

## CHAPTER · 1

# THE TWO QUESTIONS

*“Don’t ask yourself what the world needs.  
Ask yourself what makes you come alive, and then  
go and do that. Because what the world needs  
is people who have come alive.”*

— HAROLD WHITMAN



**N**ONVIOLENT COMMUNICATION KEEPS OUR ATTENTION focused on two critical questions.

Question number one: What’s alive in us? (Related questions are: What’s alive in me? What’s alive in you?) Now, this is a question that all over the planet people ask themselves when they get together. They don’t necessarily use those exact words. In English they often say it this way: How are you? Every language has its own way of asking, of course, but however it’s said, it’s a very important question.

We say it as a social ritual, but it’s a very important question because, if we’re to live in peace and harmony, if we’re to enjoy contributing to each other’s well-being, we

*NVC shows  
us how to connect  
with what's alive.*



need to know what's alive in each other. Sadly, though most people ask the question, not many people really know how to answer it very well because we haven't been educated in a language of life.

We've not really been taught to answer the question. We ask it, yes, but we don't know how to answer it. Nonviolent Communication, as we'll see, suggests how we can let people know what's alive in us. It shows us how to connect with what's alive in other people, even if they don't have words for saying it. So, that's the first question that Nonviolent Communication focuses our attention on.

The second question—and it's linked to the first—is: What can we do to make life more wonderful? (Related questions are: What can you do to make life more wonderful for me? What can I do to make life more wonderful for you?) So these two questions are the basis of Nonviolent Communication: What's alive in us? What can we do to make life more wonderful?

Now, just about everybody who studies Nonviolent Communication says two things about it. First, they say how easy it is, how simple. All we have to do is keep our communication, our focus of attention, our consciousness, on what's alive in us, what would make life more wonderful. How simple. The second thing they say is how difficult it is.

Now, how can something be so simple and so difficult at

the same time? Well, I've already given you a hint about that. It's difficult because we've been programmed to think and communicate in a quite different way. We haven't been taught to think about what's alive in us.

So, if we have been educated to fit under structures in which a few people dominate the many, we have been taught to think more of what people—especially authority figures—think of us. The reason is that if they judge us as bad, wrong, incompetent, stupid, lazy, or selfish, we're going to get punished. And if they label us as good little boys and girls, good students, and good employees, then we might be rewarded. We've been educated to think in terms of rewards and punishment instead of what's alive in us and what would make life more wonderful.

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Let's go back to the situation I asked you to think about where somebody is behaving in a way you don't like. Let's look at how Nonviolent Communication suggests that we let that person know what's alive in us in relationship to what they're doing. We want to be honest in Nonviolent Communication, but we want to be honest without using words that imply wrongness, criticism, insult, judgment, or psychological diagnosis.