

I Had a Vision But No Roadmap: My Journey to Nonviolent Communication in the Classroom

by Paulette Pierce

“Before, I taught my students how to be passionate intellectual gladiators within a classroom structured to facilitate fierce debate and total victory. Now I show them how to open their hearts and share in the construction of a community designed to support the creativity of every member.”

As a member of the Black Power generation, embracing partnership and nonviolence has not come easily. Ironically, it was research on the Black Power Movement that led me, thirty years later, in this direction. When I examined the history of the Black Power Movement through feminist lenses (which I did not have before), the violent rhetoric and activities of the period looked very different. Before, declarations of the need for armed struggle and the willingness to kill and die sounded revolutionary and felt empowering. Now, they struck me as suicidal and reactionary. Gradually, I came to believe that we, the Black Power advocates, had bought into one of the most foundational precepts of the US: that violence equals power and that the power to rule belongs to the strongest men or nation!

My new feminist insights about the Black Power Movement scared me. I was afraid I would be labeled a traitor, a dupe of White feminists. And, although I now questioned violence, both morally and practically, I still doubted that nonviolence could work in a world where dominance prevailed, where brute force seemed to triumph over love and compassion again and again.

My hope that nonviolence could be more than a utopian dream was strengthened when I discovered the work of Riane Eisler. Eisler argues that most human societies were peaceful and egalitarian before the violent imposition of patriarchy began to spread well over five thousand years ago. In stark contrast to what Eisler calls “dominator societies” which rely on fear and the threat of pain to enforce control, earlier “partnership-oriented” societies relied upon the pleasure inherent in caring for, connecting to, and developing power, with others.

These prehistoric (mostly preliterate) societies were not, she notes, utopias. Conflicts did occur. However, the archeological evidence clearly indicates that warfare was rare for at least 15,000 years in most parts of the world (other than harsh, inhabitable environments). Most importantly, the valorization of violence that is typically reflected in the art and religion of patriarchal societies was completely absent. Nor did peace, egalitarianism, and partnership between the sexes come at the cost of advanced cultural achievement. According to Eisler, many of these civilizations reached amazing levels of technological and artistic development. This powerful new interpretation of the long prehistory of the human race, of the thousands of years of peace, plenty, and partnership, helped revive my battered faith in Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream of a beloved community, of a nonviolent future for humanity.

It was at this point in my journey that I encountered the work of Marshall Rosenberg on Nonviolent Communication (NVC). Looking for practical tools to enact my growing commitment to nonviolence and partnership, I immersed myself in the videos and written materials which explain Rosenberg’s unique method. I was impressed by his call for human empathy, connection, and mutuality. I immediately saw that the basic



assumptions that support NVC are very similar to those of the Partnership Way and the Beloved Community. I found most appealing Rosenberg's insistence that all people share the same life-serving needs; that mutuality is possible; that the most satisfying form of receiving is giving from the heart.

I eagerly discussed how nonviolent communication might work in the classroom with Rob Koegel, the friend who introduced me to it. Rob was beginning to use NVC in his teaching and I was moved and encouraged by his experience. At the same time, I found it hard to imagine how I could use NVC when I teach Black Studies to primarily African American students. I teach about extraordinarily painful, charged subjects—for example, the horror of the middle passage, centuries of slavery, rape, and lynching, the enduring legacy of Jim Crow, the vigilante and institutionalized violence used against the Civil Rights Movement.

Most students feel incredible rage as they learn about such things. Over the years, many have spoken of their desire to kill White people—or, at the very least, to hurt and punish them. How would the Black majority of my students respond to me, I confided to my friend, if in the face of their outrage and pain, I counseled nonviolence? Worse yet, how would my students respond if I suggested they not blame Whites—not just for the pain they caused in the past, but for the injustices they were inflicting in the present? I simply could not imagine teaching this material without deliberately invoking and fueling powerful moral outrage.

Again and again, I kept on asking a question I could not answer: How could progressives mobilize people if, as Rosenberg insists, we don't pass moral judgment, if we don't characterize actions as right or wrong, good or evil? I was deeply invested in two related assumptions: first, that guilt, though not sufficient, was necessary to force Whites to take responsibility for the legacy of slavery and the effects of ongoing discrimination; second, that anger and blame were necessary for Blacks to mobilize our energies to fight against racial injustice and to overpower the violent resistance we would surely encounter. I felt vulnerable. I was afraid that NVC required that I unilaterally disarm while my enemy remained armed to the teeth! Then a friend reminded me that this is precisely what the civil rights movement asked and trained people to do.

