiency rates of 95% with normal methods of management. But if you want to go beyond that, if you want world-class numbers with global recognition for your performance, you have to engage your

employees fully—and the way to do that is to get this needs-based communication and other tools in place between the people doing the work. (D. Miller, personal communication, October 15, 2010)

For the last several years, Dan has also been integrating Interpersonal Neurobiology (Siegel,



1999, 2010) into his consulting work, providing people with an understanding of why the way they communicate is so crucial:

It is fundamental to get a deeper understanding of what an observation is—eliminating the "Joe, you left the workplace a mess" and transitioning to "Joe, you left 3 screwdrivers, a hammer, and a jar of nails at the workstation." This creates a different result in the neurology of the person you're talking to. And as we bring in the concept of needs, people begin to have a relationship. They start to understand that Joe must have had some kind of needs going on when he left the stuff out, and if there's some way I can let this in, it gets me out of judgment and lets my needs come into the picture, too. I have a better chance of working with Joe's amygdala in requesting behavior change when I connect with needs. In my world, communication is mostly broken down into crude components—there's not a ton of elegance to it—people are more frank about it. So needs-based communication helps a lot. It lets us have clear conversations and make clear agreements. (D. Miller, personal communication, October 15, 2010)

IPNB dovetails with NVC by providing a look inside our brains, minds, and relationships to understand the neural correlates of communication that divides and communication that connects people. What we learn is that empathy-rich communication—the core of needs-based activities—actually knits brains together into patterns of integration that support clarity, kindness, and cooperation. This kind of connectedness in the brain flourishes in interpersonal environments where reactivity is minimized because people feel seen and heard by others.

### The Future of NVC

The way IPNB is working its way into Dan Miller's corporate consulting is something that Gloria Lybecker, Independent Facilitator and integrator of NVC and IPNB from Eastern Washington, sees as characteristic for what's ahead for Nonviolent Communication:

When I reflect on the future of Nonviolent Communication, I see NVC processes being profoundly illuminated by the cutting edge lens of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB). The groundbreaking work of collaboratively crafting the language of these two models together and linking new experiential understandings and processes of deep inner work is underway. In the coming years, classes will spring up, group meetings will be sponsored, and one-on-one opportunities will be made readily available where people will experience the phenomenal awakening—"Of course I make sense!" (G. Lybecker, personal communication, October 12, 2010).

Indeed, such integrative NVC/IPNB groups are already seeding themselves along the west coast of North America, from Vancouver BC to San Diego, California.

Concerning the future of NVC, Dan Miller has this to offer:

A question about the future could be: "Is there a logistical educational delivery system for NVC knowledge and training?" My

understanding is that Marshall has this in place. You can get certified and acknowledged in Nonviolent Communication. And there are groups separate from the Center for Nonviolent Communication, like the Nonviolent Communication Training Institute and BayNVC, doing trainings geographically or in institutes. As long as there are those who have the fire to run these institutes, then people like me who stumble on these things will integrate them. There are two contributing phenomena. The first is that people will catch fire. There's enough information on the web to facilitate connection and communication, and it's a concept that will be around for many years to come. The other way is viral, with the concepts moving through our consciousness via the integrative work of folks like me. (D. Miller, personal communication, October 15, 2010)

Alan Seid adds,

The future of NVC is integral. It involves people moving into higher and broader scopes of perspective. The main thing that the future of NVC holds is the integration of interiors and exteriors, and you can't reduce the one to the other. Just like with IPNB, both have to be expressed. We have to include what happens in people's interior experience, such as their intentions, their values, and their needs, as well as what happens in their physiology, including the brain. (A. Seid, personal communication, October 20, 2010)

My own journey with NVC illuminates this discussion, since my previous articles for the GAINS quarterly have focused on precisely this melding of Nonviolent Communication and IPNB. In my workshops and teleseminars, I bring together NVC, with its external communication and internal healing applications, with the solid ground of self-understanding clarified by figures like Dan Siegel, Bonnie Badenoch, and Allan Schore. I see my struggles to live and offer NVC reflected in three possible incarnations that mirror our human attachment and brain use patterns.

When I am largely in my left hemisphere, embodying my patterns of avoidant attachment, NVC is for external use, and can be a strategy without heart—a problem solving set of communication tools that makes my life easier.

When I am living largely in my right hemisphere, bringing my ambivalent attachment patterns to life, NVC is a "consciousness," a way of being that I choose because I'm panicked about the state of the world and this is the right thing to do (perhaps this pun is intended), and something that I really think the rest of the world should be doing, no matter what their own personal opinions might be.

And when I am connected with the strengths of both hemispheres, in my moments of earned secure attachment, I am able to be both: concise, grounded in fact, and structured; while simultaneously connecting with my body's wisdom, my mindsight for others, and bringing my language to life with emotional connection and depth. I am truly capable of contingent communication, compassion for self and others, and hope for the first time. This, I think, as others in this article do, whether they are referring to IPNB or not, is the future of NVC: integration—integration of NVC with other modalities, and within NVC, the delivery of integrative practice for external communication and internal transformation.