My conscience would not let me ignore the radical transformative potential of Rosenberg's model in the classroom. Both the theory and practice of NVC represents a revolutionary paradigm shift within our patriarchal culture. It requires a decisive break with any form of coercion, unilateral control, or competitive structure that pits us against one another. It invites us to connect with our true feelings and to speak from the heart, to get in touch with what is alive in us and to express it. It assumes that we have life-affirming needs and that we cannot safely or fully satisfy our needs at the expense of others. Finally, it assumes that we only want others to meet our needs if they do so from the heart—a genuine desire to give—in which case we all gain.

These simple precepts contradict the fundamental assumptions of our culture in several respects. First, that it is better to use our heads (rely on reason) than follow our hearts (trust our feelings). Second, that individual and social well-being are best served by individual competition. Third, that social life is marked by a scarcity of that which people want and need, that there is simply not enough to satisfy everyone. Fourth, that social life inevitably produces winners and losers. Fifth, that the "winners" are more able, smarter, and moral than the "losers"—hence, they are not only better but more deserving.

NVC deliberately subverts this dominator-orientation to social interaction. It substitutes a radically democratic approach to sociability premised on the universality of human feelings and needs. According to Rosenberg, there is no need that a person can experience that we as human beings are incapable of understanding, though we may not approve the strategy used to satisfy it. Hence, empathy is always possible—not only when others are speaking from the heart, but even when they are not. Of course, we must be willing to listen with what Rosenberg calls "giraffe ears" for the feelings and needs behind their statements. He chose this metaphor because giraffes have the largest heart of any mammal. When we go straight to the head, we bypass possible empathy and instead play the lethal game of "punitive god." We self-righteously judge other people and seek to punish. If we have the power to inflict punishment and/or exact revenge we feel justified; if not, we see ourselves as victims. Rosenberg's stunning conclusion is that, in either case, the satisfaction of our real needs (i.e., love, respect, empathy, community, safety) remain unmet or, at best, in jeopardy. Why?



Because, as Rosenberg observes, any time people feel physically or emotionally coerced to do anything, they will seek to get even at the earliest possible opportunity.

Deep in my heart, I felt that Rosenberg was correct. My generation, the rebellious youth of the Black Power era, had given up on nonviolence which we had regarded merely as a tactic, not as a way of life, as Dr. King ultimately came to see it. The rage for violence soon consumed the movement. Today the spirit and symbols of “Black Power” have captured the imagination of many within the hip hop generation. True to the postmodern moment, they sample the music, fashions, ideologies, and rhetoric of a previous time to express their own frustrations and desires. It is their unfocused anger, their profound cynicism about politics, and the possibility of progressive change that most worries me—not just as a political activist, but as a teacher.

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More and more, I began to wonder what would happen if I taught my students how to connect with the real needs which underlie the hurt and pain they seek to express through outrageous, in-your-face styles which are the hallmark of hip hop. This was one reason that I started to toy with the idea of trying to use NVC in the classroom.

There was also a more personal reason: I was uncomfortable with the disconnection I saw between my commitment to partnership and nonviolence and my own style of teaching.

Teaching has been the greatest joy of my life for more than twenty years. My passion in the classroom has earned me two university-wide teaching awards. Last summer, as I studied NVC, I wondered if it could help me become an even better teacher. Students have always favorably remarked about my extraordinary enthusiasm for my subject and my ability to connect with them as unique individuals. Still, I suspected that my traditional style of teaching was in conflict with the progressive message I have always sought to convey: As the teacher I dominated class discussion and passed judgment about what things, events, and persons were “right” and “wrong.” I was the intellectual gladiator of oppressed peoples in the White academy. Primed by what Deborah Tannen calls our “culture of argument” and our “words of warfare,” my students were thrilled by my passionate commitment to justice and combative stance. I was their champion, an eloquent defender of the dignity of Black people and all those who have been marginalized in our society. I encouraged them to follow my example, to become intellectual warriors.

Although I was ready for change, I cannot say that I consciously chose to use nonviolent communication in the classroom this academic year. Instead, I stumbled into it. I had a vision of where I’d like to go with NVC but no road map. The obstacles were obvious. First, I lacked formal training in NVC which is available through Rosenberg’s organization. Second, I was very uncomfortable with the formulaic language used by NVC practitioners. Third, I still had my doubts that NVC could handle the explosive feelings which race brings up in this society. Fourth, I also doubted if I could handle these explosive feelings.

Nonetheless, at the start of the term, I began my slow embrace of NVC. I spoke about how it would be possible to communicate so as to make everyone feel safe and comfortable while speaking in the classroom.

We would, of course, have different opinions. But, I predicted, if we listened with our hearts, imagined what motivated the speaker, and always showed respect to each other the class would be more lively and interesting for everyone. My goal, I confided, is to foster as much safety and connection, creativity and enthusiasm, in this classroom as I can.

Students looked surprised and delighted when I said that I would try hard never to respond to them in class or write comments on their papers that would hurt or belittle them. I asked that they “please” tell me



if I did so by mistake. Then I shared that although I was uncomfortable with the university's requirement that I evaluate them, I would assign grades because I wanted to keep my job! I would try, however, to do this in a way that would support their growth and, hopefully, not feed into insecurities they might have. I also invited students to come up with individual or group projects which reflected their unique passion and strengths which I would use as alternatives to exams and papers to grade them. I would be thrilled, for instance, if they wrote poetry, composed a song, or created a dance relevant to the subject matter of the course.

As looks of surprise, disbelief, and relief showed on their faces, I concluded by saying I hoped we would always respect each other and use our emotions to enhance the learning process. An awkward silence followed. I reassured them that I recognized how unfamiliar and perhaps difficult it might be to embrace a new non-competitive, mutually empowering way of interacting in the classroom. "We will fall into old patterns," I stressed, "but instead of focusing on each other's mistakes we can offer concrete suggestions for improvement or even wait to later role-model how a similar situation might be handled in a more compassionate manner." A new sense of freedom and scary possibilities enfolding me. My heart sang "YES!"

Given the large class size, I asked them to wear name tags to facilitate a feeling of intimacy. I also regularly broke them into smaller groups for discussions. I explained that most people find small group settings less threatening but it might still be necessary to gently encourage shy individuals to speak up. The goal is not, I emphasized, to decide whose position is right but to try to understand the experiences that have led individuals to see things as they do. And regardless of personal reactions to any view, every speaker is entitled to respect.

Three weeks into the course I asked for written feedback on the teaching technique which, I explained, I was still new to and experimenting with.

The assignment was completely voluntary and could be submitted anonymously if they preferred. They happily complied. Some of their comments follow:

"I really like this class because there is no right or wrong answer and we all can share our experiences. Dr. Pierce has taught us how to listen to what people are saying before we jump to respond. We in turn get to teach her how things are in our generation. Sometimes it feels like a friend talking to a friend, but we all respect her, her style of teaching, and herself as a person and educator."

"Even though I don't really talk in this class, I always feel like I can and that my voice will be welcome. When I walk in here I feel like 50 friends are welcoming me. This class has created a community of love."

"Words cannot truly express the experience of joy that I receive from this class. We have people from all walks of life who feel comfortable sharing their ideas and experiences. The conversations we have evoke the spirit within us and bring out the best in us. It truly is a blessed experience to have a professor who invites us to teach and learn from one another."

"Most classes end up pitting ideas and students against each other; the class ends up feeling like a struggle to be the one who is right the most. In this class, students are respectful. I feel safe and accepted, like I'm in the company of friends. It makes me willing to share ideas and welcome constructive criticism."

"I've never been in a class where teachers feel what the students have to say is as important as their own knowledge and opinions. Not being of African American descent, I've learned things I could have never learned otherwise either through history classes or reading books . . . The topics we discuss are so powerful and extraordinarily meaningful."



I was surprised by how much more conscious of my language and gestures I became. If I said or did anything that I thought might hurt or offend, I immediately shared my concern and sought correction. I was even more amazed and delighted by how readily my students followed my example, as the following story suggests.

Krishna is a large Black woman with a commanding voice, a passionate commitment to racial justice, and a penchant for blunt expression. Angie, a White student who previously took another class with Krishna, told me that she used to feel threatened by Krishna who appeared angry all the time. Now, Angie is no longer intimidated because, in her view, Krishna had “softened.” We both laughed appreciatively as we discussed how Krishna was obviously wrestling with being more respectful and sensitive to other people’s feelings—especially White folks!

For example, several Black students recently came to class furious about a racist article in the student newspaper which misrepresented the African American Heritage Festival. In fact, they swamped me in the hallway and told me, “We just know we are going to discuss this in class!” Their anger was so intense that I worried how the White students would feel. After I agreed, I started thinking: “This is what happens when you empower students. They take over your class!” Patrice read key portions of the opinion piece out loud. Reactions came fast and furious from the Black students. Krishna sat silently boiling with rage. Finally, she blurted out, “I want to kill White folks!” However, no sooner than the words were out her mouth, she turned to the White students and explained she did not mean them and asked that they not take offense. Fighting back tears, she said, “I’m so tired of my people always being portrayed as wild animals or criminals! The s---t just never stops.” The silent empathy that enfolded her flowed from the Whites and Blacks alike.