Conal Elliott (2010), who makes NVC-related personal growth offerings as well as authoring a blog called "NVC Evolves," writes:

Personally, I hope there are many successors to Marshall, going in creative new directions. Just as Marshall's non-conformist creativity gave us such a gift, I want to see more such people go further and in ways that are as surprising and ingenious to the current NVC organization and folks as Marshall's insights were. Which I guess is to say that I want NVC to be open and expansive. I worry that it is instead becoming another religion with growing emphasis on dogma and self-preservation (top-down certification and talk of 'preserving the integrity of NVC'). I want to see NVC folks (or their successors) move past top-

down quality control methods like CNVC certification and adopt bottom-up and peer-based replacements, as described on the site 'Emergence of NVC.' Also, the future of NVC might not be thought of as NVC, especially since CNVC legally owns the trademark 'Nonviolent Communication,' so significant evolution of the NVC insights may necessarily lead to a break from the name. (C. Elliott, personal communication, October 22, 2010)

Bainbridge Island's Kathleen Macferran is actively working within CNVC as a certified trainer to bring about her dream for the future:

I imagine NVC will support personal and systemic transformation globally by conveying a paradigm of partnership and a framework for integration of that paradigm into actions, speech, thinking, and use of power. I hope CNVC will be one of the vehicles for all people to have equal and efficient access to NVC information, experience, and training. (K. Macferran, personal communication, October, 12, 2010)

Alan Seid, when asked, "What would you like to leave behind from your work in the world?" replied,

Here is an expression Marshall used: 'We are planting trees under whose shade we may never get to sit.' That's my work—some of the plantings take, some don't. What I hope to leave is a little more clarity and little more effectiveness, particularly around group process and effective decision-making, and ceremony/ritual/celebration—specifically as reflected in high-level group functioning. I want to leave behind clarity and specific tools for groups and individuals who are working to make the world a better place than it was when we found it. (A. Seid, personal communication, October 20, 2010)

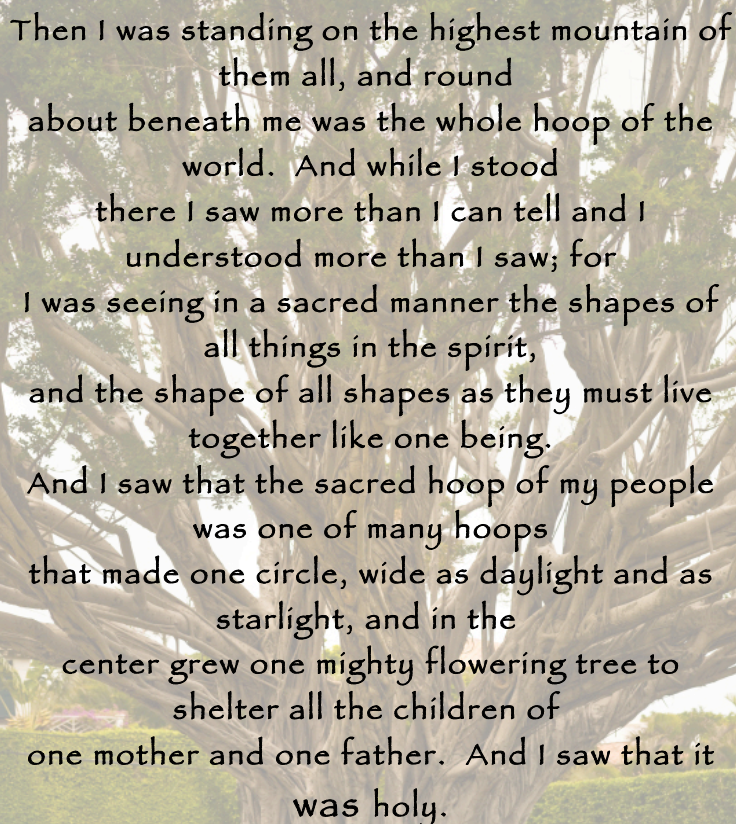
As we tap into the dreams of Nonviolent Communication practitioners worldwide, we find an expansive vision. Eric Bowers, certified NVC

trainer from British Columbia, writes: "I see NVC spreading in part from people experiencing a needs-based connection consciousness and energy through means other than the formal NVC language, for example through Restorative Circles, Dance, Drama, Inquiry, and more." (E. Bowers, personal communication, October 11, 2010)

Finally, deliciously, one of Portland, Oregon's certified NVC trainers, LaShelle Charde, writes:

"My hope for the future is that NVC consciousness becomes so much a part of how we relate to each other that we forget it was once called NVC" (L. Charde, personal communication, October 10, 2010). With that, we circle back to IPNB's vision of reinforcing new patterns repeatedly until state becomes trait. At that point, the effortless implementation of the new perspective just flows.

**Sarah Peyton** is deeply interested in the synthesis of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB) and how language reinvents the brain, particularly in the practice of Nonviolent Communication. She sees the capacity of focused language use to provide tools for the integration that IPNB describes, and enjoys the way in which this process strengthens and broadens the compassionate inner observer. She has been teaching NVC and IPNB classes and doing integrative process work in Alaska, British Columbia, Washington, and Canada for the last three years. She teaches regular session classes in the Portland, Oregon, area, is available for phone sessions, and will travel to provide day-long or longer offerings to small groups. You can contact Sarah at [pevtwood@isomedia.com](mailto:pevtwood@isomedia.com).



Then I was standing on the highest mountain of  
them all, and round  
about beneath me was the whole hoop of the  
world. And while I stood  
there I saw more than I can tell and I  
understood more than I saw; for  
I was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of  
all things in the spirit,  
and the shape of all shapes as they must live  
together like one being.  
And I saw that the sacred hoop of my people  
was one of many hoops  
that made one circle, wide as daylight and as  
starlight, and in the  
center grew one mighty flowering tree to  
shelter all the children of  
one mother and one father. And I saw that it  
was holy.

-Black Elk Speaks, *The Great Vision*



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