More tangible evidence of the strong connection between the Black and White students came when it was agreed that this racist insult demanded a response. Three White students—Karen, Libby and Pamela—volunteered to work with the Black students (including Krishna). Elicia, a dynamic young Black woman, volunteered to facilitate the organizing process. Pamela, whose boyfriend is a newspaper editor, offered valuable insider information about how to get an opposing piece published. Just one week later, this activist core led a highly successful silent protest march around the campus which attracted up to 100 students! My students were thrilled. Several wrote about how empowering it felt to plan and execute such a demonstration.

I was delighted that their organizing methods embodied many of the tenets of NVC I sought to promote: honest discussion of feelings, identification of their needs (in this case to be heard and respected), shared leadership, direct but non-confrontational style of protest, and interracial cooperation. Their stunning success built upon an evolving foundation of mutual trust and respect.

All has not been smooth sailing, however. As the academic year draws to an end, I can clearly see some areas where I still feel quite uncomfortable using NVC in the classroom. Ironically, a student’s expression of anger or the desire to cause physical harm to other people frightens me because I do not yet trust that NVC is powerful enough to handle intense hostility. Nor do I feel skilled or experienced in its use to ensure de-escalation of conflict and a mutually satisfactory resolution of differences. Underlying my fear of the process is my lingering deep suspicion that in certain circumstances all human needs may not, as Rosenberg insists, be reconcilable. I still fear that sometimes there has to be winners and losers! And my personal fear is somewhat related. I am terrified that I will be overwhelmed by the needs of my students if they genuinely connect with what’s in their hearts!

On some deep level this may be my greatest fear of using NVC. I have always been passionate about teaching and very involved with my students both in and outside of the classroom. Yet I must confess that there have been many times when I have felt overwhelmed by the incredible problems my students constantly share with me. Hearing their stories and feeling their pain, I have felt obligated to help even when such actions clearly go beyond my official responsibility and expertise as a teacher. How can I turn away, I ask myself, when I know what they’re going through?

I worry about what will happen if they learn to use NVC to discover and share their many layers of pain and unmet needs. Even before I introduced the spirit of NVC into my classroom, so many of my students got in touch with such powerful emotional issues that I had to solicit help from the Office of Student Counseling Services.



Even as I affirm the feminist principle that “the personal is political,” I still ask myself if the classroom is the proper place for this kind of exploration. How, I wonder, will I balance my students’ obvious needs for academic skills and knowledge about the world with their personal needs, i.e., for nurture, psychological counseling, financial assistance, or safety from an abusive relationship? In sum, how can I encourage more and more honest self-disclosure in the classroom and not drown in the intense feelings and needs that may be released?

Forming bonds of trust and caring among people who suffer the pain of many forms of oppression in our society is incredibly demanding. And, I fear, risky business. Who knows what will happen when the oppressed who have been schooled in silence with little access to valued societal resources respond to NVC’s invitation to speak from the heart? I want to believe that it will help Blacks, women, and all those who are marginalized to more effectively express and fulfill their humanity. Yet I worry that in the absence of adequate supportive facilities on campus to help meet the real needs of my students I will be left with an impossible task or feeling guilty for not trying.

I wrestle with what is my responsibility if I helped connect them to feelings and needs that they formerly kept buried? The question is not abstract. I just read a paper wherein the student shares the trauma of being a victim of incest for the first time.

To date, my exploration of NVC and partnership in the classroom has been scary, exciting and, most of all, liberating. I am learning how to move through my fears and anger to a place where the energy of these intense emotions can find constructive and creative expression. For me, this place of ideal learning is the classroom. I have always felt most alive and free as a teacher. Equally important, I find that the lessons I seek to teach my students have always been those I most need to learn.

So it is now. Before, I taught my students how to be passionate intellectual gladiators within a classroom structured to facilitate fierce debate and total victory. Now I show them how to open their hearts and share in the construction of a community designed to support the creativity of every member. There are no losers in this new classroom which I see taking shape. I no longer have to carry the warrior’s heavy armor or hide my weaknesses. What a relief it was to say to my class one day, “Look, the side conversations are getting out of hand and I don’t know what to do. I’m feeling frustrated and I want your help. How can we handle this problem which can undermine our group process?” The students figured out that the cause of inattention was their inability to see or clearly hear when the speaker was on the opposite side of the classroom. Then someone suggested we rearrange the seats into a big semi-circle. This done the problem never reappeared. I didn’t have to penalize or call out anyone. I shared my true feeling and made a simple request. They empathized with me and met my need for order from their hearts.

I feel quite sad as this quarter ends. I will miss the beloved community we built together over the past ten weeks. I will carry the respect we shared and the life-serving energies we unleashed deep within me wherever I go. As my connection to NVC grows and my experience of partnership unfolds, I feel truly blessed. In the words of an old Negro spiritual, “I wdn’t take nothin’ for my journey.”

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